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Still-Live and The Theatrics of the Everyday

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Still Live

The Theatrics of the Kienholz Tableaux

text by Daman Willick



Ed Kienholz and Nancy Hedden Kienholz, *Still Live*, 1974; installation: Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Berlin; courtesy LA Lower Gallery, Los Angeles

I the undersigned am at least 18 years of age. I fully and soberly understand the danger to me upon entry of this environment. I hereby absolve the artist Edward Kienholz, the owner of the piece and the sponsors of this exhibition of any and all responsibility (morally and legally) on my behalf.

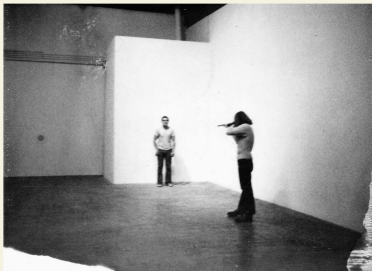
Do you sign this contract or not? You are having second thoughts as you consider entering Ed and Nancy Reddin Kienholz' *Still Live* (1974), a room-sized installation/tableau encircled with barbed wire, sandbags and barricades, at its center a loaded rifle rigged to fire.¹ Crossing the barricade, you find yourself within a recreated American domestic interior with chair, lamp, magazines and framed pictures on the walls. You sit down. Maybe you nervously thumb through an outdated magazine but eventually, you end up concentrating on the barrel of the rifle that protrudes from a bosque mechanism, resembling a television cabinet as well as a tombstone, pointed directly toward your head. You have been warned that the rifle is supposedly rigged to fire a live round randomly once every hundred years, and the flashing red light atop the black box does little to ease your nerves.

Ed Kienholz explained that he had long been interested in making an environment that was threatening—a work that would infuse the everyday violence of American society into the usually placid exhibition space and, by association, the middle-class American home. In defense of the work he wrote that, "I have been asked with some justification why I would build such a piece. My purpose is certainly not death. Quite the contrary, I would hope that this work may be able to invoke new and positive responses to the wonders of life."² In fact, Kienholz was the first to sit in front of what he called "the black box of death" in order to partake in the tableau's intended awakening. *Still Live*, in my opinion, is the most forceful tableau of an artist whose career goal was nothing less than the revolution of the everyday through art's theatrical presentation.

At the time, theatricality in contemporary art had been identified as the antithesis of modernist practice, so great a threat that art historian/critic Michael Fried proclaimed in his seminal essay "Art and Objecthood" that, "theatre is now the negation of art."³ Fried warned that much of the sculpture of the 1960s had more to do with stage design than fine art in that the reliance of such work on the interaction of a participatory audience was diametrically opposed to modernism's optical appeal. As Fried warned: "theatre and theatricality are at war today, not simply with modernist painting (or modernist painting and sculpture), but with art as such."⁴ Although his main targets were the Minimalist objects of artists like Donald Judd and Robert Morris, Fried identified Kienholz in a footnote to the essay as partaking in the ruin of art by invoking theatrical audience interaction. The fact that Kienholz labeled his assemblages "tableaux," a term taken from theatrical set design, only reinforced the artist's reliance on theatricality.

Fried's characterization of Kienholz' tableaux as theatrical was not inaccurate; Kienholz deliberately sought to disrupt the common passivity of traditional art viewing in order to expose repressed aspects of everyday life, including the imminence of our mortality. Kienholz' theatricality was meant to heighten his critique of aspects of American society, and he attempted to construct situations in which the everyday became visible for his viewers to question and ponder—to create opportunities aimed at effecting significant change in behavior. As French sociologist Henri Lefebvre wrote in his first volume of the *Critique of the Everyday* (1947), "man must be everyday, or he will not be at all."⁵ By engaging with the everyday, as Lefebvre went on to elaborate in his third volume of *Critique* (1981), "lived experience is taken and raised up to critical thinking."⁶

Accordingly, it was only through isolating aspects of our daily lives that a revolution of the everyday could take place. In essence, this is what Ed and Nancy Reddin Kienholz were attempting to achieve with *Still Live*, a title that refers both to the artistic practice of still life in which artists represent objects in space as well as to the ideas of a loaded firearm and of still being alive in the world. The Kienholzes framed and reenacted the





Shoot, Chris Burden

F Space, Santa Ana, CA
November 19, 1971

At 7:45 p.m. I was shot in the left arm by a friend. The bullet was a copper-jacketed .22 long rifle. My friend was standing about fifteen feet from me.

