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In Philadelphia, Alex Da Corte Reinvents an Allan Kaprow Classic

by Andrew Russeth



Courtesy of the artist, University of the Arts, Sadie Coles HQ, and Karma, NY. Photo by Ian Douglas.

In 1962, a young Philadelphia arts patron named Joan Kron met with the artist Allan Kaprow and asked him to stage one of his infamous happenings on behalf of the fledgling Arts Council she was helping to run. “I’ll give you *Chicken*,” she remembers him telling her, and not, “Do you want *Chicken*?” As Kaprow unspooled what he had in mind, Kron—now 92 and living in New York—says she realized, “This is going to be trouble.”

Staged on a November night in the auditorium of the YM/YWHA, *Chicken* had performers brandishing live chickens, dead chickens (Kaprow slung one around his neck with rope), and quite a few eggs. The artist’s four-page script mentions a “monstrous chicken,” nine feet tall, made of wood, wire mesh, and newspaper, and salespeople, one hawking cooked chicken parts: “Hee y’are! Get ya fresh roasted chicken dinah!” At one point, policemen entered the auditorium and sprayed the giant chicken with fire extinguishers.

“The cleanup was horrible because they were throwing eggs,” Kron recalls. The Y’s board was not pleased, some Arts Council supporters resigned, and a legend was born. “They were doing these radical things because there wasn’t the Institute of Contemporary Art yet,” says curator Sid Sachs, discussing the Arts Council. “These women were involved in the arts in some capacity, and they volunteered, and they just got these shows together.”

The Kaprow blowout marked the end of one such show, the first-ever Pop Art exhibition on the East Coast. It is only one of many remarkable moments surveyed in “Invisible City,” a four-venue exhibition about recent Philadelphia art history running at the University of the Arts there through April 4. Organized by Sachs, who runs the school’s galleries, with the art

historian Jennie Hirsh, it charts the City of Brotherly Love's vital art and design scenes in the years between 1956 and 1976, placing luminaries and lesser-known figures side by side, from designer George Nakashima and architect Denise Scott Brown to artist Bill Walton and the Philadelphia Wireman, whose ingenious, compact sculptures was discovered, abandoned, in 1982.

It's a thrilling exhibition, and last Thursday night, it delivered a reinvention of *Chicken* by Alex Da Corte, the 39-year-old Philadelphia artist whose videos were a starring attraction at last year's Venice Biennale. As the temperature dropped, people streamed quickly into the former home of the Y—now Gershman Hall, a four-story neoclassical brick pile owned by the university—to see what he had created.

Yellow signs labeled "CHICKEN" pointed the way to the auditorium. "If you want to see everything, go to the balcony," an usher advised. "If you want to be in it, go to the ground floor." Inside, the chairs had been removed from the orchestra level, the room was blanketed in yellow light, and a four-piece band was playing gentle drones. Oddly, there were no chickens in sight.

In one corner, a man in a spherical white outfit (Andrew Smith) stood in a cage, reading a blank newspaper. Scattered around the space were six platforms, on which women in yellow outfits sat, accompanied by signs ("A CLEAN MOON FOR A CHANGE!" "MOON ROCKS!") and props (lab equipment, stacked egg cartons). They looked like carnival barkers taking meditation breaks. Audience members peered down from the balcony, giving those down below the distinct impression of being gladiators in a Roman coliseum. It felt like all hell is about to break loose.

And there was Kaprow himself! He was instantly recognizable with his fulsome beard and bushy eyebrows, wearing a vest, jeans, and well-worn brown boots. (It was Da Corte, after hours of makeup work.) Suddenly a spotlight was on him, and he had an announcement: "In the words of the great Joe Brainard, I remember *Chicken*." And with that, the music turned threatening—sawing strings, as in a slasher film's soundtrack—and Kaprow was twirling his index fingers in the air, a bit like a superhero villain orchestrating chaos.

The women took turns selling various moon products with high-energy menace. One (Julia Eichten) fired up a vacuum cleaner, shouting as she dusted a huge white bouncy ball. "Don't you feel shiny?!" she growled. "Don't you feel light?! Isn't it good to be *white*?!"

"You look sad!" another (Jessica Emmanuel) crowed, liquid bubbling in beakers before her. "You look depressed! You look miserable!" It was the moon's fault, she explained. "If you're broke: moon! If you're lonely: moon!"

A purveyor of moon rocks tossed her products—whole eggs, which splattered all over. "Everybody gets a moon rock today! You get one, and you get one, and you get one!"

Lastly, blue light! The women moved on the man reading the newspaper, pushing his cage to the center. Performers in blue sprayed it with fire extinguishers, the moon man inside shaking slowly. Kaprow was on stage again. "Ladies and gentlepeople, the sky has fallen," he said, sounding a little forlorn. He suggested that people go home and call their mother, "our lady moonlight, and tell her that you love her. Happy Halloween. And good night."

The crowd lingered. There had been no chickens, but there had been moments of terrifying salesmanship, dizzying violence, and total pandemonium barely pulled back into order—

all very American things (at the risk of putting too fine a point on it), assembled over one ingenious, harrowing, entrancing hour.

“I’m still in shock,” Da Corte tells me by phone a few days after the show. “I had never done a live performance before.” Processing it all, he’s been thinking about how “it was a punk show, it was a rave, it was a comedy show, it was so many different things.”

No further performances are planned, even though he worked on it for four years, studying the details of the 1962 original. “The only thing I replaced was instead of a chicken it was this orb, the moon,” he says.

“In my imagination, when we think of an egg, we think of the yellow yolk inside,” Da Corte says, explaining how he came to focus on the moon. “There’s a funny slippage that occurs there, where, in seeing the outside of something you’re also imagining the inside at the same time. I think that’s beautiful.”

The veteran Phila artist Rosalyn Drexler penned the show’s treatment, and choreographer Kate Watson-Wallace marshaled performers and charted possibilities for movement. “It was a deeply collaborative effort with so many people,” Da Corte says. About 20 performers brought it to life. Since then, “we’ve been on this text chain discussing it and saying, Jeez, we see yellow everywhere we go,” he says, “really missing each other in this strange moment we’ve created. I think for me it was singularly quite life changing. I still have no words to describe it. It was just deeply moving for all of us.”

One suspects that Kaprow, who died in 2006 at the age of 78, might have understood what they are going through. He certainly would have admired it. In a 1966 lecture, he said, “A happening is for those who happen in this world, for those who don’t want to stand off and just look.” Later, he put it another way, arguing that “happeners have a plan and go ahead and carry it out. To use an old expression, they don’t merely dig the scene, they make it.”