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The Experiential Paradigm: The Power to Cause Things to Happen

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THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF ACTION

ART HISTORY IS a bewildering twisting vortex. Paradoxically, historical appraisals of contemporary art tell us more about the present than the past, while auspicious exhibitions of current art unwittingly illuminate art's potential. Witness recent U.S. museum surveys of artists who emerged roughly forty years ago, like Eleanor Antin, Jo Baer, Jim Dine, Robert Irwin, Yayoi Kusama, Sol LeWitt, Agnes Martin, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Yoko Ono, Nam Jun Paik, Adrian Piper, Yvonne Rainer, Gerhard Richter, Bridget Riley, Lucas Samaras, and Robert Whitman. Recent related thematic exhibitions include John Cage's curatorial anti-opus "Rolywholyover" (MOCA, 1993), "The Experiential Exercise of Freedom" (MOCA, 1999), "Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art" (Whitney Museum, 2001), "Off Limits: Rutgers University and

1. I realize that in an academic literary scholarship setting, hermeneutics would be considered more a mode of interpretation and postmodernism would be associated with, for example, the privileging of writing and the trace over subject-centered psychologies. However, my point is aimed more at the discourses that have generally emerged in art world discussion and practice.

2. Asian artists include: Lee Bul, Navin Rawanchaikul, Do-Ho Suh, Tomoko Takahashi, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Uri Tzaiq. Australian and New Zealand artists include: Adam Donovan, DeeJ Fabye, Gail Hastings, John Meade, Callum Morton, Rubik3, Nikki Savvas, Slave Pianos, Ricky Swallow, and Ronnie Van Hout. European artists include: Atelier Van Lieshout, John Bock, Monica Bonvicini, Christoph Büchel, Angela Bulloch, Maurizio Cattelan, Chiarenza/Hauser/Croptier, Martin Creed, Michael Elmgreen/Ingar Dragset, Olafur Eliasson, Ingrid Eriksson, Anya Gallaccio, Patrizia Giambi, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Bob Gramsma, Marie-Ange Guilleminot, Jens Haaning, Thomas

understanding taints the former, yet enriches the latter. And experientialists who tender unusual situations differ from postmodernists who furnish running commentaries, however tacit. Hardly mutually exclusive paradigms, works like Hans Haacke's *Grass Grows* (1969) and a Philip Glass symphony demonstrate how experiential and postmodern tendencies can coexist.

the Avant-Garde" (Newark Museum, 1999), "Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object" (MOCA, 1998), "Premises: Invested Spaces in Visual Arts, Architecture and Design from France" (Guggenheim SoHo, 1999) and "Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera" (Tate Modern, 2001).

With the possible exception of Baer, Martin, and Richter, these artists have at times produced experiential works that engage or accommodate viewers in open-ended, real-time events. Given Cage's well-known dictum that "understanding prohibits experience," experiential art must be distinguished from postmodern art, especially since

The current attention to the aforementioned list of artists suggests that the art world was heading in a different direction before postmodernist discourse (the philosophy of interpretation) privileged the explanation over the initial art experience, as the act that stimulates cognition.¹ Eco-artist Patricia Johanson describes how during the 1960s she and Kenneth Noland challenged one another to create the longest painting possible. Neither a sign of brute monumentality nor endemic of entrapment ploys, their secret contest specifically grew out of a desire to enable viewers the opportunity to experience one painting from various vantages. While postmodernists have aptly unraveled art's underlying paradoxes, their discourse has diminished the variety of innovative art experiences. Exemplary of the above generation's experiential forays, such artists have inspired viewers to bend bodies to glean their work's subtle details, donned characters who interrupted others' daily lives, produced objects that elicit multiple perceptions, instructed viewers how to make art or built chambers to supply sensorial experiences. No wonder curators consider such practices invaluable antecedents for today's slew of experience-centered artists.

Art making is foremost an act of discovery, rather than a communication tool, so artists have always made works that initially defy interpretation. And postmodernists have shown how even the most ineffable works teem with implicit messages. While Cage's classically contradictory quotes like "I have nothing to say and I'm saying it" and "I force myself always to say something new" are ripe for deconstruction; his enlisting each listener's personal experience as part of the performance upends the typical composer's sense of his/her score. This gesture's significance outweighs whether he really had something to "say," especially since each event's possibilities yield particularized outcomes that initiate discussion, yet defy categorization.

