

# On the Necessity of Violation

JEAN-JACQUES LEBEL

We must also be capable of setting ourselves above morality; not with the uneasy rigidity of the man who constantly fears to lose his footing and fall, but with the practised ease of one who can float, disport himself above it! And how should we achieve this without art, without the madman's aid? . . . And as long as you are in any way ashamed of yourself, you cannot possibly be of our number.

Nietzsche (*Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*)

The middle-class hero, product of Western culture, still dreams of seeing his moral sense triumphant over all rebellions. This mediocrity has a *bête noire*—free art. He thinks that he, personally, is being attacked by the transformations which young artists claim to be bringing into his life as well as to their own. This tireless Philistine might perhaps be able to consider avant-garde art sympathetically if only he did not feel that it made him out to be guilty, or mentally deficient; he would not stand in the way of any revolution, if only it left his *values* alone.

No one is prepared to admit that if there is still a chance of changing life it resides in the transformation of the human being; humans cling to their old ways of seeing, of feeling, of being. Art as it evolves, both historically and spiritually, has to face a reaction similar to that which neutralizes the reform of social structures. For painting and sculpture, without having exhausted all their hypnotic power, foster to a considerable degree the misapprehension of private property and the commercial value of images—a misunderstanding which, in the long run, has the effect of making their psychical effect recede further and further into the background.

The relationship which has grown up between art and the majority of those who have to do with it is thoroughly defective—a voluntary blindness and a refusal of communication. It was only to be expected that certain artists should feel this alienation—legalized, generalized and imposed by culture itself—to be an inadmissible obstacle, a challenge which could not go unanswered. But, to reply, a language and a new long-range technique were necessary. This new language, by the frank

way in which it put the question of communication and perception, by its resolution to recognize and explore the forbidden territories which had hitherto halted modern art, had to force a complete re-examination of the cultural and historical situation of art. This language is the Happening.

Thus, about eight years ago and on three continents at once, authors of Happenings started to attack the problem at its very *foundations*. That is to say:

1. The free functioning of creative abilities, without regard for what pleases or what sells, or for the moral judgments pronounced against certain collective aspects of these activities.
2. The abolition of the right to speculate on an arbitrary and artificial commercial value attributed, no one knows why, to a work of art.
3. The abolition of the privilege of exploiting, of intellectually “bleeding” artists, which has been appropriated by vulgar middlemen and brokers who detest art.
4. The abolition of cultural “policing” by sterile watchdogs with set ideas, who think they are capable of deciding whether such and such an image, seen from a distance, is “good” or “bad.”
5. The necessity of going beyond the aberrant subject-object relationship (looker/looked-at, exploiter/exploited, spectator/actor, colonialist/colonized, mad-doctor/madman, legalism/illegalism, etc.) which has until now dominated and conditioned modern art.

It is easy to see that the battle is joined around exactly those prohibitions whose violation is a matter of life and death for present-day art. This fight is concentrated around political and sexual themes—taboo above all others. We owe to Freud the elucidation of the displacement, substitution and repression mechanisms which act on the human personality by means of laws and social restraints. “. . . Prohibition,” he wrote in *Totem and Taboo*, “must be thought of as the result of an affective ambivalence . . . whenever there is prohibition, it must have been motivated by an unconfessed, unconscious desire or longing.” In the light of this pitiless theory, the function of art in relation to society becomes clear—it must express, at all costs, what is hidden behind the wall.

It was George Bataille in a 1957 lecture who defined the essential albeit imaginary nature of the wall: “Eroticism is born of prohibition and lives by it.” Bataille added that in the absence of prohibition (or a feeling of prohibition), we could not be erotic in a sense implying violation, nor “have access to what is essential for us.” Nor could we be film-makers, artists or poets, for all language turns on violation, and all art is founded on unveiling. The dialectical, supremely ambivalent nature of the violation can never be sufficiently stressed. Violation is at once birth and unbirth, the going-beyond and the return, accomplishment and death.

All transmutation begins with a rape, with a reversal. We know that Kandinsky saw his own painting for the first time in a picture by Monet lying *upside-down* on a table. Dialectical reversal is a constant in the history of art; it is one of the causes of the perpetual crisis of the spirit. The reversal of Hegel by Marx, of Vauvenargues by La Fontaine, show to what extent thought is contradictory in its development, in its very life.



Sunlove, *Happening with The Soft Machine*, 1967.

