

Epilogue

Some theologians and ministers have been hinting that if artists once went to the church for spiritual instruction, it might be time for the church to go to artists. In the two centuries since they left the church, they have stormed barricades or gone to the mountains, become tourists and dandies, felt their pulses, examined their heads, heard their guts growling, picked rags with beggars, lived in cellars with rats, hit the road, or worked in cigar stores. And now they are hurrying along Madison Avenue and jeting around the world, alternately clinking glasses at receptions and conducting seminars in places of higher learning. In between, they work soberly and steadily, for there is not a moment to lose. The best have dared to gamble on the world as it is, for good or for bad. Andy Warhol has said he wants to be a machine: a *deus in machinal*! This may be what the church must learn.

Whatever new name we give to our identity remains for the future. But I suspect that it will have more to do with the aisles in supermarkets than with the aisles in houses of God; more with U.S. Highway 1 in a Ford Mustang than the True Path; more with social psychology that Judeo-Christianity. The astronaut John Glenn may have caught a glimpse of heavenly blue from the porthole of his spaceship, but I have watched the lights of a computer in operation. And they looked like the stars.

The Happenings Are Dead: Long Live the Happenings!

(1966)

Happenings are today's only underground avant-garde. The end of the Happenings has been announced regularly since 1958—always by those who have never come near one—and just as regularly since then Happenings have been spreading around the globe like some chronic virus, cunningly avoiding the familiar places and occurring where they are least expected. "Where Not To Be Seen: At a Happening," advised *Esquire* magazine a year ago, in its annual two-page scoreboard of what's in and out of high Culture. Exactly! One goes to the Museum of Modern Art to be seen. The Happenings are the one art activity that can escape the inevitable death-by-publicity to which all other art is condemned, because, designed for a brief life, they can never be overexposed; they are dead, quite literally, every time they happen. At first unconsciously, then deliberately, they played the game of planned obsolescence, just before the mass media began to force the condition down the throat of the standard arts (which can little afford the challenge). For these the great question has become, "How long can it last?" For the Happenings it always was, "How to keep on going?" Thus *underground* took on a different meaning. Where once the artist's enemy was the smug bourgeois, it was now the hippie journalist.

In 1961 I wrote in an article,

To the extent that a Happening is not a commodity but a brief event, from the standpoint of any publicity it may receive, it may become a state of mind. Who will have been there at that event? It may become like the sea monsters of the past or the flying saucers of yesterday. I shouldn't really mind, for as the new myth grows on its own, without reference to anything in particular, the artist may achieve a beautiful

privacy, famed for something purely imaginary while free to explore something nobody will notice.

The Happeners, jealous of their freedom, deflect public attention from what they actually do to a myth about it instead. The Happening? It was somewhere, some time ago; and besides, nobody does those things anymore . . .

There are presently more than forty men and women "doing" some kind of Happening. They live in Japan, Holland, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Argentina, Sweden, Germany, Spain, Austria, and Iceland—as well as in the United States. Probably ten of them are first-rate talents. Moreover, at least a dozen volumes on or related to the subject are currently available: Wolf Vostell, *Décollage 4* (Cologne, 1964), published by the author; *An Anthology*, edited and published by Jackson MacLow and La Monte Young (New York, 1963); George Brecht, *Water Yam* (New York: Fluxus Publications, 1963); *Fluxus I*, an anthology edited by George Maciunas (New York: Fluxus Publications, 1964); Richard Higgins, *Postface and Jefferson's Birthday* (New York: Something Else Press, 1964); Michael Kirby, *Happenings* (New York: Dutton, 1964); Yoko Ono, *Grabfruit* (Long Island, N.Y.: Wunternbaum Press, 1964); Jürgen Becker and Wolf Vostell, *Happenings, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 1965); Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal, *24 Stunden* (Verlag Hansen & Hansen, 1965); Al Hansen, *Primer of Happenings and Time Space Art* (New York: Something Else Press, 1965); *Four Suits*, works by Philip Corner, Alison Knowles, Ben Patterson, and Tomas Schmit (New York: Something Else Press, 1966); and the Winter 1965 issue of the *Tulane Drama Review*, a special Happenings issue, edited by Michael Kirby, Tulane University, New Orleans. Jean-Jacques Lebel is about to publish his book in Paris, and my book, *Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams), will be out this spring. Besides this growing literature, there is an increasing bibliography of serious articles. These publications—and the forty-odd Happeners—are extending the myth of an art that is nearly unknown and, for all practical purposes, unknowable.

