

# ALLAN KAPROW'S *FLUIDS*: AN ARCHITECTURAL HAPPENING IN LOS ANGELES

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## INTRODUCTION:

In 2008, the Museum of Contemporary Art presented an exhibition entitled, *Allan Kaprow—Art as Life*, whereby art historians revisited the legacy of artist Allan Kaprow's Happenings and his influence on temporal and performative artistic practices.<sup>1</sup> In conjunction with the exhibition, the museum coordinated the reinvention of *Fluids*, Kaprow's best remembered, most elaborate, and most often repeated Happening. (Figure 1) Originally carried out in the fall of 1967 as a commissioned piece for his mid-career retrospective, *Fluids* was a multi-site Happening that took place in fifteen different locations across Los Angeles over a three-day period. In locations ranging from the San Fernando Valley, Beverly Hills to Watts, participants constructed, block-by-block, a 4,900 cubic-foot, rectangular ice structure and left it to melt. While Kaprow's previous Happenings were predominately loose and unscripted, *Fluids* required an immense amount of advanced planning and organization such as identifying sites, obtaining permits, acquiring insurance, scheduling ice deliveries as well as coordinating on-site engineers to ensure that each structure would not warp, sag or collapse during construction.<sup>2</sup> (Figure 2) Here, we can imagine Kaprow's role as an artist shifting to that of a project architect, but I will argue that the remarkable qualities of *Fluids* registered not at the scale of the individual ice structure but by way of its ambition to reveal the city's development patterns.

For three months, while living in the Pasadena foothills of art philanthropist Peggy Phelp's private residence, Kaprow toiled over the concept of what it would mean to build and present blank ice structures throughout Los Angeles. As he outlined the conditions for *Fluids*, he wrote notes ranging from fictitious press releases and newspaper articles that connected the building of ice enclosures to civil rights demonstrations taking place in the 'troubled neighborhood' of Watts, and also wrote stories of architecture firms claiming to revolutionize the concept of housing by promoting models of 'vanishing houses.' Little has been written about these forged narratives and even less has been written about Kaprow's pre-occupation with architecture and his interest in urban planning. The substantial gestures critiquing the urban condition of Los Angeles have never been considered critically, and is reconsidered here for the first time outside of an art historical context. Studied through an architectural lens, the intent of this paper is first to offer an in depth analysis of the project and present *Fluids* as a Happening that revealed the architectural and urban specificities of a city whose planning tactics were on the edge of something not yet defined. In other words, at the time Kaprow carried out *Fluids*, the Los Angeles School of Urbanism had not yet established the city's status as a model form of contemporary urbanization,<sup>3</sup> nor had Reyner Banham published his celebration of the rapidly developing city as a neatly packed ecology. Instead, Los Angeles recalled the plains and residual spaces found in Cedric Price and Peter Hall's "Non-Plan: an Experiment in Freedom" (1967-69) and Archizoom's proposal for a No-Stop City (1970) that imagined an endless city without mandates and without borders.<sup>4</sup> Not only did Los Angeles epitomize this type of vast, continuous landscape, in many respects LA's urban history was marked by a Wild Wild West approach. According to Robert Fogelson, private development drove public planning infrastructure where any "potential of planning was thus effectively reduced to zoning practices...[and] merely sanctioned the preferences of private enterprise."<sup>5</sup> In the six years between 1964 and 1970, the allowable density of homes in neighborhoods from Venice to Mid-City increased from eight units to two-hundred, and within roughly the same years, the entire county of Los Angeles issued their highest percentage of new construction permits for

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multi-family housing units. As a result, the county attracted the interest of private developers; and construction of apartment buildings in neighborhoods across the county more than tripled, while development in the neighborhood of Watts, despite their housing shortage after the uprising in 1965, remained stagnant.

Kaprow revealed these uneven development patterns through *Fluids*, mediating the city by drawing attention to the social, political and economic forces that played a provocative role in shaping the city's urban form. Through the ephemeral event of a Happening, Kaprow's aspired to undermine the mastery and originality that was important to modernism, and while *Fluids* is considered an important project in the development of live, performance art, read alongside the history of L.A.'s uneven development patterns, it becomes clear that *Fluids* exists as an architectural endeavor that narrates one of the most provocative relationships between urban form and private development.