No crisis of the mind can exist independently of the social predicament, and artists are far from being the only ones to have to bear the consequences, the horrifying anguish of the *sens perdu*. They are however almost the only people, together with criminals and revolutionaries, to react against this loss, to assume it and express it; which is, precisely, an infringement of the rules.

Adult civilizations—those which have brought to its highest point of blood-stained perfection the dictatorship of the death-wish—accuse art, indissolubly linked with childhood, of being degenerate. Brancusi's "When I am no longer a child I shall be dead" is the confession and the supreme riposte of the outlaw. Art is an illegal regression, in comparison with the "maturity" of industrial society. The emotive chord which the art of so-called primitive peoples still strikes in us, the electric shock which we feel at several centuries distance, prove that the concept of progress has a different weight in art than in political economy. A sense of history has no validity on the pre-logical, hallucinatory level occupied by true art. Surely this art, whose potency lies entirely in auto-examination or the reactive crisis which it touches off, must be a

regressive process? Has it not been compared (though from the outside) to the games of children or madmen? As for genius, it is simply regression, since we commonly admit that it is a state of recovered childhood. In reality it is not a question of the inversion of values but of their transmutation.

Thus, the “progression” of modern art—from impressionism to cubism, for example—was directly caused by a return to the source: the art of savages and of madmen. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is not the only thing we owe to Negro art, to demential art; we are in their debt for an intense psychical necessity which white art, adapting itself to the civilization, has lost. Present-day art, too, continues and is accomplished thanks to a similar disdain for the aesthetic and moral values of the ruling class. In spite of appearances, the artist has everything to lose by concluding an alliance with Authority.

The artist of the second half of this century—whether in Europe or America—is a politically and spiritually decadent being in comparison with what various genial utopians would have liked him to be—but also in comparison with his own growing pains (1910-1930). Dispossessed of most of his intellectual resources, progressively depersonalized as he “succeeds” socially, the artist is nothing but the clown of the ruling classes. It is useless to interpret this downfall as a victory of apolitical feeling over that of revolt. To the watchdogs of tradition, upset by the generally sagging market, I say that not only will we not agree to limit or put a brake on this crisis, but we will take every opportunity to exasperate it to its highest pitch. For this is our only chance to have done with this exploiting society, with its slave-owning



*Soldier eats cabbage leaves off badminton girl in Dechirex by Lebel at Second Festival of Free Expression (Paris, 1965).*

mentality and its irremediable culture. Art is in full and fundamental dissidence with all regimes and all forms of coercion, but especially with those regimes which use it for their own ends. To this mercantile, state-controlled conception of culture, we oppose a combative art, fully conscious of its prerogatives: an art which does not shrink from stating its position, from direct action, from transmutation.

The Happening interpolates actual experience directly into a mythical context. The Happening is not content merely with interpreting life; it takes part in its development within reality. This postulates a deep link between the actual and the hallucinatory, between real and imaginary. It is precisely the awareness of this link that the enemies of the Happening cannot tolerate, for it might threaten their defense mechanisms. When Merleau-Ponty decrees that "the phenomenon of hallucination is not part of the world, and is not accessible," he is saying that art, considered as a language of hallucination, has no place in that "normal life" we are expected to tolerate. The extremely limited space assigned to art in society in no way corresponds to its mythical volume. To pass from one to the other—at the risk of breaking the law—is the primordial function of the Happening.

It is avant-garde art that liberates latent myths; it transfigures us and changes our conception of life. If this is a crime, there is no reason why we should deny it—on the contrary, we should claim it for our own. The serious difficulties met with by the authors of Happenings (in London and Paris notably, with the police or culture-censors) at once put the struggle for liberty of expression on a political footing. This must not obscure the "mythical thought behavior" which Mircea Eliade has detected in avant-garde art. This "going into action," the poetical investigation and elucidation make up the random element, the element of risk essential to any creative activity worthy of the name. If the concept of knowing each other, of knowing ourselves, has any meaning in the day of the Bomb, it is not only thanks to ethnologists, but to artists. Since Picabia, Duchamp, and their friends put culture on fire, the words *art* and *crisis* have designated one and the same phenomenon.

The Happening, like music or the cinema, is a language to which each person brings a different content; there is a distinction to be made between a Happening by Kaprow or Oldenburg, and a Happening by Ferrò, Pommereulle, or Kudo, for example. In Europe, the first of these "events" took place at the end of the Anti-Trial exhibition, and only artists associated with the Free Expression Workshop fully and directly tackled political and sexual themes in the course of their Happenings. This may have confused the misinformed as to the possible total and imaginary significance of this genre. Each Happening has a network of meanings linked to a precise psychological and social context; our position differs greatly from that of the Americans Kaprow and Oldenburg.

