

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RR-8
Happenings in Japan - II

28 Uguisudani-machi
Shibuya-ku, Tokyo

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Dear Dick:

Amidst the protests and the exhibitionalistic events have been spaced some of a significantly different order, not happenings in the classical New York sense but certainly important. They are the products of Kuniharu Akiyama, Toshi Ichiyonagi, and Toru Takemitsu. Relying less on focus and unexpected juxtapositions, they are more concerned with what I have called associative development. Special focus can be deliberately banal, settling on something like one of the Gutai Group's balloons which gradually grew to thirty feet in length extending out over the audience and emitted jets of smoke from orifices along its length; or it can, in combination with associative development, produce a more subtle and haunting result. Symbolism, after all, can do no more than remind us of something we already know.

Ichiyonagi's "Experimental Music" was included on a program of happenings in the Fall of 1966 at the Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo. Four persons were seated in straight chairs on a stage facing the audience. Contact microphones were fixed to the surrounding floor. "As slowly as possible" the performers leaned to one side, and, at the end of a time period which they privately judged to be four minutes, they were to have reached the point of imbalance and toppled to the floor. At that instant began a second period during which each performer was directed to struggle violently but silently with his chair. When this second estimated four minutes was up, each individual froze in whatever position he found himself. Then, when all four were ready, the performers resumed sitting on their chairs and, as before, began leaning gradually to one side. The curtain slowly descended, falling completely before balance was lost again. Throughout, the sounds of this mute, stoic, four-way struggle were electronically amplified and broadcast in the hall. (special focus and associative development)

In this event, the structure, though permissive, is beautifully clear. It involves skill in the pursuit of a generally understood aim, and the tension arising from shared knowledge regarding the outcome (an outcome which is inevitable

and yet unexpected). Dancers might provide a more elegant realization, but the task is accessible to any layman. The sounds are intriguing in that they are the products of a perfectly familiar set of objects and visible actions, yet incongruous in their amplified form. One can pose, for the sake of comparison, a hypothetical set of instructions in the epigrammatic style which is so widespread in the present "intermedia" area between music, theater, and literature: "Find suitable materials and make a stool. Sit on it."

"Blue Aurora for Toshi Ichiyangi" was prepared by Takemitsu for presentation at the University of Hawaii's East-West Festival in 1964. Consisting of three simply but artfully made collages and a fourth card containing specific but incomplete directions, it is a suggestive, multi-layered play on water, the color blue, directions, directionlessness, space... When John Cage realized it in Tokyo, he wore blue socks, blue gloves, and a blue net mask. Having asked some people to shine flashlights equipped with blue filters around the auditorium during the performance, he proceeded to move slowly in accord with his interpretation of the instructions, periodically whispering the word "space." Water poured from one glass into another, apparently empty, became instantly blue. A large piece of blue silk material was allowed to run hissing between his hands or across the surface of a table. In the end, all lights were extinguished while the word "and" (prominent in one collage) in enormous block letters was illuminated by black light. When the normal lights returned, Cage sat quietly in a chair, without blue accessories, smoking a cigarette. (associative development)

In "Blue Aurora," the performer is invited to display a high degree of virtuosity. Starting with a tangible and yet indefinite stimulus, he must put specific fragments (words, colors, directions) into a context of his own design. The "score" decrees nothing, but provides a climate. Seeing that the author has done his work thoroughly, without relying on in-group associations though perhaps including them, one may be moved to exert his own capacities.

Though happenings rarely require or admit anything in the way of a plot, they do generally have a theme or point. But frequently a verbal, written, or photographic report makes a stronger and more evocative point than the happening itself is able to. Descriptions, of course, instinctively exclude all that distracts. Even the interfering or disagreeable elements take on an amusing tone so long as one has not had to go through them himself. This particular quality of the happening - the disparities between first and second-hand experience - deserves closer inspection.