### Mediating through Maps

Surveying the physical landscape of Los Angeles, Kaprow began to map various locations within the city of Los Angeles, choosing sites with distinct histories such as the Dodge House in Mid-City, the Trousdale Estate in Beverly Hills, and on campus of Pierce College in the San Fernando Valley. The Dodge House was built for Walter Luther Dodge by Irving Gill in 1916. Located in a single-family R-1 zone, the neighborhood was re-zoned to R-4 in 1964, increasing the allowable density of the homes on N. Kings Road. In May 1967, the owner of the property Bart Lytton announced a \$2.4 million development plan for the 2.75-acre site and five months later Kaprow performed *Fluids* on the front lawn of the property.<sup>6</sup> The house was ultimately demolished in 1970 and replaced with apartments, and whether Kaprow's only intention to carry out *Fluids* at the Dodge house was merely to support preservation efforts, *Fluids* highlighted the city's real estate trends and shifts taking place in residential building activity at the time. (Figure 3) The large ice houses built on the Pierce College campus similarly appeared to draw attention to the history of real estate speculation that played a significant role in the making of the San Fernando Valley.<sup>7</sup> Lastly, in the final performance of *Fluids*, Kaprow chose the site of an empty lot in the Trousdale estates, a former ranch that was purchased and subdivided for housing development in 1954. Located at the foothills of Beverly Hills, the Trousdale estates represented what Reyner Banham called the privileged enclaves where "the financial and topographical contours (of the foothills) correspond almost exactly: the higher the ground the higher the income."<sup>8</sup> In the winter of 1965, *Architecture Digest* featured phase two of the Trousdale Estate's development designed by A. Quincy Jones and Frederick Emmons. While only five of the proposed ten model homes were built, the major selling points included the estates' "air of deeply buried privacy."<sup>9</sup> and view of "Century City"<sup>10</sup> that had recently been developed. The act of building melting ice structure on the Trousdale's private development spoke directly to LA's penchant for exclusivity, perpetuating what Bernard Tschumi correctly criticized as America's form of middle-class retreat from the "decaying remnants of the inner-city."<sup>11</sup>

Mapped in its entirety, *Fluids* extended through time and space, recalling a 'psychogeographic' intervention in the city. (Figure 4) When Guy Debord and the Situationists developed the *Naked City* in 1957, they sought to counter the effects of the 'spectacle' through spatio-temporal investigations of the city, using duration of experience and participatory action. Composed of fragments and cut-outs from the existing structure of the Plan de Paris, the *Naked City* produced a new type of map that enhanced what Debord regarded as an "illustration of the hypothesis of psychogeographical turntables." For Debord, a psychogeographical map of the modern city allowed a user to drift through the city, organize space around revolutionary principles, and reclaim urban environments from the grips of commodity consumption in order to ultimately re-appropriate space for social needs. In a similar manner, *Fluids* directed attention to the spectacle of capitalist production and worked to subvert the politics laden within each location.

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### Mediating through the Ephemeral

In an interview after *Fluids* was carried out, Kaprow explained how he intended *Fluids* to be an intervention on urban planning explaining, “in this country, we’re brought up on multiplicity; it’s the very stuff of our spiritual and economic life. The sense of seriality, of continuousness within which everything quickly grinds down only to be replaced by something else. These things make me aware of time and space in a way that traditional approaches to aesthetics never could.”<sup>12</sup> As former student of John Cage and an attentive reader of John Dewey,<sup>13</sup> Kaprow became highly critical of the institution of art,<sup>14</sup> and aggressively worked to “blur the line between art and life.”<sup>15</sup> As early as 1959, Kaprow began to rearrange the relationship between the artist and audience and explored duration, weather, and space. He also began to experiment with participation and most importantly, began to relocate his practice out into the environments that people experienced on a daily basis.<sup>16</sup> For Benjamin Buchloh, Kaprow’s emphasis on the ‘everyday’, “critically addressed nominal status of the art object, the art audience and the artist as producer.”<sup>17</sup> By resisting the authorial role of the artist and in his direct repression of “traditional approaches to aesthetics” and promotion of the ‘everyday’ Kaprow was, interestingly, appropriating architectural concerns.

