

## WHAT'S HAPPENING?

“Although only a handful of artists were presenting them, the Happenings of the early 1960’s quickly gained a reputation for being chaotic, spontaneous, ‘anything goes’ forms of avant-garde theater, and they acquired a certain word-of-mouth notoriety within the New York art world for generating an atmosphere of frenetic energy and adventure.” (Kelley, 43)

Al Hansen’s Happenings generated a new form of the Playbill- the Afterbill. As the name suggests, the afterbill was distributed to the audience AFTER the conclusion of the performance with blank pages provided for notes, ideas and observations. It is a new and interesting concept: not only does it illustrate a new role that the audience adapts but it creates an interesting reflection on history as a whole being an afterbill. Where do Happenings fall on those pages? They are certainly not the overture, nor the reprise, nor intermission. The question can be placed: are they featured in the program at all, or are they lost under a full page add promoting the latest Broadway opening?

Peter Brook provides some definitions which help in understanding the theatre of the 1960’s: “A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged”. (Brook, 9)

### ***THE DEADLY THEATRE***

“A true theatre of joy is non-existent and it is not just the trivial comedy and the bad musical that fail to give us our money’s worth- the Deadly theatre finds its deadly way into grand opera and tragedy, into the plays of Moliere and the plays of Brecht.” (Brook, 10)

“In a living theatre, we would each day approach the rehearsal putting yesterday’s discoveries to the test, ready to believe that the true play has once again escaped us. But the Deadly Theatre approaches the classics from the viewpoint that somewhere, someone has found out and defined how the play should be done.” (Brook, 14)

### ***THE HOLY THEATRE***

“We are all aware that most of life escapes our senses: a most powerful explanation of the various arts is that they talk of patterns which can only begin to recognize when they manifest themselves as rhythms and shapes.” (Brook, 42)

“The instant must be used, but how, what for? Here we are back to the root question- what are we searching for anyway?” (Brook, 56)

## ***THE ROUGH THEATRE***

“Of course, it is most of all dirt that gives the roughness its edge; filth and vulgarity are natural, obscenity is joyous: with these the spectacle takes on its socially liberating role, for by nature the popular theatre is anti-authoritarian, anti-traditional, anti-pomp, anti-presence.” (Brook, 68)

“It is only by searching for a new discrimination that we will extend the horizons of the real. Only then could the theatre be useful, for we need a beauty that could convince us: we need desperately to experience magic in so direct a way that our very notion of what is substantial could be changed.” (Brook, 96)

## ***THE IMMEDIATE THEATRE***

“We are implying to a working man that theatre is part of Culture- that is to say, part of the big new hamper of goods now available to everyone. Behind all attempts to reach new audiences there is a secret patronage- ‘you too can come to the party’- and like all patronage, it conceals a lie. The lie is the implication that the gift is worth receiving.” (Brook, 132)

“In everyday life, ‘if’ is a fiction, in the theatre ‘if’ is an experiment. In everyday life, ‘if’ is an evasion, in the theatre ‘if’ is the truth. When we are persuaded to believe in this truth, then the theatre and life are one.” (Brook, 140-141)

## ***THE ART WORLD***

Pop art- art based on modern popular culture and the mass media

Found object art- an ordinary object found at random and considered as a work of art.

Collage- a form of art in which various materials are arranged and stuck to a backing.

Assemblage- art made of pieces fitted together

“There is as much difference between some Happenings as there is between Beethoven and Hershey’s chocolate bars.” (Kaprow [Pasadena] 16)

## **WHO’S HAPPENING?**

### ***ALLAN KAPROW***

- 1927- Allan Kaprow is born, August 23. Father is attorney in New York.
- 1943- moves to New York, attends the High School of Music and Art.
- 1945- enters NYU. Majors in art, literature, music and philosophy.
- 1947- studies painting with Hans Hoffman
- 1949- sees exhibition of Jason Pollock
- 1952- Completes his master thesis- A Study in Seeing. Devotes time to



art work. Action- collages.

- 1957- Studies music composition with John Cage. Begins to build his first environment. "I complained immediately about the fact that there was a sense of mystery until your eye reached a wall. Then there was a dead end. At that point my disagreement with the gallery space began." (Henri qt. Kaprow, 91)
- 1959- The term Happening is used in print. Performs **18 Happenings in 6 Parts**, Reuben Gallery, NY. "The performance is divided into six parts. Each part contains three happenings which will be performed at once. The beginning and end of each will be signaled by the bell. At the end of the performance two strokes of the bell will be heard... You have been given three cards. Be seated as they instruct you." (Kelley, 30)
- 1965- Shifts concentration to Happenings, rejecting environments. Performs in John Cage's Theater Piece, Judson Hall.

Additional works: **Spring Happening, Yard, Fluids**

"K: In fact, their very blankness and their rapid deterioration proclaims the opposite of significance.

