

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RR-7  
Happenings in Japan - I

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27 July 1967

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Dear Dick:

The experience of dislocation is becoming rarer now. Voracious mass media and modern technology have sated us. It by no means follows that startling events (Sputnik, the Kennedy assassination) or combinations of them (the US government training pilots from Arab countries which have broken off diplomatic relations with it) cannot occur, but, nonetheless, the unlikely has become a somewhat flacid notion. The proliferation of intensifying adjectives, intended to refurbish common events, and of chemical and physical inducements to the admittedly uncommon world of psychedelic experience attest to this.

From the perspective of recent developments in technical manipulation of media and environments - the Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper" record; electronically automated teen-age night clubs like the "Cheetah" chain; computerized light sculpture, which has also been used by advertising agencies in enormous programmed signboards; massive entertainment facilities like Disneyland and the Gyrotron at Expo '67; not to mention the more direct tactic of manipulating the observers themselves by means of LSD and more recent hallucinogens - the frequently amateur-theatrical nature of happenings seems mild.

The needs which gave rise to happenings are real and current, though, and the reaction against "professionalism" and civic-centeredness in the traditional arts justified. There follows a two-part commentary based loosely on events in Japan during the last ten or twelve years. Firstly some discussion of and reflection on the Japanese scene, and secondly, more specific remarks on happenings in general and where they might lead us.

Happenings seem to me to rely on one or more of three fundamental schemes, though they are certainly not thought of as such: special focus, associative development, and juxtaposition. The first involves the illumination of one element

through enlarged scale, proliferation, repetition, and so on. Associative development implies a semi-improvisatory, open-ended series, from a simple beginning through more or less closely related stages. In juxtaposition, normally remote objects or processes, especially archtypes or myths, are brought together for combined though not necessarily integrated presentation.

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Only after fragmentation and dissociation have become commonplace can the idea of juxtaposition become natural. The same is true, to a lesser degree, for unusual focus and remote associations. We are now accustomed to rapid response to our changing needs, and, as well, to rapid adaptation to pressures impressed by the needs of others. In the art world, the Futurists and Dadaists systematically punctured inflated traditions and habits. In The Art Of Assemblage, William Seitz notes that Dada substituted, for the first time in Western thought, a non-rational frame for a rationalized hierarchy of values. More broadly, it became clear during this century that our capacity for producing change and affecting substitution was fast exceeding our ability to adapt. After Nuremberg and Hiroshima, we can have few illusions about man's power of bureaucratically and mechanistically disrupting the most basic of human continuities: the individual life.

Emerging into the industrial age by an even more precipitous ascent than the Western nations, Japan must contend, as well, with radical linguistic and social disparities. War and the following occupation further intensified the magnitude and rate of change. Zen Buddhism has been fundamental in shaping Japan and it has always permitted, even honored, non-rational ways. The superposition of scientific values and the necessity of highly "logical" thought patterns on Japanese society resulted in still another disruptive schism.

It is not surprising that the Japanese artist should have been enmeshed in the perception of discontinuity. Nor is it surprising that, faced with remote alternatives, he frequently chooses an imitative way - unwilling to turn back to traditions which seem displaced or irrelevant and unable to achieve the demanding act of genius: reconciliation between fundamentally disparate elements. What is remarkable and encouraging is that there is so much significant effort by the younger Japanese artists.

The Japanese propensity for group associations can be inferred from the statistics below. In 1955, at least four years before Allan Kaprow's "Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts" christened the genre in October 1959, a group of artists centered around Jiro Yoshihara in Osaka were presenting