By turning to architecture, Kaprow was able to make use of the disciplines renewed concerns for organizing bodies in space, ephemerality, participation and collaboration, on a level that making “traditional art” could never afford. During the sixties, architecture was still experiencing the tail end of post-war expansion, which had obscured its capacity to communicate as a socially engaged form of language in large part due to its association with economic conditions of production, standardization and distribution.<sup>18</sup> As a response, architects during this time began to shift their focus toward a socially and politically engaged practice. Emphasis on urban events, participation, experience and duration were emblematic of architecture’s desire to “bring architecture back in touch with the heartbeat and the fleshy hand of the man.”<sup>19</sup>

Conceived as a participatory event, *Fluids* appropriated these concerns and used architecture to generate interaction amongst participants through the collaborative labor of constructing ice houses. In each of the fifteen different locations that *Fluids* was carried out, the physical act of communal labor recalled the countercultural communitarianism of Drop City, which exemplified Kaprow’s call for “total integration of art and life” to the fullest degree.<sup>20</sup> The collaborative effort associated with the impulse to build “community” translated directly through the act of building itself, wherein each location participants followed a hard and fast recipe. “Rectangular ice enclosures of ice blocks (measuring about 30 feet long to wide and 8 feet high) are built throughout the city, their walls are unbroken, they are left to melt.”<sup>21</sup> However, evident in the working notes in Kaprow’s archive, adhering to this procedural script was the least important component of *Fluids* and only necessary insofar as serving as a primer for interaction.

### *Fluids* in Watts

Among the loose-leaf sheets of legal paper marked with budget estimates, preparatory sketches, and numerous fake press releases, Kaprow wrote a “news brief” that described the construction of giant ice structures in Watts and “other trouble town areas.” (Figure 5)

The write up was short, but described how the process of building *Fluids* caught the attention of the media.

Police have no reports of ~~civil disobedience~~ that there is any connection with civil rights ~~dis~~ demonstrations. Authorities and local leaders in Watts and other trouble-town areas ~~and other strife town areas~~ deny knowing ~~connection with local political movements~~ anything more than what was read in the newspaper.

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Kaprow struggled to find the appropriate words to use in the draft, writing ‘civil disobedience,’ crossing it out, then correcting what seems to be an attempt to write out ‘civil rights disturbances’ to ‘civil rights demonstrations.’ The news brief calls attention to assumptions often made that any crowd engaging in a form of public activity could be misconstrued as a type of civil disturbance, particularly in the neighborhood of Watts where the widely publicized rebellion took place in 1965. While there is no evidence to suggest that Kaprow was trying to create a riot through the performance of *Fluids*, his description of a public spectacle does correspond to the type of social action in public space that he was ultimately interested in exploring.<sup>22</sup>

### Mediating through Participation

Describing the Happening as an act of civil disobedience may have been the most appropriate way to describe Kaprow’s desire to create an art of collaborative actions rather than a lasting object-based art. Like many of his Happenings, it is unclear if he ever had a singular and fixed intention for his work, but to the extent that Kaprow was undoubtedly interested in redefining the audience of art to become active participants, it would seem inconceivable to regard *Fluids* as it took place in Watts without considering its relation to architecture’s contribution to the burgeoning philosophy that social change and community development can be achieved through collaboration and participation. Analogous to a site-specific work that revealed site’s social, political and symbolic context,<sup>23</sup> *Fluids* in Watts produced an awareness of the heightened social and political issues that were laden within the site. In this way *Fluids* can even be described as an act of architectural activism reminding us of the significant role the citizen, user, and participatory groups began to play in determining the immediate outcome for L.A. neighborhoods, especially the city’s central city neighborhoods such as Watts.

The challenges the city of Watts faced in the aftermath of the uprising deserves more detailed scrutiny than can be given here, but the issues that were largely responsible for the uprising remained and Watts continued to be institutionally segregated, politically and economically from the rest of Los Angeles.<sup>24</sup> According to a 1970 AIA sponsored conference on the effectiveness of Community Development Corporations, only 36 housing units had been developed in south central five years after the Watts rebellion when more than 5,000 units were reported to still be needed. Unlike the San Fernando Valley and Mid-City where neighborhoods were up-zoned for increased development, there was very little private or civic investment in the central city, even with the concentrated need. As a result, neighborhood based community action groups established an active voice in the planning process and became the life force of a neighborhood fraught with limited preservation assistance from the city. Groups such as the Watts Community Housing Corporation, Studio Watts Workshop and the Urban Workshop represented this shift. As new category of do-it-yourself community planners, tasked with intervening in their immediate neighborhood, their efforts seemed to coincide directly with Kaprow’s emphasis on participation that defined his architectural Happening.