As far as we are concerned, we wish to delve more deeply into the very experience of painting. All that was left of "action-painting" was action. We were determined to become one with our hallucinations. We had a feeling of apocalypse, an insuperable disgust with the "civilization of happiness" and its Hiroshimas. Everything which had not become irremediably meaningless revolved—and still revolves—round two poles: Eros and Thanatos. It is a question of giving form to the myths



which are ours, while falling prey as little as possible to the alienating mechanisms of the image-making industry.

For a long time there has been in existence a method with which the Happening has unquestionable affinities. Hans Arp, when a soldier, blew his nose in the flag when his name was called; Jean-Pierre Duprey urinated on the "eternal flame" at the Arc de Triomphe and put it out: poetry is not a matter of words. And the demolition, during the Commune, of the Colonne Vendôme—the symbol of Empire—remains Gustave Courbet's best work. The authors of this kind of *chef-d'oeuvre* have always had to pay for it dearly. In spite of everything, an art which does not face up to the principle of reality is one which has agreed to cheat, to compromise, to go down on its knees.

One of these days, an anti-racist and/or anti-war demonstration blocking the traffic in New York will end as a Happening. Note that the latter would not necessarily be synonymous with violence—that would be reducing it to the atavistic determinism of a civilization obsessed with auto-destruction; yet the breaking of bonds is the very essence of poetry. I have noticed how little it would have taken for several street demonstrations in which I have taken part to turn into riots. Is it only the threat of the bludgeon and the fear of murderous repression that prevent collective anger from bursting forth? Freedom of mind will have no chance of becoming freedom of action as long as the "special mechanism for coercion" (constituted on the cultural and social level by the State) has not been liquidated. It is less than ever possible to reform a limited segment of human life (even that known as the cultural sector) without reforming the whole, and its principle. It is true that even the Pythoness got paid, in the good old days of the golden century.

The domain known (for lack of a more precise definition) as that of magic is the only one in which art can exist. All art is magic, else it is not art. I mean that art is the means of transmission of certain psychic forces and that it has always, in all cultures, made it possible for man to express and satisfy a need for magic. Civilization regulates the transition, in man, from one state to another. Thanks to art, the multiple states of the human being must, in spite of everything, become livable possibilities. The only reality in art is furnished by the hallucinatory experience, around which crystallize (ephemeral) rites, and around which our mythical thoughts express themselves. The communication of this experience is essential to the life of the mind, yet it is clear that it has been interrupted. Every possible means must be used to re-establish it. The era of hallucinogenic drugs ushers in a new state of mind, breaks with industrial preoccupations, in order to devote itself to the revolution of being. Cubism, dadaism, surrealism, expressionism, or abstract impressionism, and even "kinetic" or "op" paintings have (timidly) tried to approximate certain aspects of the hallucinatory experience. Now, it is no longer a matter of representing it, but of living it, and making it possible for others to live it.

It is unfortunate that the work of Levi-Strauss and the recent developments in psycho-chemistry should not yet have provoked the upheaval so necessary to perception of the artistic deed and of its correlation with totemism. Of the hundreds of volumes of research and general nonsense directed against art, all that en-

ture are several sentences which take its fundamental animism into account. Freud put forward an inspired supposition in *Totem and Taboo*: "Art is the only domain in which the omnipotence of the Idea has persisted until our time. . . . It is correct to speak of the magic of art and to compare the artist with the magician. . . . Art, which certainly never began as 'art for art's sake,' at first found itself working for tendencies which are now, for the most part, extinct. It is permissible to suppose that among these tendencies were a good number of magical intentions."

*Arts* illustrated a pertinent article by Micea Eliade with a photo of one of Claes Oldenburg's Happenings, accompanied by this caption: "Some of our contemporaries, in their yearning for 'initiation,' have gone as far as inventing new rites, if not new cults altogether." Eliade goes on: "We dream of being 'initiated,' of managing to decipher the occult meaning of all this destruction of artistic languages, of all these 'original' experiments which seem, at first sight, to have nothing left in common with art." And again: ". . . on one hand, we have an impression of 'initiation' . . . on the other, we display clearly to those *others*, the crowd, our adherence to a secret minority; not, any more, to an 'aristocracy' (modern elites are leftward-looking) but to a gnosis, which has the merit of being both spiritual and secular, by being in opposition not only to official values but to the traditional Churches." Here the question is clearly defined by the terminology of an historian examining from a distance the history of art, initiation, and gnosis. It would seem that the Happening expresses "mythical thought"; it remains to be decided what is rational about it, and what eruptive.