Hence, it is in the spirit of things to introduce into this myth certain principles of action, which would have the advantage of helping to maintain the present good health of the Happenings while—and I say this with a grin but without irony—discouraging direct evaluation of

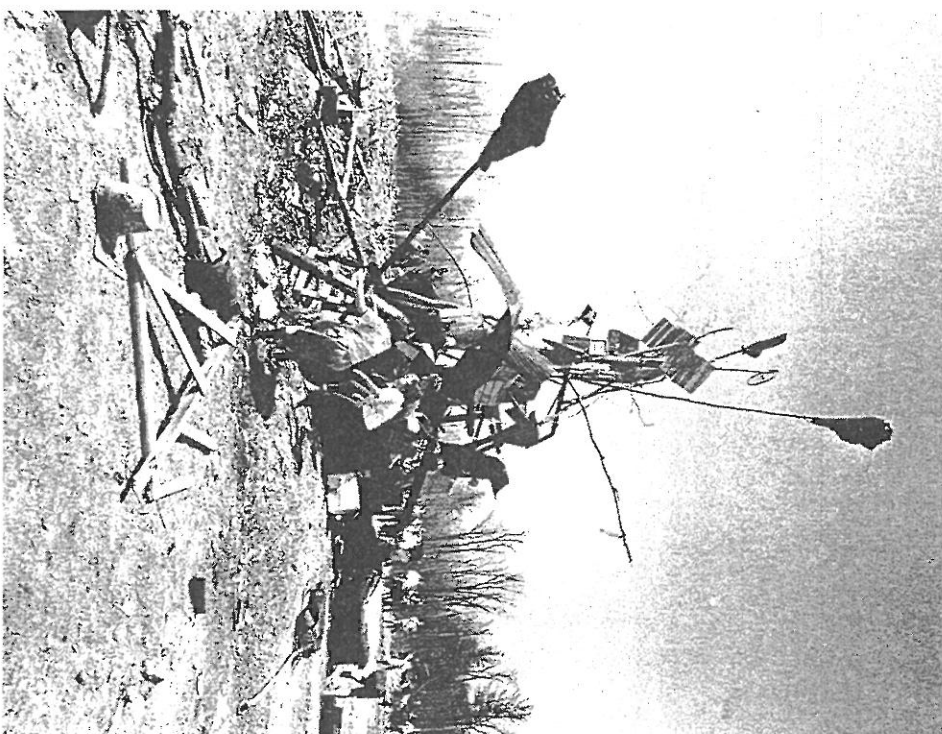


Fig. 10 Allan Kaprow, *Household*, 1964, near Ithaca, New York. Photograph by Sol Goldberg.

their effectiveness. Instead, they would be measured by the stories that multiply, by the printed scenarios and occasional photographs of works that have passed on forever—and altogether would evoke an aura of something breathing just beyond our immediate grasp rather than a documentary record to be judged. In effect, this is calculated rumor, the purpose of which is to simulate as much fantasy as possible, so long as it leads primarily away from the artists and their affairs. On this plane, the whole process tends to become analogous to art. And on this plane, so do the rules of the game:

1. *The line between the Happening and daily life should be kept as fluid and perhaps indistinct as possible.* The reciprocity between the handmade and the readymade will be at its maximum power this way. Two cars collide on a highway. Violet liquid pours out of the broken radiator of one of them, and in the back seat of the other there is a huge load of dead chickens. The cops check into the incident, plausible answers are given, tow truck drivers remove the wrecks, costs are paid, the drivers go home to dinner . . .

2. *Themes, materials, actions, and the associations they evoke are to be gotten from anywhere except from the arts, their derivatives, and their milieu.* Eliminate the arts, and anything that even remotely suggests them, as well as steer clear of art galleries, theaters, concert halls, and other cultural emporia (such as nightclubs and coffee houses), and a separate art can develop. And this is the goal. Happenings are not a composite or "total" art, as Wagnerian opera wished to be; nor are they even a synthesis of the arts. Unlike most of the standard arts, their source of energy is not art, and the quasi-art that results always contains something of this uncertain identity. A U.S. Marines' manual on jungle fighting tactics, a tour of a laboratory where polyethylene kidneys are made, a traffic jam on the Long Island Expressway are more useful than Beethoven, Racine, or Michelangelo.

