



LETTERS

ON HAPPENINGS


The Editor:

I believe that the emphasis you have given [T30] to Cage and McLuhan as germinal influences on Happenings may be oversimplified and, as a result, really unfair to these men. As quite a few of us see the Happenings, what is astonishing is that they are pan-artistic phenomena, in which energies originally developing within the separate fields of painting, dance, music, poetry, etc., began to cross each other's paths at various and unexpected places. This was what mutually affected all of them, and in turn produced new hybrid arts and new ideas as well. Mike Kirby has observed this, certainly, but in dealing with only the American (and largely the New York) group, he has tended to localize the whole business around Cage. Cage's indirect stimulation should not be underestimated, but to place upon him the burden of sponsorship for a range of activities which in part he had nothing to do with, and which in part he is not comfortable with, is to do him a disservice. I do not know how McLuhan feels about this, but Cage is apparently uncomfortable with his assigned role; his interview in T30 made that perfectly clear.

With respect to the first Happenings group in New York, consisting of

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painters, the direct line of historical stimulation (usually conscious) seem to have been the Futurist manifestos and noise concerts, Dada's chance experiments and occasional cabaret performances, Surrealism's interest in automatic drawing and poetry, and the extension of these into Action painting. All focused in one way or another on the primacy of the irrational and or the unconscious, on their effect upon undirected body responses, and on the elimination of pictorial and other professional skills as criteria of art. Thus the idea of art as "act" rather than esthetics was implicit by 1909 and explicit by 1946. Between this background and Cage, there was Bob Rauschenberg, who, as costume and set designer for Merce Cunningham's dance group, not only kept the painters aware of Cage's thought, but also suggested how the plastic arts can become part of a performance situation. In other words, our prime sources were visual, whatever non-visual outcome these led to.

Now, speaking personally, my studies with Cage followed a direction I had begun to take a few years before when I was concerned with the implication that Action painting—Pollock's in particular—led not to more painting, but to *more action*. I perceived that Cage could help, especially in the area of noisemaking which I was using in my Assemblages and Environments then. Needless to say, he did not discourage me, and I did my first Happenings in his classroom. Yet I possibly learned things which Cage was not inclined to teach, although I was quite satisfied. This is reason enough to relieve him of any responsibility for my different interests. Moreover, to complicate matters, some of the other painters who may have gotten ideas from my example, not only didn't study with him

—they misunderstood what *I* was doing. Is Cage to be held responsible for them, too? Am I? Isn't this what's great about it all?

As far as McLuhan is concerned, his name never came up in any conversations before a year or so ago. And now that it has, his basic insight, the famous "the medium is the message," is hardly unusual, when you come down to it. French formalist art from Manet to at least Cubism offered precisely this recipe for our understanding, and it became a staple of academic modernism by 1940. McLuhan's present interest lies in his application of the theory to the mass media (such as TV). So far as I know, he has had no effect upon the *Happenings* at all.

Marshall McLuhan aside, we still must take into account more than thirty *Happenings* outside the United States, living in at least twelve countries, including Japan, Argentina, Spain and Czechoslovakia. They have their own ideas, even if they are aware of us here. It might be a thought for some future issue of TDR.

Allan Kaprow

The Editor:

I recently subscribed to TDR, full of hope because your *Happenings* issue seemed to indicate that here, finally, was a theatre magazine of the twentieth century. However, your Spring issue was in another world altogether: the old guard writing about the totally dead. Now I understand why the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, reviewing on April 30th a *Happening* presented by Schechner and two other Tulane professors, commented: "It beats an evening at home with the *Tulane Drama Review*."

Mimsy Lee

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