Before deciding that the author of a Happening is a hierophant, an essential difference must be noted. The ceremony conducted by a medicine-man takes place ac-

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*Rita Renoir in Picasso's Desire Caught by the Tail, directed by Lebel (Saint-Tropez, 1967).*



## À PROPOS DE L'EX-THÉÂTRE DE FRANCE

The Committee for Revolutionary Action (C.A.R.), together with the militants of the revolutionary student movement, has occupied the ex-theatre of France and transformed it into a permanent meeting place for all. During the night of May 16, it transferred the responsibility for the unlimited occupation of places to a Committee of Occupation made up of actors, students, and workers whose political position is in line with their own. The goals of the occupation remain the same:

—The sabotage of all that is "cultural": theatre, art, literature, etc. (right-wing, left-wing, governmental or "avant-garde") and the maintenance of the political struggle in highest priority.

—The systematic sabotage of the cultural industry, especially the industry of show business, in order to make room for true collective creation.

—The concentration of all energy on political objectives such as the expansion of the revolutionary movement, the struggle in the streets against State Power, and the reinforcement of the union of revolutionary workers, revolutionary students, and revolutionary artists.

—The extension of direct action: for example, by the occupation of the greatest possible number of places of work, of communications, of decisions.

The C. A. R. feels that it accomplished its goal in occupying the Odéon, ex-Theatre of France, when its political objective was clearly and publicly achieved: the government press (Paris-Presse) recognized, moreover, that the occupation of the ex-Theatre of France and certain workshops in the Renault factory at Cleon has provoked a drop in the Paris stock market. Today, this irreversible movement must be extended and reinforced. In regard to theatre, the slightest corporatist activity, the slightest intramural and organized entertainment, the slightest relaxation of revolutionary agitation, would be a betrayal of the élan which was revealed on the barricades and which must not diminish but increase and fortify at all costs. Never again must a single ticket be sold at the ex-Theatre of France; its free status must be maintained. The theatrical act of occupation was, under the circumstances, a political act:

—It laid siege to one of the bastions of Gaullist power.

—It revealed the collusion between certain counter-revolutionary trade-union elements and Management allied to the State (i.e., goons).

The C.A.R. has decided to move on to other things in other places. The C.A.R. expresses its solidarity and its sympathy with the Committee of Occupation of the ex-Theatre of France and remains at its disposal to aid in rejecting all attempts by the State to reoccupy these places, to prevent all reconversion of places back into theatres.

The only theatre is guerrilla theatre. **REVOLUTIONARY ART IS MADE IN THE STREETS.**

Comité d'Action Révolutionnaire de l'ex-Théâtre de France

17 May, 1968





*Miss Festival Contest by Lebel, which disrupted a panel discussion at the 1968 International Experimental Film Competition at Knokke-Le-Zoute, Belgium. The Happening was immediately followed by an Anti-Vietnam War demonstration. Weeks after the event, M. Lebel was arrested and charged with obscenity.*



ODÉON  
 THÉÂTRE  
 DE  
 FRANCE  
*Robert Bataille*

according to a scheme which is the underlying principle of a complete rite; its progression strictly obeys a dogma, a cosmogonic theory. The artist taking part in a Happening is, on the contrary, looking for cosmogony in the action. He re-invents the world by coming into contact with it. He obeys no Rule. His action is undoubtedly conditioned by the collective subconscious which is its motor, but we may say that the man/world equation is an open one, to which each Happening brings a new and evolutive solution. The Happening tries to loosen the labyrinthine knot of the Real; it is, above all, a deliverance from the tangled thicket of the knots of culture. Each participant has a different interior mandala, and thus communication takes place transconsciously. It would appear that there is a transition from inorganic to organic matter, and that, in the same way, the inorganic matter of thought—the pulsion—is transformed into an ideograph, a language, an action. Caught by and in the Happening in its rough pregrammatical state, the thought-process is free and undistilled. Seeking itself, it creates itself. During this intersubjective communication a certain phenomenon occurs—the manifestation of the “cosmic link.”