programs of events which can certainly be seen as anticipating Kaprow in vigor and imagination, though not entirely in intent. Beginning in 1955, the "Gutai Group" ("concrete group") gave presentations in and around theaters in Tokyo and Osaka. In 1959, the "Neo-Dada Organizers" first displayed their constructions and paintings at the Yomiuri Independent Show, and from the "organizers" several years later came the "High-Red-Center Group" (title derives from the literal meanings of the principal members' names: painters Takamatsu, Akasegawa, and Nakanishi). "The Experimental Workshop" (1951), under the spiritual leadership of Shuzo Takiguchi, included composers Ichiyonagi, Mayuzumi, Takemitsu, and Yuasa, as well as poet-critic Akiyama, and artists Yamaguchi and Fukushima; while the "Group Ongaku" ("music group") made up of composers Ichiyonagi, Shiomi, and Tone, and artist Kosugi began its "dada music" in 1961. More recently there has been occasional activity by individuals such as Kuniharu Akiyama, Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, and painter Ay-O, as well as spectacles by Kato's "Zero Dimension Group" from Nagoya.

A few outlines will suggest the normal run of Japanese-style happenings:

On every intersection of any size in Tokyo, a small building with a conspicuous red light is situated. This Spring, members of Tokyo's "Dating Group" rushed to positions in front of one of these police boxes and proceeded to eat several chickens, still bloodily alive. There are apparently no statutes covering this situation, (*juxtaposition*)

In 1960, painter Shusaku Arakawa invited a large number of persons to be seated in a balcony which could only be reached by means of a ladder. The "audience," visitors to an art festival at Nippon University, suddenly found itself in complete darkness. Arakawa removed the stepladder and quietly lay down on the floor below. When nothing whatever happened for more than an hour, the audience became restless and finally, in boredom and irritation, jumped down to the floor. Finding Arakawa, they began to interrogate him. He was unresponsive. Further irritated, the crowd began to prod and finally kick him. Through it all, he remained mute, without visible reaction. (*associative development*)

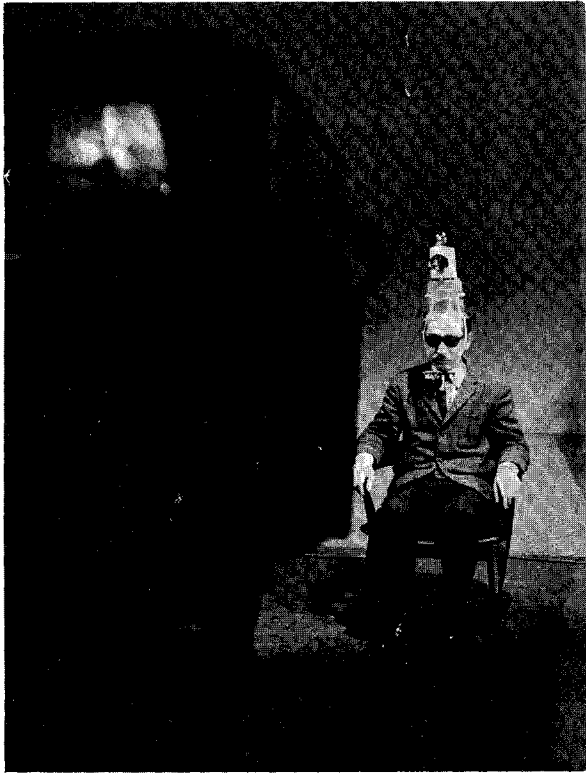
On a stage before a Tokyo audience in 1957 lay a flat plastic mass measuring approximately 10 feet by 20. Slowly it began to expand as gas was pumped in unobtrusively. Swaying and shifting, it revealed a Pollock-like pattern as its dimensions grew. When it had reached the size of a small bus, it was cut into and slowly withered. (*special focus*)

In December of 1966, the painter Ay-O returned from New York and organized, with Akiyama and Yamaguchi, a bus excursion along a sight-seeing route well populated with temples and

shrines. At one point by the windy docks lining the Pacific, balloons were released and rolls of toilet paper thrown into the air, unwinding across the paths of the running participants. Elsewhere a television set was abused by missiles and axes after which it was to be buried. The winter ground proved too hard, and the set was thrown into Tokyo Bay instead. Questions from Robert Filliou's "Ample Food For Stupid Thought" were read and answered. At sunset, the group split in two and walked in opposite directions about the outer path of a large temple. When two persons met, they shook hands (Shaking hands has a peculiar flavor for the Japanese whose customary greeting is the bow.).

