

## Pinpointing Happenings

(1967)

From now on, those who would write or speak intelligently about Happenings must declare what sort of phenomenon they are referring to. *Happening* is a household word, yet it means almost anything to the households that hear it and use it. Consider the following:

A few seasons ago, an issue of the *New Republic* with a lead article on the political campaign of Bobby Kennedy, announced on the cover: "Bobby Kennedy Is a Happening."

Howard Moody, a minister at New York's Judson Church, sent me a reprint of an excellent sermon called "Christmas Is a Happening."

Disc jockey Murray The K once punctuated his hyped-up delivery with "It's what's *happening*, baby!" In his new job, with his now carefully modulated voice, he grooms the call-letters of WOR-FM, "The Happening Station."

A cosmetics commercial, composed of a swirl of gimmicky, suggestive noises leading to the name of the product, ends sexily, "That was a Happening—by Revlon."

Manhattan's former parks commissioner, inaugurating the Great Year of the Spiritual Thaw, sponsored paint-ins, reserved the park for cyclists on Sundays, flew kites in Sheep Meadow, had a water splash on the lake, demonstrated some fancy ice skating, made snowball throwing official, invited the public to a stargazing, and throughout gave the city a phrase to explain it all: "Hoving's Happenings."

Hippie groups, discotheques, PTA meetings, Rotary Club outings, a popular rock-and-roll band, a hit record by the Supremes, a party game kit, and at least two regular-run movies—all are called Happenings.

The *Saturday Review* asked recently in a feature article if American history was not a Happening; there was even a news analyst last winter who cynically judged our war in Vietnam as "a Happening gone out of control."

But everything came together one Sunday in January. In the *New York Times Magazine*, a piece on furniture design was titled "1966 Was a Happening." It summed up an entire year of our lives. The clear implication was that *life itself* is a Happening. And in a special sense perhaps it is, although what this sense is will have to come later.

What do the fifty or so Happeners around the world think a Happening is? With them, too, the variety of opinion is disconcerting. Most, including myself, have tried to get rid of the word *Happening*, but this seems futile by now. Granting a certain amount of oversimplification, roughly six directions appear prevalent. Among them there is a fair amount of overlapping and a continuous recombination. As difficult as it may be to find a pure Happening of each sort, however, future critics will find it useful to identify as nearly as possible the kind of work they are talking about. (There is as much difference between some Happenings as there is between Beethoven and Hershey's chocolate bars.)

First there is the *Night Club* or *Cock Fight* or *Pocket Drama* style, in which small audiences meet in cellars, rooms, or studios. They press close around the performers and are occasionally drawn into the action in some simple way. Jazz may be played, a couple may make love, food may be cooked, a film may be projected, furniture may be battered to bits or paper torn to shreds, dancelike movements may occur, lights may change color, poetry or words of all kinds may pour forth from loudspeakers, perhaps superimposed or in unusual order. Throughout, a mood of intense intimacy prevails.

An extension of this type of Happening is the *Extravaganza*. Presented on stages and in arenas to large audiences, it takes the form of a fairly lavish compendium of the modern arts—with dancers, actors, poets, painters, musicians, and so forth all contributing talents. In basic concept (probably unconsciously) the Extravaganza is an updated Wagnerian opera, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Its character and methods, however, are usually more lighthearted, resembling three-ring circuses and vaudeville reviews in the way that these were developed by Dada and Surrealist antecedents. This Happening is the only kind with which

ing to them. In this mode, the intended focus upon a mixture of the commonplace and the fantastic makes the journey a modern equivalent to Dante's spiritual one. The creator of this Happening, more than a mere cicerone, is in effect a Virgil with a message.

The fifth is almost entirely mental. It is *Idea* art or literary *Suggestion* when it is written down in its usual form of short notes. "It's raining in Tokyo"; "Fill a glass of water for two days"; "Over there"; and "Red light on the Brooklyn Bridge" are examples. They may be enacted but need not be (and often are not). They follow the Duchampian implication that art is what is in the mind of the beholder, who can make art or nonart at will; a thought is as valuable as an action. The mere notion that the world is full of ready-made activities permits one quite seriously to "sign" the whole earth, or any part of it, without actually doing a thing. The responsibility for such quasi-art is thus thrown entirely upon the shoulders of any individual who cares to accept it. The rest is primarily contemplative but may lead in time to meaningful action.

