

American Avant-Garde in the 60's 2

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You may think that I insist too much on happenings, but I do it deliberately because I think they were so capital for an understanding of everything that has taken place in the American theatre in the 60s and later on. So, I go back to what I was discussing last time, the “action collage” and the model of “action painting” by Alan Kaprow in New York. His name is spelt K-A-P-R-O-W, Alan Kaprow. And he had a gallery and he decided he wanted to fill the gallery with elements which would not be what is called “peinture de chevalet”. You would not just look at paintings on the wall, but you would circulate in the midst of an environment. An environment, this is the definition which is given of environment as opposed to happening. The term environment refers to an art form that fills an entire room or outdoor space surrounding the visitor and consisting of any materials whatsoever, including lights, sounds, and color. That's the definition by Alan Kaprow himself. And you will notice the term visitor. You are not a spectator, but you are a visitor as you are a visitor in an art gallery. And now the definition that he gives of the term “happening”. The term “happening” refers to an art form related to theatre, in that it is performed in a given time and space. Its structure and content are a logical extension of environments.

This is his description of how he started from environments and they became happenings. He said the next exhibition was an extension of these single works. “Now I just simply filled the whole gallery up, starting from one wall and ending with the other. When you opened the door, you found yourself in the midst of an entire environment.” So he had introduced flashing lights, hunks of matter, and they included more and more audible elements, such as the sounds of ringing buzzers, bells, toys, etc., until he says he had accumulated nearly all the sensory elements he was to work for during the following years.

So, the materials, he says, were varied. Sheets of plastic, crumbled up cellophane, and here I insist on the fact that cellophane was one of the most, well, constant elements used in happenings because of its maybe shining appearance, but also disorderly, and the fact that it makes noise when you walk on it and that you cannot give it any geometrical shape. It is the opposite of what is done in theatre settings usually. Tangles of scotch tape, also very useful, tangles of scotch tape. Sections of slashed and daubed enamel and pieces of colored cloth hung in hands that looked like Jewish prayer shawls or other ceremonial adornments, and this is a new element added here, a sort of sanctified atmosphere of the sense that every object is sacred. This is something which would be very important for the Living Theatre. From any position you could see the lights hung in the space, but dimly, and here again "dimly" is important, you are not in the flooded flashlights of the picture frame stage, but you are in a semi-obscurity where you make out things, you try to perceive things and you are not sure, but dimly through various layers of the materials and every person entering the place was immediately lost in a suspended atmosphere because no one could clearly see another.

Here the term I would like to insist on is the term "suspended atmosphere". You remember that when we studied Tennessee Williams, the suspension of time was something that he insisted on and there is a poetic quality in this suspension. Here the atmosphere is suspended because you do not go from one point to the next, but you are hanging or floating somewhere in between. The lanes, the passageways, the brakes in the planes were all small so that you tended to move in a waving, billowing, cloud world, slowly and with some difficulty. This is also this notion of obstacle, of difficulties, climbing sort of cardboard mountains, pushing things, carrying material, this will be one of the constant elements and it will become, as I was saying, a convention, a new convention, it will become a new academism, but not for a while. It was a constant element in these happenings and it was against the slick quality of soap operas, for instance, or of traditional theatre.

You understand what I mean by a slick quality, that is to say, shining surface, everything is easy, every obstacle is dismissed, as opposed to real life in which everything is difficult and you have to wake up and get to work and find the objects you need, everything. There, everything is done for you. No, not so in happenings, you are in the conditions of real life.

Once every hour, for about 15 minutes, five tape machines spread around the place, played electronic sounds which I had composed. Also great importance are the electronic

sounds and you understand that the sounds can be very aggressive, you can push and push until it is exploding inside your head and somebody like Richard Foreman, whom I mentioned before, with his theatre, used for a while, then he subsided a little bit, for a while he used a number of decibels which were a torture to the spectators and this was done as a sort of provocation. But I complained, this is again Kaprow speaking, I complained immediately about the fact that there was a sense of mystery until your eye reached a wall, then there was a dead end. So, he has a problem how to get rid of the wall and you understand that the theatre gets rid of the fourth wall, what is called traditionally the fourth wall, by replacing it with a sort of transparent glass and even the glass is not there. The "picture frame stage" is like the absence of a fourth wall but even in its absence the wall is there, if I may say.

When you are working in the space of a gallery, the gallery is separated from the outside world with this wall, so what was he to do? At that point my disagreement with the gallery space began. I thought how much better it would be if you could just go out of doors and float an environment into the rest of life. I tried destroying the sense of bounded space with more sound than ever played continuously. So, this sense of going out of doors, this sense of finding real places as opposed to theatre space or gallery space is a thing which happenings will have in common. And in the 60s the fashion, because it has to be called a fashion, will be to play, to perform rather, in parking lots, in department stores, in railway stations sometimes, in garage, every place you could find where you could gather a group of people was used but never the theatre as such.