S: But it does have a significance, and you can't be ignorant of it. It's almost a parody. Here we are, a country that builds monuments at great expense; a terribly property-conscious country with people who want to own everything. But plainly ice in sunlight is something that can neither be possessed nor preserved. And if you build a monument that immediately deteriorates, you are running against the American grain." (Schechner, 154)

"In making a happening, it is better to approach composition without borrowed form theories, and instead to let the form emerge from what the material can do." (Kaprow [Drain], 56)

## ***JOHN CAGE***

"Some time ago counting, patterns, tempi were dropped. Rhythm's in any length of time (no-structure). Aorder. It's definitely spring- not just in the air. Take as an example of rhythm anything which seems irrelevant." (Cage, A year... 123)

"Art influenced by cage tends to be not only non-sequential (and thus, in intention, liberating) but unpredictable even to the artist" (Henri, 89)

1952- Black Mountain College untitled event

1956- Teaches composition to Allan Kaprow, Dick Higgins, Al Hansen resulting in pieces like **Alice Denham in 48 seconds**

***AL HANSEN***

**Hall Street Happening** “The performers were given things to start them in the piece, but were allowed to go in whatever direction they felt like. They’d been given no limitations.” (Hansen, 18)

***DICK HIGGINS***

“We need more portability and flexibility, and this traditional theatre cannot provide. It was made for Versailles and for the sedentary milord, not for motorized life-demons who travel 600 miles a week. Versailles no longer speaks very loudly to us, since we think at 85 miles an hour.” (Intermedia, 50)

***CLAES OLDENBURG***

“Stage= place where I paint. It should have been made clear that Happenings came about when sculptors crossed into Theatre taking with them their way of looking and doing things”. (Henri, 86)

His work (**Store Days**) tends to be “personal, physical, concerned with objects and basic human and domestic predicaments” (Henri, 100)

***ROBERT WHITMAN***

**The American Moon** “Time for me is something material... it can be used in the same way as paint or plaster or any other material. It can describe other natural events. I intend my work to be stories of physical experience... Time is the material I use to describe these things.” (Henri, 102)

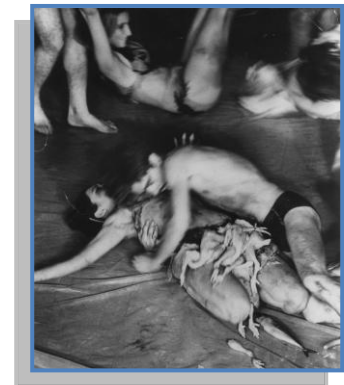
***CAROLEE SCHNEEMAN***

**Meat Joy**, a ritualistic love-making with paint brushes, joyous plea of sexual liberation

***WOLF VOSTELL***

**You**- Thinks in social terms, political, relates to terror of concentration camps.

Others: Merce Cunningham, George Brecht, Meredith Monk



“The problem of finding a label for your activities, should they fall outside the conventional ‘painter’, ‘poet’, or whatever, still exists today, and largely accounts for the multitude of ‘isms’ that confuse the layman.” (Henri, 19)

## WHOSE HAPPENING?

There are almost as many definitions as there are participants in the Happening movement. Listed below are several definitions, from which I draw my own conclusions.

“A Happening is an assemblage of events performed or perceived in more than one time or place. Its material environments may be constructed, taken over directly from what is available or altered slightly; just as its activities may be invented or common place. It is art but seems closer to life.” (Kaprow {Pasadena}, 11)

“Happenings might be described as a purposefully composed form of theatre in which diverse allogical elements, including nonmatrixed performing, are organized in a compartmented structure.” (Kirby [Sandford], 11)

“A collage of situations and events occurring over a period of time in space.” (Hansen, 24)

“Staged or improvised occurrence; phases of reality. Preparation of facts, theories, dreams untied to a specific kind of space; but at various places in the city.” (Higgins qt. Vostell, 270)

“All the various performance forms in which the emphasis is placed not on who does a particular thing or why, but on, simply, what gets done.” (Higgins, 270)

“Happening is a function of time, space, dramaturgic figures and dramaturgic situation.” (Suvin, 134)

“Behind the Happening is the shout ‘Wake up!’” (Brook, 55)

### **COMMON DENOMINATORS**

- There is a form of construction (they do not ‘just happen’)
- Rejection of “plot”
- Takes place in a time and a space (or times and spaces simultaneously)
- There is an aspect of performance and an audience is usually involved.
- Environment + Action = Happening

### **MAIN INFLUENCE**

*\*Read over the statement in the following text box. After the statement is absorbed, vocalize your agreement, disagreement or otherwise state your opinion. You may do so simultaneously, or you may wait your turn\**

EVERYONE RECEIVES A DIFFERENT STATEMENT!

### ***HAPPENINGS ARE INFLUENCED BY...***

... Futurism through events such as the Futurist aerial theatre, with colored airplanes dancing in diffused smoke (Henri) and the notion of simultaneity (Sandford).