Because it is a product of two of those who have demonstrated a continuing interest in happenings, who, in fact, helped to introduce them into Japan, I will give a more elaborate description of a happening which was requested by and planned for a regular TV program for Tokyo teen-agers, "Young 7:20." Six days a week, a host and hostess preside over this popular 40-minute show which includes filmed interviews, music from "The Hot Five," news, and other items.

TV happening devised by Akiyama and Yamaguchi. Consists of five short interjections (special focus and juxtaposition) to the main body of the program and a final continuous 9-minute section (juxtaposition) over which studio audience interviews will be conducted. The intention is to have first five events arresting and discontinuous, each beginning an activity or tendency which will continue throughout the whole program (though not directly on camera) until combined. 1) Yamaguchi sitting impassively looking at the camera while a rotating signal light roped to his head sweeps around. 2) Cameras pan over web of ropes on and about a catwalk high above normal studio floor. A heavy rope cable falls (with a crash in the studio, but inaudibly on the broadcast) to the floor beside a grand piano with the lid removed at which Akiyama is playing. He catches it and continues improvising. This is intended to show actual studio space and its different varieties (formal and supportive), to introduce rope motif, and potential for connection. 3) Close-up, showing inside of piano and Akiyama's hands. Piano is prepared with a variety of bolts, erasers, toys, etc., and wired by means of contact mikes to electronic modulators and gate circuits. Intended to display incongruity of stern concert grand littered with junk and more particularly to point up the disparity between actions and resultant sounds. A slight gesture on Akiyama's part may produce an ear-shattering roar. 4) Close up of Yamaguchi's mouth, chewing. Mouth and mustache move slowly, methodically. Picture fills the whole screen, unexpected, unexplained. Director is uncomfortable with this shot and later superimposes announcement of the program's next regular feature. 5) Girl lying under sheet on a bed, fully clothed. Her hands are tied by the end of a long rope which stretches up to another section of the catwalk where a camera is stationed. To each finger of her gloves a feather is attached and she moves the appropriate one, striking a large styra-foam "R,"



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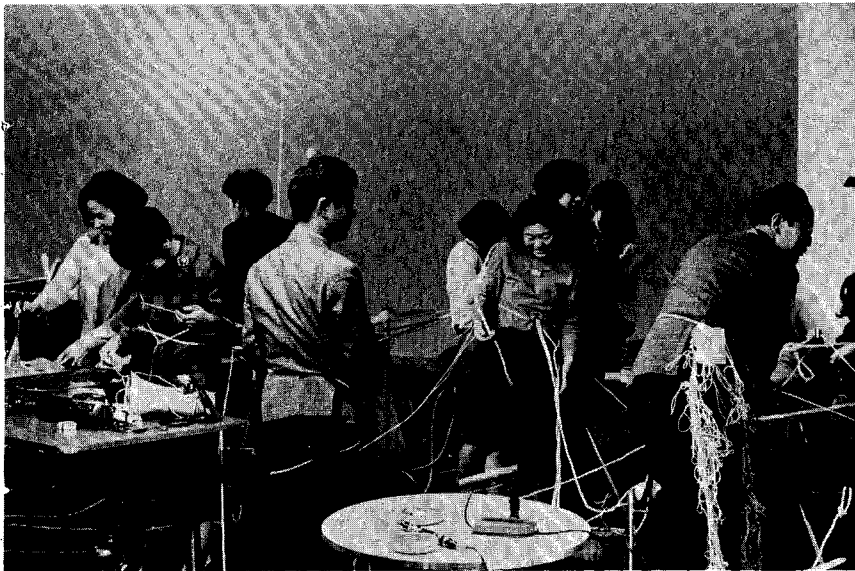


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- 1 Yamaguchi with rotating head lamp
- 2 Mouth as seen by TV audience
- 3 Happener Akiyama
- 4 Snarled rope as it appeared in the studio without the aid of camera framing
- 5 A similar scene as viewed by the "happening camera" (caption in lower right)



as a young man reads slowly from a series of numbers. A chicken is tied to the foot of the bed. Concurrently, though not featured, another event by the same young lady, Chieko Shiomi, begins. Rubber balls on which various words and names have been written are to be thrown around the studio. Persons are to catch, read, and throw the balls on to someone else. In practice, no one reads. The stagehands and camera crew take the occasion to throw the balls vigorously at the host and hostess, and the audience members (who were, incidentally, submissive but uncomfortable throughout the rehearsal and filming).