3. *The Happening should be dispersed over several widely spaced, sometimes moving and changing, locales.* A single performance space tends to be static and limiting (like painting only the center of a canvas). It is also the convention of stage theater, preventing the use of a thousand possibilities that, for example, the movies take pictures of but, in the final film, can only be watched, not physically experienced. One can experiment by gradually widening the distance between the events in a Happening. First, at a number of points along a heavily trafficked avenue; then in several rooms and on several floors of an

apartment house where some of the activities are out of touch with one another; then on more than one street; then in different but proximate cities; finally, all around the globe. Some of this may take place en route from one area to another, using public transportation and the mails. This will increase the tension between the parts and will also permit them to exist more on their own without intensive coordination.

4. *Time, closely bound up with things and spaces, should be variable and independent of the convention of continuity.* Whatever is to happen should do so in its natural time, in contrast to the practice in music of arbitrarily slowing down or accelerating occurrences in keeping with a structural scheme or expressive purpose. Consider the time it takes to buy a fishing pole in a busy department store just before Christmas, or the time it takes to lay the footings for a building. If the same people are engaged in both, then one action will have to wait for the other to be completed. If different people perform them, then the events may overlap. The point is that all occurrences have their own time. These may or may not concur according to the fairly normative needs of the situation. They may concur, for instance, if people coming from different areas must meet in time to take a train somewhere.

5. *The composition of all materials, actions, images, and their times and spaces should be undertaken in as artless and, again, practical a way as possible.* This rule does not refer to formlessness, for that is impossible; it means the avoidance of form theories associated with the arts that have to do with arrangement per se, such as serial technique, dynamic symmetry, sonnet form, etc. If I and others have linked a Happening to a collage of events, then Times Square can also be seen that way. Just as some collages are arranged to look like classical paintings, others remind one of Times Square. It depends on where the emphasis lies. A Happening perhaps alludes more to the form of games and sports than to the forms of art; in this connection it is useful to observe how children invent the games they play. Their arrangement is often strict, but their substance is unencumbered by aesthetics. Children's play is also social, the contribution of more than one child's idea. Thus a Happening can be composed by several persons to include, as well, the participation of the weather, animals, and insects.

6. *Happenings should be unheard and performed by nonprofessionals, once only.* A crowd is to eat its way through a roomful of food; a house is burned down; love letters are strewn over a field and beaten to pulp by a future rain; twenty rented cars are driven away in different

directions until they run out of gas . . . Not only is it often impossible and impractical to rehearse and repeat situations like these, but it is also unnecessary. Unlike the repertory arts, the Happenings have a freedom that lies in their use of realms of action that cannot be repeated. Furthermore, since no skill is required to enact the events of a Happening, there is nothing for a professional athlete or actor to demonstrate (and no one to applaud either); thus there is no reason to rehearse and repeat because there is nothing to improve. All that may be left is the value to oneself.

7. *It follows that there should not be (and usually cannot be) an audience or audiences to watch a Happening.* By willingly participating in a work, knowing the scenario and their own particular duties beforehand, people become a real and necessary part of the work. It cannot exist without them, as it cannot exist without the rain or the rush-hour subway; if either is called for. Although participants are unable to do everything and be in all places at once, they know the overall pattern, if not the details. And like agents in an international spy ring, they know, too, that what they do devotedly will echo and give character to what others do elsewhere. A Happening with only an empathic response on the part of a seated audience is not a Happening at all; it is simply stage theater.

The fine arts traditionally demand for their appreciation physically passive observers, working with their minds to get at what their senses register. But the Happenings are an active art, requiring that creation and realization, artwork and appreciator, artwork and life be inseparable. Like Action painting, from which they have derived inspiration, they will probably appeal to those who find the contemplative life by itself inadequate.

But the importance given to purposive action also suggests the Happenings' affinities with practices marginal to the fine arts, such as parades, carnivals, games, expeditions, guided tours, orgies, religious ceremonies, and such secular rituals as the elaborate operations of the Mafia; civil rights demonstrations; national election campaigns; Thursday nights at the shopping centers of America; the hot-rod, dragster, and motorcycle scene; and, not least, the whole fantastic explosion of the advertising and communications industry. Each of these plays with the materials of the tangible world, and the results are partly conscious ceremonies acted out from day to day. Happenings, freed from the restrictions of conventional art materials, have discovered the

world at their fingertips, and the intentional results are quasi-rituals, never to be repeated. Unlike the "cooler" styles of Pop, Op, and Kinetics, in which imagination is filtered through a specialized medium and a privileged showplace, the Happenings do not merely allude to what is going on in our bedrooms, in the drugstores, and at the airports; they are right there. How poignant that as far as the arts are concerned, this life above ground is underground!