... Dada through nonmatrixed performing, compartmented structure, methodical use of chance method, drop art and hat poetry.

... Symbolism through the sense of “appeal to pure imagination, by-passing reason” (Henri, 10)

... Surrealism - an order of disorder, a “systematic unhinging of all the senses” (Henri, 21).

Also borrow from surrealist environmental art. They differ from surrealism because they don't attempt to unlock the unconsciousness, but instead find surprises in the everyday.

... Wagner's ideas of Gesamtkunstwerk- various art forms working together, collage. “The Happening was less Gesamtkunstwerk than kitchen-sink art, a work with everything thrown in.” (Kelley, 40)

... Artaud- “Instead of continuing to rely upon texts considered definitive and sacred, it is essential to put an end to the subjugation of the theatre to the text, and recover the notion of a kind of unique language half-way between gesture or thought. [...] Obviously it uses movement, harmonies, rhythms, but only to the point that they can concur in a sort of central expression without advantage for any one particular art.” (Kirby\* qt. Artaud, 21)

... Bauhaus- dehumanization of performers.

... Brecht- estrangement effect.

“Happenings estrange basic conventions of spectacle such as entering by an aisle or sitting in front of the performance area. They also lift everyday commonplaces out of the ordinary aura and into the focus of attentive scrutiny. [...] the audience becomes to a certain extent its own spectacle.” (Suvin, 140)

“Precisely because art can be confused with life, it forces attention upon the aim of its ambiguities to ‘reveal’ experience” (Kaprow [Pasadena], 13)

### ***THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE***

“No special person comes to happenings; they attract all kinds of people, but I feel they are mostly attractive to openness oriented people.” (Hansen, 44)

What are the public's preconceived notions when they attend a performance?

- The role of a spectator.

- A seat.
- Rehearsed and organized talent.
- Curtain? Proscenium? Fourth wall? Magic?

How can an audience unlearn? How can one control audience's interpretations? Does one need to control audience's interpretations?

"This focuses on the happening in a way that these performances engulf the spectator; the environment is a work of art that the observer goes into and walks around in and in some cases actually participates in." (Hansen, 6)

"Today we think in terms of 'messages sent and received' and understand that perception is a relationship between the sender, the message and the receiver. These vary so greatly that abstractions, of whatever kind and in whatever field, remain useful but recognizably 'untrue'. In the midst of this complexity we know that politics and science have become more 'artful' in their representations of their abstractions just as artists have sought more frequently the specificity of the streets." (Schechner, 230)

"What a conundrum life is. Things, events, situations, works of art, people, events- all have facets with which they address themselves to us. We get as much as we are tuned up to receive. Perhaps in my happenings I am trying to tune people up." (Hansen, 87)

"I play games; if I called them sermons then nobody would play. Not even I. the game is the moral; the moral of the game is to beg the question." (Kaprow [Pasedena], 10)

"There is something about games and play in happenings. There is something about showing off. There is something in any art about toilet training, where the artist does a nice piece or thing and friends comment as if: 'Isn't he a good boy! Look at what he did!'" (Hansen, 36)

### ***THE AFTERBILL***

How does one measure success? Is it in the numbers of people who viewed your work? Is it the number of positive critiques? Is it the total number of works produced? Or is it not something that can be reduced to a mathematical equation, in which a Happening= Audience + Performers + Environment / Total Art.

"Happenings are in part a sociocultural document: but above all they show the potentiality of new forms and materials for theatrical communication and challenge our aesthetic." (Suvin, 143)

I like the idea of measuring success through challenges. Challenges which were overcome, and challenges which were created. Challenges which open our eyes to a new way of viewing the world. When you return from a play, the playbill gets placed on a shelf, where it collects dust, forgotten. The afterbill keeps going...and going...and going...and.....

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## ***ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY***

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Cage, John. A Year from Monday; New Lectures and Writings. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1967. Collection of various writings, very "stream-of-consciousness".

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Drain, Richard. Twentieth-Century Theatre: A Sourcebook. London: Routledge, 1995.

Hansen, Al. A Primer of Happenings & Time/Space Art. New York: Something Else Press, 1965. Hansen recalls and reflects on his experiences with happenings, classes with John Cage, relationship with Kaprow, etc. Includes happening "scripts".

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Sandford, Mariellen R. Happenings and Other Acts. Worlds of performance. London: Routledge, 1995. I focused on the articles by Marti Kirby, 3 of them can be found in this collection.

Schechner, Richard. "Extensions in Time and Space. An Interview with Allan Kaprow". The Drama Review Spring 1968: 153-159. Focused mainly on "Fluids".

Schechner, Richard. "Happenings". The Tulane Drama Review Winter 1965: 229-232. Offers great perspective on the audience relationship.

Suvin, Darko. "Reflections on Happenings". The Drama Review 1970: 125-144. Very detailed taxonomy, classification and definition of Happenings. Also talk about the estrangement effect adding Brecht into the mix.