### Conclusion

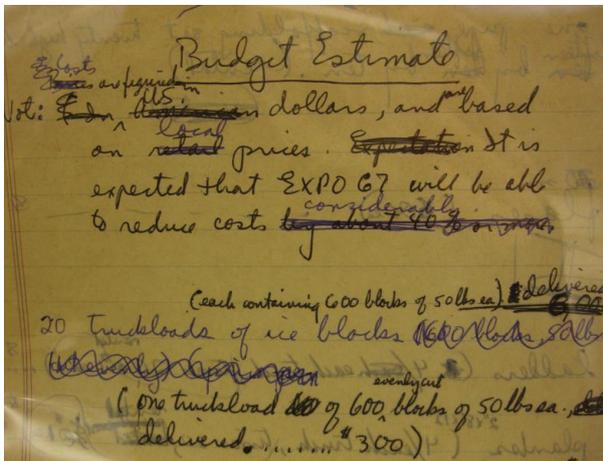
As a pointed example of an artwork that transgressed the disciplinary boundaries set by art history, this paper examined how *Fluids* intersected directly with architecture’s desire to reinforce collaboration and participation as an expanded definition of architectural practice, translating and transferring architectural concerns in order to produce what I defined as an architectural happening. Kaprow’s concept of the “Happening” and his interest in participatory events, dislodged the authorial figure of the singular artist in favor of collaborative strategies that involved audience members. As a singularity in Kaprow’s oeuvre, *Fluids* engaged the urban environment, drawing on the urban form of Los Angeles and private development in order to reveal the social, political and economic underpinnings of the city’s urban structure. Moving from site to site, *Kaprow* mapped L.A.’s fragmented ‘territories’ and highlighted the intensely different socio-economic locales of Beverly Hills, the valley and Watts, and in each location, re-claiming space through social and spatial relationships,<sup>25</sup> even if momentarily to build ice houses.

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**Figure 1.** Fluids, 1967. Location Trousedale Estates. Photo: Julian Wasser.