Most people are embarrassed or annoyed by unskilled activity, unless they have some personal stake in it (like a father and son talent show). The same is true of cluttered environments and time dimensions which prove too large for the available events. Consciousness of time (and hence boredom) arises from effort at achieving continuity. If there is not sufficient motivation for the observer, he loses interest and passes into a state of daydream or bald discomfort. Unless attentive, he is unlikely to receive detailed or meaningful impressions from new experience.

For the most part, activity results in satisfaction to the degree that it involves the successful use of skills. These do not need to be "professional" skills. Even the most rudimentary instances of human gregariousness include rhythmic handclapping, swaying, and chanting. These too are tasks, but geared to the common denominator. Personal satisfaction comes from doing something in a way that ranks well on one's own scale of values. It is a serious miscalculation to expect that people will be moved, altered, or enlightened by observing inept performance or from taking part in activity which does not challenge their personal capabilities effectively (taxing enough to require real effort, not so taxing as to assure defeat). It is unfortunate that the dull, cluttered, or rambling reality of many happenings inhibits rather than releases, obscures the aims rather than enunciates them.

More contemporary than the traditional techniques of extension and embellishment, the juxtaposition of normally disjunct elements has become increasingly important as a key to new awareness in science and in art. Grey Walter in The Living Brain has given the following picture from the perspective of a neurophysiologist:

...a man may learn by experience to associate two series of events between which any connection seemed at first wildly improbable. For such associations to be possible, provision must be made for every signal entering the nervous system to be relayed to every part, not merely to the specialized receiving zone. Thus from the knot of an event is generated a web of speculation; when two series of events are perceived together they form the warp and woof of a shimmering fabric into which is woven the pattern of probability that the two events are significantly related. The repetition in time of this pattern permits the construction of a hypothesis of correlation; the idea that one series of events implies the other.

In a compact passage this evidently sensitive scientist points up the importance of the continuity of events (series) and the exercise of attentiveness on the part of both maker and observer-participant (provision must be made..., repetition in time...) if one is to achieve a meld of two extraordinary associates. Traditional concepts of continuity are far too restrictive now, but the improbable, by definition, can only be anticipated when carefully prepared. This does not mean that it is necessary to resort to established formulas - of period comedies and sonatas or theater-of-the-absurd and psychedelic rock. A limitless variety of events might qualify, but pattern and effort would seem to be basic.

Psychologist Sarnoff Mednick of the University of Michigan developed a test for creativity several years ago based on the ability to make associations between things which might not appear related at first thought. To achieve generality, he used common word-pairs in the following way. Rat, blue, and cottage might appear on the first line of a test, wheel, electric, and high on the next, and so forth. The test subject is asked to locate a word which combines naturally, as a pair, with each one of the series of three. In the first instance above, that word is cheese, and in the second either chair or wire. Something further, and of considerable significance, came out of the RAT (remote associates test). The possible existence of a need for novelty (a need in the sense of a "drive state" analogous to more obvious ones such as hunger, sex, etc.) was investigated. Results showed that subjects who scored high appeared to have a drive towards novelty (or away from redundancy), while low scorers appeared to have a positive aversion for novelty.

If this is finally established, it will refine our understanding of the difficulties which already seem inherent in the happenner's expectation of and desire for participation. In short, those who need it, don't need it. On the other hand, those who might be thought of as profiting from involvement in novel or "liberating" circumstances have a physiological drive away from them. Continuing in a vaguely psychological tone, the "responsibility" which American happeners call for on the part of participants requires willingness to accept it. The willingness, in turn, involves some level of motivation. A stronger drive towards novelty results in a firmer commitment to "responsibility." This circularity leaves the happening, as most frequently espoused, a closed activity: suited to those who recognize the desirability of it but hardly reaching out to others. New bands of devotees are formed, like madrigal groups, enjoyable but registering no wide impact on society (as rock and roll, for example, has).