Courtesy the artist and Gagosian Gallery, New York

inherent violence of American society, especially the ubiquity of gun violence at home and abroad during the Vietnam Era, in order to bring its realities to the forefront of the spectators' lives.⁷

Still Live was not the first theatrical work to address the underlying violence of the day; Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) is arguably the most well-known art action to address the seemingly rampant gun violence of the period. Burden explained that *Shoot* was in part the result of wondering what would happen if, during a period when people were trying to avoid being shot, he had himself shot on purpose. He explicitly connected his performance to the violence of the war and the enactments of such violence in television dramas and movies. As he explained:

Vietnam had a lot to do with *Shoot*. It was about the difference between how people reacted to soldiers being shot in Vietnam and how they reacted to fictional people being shot on commercial TV. There were guys my age getting shot up in Vietnam, you know? But then in nearly every single household, there were images of people being shot in TV dramas. The images are probably in the billions, right? It's just amazing. So what does it mean not to avoid being shot, that is, by staying home or avoiding the war, but to face it head on? I was trying to question what it means to face that dragon.⁸

Burden brought the dramatic television representations of death and disaster into the gallery, where he replaced the distant broadcast image with his real live body. The few spectators of *Shoot* undoubtedly witnessed the staged, live shooting with emotion and shock and must have felt a moral responsibility as witnesses to assist the artist/victim. However, the film and photographic documents of the performance do little to reverse the common passivity of audiences to media images of the violence of society.

Conversely, Kienholz required the participation and interaction of his audiences in order to transform art viewing into an active endeavor. Like Burden, he was particularly sensitive to the public's ability to ignore the violent realities of the period and had long been interested in creating works that implicated the audience through inviting participation and action. Kienholz created what he believed to be non-elitist, populist art, and he aimed for his tableaux to be direct, immediate and interactive. This idea of populism was central to Kienholz' program; he often spoke of wanting to inspire his audiences to action beyond the confines of art galleries and institutions.

Many of Kienholz' installations sought to implicate and expose the inactivity of the public with the hope of reviving their inaction. For example, before entering his well-known tableau *The Beanery* (1965), one has to walk past the stack of newspapers with the headline *Children Kill Children in Vietnam Riots*. Once inside the piece, the headline haunts the spectator

as they explore the reveries taking place inside a recreated Hollywood bar scene. The *Portable War Memorial* (1968) extended Kienholz' critique of the American public's inaction in the face of war and injustice. Kienholz invited viewers to sit in familiar suburban lawn chairs, purchase bottles of Coca-Cola from a vending machine while surrounded by a Southern California roadside fast-food façade, an Uncle Sam propaganda poster, a distorted reenactment of the Marines claiming victory at Iwo Jima, and a memorial to nations that have perished as a result of modern warfare. Here, Kienholz paralleled American commodity culture with imperialism, and invited the audience to take a front row seat. In defense of the work (he was attacked by the right wing for being unpatriotic) the artist said:

I would first of all never insult this country as I love it perhaps even as well as you. I would, however, in my [own] way presume to change it...Our moral/ethical posture is not so shining that we should weight other cultures with it. We should, perhaps, as a nation and as individuals, understand ourselves and our influences to a far greater degree.⁹

Hence, his goal was to refocus our attention from the trivialities of life to aspects in need of change. He constructed situations in which the everyday became visible so that audiences would be motivated to act rather than remain passive viewers.

In *The Eleventh Hour Final* (1968), a title that plays off the terms "the eleven o'clock news" and "the eleventh hour," Kienholz brought the violence of the Vietnam War into an assembled middle-class living room. From the comfortable vantage point of a sofa, one stares at a television with the war's weekly death toll painted permanently on its screen. When turned on by the viewer, the TV housed a decapitated mannequin head returning their gaze in perpetuity. Kienholz implicated TV in the general disinterest of most Americans to the violent realities of the day, explaining:

It is my contention that to the extent that the major networks inter-twine, we, the viewing public, are endangered...In my thinking, prime time should be understood as the individual span each of us has left to live here on earth. It's a short, short interval and deserves the best quality possible. Certainly better than the boob tube pap we all permit in the name of bigger corporate profits and free enterprise.¹⁰

The Eleventh Hour Final thus points to our mortality and the necessity to be active and aware of our remaining time on earth. This project—to rethink our understanding of "prime time" and the American TV viewer as "endangered"—gets radically extended in *Still Live*. In essence, to enter the tableau was to risk death, and the contract all participants were required to sign only reinforced the integration of the art with everyday realities. The contract, in fact, brought the work down to the everyday. Participants were made aware and put on notice of the uniqueness of the situation. They were required to read and sign the document to reinforce their participation in the work. One wonders, however, just how liable the artist would have been if a participant had been shot while seated in *Still Live* and whether or not the rifle was actually rigged to fire.

Still Live was first exhibited in West Berlin in 1974, funded in part through a visiting artist's fellowship. The work so crossed into the everyday, breaking the boundaries between art and life, that German authorities arrested Ed Kienholz for possessing a firearm and threatened to charge the artist with attempted murder.¹¹ Interestingly, they labeled the artwork into evidence as "a death machine."¹² Though the controversy surrounding the artist's arrest—and the subsequent intervention of the American Consulate to save the work—clouds histories of the piece, *Still Live* remains one of the Kienholzes' most forceful and affective interventions into the everyday. Unfortunately, the work remains in storage to this day.