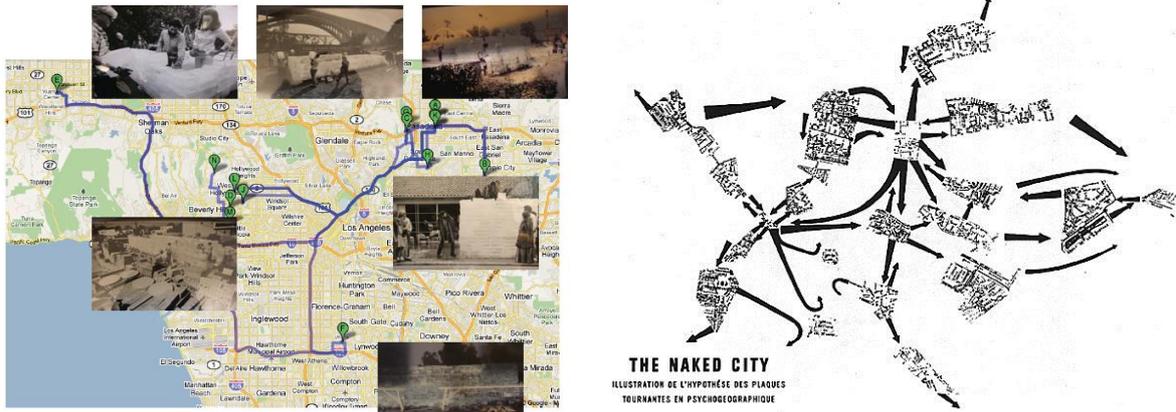
**Figure 2.** Budget Notes



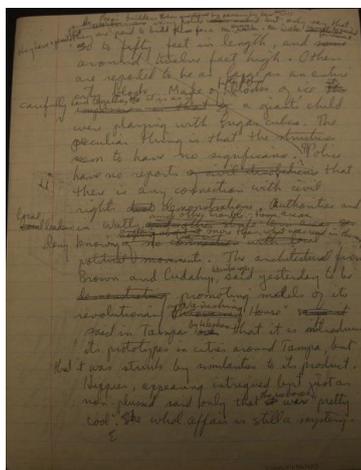
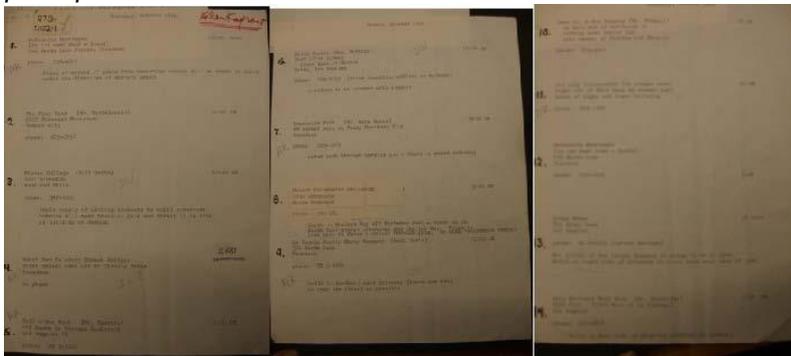
**Figure 3.**

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**Figure 4.** Image shows locations that I plotted into Mapquest based on the Kaprow's list. Image below is the list of locations to stage Fluids which includes full address, date, time, and potential participants/volunteers.



**Figure 5.** Kaprow's notes on Watts location

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<sup>1</sup> For Happenings and their connection to performance art and theater see; Kirby, Michael. "Happenings, an illustrated anthology." Scripts & Productions by Jim Dine.

<sup>2</sup> Kelley, Jeff, and Allan Kaprow. *Childsplay: the Art of Allan Kaprow*. (Berkeley: University of California, 2004.), 121.

<sup>3</sup> During the early 1970s, Los Angeles architects and urban planners were only beginning to destabilize and reconfigure the Chicago School's approach to urbanism that had dominated the planning discourse. See Michael Dear's *From Chicago to LA: Making Sense of Urban Theory* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Non-Plan: an experiment in freedom' New Society 338, (20th March 1969) Reyner Banham, Peter Hall, Cedric Price, Paul Barker and Archizoom Associates, "No-Stop City. Residential Parkings.Climatic Universal System" Domus 496, March 1971, 49-55.

<sup>5</sup> Fogelson, Robert M. *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967.

<sup>6</sup> John Pastier (1969-08-31). "Dodge House Future Hangs in Balance as Threats Reach Peak". Los Angeles Times. And Saving of Dodge House Assured by Financier". Los Angeles Times. 1967-05-11 Lytton Company owned by Bart Lytton who bought the Dodge House from the Board of Education for \$800k in 1966. In May 1967, Lytton announced a \$2.4 million development plan for the 2.75-acre site.

<sup>7</sup> Subdividing land for suburban development in the San Fernando Valley was predicated on the belief by speculators that water would be available in the agrarian valley. On November 1913, William Mulholland provided the resource to the valley, opening up the possibility for speculators to actually develop on their land. For an excellent history of the single family only zone in Los Angeles see Dana Cuff, and Per Johan DAHL. "Rx for the R1:Sustaining the Neighborhood."

<sup>8</sup> Dear, Michael. "Rediscovering Reyner Banham's Los Angeles."

<sup>9</sup> Banham, Reyner. *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*. Berkeley, Ca.: University of California, 2009. 33-34.

<sup>10</sup> Artist Judy Chicago carried out a similar performance entitled *Disappearing Environments*. In 1968, Chicago collaborated with Lloyd Hamrol and Eric Orr to build nine, all-white, mini-ziggurats made of twenty –five tons of dry ice. By using the temporary material of dry ice and incorporating road flares, the artists produced a spectacle of light and space that emphasized the city's exuberant consumer culture. Although the title of the performance uses the term 'environment,' Judy Chicago describes this event as part of her investigation of "atmospheres," which is distinct from Kaprow's investigation of 'environments' discussed in this paper as Kaprow's interest in the built environment. For more on Chicago see Lacy, Suzanne and Jennifer Flores Sternad. "Voices, Variations and Deviations From the LACE archive of southern California performance art." In *Live Art in LA Performance in Southern California, 1970-1983*. Ed. Peggy Phelan (New York: Routledge, 2012):64.