The sixth and last kind of Happening is the *Activity* type. It is directly involved in the everyday world, ignores theaters and audiences, is more active than meditative, and is close in spirit to physical sports, ceremonies, fairs, mountain climbing, war games, and political demonstrations. It also partakes of the unconscious daily rituals of the supermarket, subway ride at rush hour, and toothbrushing every morning. The Activity Happening selects and combines situations to be participated in, rather than watched or just thought about.

Of the six categories of Happening, the last appears to me most compelling, if indeed most risky. It is the least encumbered by artistic precedents and the least professionalistic; it is free, therefore, to confront the question raised earlier, whether life is a Happening or a Happening is an art of life. Asking the question seems preferable to defending the Happening from the very start as an art form. The Activity type is risky because it easily loses the clarity of its paradoxical position of being art-life or life-art. Habit may lead Happeners to depend on certain favored situations and to perfect them in the manner of conventional artists. Or their choices may become so indistinguishable from daily events that participation degenerates into routine and



Fig. 11 A participant in Allan Kaprow's *Record*, 1967, near Austin, Texas. Photograph by Howard Smagula.

the public has any familiarity and, incidentally, with which it feels some degree of comfort. Watered down, it has emerged as the stock-in-trade of the discotheque and psychedelic scene.

Then there is the *Event*, in which an audience, again usually seated in a theater, watches a brief occurrence such as a single light going on and off or a trumpet sounding while a balloon emerges from its bell until it bursts. Or there is a prolongation of a unitary action such as a man walking back and forth across the stage for two hours. Most frequently, deadpan wit joins, or alternates with, disciplined attentiveness to small or normally unimportant phenomena.

Next is the *Guided Tour* or *Pied Piper* kind of Happening. A selected group of people is led through the countryside or around a city, through buildings, backyards, parks, and shops. They observe things, are given instructions, are lectured to, discover things happen-

indifference. Either way, they will have lost the handshake between themselves, their co-participants, and the environment.

It is possible now to consider the difference between the Happening and an advertising campaign, a commuter train ride, the stock exchange. Or if these seem too prosaic—notwithstanding the deliberately prosaic quality of some Happenings—there is the recent Alaska earthquake, the Candy Mossler murder trial, the Buddhist monk who burned himself in Saigon, and, for piquant relief, the Mad Litterbug who periodically covers several city blocks in New York with paper cutouts.

Clearly none of these examples was initially a Happening. Yet any of them *could* be if some Happener wished to include them. The distinction is simply that of assigning a new or multiple set of functions to a situation normally bound by convention; at the very least, it is the consciousness of this possibility. We might imagine that Candy Mossler was a female impersonator whose every appearance in the newspapers caused those in the Happening to dress as she did and privately taperecord their thoughts. These were later sent to "Mrs." Mossler, signed with her name and address.

A Happening is always a purposive activity, whether it is gamelike, ritualistic, or purely contemplative. (It may even have as its purpose no purpose.) Having a purpose may be a way of paying attention to what is commonly not noticed. Purpose implies a selective operation for every Happening, limiting it to certain situations out of countless options. The selections individual Happeners make are as personal as their influence upon lesser figures is obvious. The expressive character of the selection of image-situations may be assertive or passive, but the choice itself suggests value: what is presented is worthwhile in some way. What is left out, by virtue of its very exclusion, is less worthwhile for the time being: it is withheld from our attention. If life can be a Happening, it is only a small portion of life that can be apprehended as one; and only a Happener will make the decision to so apprehend it. If we were speaking of painting or music, what I am saying would seem truisitic. But the vast and giddy nonsense about what Happenings are makes it necessary to point to some of their actual characteristics.

Like much social endeavor, and like all creative endeavor, Happenings are moral activity, if only by implication. Moral intelligence, in contrast to moralism or sermonizing, comes alive in a field of press-

ing alternatives. Moral certainty tends to be at best pious and sentimental, and at worst pietistic. The Happenings in their various modes resemble the best efforts of contemporary inquiry into identity and meaning, for they take their stand amid the modern information deluge. In the face of such a plethora of choices, they may be among the most responsible acts of our time.