As to the importance of sound, the importance of sound to give you a sense of space, this is also something very interesting because you know that sounds can distort your sense of space and if there is a lot of sound you feel you are stifled and you feel there is not enough space, so you can play with the sense of space through sounds, even though it may sound a paradox. Hidden up in the toys that I had gimmicked up so that it was impossible to tell their identity, bells, tinkles, rattles, grinders, marbles in tin cans that turned over and so on. And finally, he did what he called these happenings, which was getting rid of the gallery space, that was one thing, and one thing which he insisted on also and which is while the audience participation devices, more and more the simple visitors became participants, performers in the performance, in the happening. For instance, what did they have to do? Rolls of words to move, words on cards hung on strings, words to pin up and rubber stamps to make phrases

with. That was one of the possibilities, people had to push objects to turn on lights, they were involved in the performance itself. Kaprow was not the only one and some artists became famous thanks to their environments which all had different quality according to the artists, I'll just name very few names, Claes Oldenburg for instance, his happenings were personal, physical, concerned with objects and basic human and domestic predicaments. I'd like to give you one or two titles of his happenings. One of them was called *Store Days* and it took place in three adjacent rooms, what was called rooms, the bedroom, jail, the kitchen, butcher shop, the living room, funeral parlor, whorehouse. And there were three periods, a customer enters, a bargain and how the founders struggled. This gives you an idea of what it was about. And Jim Dine is another name, with *Smiling Workman*, *Shining Bed*, *Car Crash*. *Car Crash* took place in a rear room where shelves and some materials left behind from previous tenants had been used as part of a complex wall environment. The action began in darkness with recorded traffic noises, a man dressed in silver with two lights on his head appeared, this was the car played by Dine himself, you see that gives you an idea of the devices also, the car is played by a man with two lights on his head. Two other figures appeared holding two flashlights held like headlamps, both wore white masks and white clothes, a boy and a girl wearing clothes of the opposite sex. They proceeded to play a sort of hide and seek game with their lights. Game, you know, this was all considered as games more or less.

And then you had another interesting man who did happenings, that was Robert Whitman was his name, like the poet. And he was very conscious of the element of time and this is also something which influenced the theatre later on. And it influenced, well, people like Peter Handke, who is not an American, he's German, as you know, but he's been very much influenced by this whole period of experimentation in the States. Time, Robert Whitman says, is for me something material. It can be used in the same way as paint or plaster or any other material. It can describe other natural events. I intend my works to be stories of physical experience. Time is the material I use to describe these things. The accent is on physical experience and in the Living Theatre also the physical presence of the actor will be important. Because I want to be a little more systematic now and insist on three or four factors. If we can say that the happenings provided the spectators with a kind of deconstruction of the rules of the theatre, you can say that there is a deconstruction of time precisely, because nothing is predictable anymore. In a well-built play, you can predict what is going to happen. Not so in

this new type of theatre. There is no clear beginning, no clear ending. The works performed are sometimes very long.

For instance, Bob Wilson will, in his theatre, perform a piece which lasted for 24 hours. So, you can imagine the situation of the spectator when what is presented lasts for 24 hours. And there was in this performance which lasted for 24 hours. It is called *Overture to KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACEe*. You had a yogi, a man in the lotus position, who remained motionless during the performance, 24 hours. And then every hour, you had a rose, one rose, which was suspended from the top and which came down a little as a sign of punctuation. It was a very poetic punctuation of time.

What is used, the time which is used as material, is the real time. And by the real time, I mean that it is not the theatrical time, what the Americans called matrix time. Matrix is the term used for the imaginary structure. So, in the theatre, you can have in two hours a lifetime, or you can have three seasons. You can go from youth to age. In this new type of theatre, two hours is two hours, three hours is three hours, and 24 hours is the same. There is in the same way a deconstruction of space. Space is not matrixed either. For instance, the stage in traditional theatre can represent a ship, the deck of a ship. No, if you have boards, they are plainly boards. They are nothing else. I was mentioning the real places like parking lots or hotels or courtyards. They are used as the real places they are. They are slightly distorted, not used totally functionally, but still with a reference to their original function. There is no setting, no frame, no limitation. In some cases, a performance could be performed in several cities at once. And there is no matrix performance.

There is a deconstruction of the character. The performers are not playing a part, pretending they are someone else. I took the example of a boat, pretending they are a sailor, for instance. No, they are themselves. They are performing tasks. I think that I will make you understand exactly what this means by reading a short passage from one play by Peter Handke, and I'll read it in French. He's German, so there is no sense in translating him into English. And the text I have here is in French anyway. So, it is called, it's a play called *Outrage au Public*. And it's a play, which was done in Germany in 1966, in which the performers break the game of being characters, and they address the audience directly, which you're not supposed to do when you perform on a stage. The audience is supposedly invisible. So, this is how they address the audience.