<sup>11</sup> Tschumi, Bernard. "Sanctuaries" *Architectural Design* 43 September 1973.

<sup>12</sup> Kaprow, Allan, and Jeff Kelley. *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Berkeley: p185 reprinted in *Pop LA: Art in the City in the 1960s*. University of California, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Allan Kaprow was highly influenced by American philosopher John Dewey and wanted to "take life's meanings from outside art and inside common experience." Kaprow, Allan, and Jeff Kelley, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Branden W. Joseph. "Robert Morris and John Cage: Reconstructing a Dialogue Author" *October*, Vol. 81 (Summer, 1997), pp. 59-69. The MIT Press and Smithsonian, Robert and Allan Kaprow. "What is a Museum: A dialogue between Robert Smithson and Allan Kaprow" (1967). In Smithsonian, Robert, and Jack Flam. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Berkeley, Etc: University of California, 1996. Pp43-51.

<sup>15</sup> Inspired in part by John Cage's chance experimentation and Kaprow's call to keep the line between art and life as "fluid and perhaps as indistinct as possible."

<sup>16</sup> Kaprow's interest in the 'everyday' was also visible in his desire to root Happenings within the broad social and cultural current of the sixties. In "*Pinpointing Happenings*" he situates "Happenings" alongside Bobby Kennedy, Hippie groups, party-game kits, slogans to popular radio stations, and the Supremes, in order to position "happenings" as a celebratory form

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of social, political, cultural and artistic liberation and firmly outside of the institutional context of the art world.

<sup>17</sup> See Buchloh, B. H. D., Judith F. Rodenbeck, and Robert E. Haywood. *Experiments in the Everyday: Allan Kaprow and Robert Watts, Events, Objects, Documents*. (New York: Columbia University, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, 1999.)5 and 42.

<sup>18</sup> On how functionalism in architecture became ultimately co-opted by the "corporate activities of an enlightened capitalism" see Vidler, Anthony. "Histories of the Immediate Present Inventing Architectural Modernism." In *Writing Architecture Series*. [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008] 82-83. And R. E. Somol "Still Crazy after All These Years" .*Assemblage*, No. 36 (Aug., 1998), pp. 84-92. The MIT Press.

<sup>19</sup> C. Ray Smith. "Involvement and Commitment" in *Supermannerism: New Attitudes in Post-Modern Architecture*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Inspired in part by John Cage's chance experimentation and Kaprow's happenings, the founders of Drop City, according to Ellisa Auther, in *West of Center*, originally began rehearsing for Drop City by staging "Drop Art," that took on the ethos of Cage and Kaprow by dropping large objects off a building to see how they would drop in the street. See, Auther, Elissa, and Adam Lerner. *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977*. Denver, Colo.: Published in cooperation with the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, 2012, p.32.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Schechner and Allan Kaprow. "Extensions in Time and Space. An Interview with Allan Kaprow" *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 12, No. 3, *Architecture/Environment* (Spring, 1968), pp.153-159.

<sup>22</sup> Art historian Benjamin Buchloh explains Kaprow focused his attention on shifting art practices from an apolitical, privatized formalism to that of a socially and politically engaged practice. See Buchloh, B. H. D., Judith F. Rodenbeck, and Robert E. Haywood. *Experiments in the Everyday: Allan Kaprow and Robert Watts, Events, Objects, Documents*. (New York: Columbia University, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, 1999.), 5.

<sup>23</sup> The definition of site-specificity used here is taken from Rosalyn Deutsche,'s extended definition of the term. She explains the term site-specificity came to inherit a site's social, political and symbolic context. Described as a technique that was originally developed to bring art outside of its institutional frames, site-specific work underwent permutations in the sixties and seventies to include "the discursive and historical circumstances within which artwork, spectator and site are situated." Deutsche, Rosalyn. "Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City." *October (cambridge, Mass.)*.47.47 (1989): 84-90. For more on site-specificity, see Kwon, Miwon *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> A lack of transportation infrastructure prevented access to the rest of LA's "economy", perpetuating the poverty within the neighborhood.

<sup>25</sup> Lefbvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2009. 73.

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