Imagine surviving a potentially fatal tumble in an ocean wave by diving under it. Feeling encircled by discursive art mirrored in no-win sociopolitical analyses, artists who emerged in the early 1990s dove in a new direction, so as to surmount postmodernism's super-self-conscious strategy of total critique. Grounded in an aesthetic of generosity and an awareness of the aforementioned artists, experiential practices prioritize the sensorial present (is-ness) over the work's ready referents (about-ness), which happen upon reflection. Such vivacious practices facilitate intimacy, conviviality, playfulness, and perdurance.

Footnoted here are several lists by continent (among



hundreds of possible examples) of experiential artists that emerged in the 1990s.² Such artists have incidentally rekindled classic existential values like choice, freedom, personal responsibility and, especially, capability. While a libertarian impulse espousing freedom as a “concept” had existed on the right for several decades (most noticeably Milton and Rose Friedman’s PBS series *Free to Choose*), the left found ways to realize freedom (the DIY aesthetic). The primary difference is that left-leaning “livers” implement workable solutions to eke out a *Lebenswerk*, actualized experiences that provide alternatives to an otherwise stifling art world. No less theoretical, critical, or political than postmodern art, experiential art focuses on the transformative power of action. When artists opt for what Hannah Arendt distinguished as praxis (doing-as-acting) versus poesis (doing-as-making), the participant’s response is woven into the text. The net effect is inclusive, especially as compared to the postmodernist spectator’s posting his/her “writerly” analysis from a distance.

Given younger artists’ greater attention to the viewer’s experience, one grasps the connection between the past decade’s beauty debates and the concurrent trend toward experiential art. Not surprisingly, in 2000 the Hirshhorn Museum’s “Regarding Beauty” included works by a handful of artists (Matthew Barney, Anish Kapoor, Pipilotti Rist, James Turrell, Felix Gonzalez-Torres) who regularly produce experiential works. If one were to equate beauty with an aesthetic of generosity, another beauty exhibition or essay could focus on experiential art, which exemplifies rather than discusses (“regarding”) beauty. Since abstract paintings by “Regarding Beauty” stars Agnes Martin and Gerhard Richter arouse sensorial responses, one must also acknowledge their work’s experiential component. That none of the writers appearing in Richter’s 2002 MoMA catalogue mention the concept of beauty, let alone discuss the kinds of experiences his paintings afford viewers, is further proof that younger artists/critics value inclusiveness more than older ones.



“The Responsive Eye,” MoMA’s 1965 Op art exhibition that featured Bridget Riley’s painting *Current* (1964) on the catalogue cover, is a great example of a contemporary survey anticipating the future, since many of its paintings were destined to activate viewers’ bodies. (Re-title the exhibition “The Responsive Viewer” and it could be current again!) Since the eye is now recognized as a vehicle, rather than a destination, viewers who strut about the room to observe different effects garner more experiences. One may ask why moving about trumps sitting quietly on a bench. To answer this, we must turn to 1970s Latin American artists, who recall replacing art’s discursive nature with its cognitive function in order to “transform the world through the specificity of art.”³ Whether object, event, or situation, experientialists (unlike postmodernists who view all experience as mediated) believe that art’s cognitive function begins with direct engagement. Bridget Riley’s recent large-scale wall painting (a situation), wherein circles appear to bounce and burst like bubbles, demonstrates her interest in remaining *au courant*.

Hirschhorn, Carsten Höller, Fabrice Hybert, Twan Janssen, Fransje Killaars, Lang/Bauman, Aernout Mik, Gianni Motti, Lucy Orta, Tobias Rehberger, Pipilotti Rist, Ugo Rondinone, Roland Schimmel, Stig Sjolund, Gerda Steiner/Jörg Lenzlinger, and Gillian Wearing. North American artists include: Polly Apfelbaum, Matthew Barney, Jessica Bronson, Tania Bruguera, Janet Cardiff, Kahty Chenoweth, Raúl Cordero, Teresita Fernández, Tamara Fites, Andrea Fraser, Terri Friedman, Luis Gómez, Stephen Hendee, José-Antonio Hernández-Diez, Christine Hill, Perry Hoberman, Martin Kersels, Charles Long, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Inigo Mangano-Ovalle, Rita McBride, Ocean Earth, Gabriel Orozco, Jorge Pardo, Rob Pruitt, Jennifer Steinkamp/Jimmy Johnson, Fred Tomaselli, Austin Thomas, Shirley Tse, and Andrea Zittel. South American artists include: Helmut Batista, Ricardo Basbaum, Michael Groisman, Ricardo Lanzarini, Laura Lima, Marepe, Ernesto Neto, Ana Maria Tavares, and Márcia X. Additionally, artist-initiated “ecovections” engage community members and scientists in the production of transformed spaces, which are often inhabitable.