The various unexplained items were aimed at underscoring the usually flat, lavishly explained or easily understood flow of TV events. The rope theme (probably first used by Marcel Duchamp in decorating a 1942 surrealist exhibition in New York) is extremely popular in Japan. In the studio, the coils of various lengths and dimensions became quickly and hopelessly tangled. The organizers and crew struggled all afternoon with them and, in the end, the planned "spontaneous intertwining" around the studio audience was disappointing. The audience members were encouraged to wrap rope and string around themselves and everything in the neighborhood, but lacking instructions, aggressive interest, and lengths of unknotted rope, they produced a pathetically limp result in the studio. Interestingly, the situation as seen by the camera and broadcast looked dense and chaotic as had been intended. Rope was used also with the idea of disrupting the normally smooth TV continuity.

In rehearsal (first of three stages in which this happening existed) rough spots were to be worked out, but in fact everyone discovered what pleased or threatened him and adjusted his behavior accordingly. The director forbade use of the rope on the crew and staff so that continuity would not be interrupted. He took final control of the piano sound away from the happeners (They intended to blot out the program's normal sound capriciously from time to time.). During rehearsal, a critic was interviewed and when asked in what way listeners might participate he replied, "By switching channels." This too was suppressed. Watching the actual filming, one was conscious of many levels of intention arising from different sources: the happeners; the program's normal producers; the crew whose "job" included a certain degree of cooperation all around; and the TV studio audience which was neither adequately prepared nor, after the rehearsal, spontaneous. During viewing, each group had, from the vantage point of distance and the nature of its personal role, a quite different reaction. The directors of "Young 7:20" were uniformly pleased with the response to the program in its repressed form. The happeners, having lost interest, did not watch.

A large portion of the Japanese activity which might come under the heading of happenings (I will use this term to cover the variety of efforts described above.) has a flavor of personal, and sometimes social, protest. As art critic Yoshiaki Tono has pointed out, some of the early groups such as the "Neo-Dada Organizers" were more social than artistic in nature. They participated in demonstrations against ratification of the Japanese-American Security Treaty with as much or more relish than they sponsored "esthetic" events. "The art activity of the group," writes Tono, "was thus somewhat compromised by the social heat of its members. ...it was like a bomb, bursting with great force, but lacking the force to sustain itself." Experiments with happening-like events on the part of the "Gutai Group" and later with the "High-Red-Center Group" grew naturally out of changes in their materials and techniques as artists. This is one explanation for the relatively short span of interest on the part of most individuals. Once passing personal needs were satisfied, there was apparently not sufficient pressure from social or political factors to support a continuation. Of the groups mentioned earlier, only the "Zero Dimension" and "Dating" groups are still in operation. There is, as a result, no roster of Japanese happeners, but a large number of painters, sculptors, and musicians who have a history of sporadic involvement.

It is interesting, and perhaps not so incidental, that those Japanese who live abroad have achieved the reputation of being particularly unrestrained. This may be due to the individuals themselves (though the most notorious Oriental, Nam June Paik, is Korean) or it may simply reflect the power of the inhibitory forces, social and habitual, which operate in Japan. Spirited the people certainly are, whether at a sporting event, a sake party, or a protest demonstration, but they are rarely wild or vulgar. There is considerably less opportunity for individual action as an outlet, and more for group demonstration.