Ornette Coleman has written about his record *Free Jazz*: “You can hear the others continue to build together so beautifully that the freedom even becomes impersonal.” Such is the degree of direct interpersonal communication that the Happening aims for. This fundamental mediumism of thought must be maintained, in defiance of all rationalist conditioning. Recent experiences have shown that the ingestion of certain hallucinogenic substances creates a mood in which each person dreams the dreams of the others; the Happening is the concretization of a collective dream and a vehicle of intercommunication. At this level, expression escapes censure, sophistication and trafficking.

The Tokyo happenings, and those of Amsterdam or Paris, seem to have a point in common: the advent of sexuality. In this domain more than any other, spontaneity is forbidden by the coercive moralism of our society. Those offended should consider these words by Mircea Eliade in *Images and Symbols*: “. . . to interpret a psychical situation in sexual terms is most emphatically not to humiliate it for, except in the modern world, sexuality has always and everywhere been a hierophancy, and the sexual act a complete one (and thus, it follows, a means to knowledge *as well*).” Absolutely the opposite of an act of profanation. To detractors, I further reply with a question: “Have you ever seen anything more obscene than two generals kissing each other?” That sort of people do it all the time at “investitures.” As for us, we are not in favor of civil or military puppet-shows—pretence games are not our forte.

Too often, Happenings are cited as attempts to *recover* “a lost world,” a lost communion, a lost innocence. Without underestimating the importance of archetypes, we must nevertheless try to reply to the fundamental questions of *modernity*. At its highest point of tension, is not artistic activity the creation of a new world, never seen before, imperceptibly gaining on reality? Or is artistic activity a kind of subjective, sublimatory archaeology, focused on the interior distances of History? Kaprow expounded (in *Art News*, May 1961): “In contrast with the art of the

past, Happenings have structurally speaking no beginning, middle or end. Their form is open and fluid, nothing obvious is pursued and consequently nothing is gained, save the certainty of a certain number of occurrences, events to which one is more than ordinarily attentive. They only happen once (or a very few times), then disappear forever, and others take their place. . . ." Let us continue an imaginary conversation with Kaprow.

So, is the Happening a return to the "primitive," in reaction against the anaemic painting of the Paris or N.Y. schools?

In a way, yes; but the word "return" is misleading. Let us say that what we find least tolerable is *de-signification* (Kosta Axelos' term), stagnation and censorship of the mind.

Let us define the question. You have mentioned "collective exorcism"—does that mean you are bringing back magic, to combat the non-significant aestheticism of fashionable painting?

Yes. Yet the Happening is not a language based on a specific pictorial, poetic or hermetic tradition. There is always an imperceptible difference of method between magic and art; Marcel Mauss, moreover, anticipated this preoccupation of ours when he said: "Magical rites and magic as a whole are, first of all, facts of tradition. Actions which are not repeated are not magic. Actions in whose effectiveness an entire group does not believe, are not magic. The form of these rites is eminently transmissible and is sanctioned by opinion. Whence it follows that strictly individual actions . . . cannot be called magic." (Cf. *Sociology & Anthropology*, P.U.F., Paris 1959.)

Therefore the Happening is not a magic ritual.

For it to be so, the artist or artists taking part would have to be magicians. Whereas the artist can only be a magician if society, or a fragment of society, believes in him. Certainly, art and magic have always made common cause, and we have had the etymology of the word *technique* dinned into us sufficiently to be aware of its importance. Yet art as a vehicle for magic has not, for a long time in Europe, had the opportunity of being practiced or even tolerated. One hardly dares imagine what would happen if the general public were capable of seeing and understanding the way in which ritual images and objects should be used, for the secret region into which such art takes us is that of the revolution of the being—*forbidden zone!* Magic demands that those who aspire to practice it should hold themselves apart from society (refusal and challenge); the magician is indomitable.

Now, does the artist's spiritual opposition absolve him from all real opposition? This is the question that comes out of the *class collaboration* into which so many pure minds throw themselves. According to Allan Kaprow (*Art News*, October 1964), the artist is henceforth deprived of "his classical enemy, society." I completely disagree. Rebellion is, always will be, one of the main sources of artistic activity. I mean that industrial society has not yet succeeded in eliminating art as a form of social behavior. The network of alienations passing between the cultural and the social is so dense that it has become impossible to create anything at all without automatically calling into question the socio-cultural *ensemble* in which we live. Thus authentic avant-garde art, contrasted with its civilization, is naturally revolutionary. Rimbaud's *Changer de Vie*, which has been the signal for nearly all the important artistic and scientific (one is tempted to add—political) creations of our time—is it not still, for most observers, the signal of a madman?