3. Mari Carmen Ramírez, “Tactics for Thriving on Adversity,” *Vivencias* (Cologne: Die Deutsche Bibliothek, 2000), 69.



POSTMODERN PROBLEMS

A RATHER EQUIVOCAL term, “postmodernism” was adopted during the mid-1970s to categorize material culture’s sudden interest in style. The acoustic/visual layers employed by composer Philip Glass or post-Minimalist sculptors, as well as the enticing ornaments applied by architects Michael Graves, Robert Venturi and Philip Johnson, or the Pattern and Decoration painters, challenged the modernist dictum “form follows function.” Most bizarrely, efforts to rationalize form transposed style into a discursive argument for the need to appreciate “other” styles (the running commentary). While such works addressed audience appeal, only the post-Minimalist sculptors and composers created particularly experiential works. Their compositional processes instigated situations that occupied viewers in the activity of discovering unusual visual/acoustic details.

The second edition of Madan Sarup’s primer, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, describes the postmodern sensibility as undergoing shifts from epistemology to ontology, knowledge to experience,

theory to practice, and mind to body.⁴ Sarup jumped the gun regarding the shifts to experience, practice, and the body, for nothing could be less immediate than most material culture produced during the 1980s (the height of postmodernism), even though the decade’s imag-

ery was often lifted from everyday sources. Under late postmodernism, the aesthetic process grew iterative: existing works inspired various theories and prevailing concepts encouraged the adoption of works that complemented postmodern schemes.

Sarup’s initial list of postmodern values comprised: (1) an emphasis on surface over depth; (2) a suspicion of originality and authenticity; (3) the collapse of the distinction between high and low culture; (4) the “fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents”; (5) the “transformation of reality into images”; and (6) the use of parody, pastiche, irony, and playfulness.⁵ Compare these points to the factors driving the revived interest in experiential art: (1) a preference for “actions” that facilitate possibility, rather than articulate sociopolitical conditions; (2) the deployment of open systems, which engender myriad forms and subjective

experiences; (3) the dissolution of hierarchies (artist/spectator, museum/visitor, and precious objects/memorable experiences); (4) an interest in time-based events, and the particularization of attendant emotions, personal relationships, and memories; and (5) a desire to provide otherwise unavailable experiences.

Postmodern art’s supposed “playfulness” seems to arise more from the endless play of signifiers than from the remarkably staid objects themselves. In *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger remarks that avant-gardes reintegrate art into the praxis of life.⁶ Perhaps this explains experiential art’s periodic resurgence every forty years or so, first emerging in the teens with Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel* (1913/51), Dada, Futurism, and Suprematism, to reappear mid-century with Gutai, Happenings, Nouveau réalisme, Fluxus and Neo-Concretism, and now recurring in spades! Sarup’s added shifts toward experience, practice, and the body characterize, rather, the movements that momentarily emerged after modernism, the period when art seemed headed in a different direction, and the current experiential momentum.

Regarding the supposed shift to practice, postmodernism’s interpretational theories overwhelm any discussion of particular “practices,” characterizing instead a world where the play of images, or simulacra, bears no relationship to an outside, external “reality.”⁷ Experiential practices require a public playing field, yet postmodernists like Jacques Derrida readily deny the presence of a knowable “now,” rendering certain privileged notions of present experience naive.⁸ Even as one grows evermore aware of our mediated world, the postmodern art “experience” is limited to “looking at” art—watching single-channel videos on television monitors, seeing a performance artist or wandering around an installation, activities that are technically no different than the kinds of “experiences” afforded by modern art. Postmodernism’s supposedly “liberating” quality was its denial of some inherent readability, taken by overzealous viewers as license to produce texts themselves (or interpret works as they pleased). While modernists mostly did not recognize art’s versatile nature, its objects are no less “writerly.” A Picasso Cubist painting, say, evokes no fewer predicates (or meaningful attributes) than a Warhol Brillo box. Postmodernism hardly entails a shift in artistic “practice” so much as an articulated shift in “attitude” among theorists, or perhaps the presence of more artworlders eager to pen their opinions.