At roughly the same time happenings began to attract attention, several other phenomena arose in the fields of

advertising (Madison Avenue's "Brainstorming") and industrial research. In his book Synerctics (1961), and later through consultation and training services, W. J. J. Gordon has shown that non-rational processes can be useful to industry. He devised techniques for stimulating problem solving and the generation of new ideas through cooperative group explorations. There are two basic operations in synerctics: "making-the-strange-familiar," and "making-the-familiar-strange." The second process employs three analogical mechanisms, personal analogy (imagining one's feelings if one were the object under discussion - a faucet or fog); direct analogy (likening disparate things by means of an associate - typewriter and pipe organ); and symbolic analogy (characterizing the implications of a key element by the briefest possible phrase - "dependable intermittency" for "ratchet"). At the extended group sessions which he oversees, Gordon encourages "fantasy" and the interaction of the techniques described. He discourages hasty attempts at judgment and the labeling of anything as "irrelevant."

Allan Kaprow, the foremost apologist for happenings, warns against the dangers of thinking of "composition" in happenings as self-sufficient form, or as an organizing activity in which materials are taken for granted as means toward larger ends. Composition, he writes, should be "understood as an operation dependent upon the materials (including people and nature) and phenomenally indistinct from them" (*italics supplied*). While there is little disagreement about the usefulness of freedom, there are differences concerning the nature of the skeletal support. Structure may, of course, be remote from that which has been considered adequate in the past. A frame may be anything from Takemitsu's collage to Gordon's analogical techniques, and beyond, but it is yet to be demonstrated that happenings can successfully involve people without something of the sort.

In the case of synerctics, motivation is powerful: money. The goal is clear as well, narrowing the field of play. In happenings the frame is often too vaguely defined, too carelessly realized. A frequently expressed goal, the "unstructured" manner of daily life, is curious in view of the depressingly thoroughgoing structure it actually has: winter and summer; daylight and darkness; baby, travel, TV schedules; approved times for eating, sleeping, working, visiting, relaxing; the limits of the law, of decorum, of property rights, linguistic fluency, budgetary means; family, class, business, religious, national, racial allegiance, and so forth. The structure of restraints which limits us at each moment is, after all, what the "hippies" are denying.

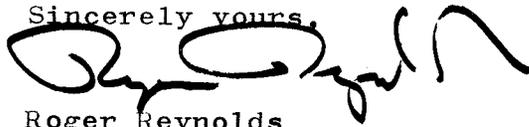
There is a revealing confusion of terms surrounding happenings. "Radical juxtaposition," is misleading, requiring the substitution of "outlandish" or "startling" for radical which actually means "of, or proceeding from, the root." Also unfortunate is the implication that it is what is put together - not how the combination is presented and how received - which is the crux of things, (Marshall McLuhan's

"medium is the message" motto is as misleading as most other striking aphorisms. "The medium" undoubtedly influences the manner in which material is prepared for presentation, and the mood of our receptivity, probably far more than we have been able to admit, but, excepting the initial exposure to a new medium, the residue of subject matter makes the lasting impact. Information remains when the sense of the experience has faded.)

Another common word used in describing happenings is "collage." This technique as used by artists, and more recently film-makers, is powerful. Not only the relationships between events, as presented in the work, project (fragmentary, overlapped, atypically oriented), but the normal, "real" contexts of the collaged elements are evoked, giving rise to other chains of connection and allusion. With happenings, this process can become pretentious and self-defeating. One cannot remove a slice of life from its normal context and still have life. One can actually go about his business or he can pretend to. If one is pretending, he may well have the kind of revelations which arise from self-consciousness, but there should be no illusions about the artificiality of the process. The artist who hasn't the courage to paste a real letter or eagle to his work and paints it instead looks too cautious, but the analogy cannot be transferred to happenings. Imitation is, in any case, the palest form of learning.

There is every reason to applaud the experimental investigation (artistic or scientific) of analogical and non-rational processes. This is an exciting and doubtless a fecund terrain. It would be good to see more inventive exploration and to hear less about the "separation between art and life." "Life" is, for the most part, not much less artificial than "art," and, in this age of credibility gaps, who can still feel duped or misled by the trivially obvious "rules" or "boundaries" of the art game?

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roger Reynolds', written in a cursive style.

Roger Reynolds

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