In the recent modern art textbook *Art Since 1900*, Yves-Alain Bois dismisses Kienholz—in a section entitled "Kienholz tries too hard"—as an artist who makes his political points with a sledgehammer, writing:

Kienholz never had faith in his public (nor in his advocates, for whom he always provided long captions painstakingly deciphering the elements of his yet-let-too-clear allegories). Like any advertisement, his works are one-liners pounded into the beholder's head with a skull-crashing bat.¹³

Such criticism, however, misses the point completely. Here was an artist unconcerned with art for art's sake. In fact, his 1958 assemblage by that title expresses his opinion of the hermetic nature of "advanced art." Kienholz' blatant disdain for formalist and obscure art was, and is, just what is so challenging about his practice. Instead, he sought to disrupt the viewer's everyday existence in order to expose the hypocritical and alienating factors of American society and culture. As such, he had little use for subtlety. Passive forms of entertainment, as Lefebvre explained, only reinforced modern isolation from the everyday, a system he called the "bureaucratic society of controlled consumption."¹⁴ Kienholz aimed at nothing less than a major disruption of such passivity. His guiding principle was to make art that intervened in the everyday by encouraging theatrical participation and critical thought.

This is what separates *Still Live* from Burden's Shoot, which seems more about a spectacular solipsism; shocking, yes, but doing little to reverse the traditional passivity of its viewing audience. The Kienholzes, however, conceived of their viewers as discovering themselves through participation. Where *Shoot* focused viewers' attentions on the artist's body and psychological makeup, *Still Live* forced its participants to sign their lives over to the threat of their death. I can't help but think here of aspects of Roland Barthes' conception of the death of the author as leading to the birth of the reader. Where Burden's Shoot could have resulted in the artist's death, it is in *Still Live* that many of Barthes' ideals come to fruition. As Kienholz wrote of his viewer-focused practice:

I mostly think of my work as the spoor of an animal that goes through the forest and makes a thought trail, and the viewer is the hunter who comes and follows the trail. At some point I as the trail maker disappear. The viewer is then confronted with a dilemma of ideas and directions.¹⁵

Hence, it is in the disappearance of the artist that the emergence of the viewer takes place, made fully aware of their everyday existence.

[Author's note]

I presented an earlier version of this paper at the Nottingham Institute for Research in Visual Culture conference "Representing the Everyday in American Visual Culture" held at the University of Nottingham, September 2008. Additionally, I would like to thank both Joe Emerling and Jon Leaver for their insightful comments on drafts of the paper.

- In 1981, Ed Kienholz proclaimed that all of his work created since his marriage to Nancy Reddin in 1973 should be understood as co-authored by himself and Nancy Reddin Kienholz. See Edward Kienholz, *The Kienholz Women* (Zurich: Galerie Maecht, 1981), 1.
- Edward Kienholz, "Artist's Statement," *Edward Kienholz: Still Live: Aktionen der Avantgarde, Projekt für ADA2* (Berlin: Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 1975), n.p.
- Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 153.
- Ibid.*, 163.
- Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, trans. John Moore (New York: Verso, 1990), 127.
- Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of the Everyday*, vol. 3, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005), 10.
- The Vietnam War resulted in over 58,000 American deaths and millions of Vietnamese deaths. The era was also marked by violent and deadly protests to the War, political assassinations and the rise of gun crime and violence. Guns and gun violence was the news of the day, and the Gun Control Act of 1968, enacted in response to the high-profile assassinations of the period, did little to control these instances of violence or the rising handgun crime rates and gun ownership numbers of the time: Gun homicides increased over 90% in the U.S. between the years 1964 and 1970.
- Chris Burden quoted in *Broken Screen: 28 Conversations with Doug Aikim* (New York: D.A.P., 2006), 76.
- Edward Kienholz, "The Portable War Memorial," *Edward Kienholz* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1970), n.p.
- Edward Kienholz, "Letter to Gertrud G.E.L.," 1984.
- Kienholz and his attorneys called upon the assistance of the American ambassador to West Germany to save the work from being destroyed. As a result, the work was taken out of Berlin and transported to safety in Switzerland. For a good account of the controversy, see Roland H. Wilgenstein's, "How the Allies kept a 'Death-Machine' alive." Reprinted in Edward Kienholz: *Still Live: Aktionen der Avantgarde, Projekt für ADA2* (Berlin: Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 1975), n.p.
- Ibid.*
- Hal Foster, Yves-Alain Bois and others, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 420.
- Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Kabinewitch (London: Penguin, 1977), 68.
- Quoted in Carrie Rickey, "Unpopular Culture (Travels in Kienholzland)," *Artforum* 21, no. 10 (June 1983), 46.