Baudrillard’s observation that great stars dazzle due to

4. Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 172.

5. *Ibid.*, 132.

6. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), 53.

7. Sarup, 164.

8. *Ibid.*, 35.



their absence of talent, their “nullity” and “coldness” (as per his 1979 *De la séduction*) seemed to inspire even more visually stingy works awaiting “tacked-on” justifications, even as it made a case for visual allure. In a different context, one of the reigning postmodernist theories was art writer Donald Kuspit’s view that the critic is the “real” artist, since his/her interpretation grants the work its status as art. This view totally distorts the work’s significance, especially since the critic’s interpretation wholly depends upon the work’s prior existence. What makes Kuspit’s stance implicitly postmodern is that it no longer views a work as a particular artist’s expression; any ideas or values that a work triggers are transferred from the artist onto the viewer. While this is methodologically attractive, it remains problematic when commentators apply this point to empower themselves rather than to acknowledge how all viewers are equally legitimate in granting a work its meaning. This is actually a shift made cogent by postmodernism, though it applies equally to works from all eras of art history. Hannah Arendt coined “thought-things” to describe how enduring works on display in museums have inspired myriad ideas throughout the ages.

As an analytical device, deconstruction evolved to bridge the producer’s apparent cognitive dissonance, typical of a “decentered consciousness.” Derrida, I believe, made a grave error when he tied the trace to philosophical argument—“the trace must be thought before the entity.” Had he written “perceived” or “experienced” instead of “thought,” his motto might ring true, as it would link lost traces to forgotten memories. Similarly, the trace would avoid the consciousness that thought requires. More often, the process of making art entrains the artist’s subconscious thoughts, so the trace is rather contiguous, except where works serve to illustrate some program.

First-hand experiences actually facilitate access, however delayed, to ideas and experiences stored in one’s own memory (thoughts of “other” traces). Derrida’s designating the trace as prior initially appears representational, as if the interpretative process recovers some lost trace rather than propels the imagination forward as he insists. When interpreters let the entity stimulate thoughts of “other” traces, they extrapolate rather than interpolate (or trace back) meaning. Since such thoughts are ancillary to the entity, the works are anti-representational. The process of extrapolation parallels the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre’s associating the authentic life with the actor in the thick of action, not some detached spectator.⁹ By contrast, postmodernists who

think or write “about” material culture from the detached, “spectatorial” vantage privilege the interpreter’s performance over lived experiences.

What’s left to grasp is postmodernism’s uncomfortable, rather self-conscious attitude toward the body, emotions, and desire, let alone its nonexistent self. Given theory’s predominance, the body that discovers sensual preferences, explores personal values, and generates memorable experiences proves rather dispensable. Although Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) was directed at films wherein passive, eroticized female stereotypes empower male viewers, postmodernists rather hastily extended her critique of the sexy subject’s negative consequences to all compelling objects. As a result, artists felt morally obliged to make works that further downplayed or displaced human desire.

Paradoxically, theorists linked to a movement originally distinguished for its stylistic flourishes simultaneously squelched them. Such swampy contradictions are typical of postmodernism’s fusing the Frankfurt School’s critical theory, anchored in a “destructive, negative hermeneutics (or philosophy of history) of all civilization,” onto an over-exaggerated existentialist account of a destabilized self, mired in inauthenticity.¹⁰ Among structuralists, post-structuralists and critical theorists, “Sartrean authenticity is rendered zero.” All communication “is systematically distorted” or is replete with hidden rhetorical devices that deceive audiences, despite the speaker’s intentions. Or a “code” intervenes, so that the speaker is never able to get his/her message across.¹¹

Such mutual manipulation deteriorates any confidence in the sense or shared intelligibility of the exercises of self-reflection and its “refusal” among other speakers, reinforcing one’s lack of freedom.¹² Luce Irigaray, who has been identified with postmodernism, recently described deconstruction as being trapped in a “secular manner of know-how,” imprisoning reason itself in “nihilistic madness.”¹³ This is the no-win paradigm that younger artists have sought to dive under. And the nihilistic madness will prevail until critical theorists accept Sartre’s realization that “self-