*Lebel's Happening on the theme of Playtex bras (Tour d'Argent Restaurant, Paris, 1965).*

The Happening answers with actions. The marriage between theory and praxis is consummated—an extremely rare event. Transformation of thought, of the dream become Action in which Being in search of its sovereignty attains its greatest openness; the Happening, of all the languages at our disposition, is the least alienating. John Cage and Eric Dolphy play not only with notes but with sounds and noises; Picabia and Rauschenburg paint not only with colors but with everyday objects; Oldenburg or Ferrò will make a picture not only with images but with events. We no longer paint battles—we wage them.

A painting only exists when it is looked at, when its content is recognized and deciphered *qua* image. This subject-object relationship has the serious disadvantage of putting art at the mercy of the short-sighted or dishonest spectator or specialist, and to beat a one-way path, in the functioning of the image, leading to a checkpoint, to a form of censorship and a corruption of the senses. This could not be allowed to go on any longer.

The “going-beyond” postulated by the authors of Happenings has only just begun.



Already, it has called into question not only painting, but also the habits of thought provoked by it, including the frustration of the spectator, the professional deformation of the looker-on, etc. The Happenings puts into action (as opposed to merely representing) the varying relationships between individuals and their psycho-social environment. Contemporary art demands the active intervention of the spectator. In these conditions, the *voyeur*, by his very deficiency, has no part in the action. With the *art of participation*, the looker-on no longer makes the picture (as Duchamp remarked *à propos* the static picture); he plays dead outside the door.

The Happening is above all a means of plastic expression. By placing painting *in* (not, like Pollock, above) its veritable subconscious context, it carries out transmissions and introduces the witness directly into the event. A painter's solution for a painter's problem. We cannot expect critics or art-lovers to understand this urgent necessity of going beyond painting—they already have a terrible time trying to understand painting itself.

Whether it does in fact set off a chain of images, or dreams aloud, or tells a story, or is to be found in an objectified perspective, whether it is improvised or perfectly elaborated, a Happening never gives a stock answer to the questions it asks. It imposes no restrictions on affective ambivalence. The Happening is neither an irrefutable theory nor an infallible system; its only criteria are subjective. In cases such as this, "success" cannot be gauged as if it were a boxing match, a corrida, or a play—according to "talent" and box-office receipts. Everything depends on the collective watchfulness, and on the occurrence of certain parapsychological phenomena. And these phenomena may have "delayed action"; they may also escape the obdurate or inattentive witness completely. The Happening is not an invariable ceremony—rather, a state of mind, an act of clairvoyance, a poem in action to which everyone adds a movement or a paralysis, a pulsion expressed or repressed, a feeling of rejoicing or despair. Art at last has some chance of being more than merely a screen on which each projects his own anguish—a looking-glass through which it will be possible to pass. No one can force the man who, fascinated or terrified by the reflection of his own image, prefers to stay on his side of the mirror. In spite of its dazzling powers, contemporary art has to some extent gone aground in mid-voyage. It has not managed to go beyond the "one-way street" of unilateral contemplation. In 1910 there did indeed begin a *révolution du regard*, from which time spectators have "done the painting." At last it was admitted that the origins and psychical content of art left no room for aestheticism, for propaganda and commercialism (those outward signs of the counterfeit). Without Picabia, Duchamp, Schwitters, and the Surrealists, we should still be at the level of Utrillo and the pot of flowers. But it is out of the question to be lost in admiration before anyone—idolatry is inadmissible. Once this is clear, a new mutation becomes imperative.

Thus, the Happening established a relation between subject and subject. No one is (exclusively) a spectator, but is looked at, considered, scrutinized. There is no monologue, but dialogue, exchange and circulation of images. No one can get away with flippant gibes, pulling faces in mirrors or signing the visitors book. If someone does, he is playing dead.