Japanese society is well equipped with the tools of repression. Not only the traditionally inviolable family, school, and business loyalties - factors which result in the still high rate of arranged marriages and the absence of job mobility - but the language itself acts constantly against individual dignity and unsanctioned enterprise. Such a seemingly straightforward comment as "I am pleased with my new work," is unthinkably brash in the Japanese language. There are, in addition to normal verbs, two other sets, one of which serves to humble one beneath the person to whom he is speaking, and another which honors the person to whom one is speaking so that he is placed effectively on a higher level. Social pressure is such that during the fifties the highest ranking cause of death in the age group 15 to 30 was suicide. If one can change his circumstances, replace old

loyalties or surroundings with new, he can find release from otherwise intolerable personal situations, if not, "alternatives" become more drastic.

These factors may illuminate an important way in which Japanese happenings are distinct from the American variety. Anonymous participation in group art efforts is not such a compelling ideal here, where, after all, group involvements and endeavors from the inescapable school uniforms to mass vacations (in which all members of a corporation join) are an inevitable aspect of daily life. Here I am, of course, separating individual products from formal group alliances which abound. A satisfactory sense of outlet or release comes more naturally in the form of individual action, even exhibitionism. Strictly impressed standards of personal decorum may be more easily violated under the banner of "art." The audience has not, as a result, been eliminated in Japan. It is essential. Although very little is generally asked of the spectator, he is, conversely, never abused.

The short-term commitment of most Japanese happeners seems to indicate that this activity serves a primarily personal function (psychological rather than artistic). The relationship between happenings and political protest mentioned above is no more than a coincidental result of strong individual feelings. Politically, events in Japan would seem to demand protest now more than before, yet it has abated. The society is reflected by the materials used, as one would expect: the slashing of large paper screens (modeled after the invitingly fragile paper shoji or sliding doors), and the inflation of or encasing by enormous sacks and balloons (everything one buys in Tokyo is enclosed in plastic bags, from a table with chairs to already plastic wrapped ears of corn). The preoccupation with junk and debris which followed the Second World War, however, has passed completely now, and there is not a trace of the self-consciously homely lower-East-side décor which is the favored atmosphere for many American works. While individualism and antiseptically neat suberbias in America lead to the need for "participation" and chaotic settings, Japan's crowded, tightly group-structured society naturally leads elsewhere.

Contemplation and esthetic awareness are deeply ingrained features of Japan's ancient, deflected, but uninterrupted history. Zen Buddhism attempted to make a virtue, a joy, out of deprivation. Things are rapidly changing, but not so radically as to have displaced these elements. A gardener, for example, is expected to work little more than half the time he is on duty in order, I was told, to leave ample time for consideration of the correct moves. In short, it is scarcely a new idea to the Japanese that one could or should attempt to find beauty and meaning in ordinary objects or life.

It should be noted, in passing, that violence and vulgarity do not dominate Japanese happenings (no matter what Life Magazine may write nor how many times the explainers invoke the name of Artaud). It is true that the culture's admittedly un-Western attitudes about sensuality and nudity might make it easier for a Japanese happenner to do things which seem "emancipated" to the European or American bystander. Such things cause no excitement here. If Dada's method was shock, its lasting force has depended on the imaginative artistic force of adherents like Arp and Duchamp. From our vantage point, it is clear that outrage resided less in their acts than in the attitudes of their public. Similarly, happenings do not need to rely on shock, which is, in any event, more difficult to achieve now. They have more effective means.

There are still small-scale events each season in the larger Japanese cities, usually put on by college students for private gatherings, but most of the appropriate energy is now directed either at individual work by artists who are increasingly successful internationally, or towards feeding the burgeoning interest in "off-Ginza" theater. Farce and theater-of-the-absurd - native and imported plays - have become increasingly popular with the younger people in Tokyo, not, apparently, because the approach is newer than that of happenings (It isn't.), but because controlled, skillful activity is more appealing, more satisfying to them. Their matter-of-fact attitude toward happenings was echoed nicely by Jiro Yoshihara, mentor of the Gutai Group, which inaugurated Japanese efforts. When I asked him why the group was no longer doing happenings, he replied simply, "We've already done them."

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roger Reynolds', with a stylized, flowing script.

Roger Reynolds

Received in New York August 28, 1967.