9. David Cooper, *Existentialism: Reconstructed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 172.

10. Andrew Arato, *The Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1988), 24.

11. Cooper, 182.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Luce Irigaray, *Between east and west* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 4.



reflection is conducted not by switching on an inner search-light, but by observing how one is reflected in that 'world of tasks,' which is the 'image of myself.'"¹⁴

PARADIGM SHIFTS

IN THE EARLY 1990S, several trends signaled the initial shift from "nihilistic madness" to a world of tasks: (1) the emergence of art that green-lighted desire in and for itself; (2) the preference for particularized (anti-essentialist) perspectives; (3) the explosion of art-about-the-body; and (4) the reinvestigation of visual pleasure. Under this transitional paradigm, the visual magnificence of Mapplethorpe's erotically charged photographs was credited with inspiring the viewer's attention to their transgressive content. While the postmodern canon included Mapplethorpe's work, its critical attention focused on the implications of his "unworldly" subjects rather than his sexually arousing photographs. One could cite at least 85 artists producing art "about" the body, though works actually involving viewer's bodies were still rare. Artists

were exploring ways to engage viewers' bodies as never before.

By 1995, the shift was in full sway and action-oriented movements (Nouveau réalisme, Fluxus, Neo-Concretism, performative interventions, land art) previously ignored by postmodernism proved central to the paradigm. Experientialism would have been identified earlier had Marcel Duchamp, who consistently

produced experiential objects and designed experiential exhibitions, encouraged viewers to spin his *Bicycle Wheel* rather than insist that the spectator contribute to the creative act via deciphering and interpreting.¹⁵ Fully aware of the rendezvous' experiential nature, as well as *Etant Donnés's* (1946-66) stature as an amuse(u)ment park ride (no less so than Disneyland's Swiss Family Robinson tree house), Duchamp's arranging for the Philadelphia Museum of Art to display his works en masse inaugurated the experiential museum.

Just as modern and postmodern objects characterized by

poesis (doing-as-making) have given way to "a world of tasks," characterized by Arendt's conception of praxis (doing-as-acting), museums are increasingly marketing themselves as events, rather than vaults. As for now, MoMA is to Hard Rock Cafe as pictures are to guitars. Two Cleveland-based economists recently identified the "experiential economy" (experiences as commodities) as the fourth economic revolution, analogous in art to the experiential museum; preceded by the service economy (services as commodities), analogous in art to the critic/consultant; preceded by the goods-based industrial economy (manufactured goods), analogous in art to the gallery; preceded by the agrarian economy (making things from scratch).¹⁶

For meaning to flourish, critical analysts must adopt an anti-representational theory of art, which entails justification not truthfulness. This attitude first appeared 65 years ago, when Sartre wrote "What exists appears, lets itself be encountered, but you can never deduce it"; something distinctly particulate exists "beneath all explanation."¹⁷ Such an open-ended interpretive scheme explains how works elicit an infinite number of responses. Most importantly, each response indicates the variety of cognitive experience the work triggers. The increased interest in art that actualizes action parallels the recent organization of protests to vocalize attitudes toward war and peace, global trade, the WTO, Davos, GMOs, and the G8. As survival strategies, both participatory art and protests enable people to maneuver their world, to acquire habits of action for coping with reality.

THE EXISTENTIAL "TRACE"

MID-CENTURY EXPERIENTIAL practices coincided with existentialism's height of popularity, so existential values probably grounded their pursuits. It is now rather impossible to discern existentialism's influence, though "traces" of its can-do spirit, in spite of mishaps and uncertainties (its life-is-not-a-bed-of-roses caveat), pervade current films (*Lost in Translation*, *Love Actually*, *Pieces of April*) and novels (*Life of Pi*, *Cold Mountain*). Just as postmodernist theorists helped to navigate that era's material culture, existentialists (or related thinkers) like Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Gabriel Marcel and Hannah Arendt seem relevant once more, even though situations, interventions and participatory art thwart explication. Existentialism, which first surfaced 60 years ago, can neither justify nor explain the resurgence of experiential art.

14. Cooper, 97.

15. Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," in *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (New York City: De Capo Press, 1973), 140.

16. B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, "Welcome to the Experience Economy," *Harvard Business Review* (July-August 1998), 97.

17. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (1986), 184 ff.

18. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1957), 553-54.

19. Kristeva, 42.

20. *Ibid.*, 75.