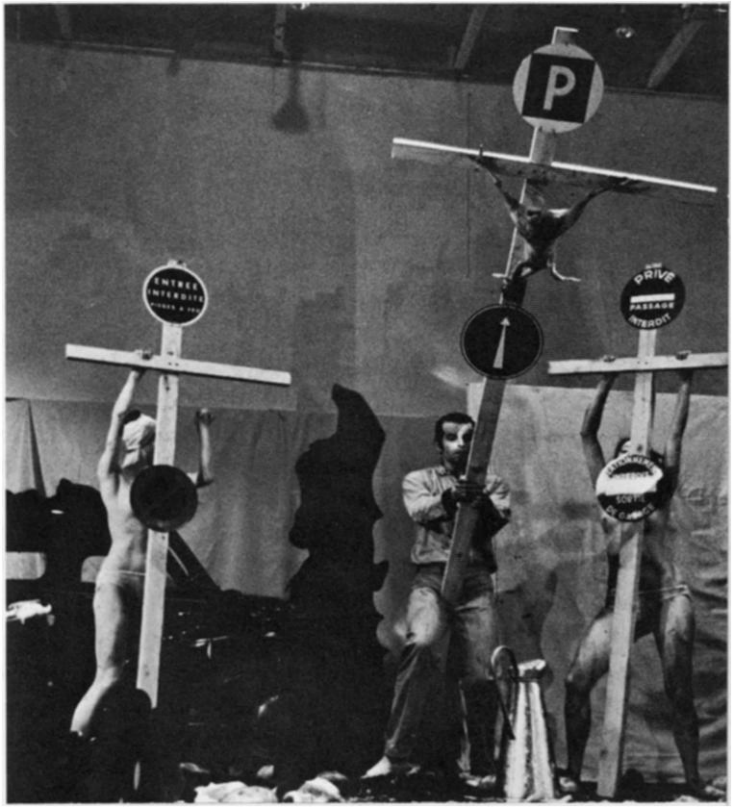
The random element, the non-respect of taboos, the broadening of awareness—these constitute an indictment of the falsehoods of civilization and of its rules for living. But this only partly explains the perpetual state of war which exists between art and society. There is a case for analyzing the non-availability, the aggressivity, and the powerlessness (to perceive and to participate) in which some of those “responsible” for culture take refuge. Art and Society try to profane one another; at one moment demolishing, at another negotiating. It is time this duel became a dialogue. Yet nothing arouses quite so much hostility and puerile negation as an invitation to dialogue. The wish to attack, sabotage, and destroy is provoked as much, if not more, by the shameful desire to climb up on the stage in a forbidden zone, as by the action taking place there. In Milan in 1960, the police burst into the Anti-Trial manifestation and seized four paintings (the Collective Antifascist Picture among them). The London Police, for their part, were content with purely and simply forbidding our second Happening in Dennison Hall (1964). There are many, many such examples.

In the midst of the generalized delinquency of the cultural and political scene, the Happening appears like an intruder, an interrupter of the censorship exercised over

Sunlove, *Saint-Tropez*, 1967.



Sacramental Melodrama by *Alexandro Jodorowsky, Second Festival of Free Expression (Paris, 1965).*



art by economic authority. The Happening was the first artistic concretization in Europe of a new consciousness, sharpened by adversity. The structural transformation of human relationships is beginning to be methodically advocated. The following statement by Alexander Trocchi accurately corresponds with the steps which have brought us from the Anti-Trial to the Happening: "... *Artists will have control of their own means of expression.* When they achieve that control, their 'relation to a community' will become a meaningful problem, that is, a problem amenable to formulation and solution at a creative and intelligent level. Thus we must concern ourselves forthwith with the question of how to seize and within the social fabric exercise that control. Our first move must be to *eliminate the brokers.*" ("A Revolutionary Proposal," *City Lights Journal*, 1964.) This is a clear statement of the social aim of many an artist. Such a radical attitude, in relation to the power structure, comes as the only possible solution for the creative mind—striving towards an artistic *and* political revolution—faced with the industrial or commercial demands of contemporary society. On all sides, artistic action finds itself obliged to go beyond the pitiful limits of legality.

The political element of its combat, however determining it may be, must never replace the Happening's psychical intent. My opinions may not be shared by my American friends Kaprow and Oldenburg but it cannot be denied that our Happenings have something in common—they give back to artistic activity what has been torn away from it: the intensification of feeling, the play of instinct, a sense of festivity, social agitation. The Happening is above all a means of interior communication; then, and incidentally, a spectacle. From outside, its essential part is unintelligible.