21. Julia Kristeva, Hannah Arendt (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 80.



Rather, the existential quest for freedom and capability stipulates how to step out of the postmodern quagmire. Sartre wrote that “man is the one by whom it happens that there is a world (...) he is also the one who makes himself (...) it is therefore senseless to think of complaining since nothing foreign has decided what we are.”¹⁸ Like earlier avant-gardists, the Heidegger student Arendt saw the world, not the word, as the place where the life of the mind could link the demands of praxis to the demands of a meaning poised for endless questioning.¹⁹ Anticipating recent critiques of essentializing theories, Arendt stressed the importance of “becoming a who.”²⁰ By fostering subjectivity, experientialists affirm the humanity implicit in “becoming a who.” Julia Kristeva, the Lacian psychoanalyst who recently wrote a book about Arendt’s life’s work, notes how action adapts itself in the heart of plurality, enabling the latter to achieve *eudemonia*, that “blessedness” or, rather, “well-being” that accompanies each man throughout life but is visible only to others.²¹ By inviting visitors to partake of memorable shared experiences, museums and galleries make visible this search for well-being.

When accessibility inspires indeterminate reciprocal relations, public spaces are rendered political. The existentialists considered availability “a reciprocal relation through which each party is committed not only to treating the other as a free person, but to enabling and collaborating with his freedom (...). A person can only realize himself ‘qua freedom’ as a participant in such reciprocal relations.”²² Similarly, the late American philosopher Donald Davidson qualified a free action as one where a change in the agent causes something to happen outside himself.²³ This sounds like quintessential Cage, who contrived ego-free formats (viz., a change in the agent) to transform artist and audience alike (cause something to happen outside him/herself). The existentialists saw freedom as neither an ideal nor a passion, but as part and parcel with human existence.²⁴ In Arendt’s seminal essay “What is Freedom?”, she argues that only where the “I-will” and the “I-can” coincide does freedom come to pass.²⁵ Unlike her teachers Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, Arendt proposed public appearance, empowerment (the “I-can”) and discussion as immunity against existential regret and angst.

For Arendt, the “I-can” liberates willing and knowing from their bondage to “necessity,” specifically the insufficiency of talents, gifts, and other qualities that impede action. That is, freedom exists whenever one overcomes their natural limitations to implement a plan. The term

“ecovention” (ecology + invention) was recently coined to describe an artist-initiated (“I-will”) project that employs an inventive (“I-know”) strategy to transform a local (“I-can”) ecology. Unlike other kinds of land art, ecoventions generally balance all three positions. For example, earthworks stress the “I-will,” environmental art emphasizes the “I-can,” and most eco-art focuses on the “I-know.” The collaborative nature of ecoventions, which often involve artists, scientists, citizens, volunteers, politicians, architects, urban planners and landscape architects in wide-ranging discussions from start to finish, ultimately balances these positions, making their realization possible. “To transform,” here, doesn’t necessarily mean to improve or fix, since experimental ecoventions yield unpredictable outcomes. Unlike science, ecoventions defy instrumentalism. An ecovention’s value reflects the way that human potential alters history’s course, rather than the action’s measurable success, though most ecoventions exceed expectations. Taking action is the alternative to doing nothing.

The irreversible nature of open systems disables repetition, thereby enabling multiple unexpected experiences. According to Sartre, every action embodies a person’s own order of values and meanings and every choice implies commitments that act as “guiding lights” for future conduct and attitudes.²⁶ Similarly, Davidson’s concept of actions displays desires that cannot be overridden.²⁷ Their impact cannot be undone like a destructible object. One’s intentional life (hopes, desires, fears, perceptions) is incomprehensible outside of participation and engagement.²⁸ Arendt distinguished open-ended actions from both labor (which entails survival) and work (which has utilitarian goals). In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt described how each unpredictable action releases human potential and initiates unknowable processes. “In acting, in contradistinction to working, it is indeed true that we can really never know what we are doing.”²⁹ Arendt wrote that to be free and to act are one and the same, so works that facilitate action cannot help but engender freedom.³⁰

- 22. Cooper, 176.
- 23. Donald Davidson, *Actions + Events* (Oxford University Press, 1980), 64.
- 24. Cooper, 158.
- 25. Hannah Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2000), 451.
- 26. Cooper, 173.
- 27. Davidson, 267.
- 28. Cooper, 72.
- 29. Arendt, 178-80.
- 30. *Ibid.*, 446.

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