The principle of stage-audience integration, the pre-eminence of artistic creation over rational examination, the importance given to mood and environment consti-

tute the specificity of the Happening in comparison with the theatre and with the psychodrama as defined by Moreno. If the basic hallucinatory raw materials are the same, there is no question of reducing them to their simplest expression, even less of making them disappear, but of transforming them into a visible language. Theatre and psychodrama have not the same field of action, and the Happening has a third. I am of the opinion that the Happening must keep its distance from the commercial preoccupations of the theatre, and from the therapeutic ones of psychodrama. Already, in the U.S., Happenings are being turned out to order for universities or smart parties. Certain playwrights and film-makers have begun to plagiarize the findings of Happenings—they completely distort the significance of what they use. It is well known that the avant-garde theatre's greatest difficulty is to find a "market"; its promoters are trying to drum up an audience "even in the suburbs."

We are doing exactly the opposite. It will be remembered that during the Happenings which Kaprow did for the Théâtres des Nations in 1963, we met the spectators in the Théâtre Récamier and took them half a kilometer away, to the second floor of the Bon Marché. Environment is the essential element in any Happening. Art must literally "go down into the street," come out of the cultural zoo, to enrich itself with what Hegel (without humor) called "the contamination of the casual." Thus, the first European Happening (at the end of the second Anti-Trial, June 1960) took place partly in the streets and on the canal of the Giudecca in Venice. In 1963, Wolf Vostell organized *Cityrama*, moving across Cologne. We have used the spaces of the Boulogne cinema studios (*Manifestation for conjuring the spirit of Catastrophe*, 1963), the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris (*Incidents*, 1963), and the American Artists Center (Festival of Free Expression, 1964 and 1965). We hope to do other things in a station, a stadium, an airplane. To be elsewhere. To be radar. To be there. The conventional theatre, the art shop or gallery, are no longer (and perhaps in themselves have never been) sacred places—so why shut ourselves up in them? Artistic activity is founded on high telepathy—a contact high—and everything which comes into its field becomes a *sign*, and is part of art. It is therefore evident that the primary problem of today's art has become *the renovation and intensification of perception*.



Publik, by Ben Vautier (Paris, 1966).

*Jean-Jacques Lebel's essay (in a longer form) was originally published in New Writers 4 (London: Calder and Boyars, 1967) and is reprinted by permission. The piece is somewhat dated: Happenings, politics, France, and Lebel have all moved and changed since it was written. Just before this issue went to press, we received the following note.*

## PARIS POSTSCRIPT, MAY/JUNE 1968

*Something has changed.* After the Sorbonne and the Sud Aviation factory in Nantes, the ex-Théâtre de France was taken and occupied by a Comité d'Action Révolutionnaire and transformed into a totally open forum, a day and night *agora* for political discussion and action. This ex-theatre ceased to be the toy of the power-elite, became a place where everybody (not just the professional clowns) had the right to the most extreme expression, contestation, and communication. No more theatre or expensive spectacles for a passive audience of consumers—but a truly *collective* enterprise in political and artistic research. A new type of relationship between the “doers” and the “lookers” is being experimented with. Perhaps we will succeed in helping hundreds of thousands more to let go of their alienated social roles, to be free of mental Stalinism, to become the political and creative doers they dream of being.

Art has always been halfway between wishful thinking and wishful doing—isn't that why it has often been prophetic? Today more than ever the emphasis is on getting things done. This brings us to a specific type of collective effort which implies an out-front rejection of the present cultural system: guerrilla theatre, street happenings and similar activities. The important thing these various creative attempts have in common is that rather than seeking integration into the industry they seek to disrupt it. These experiments in liberation theatre are in open conflict with the capitalist environment, and they are related in their opposition: the Living Theatre, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and the German revolutionary student theatre group, the Bread & Puppet Theatre and European happeners. We can no longer be satisfied with loopholes and cracks in the System; we can no longer accommodate ourselves with the pseudo-liberation of a profit-oriented economy which winds up controlling not only the distribution but the actual conception and materialization of the theatrical vision.

The Great Society is not the only one which is trying out its new weapons on rioting blacks, war-resisting demonstrators or mind-dancing hippies. The streets of many large cities in Europe are similar testing grounds. But the Japanese Zenkaguren have developed a weapon of their own: shit in loosely sealed cellophane bags. Truth grenades: highly recommended when attacked by MACE-spraying rioting police. It's time for mass shit-ins. Hit the impeccably toilet-trained “adult” civilization where it hurts—in its heavenly cleanliness. The sooner everyone realizes that

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the better. From then on, it's pure spontaneity.

*Jean-Jacques Lebel*