This is very interesting, because it is one of the main differences between matrix and non-matrix performance, the fact that there is no symbolic separation between the house, the spectators, and the stage. And he puts it almost geographically by saying that the local time is the same. As I was saying, all this was very interesting until it became academic.

And somebody who has reflected on this, and who has put it very well, is Peter Brook. Peter Brook is English, but also his *Marat-Sade* has been performed in the States. And he was very much influenced by Artaud, who was also, Artaud with *Le Théâtre et la peste*, was also a very important influence on the Living Theatre. And for a while, Peter Brook was full of admiration for the innovativeness of happenings. And then he thought that people were less inventive, and they were copying each other. And this refusal of all rules make them like kids playing in a courtyard and repeating the same stereotypes. A happening, he says, is a powerful invention. It destroys at once many deadly forms, like the dreariness of theatre buildings, and the charmless trappings of curtain, cloakroom, program, bar. A happening can be anywhere, anytime, of any duration. Nothing is required. Nothing is taboo. A happening may be spontaneous. It may be formal. It may be anarchistic. It can generate intoxicating energy. Behind the happening is the shout, wake up. Van Gogh made generations of travelers see Provence with new eyes. And the theory of happenings is that a spectator can be jolted eventually into new sight, so that he wakes to the life around him. This sounds like sense. And in happenings, the influence of Zen and pop art combine to make a perfectly logical 20th century American combination. This is an extract of his book *The Empty Space*, and the chapter is entitled "The Holy Theater". So I go on to quote Peter Brook. But the sadness of a bad happening must be seen to be believed. And here he's very harsh on the bad happening. And we, if we have seen some of us bad happenings, we can only agree with him. Give a child a paint box, and if he mixes all the colors together, the result is always the same muddy, brownish gray. A happening is always the brainchild of someone, and unavoidably it reflects the level of its inventor.

If it is the work of a group, it reflects the inner resources of the group. This free form, and he insists again on this theme of freedom, which I mentioned before, this free form is all too often imprisoned in the same obsessional symbols. Flour, la farine, not fleur, but farine, flour, custard pies, rolls of paper, dressing, undressing, dressing up, undressing again, changing clothes, making water, throwing water, blowing water, hugging, rolling, writhing.

You feel, and this is the cruellest thing that he has to say now, you feel that if a happening became a way of life, then by contrast, the most humdrum life would seem a fantastic happening. Very easily, a happening can be no more than a series of mild shocks followed by letdowns which progressively combine to neutralize the further shocks before they arrive. All right, so you cannot go on being a shock, and you have to turn to something else.

And this is what we shall do too, we are going to turn to something else. So, what I'd like to indicate for the next few minutes, and then we will discuss it more at length maybe, would be the achievement of the living theatre, which we have to admire. Julian Beck, as I mentioned earlier, died at the age of 60 in September of last year. And there was an article in the New York Times, which was devoted to him, the New York Times of September 17th, 1985, saying the Living Theatre, which Mr. Beck founded in 1947 with his wife, Judith Malina, was one of the most influential and long-lasting companies of the avant-garde movement. Its work, especially *The Connection*, *The Brig*, and *Antigone*, *Antigone* was the *Antigone* by Brecht, which Judith Malina had directed, brought social issues and audience involvement to the fore. Audiences at a living theatre performance could expect to be exhorted as much as entertained.

The Connection was this play, which was a play about drug addicts, and it had this truthfulness, which I mentioned, because it was supposed to be something which was filmed for television, and we had a sense that the people who were on stage were actually not actors, but drug addicts. We were waiting for their connection. And you had in the play a band of jazz musicians who were doing a jam session, and inside the play, which was a performance but not directly a play, you had a jam session which lasted for something like half an hour.

So you started to believe that these were real musicians, which they were. So if you had real musicians, why was the rest not true? And perhaps you were tempted to think that the actors were actually what you were told they were. The next play after that, *The Brig*, *The Brig* was a play about the Marines, the brutal Marine Corps prison, and it was a very cruel play. There was an influence of Artaud, it was in that play, with the brainwashing which the people who were condemned to *The Brig* had to undergo. What distinguished these works, the article goes on to say, was their harrowing realism and their attempt to break down the so-called fourth wall separating actor from audience. This is, I would not agree with this definition of realism, but we can accept it for a while.

Then the Living Theatre went to Europe because they were kicked out of the States for not paying rent or not paying taxes or something. You have to realize that they were anarchists in their conviction, and that they were against any rules set by the state. So, they put themselves in illegal conditions at times. And they toured Europe around the years 1967-68. In 1968, they were at the Avignon Festival in France. Before that, they had performed *The Theatre of Chance*, which I mentioned, a play by Brecht *In The Jungle of Cities*, and another play by Brecht, *Man in Man*, in which Joe Chaking was playing. And then in 1964, 1965, 1966, *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces*, which was a creative, a collective creation. And then *Frankenstein*, *Paradise Now*, and this is what we will discuss later on because they are very interesting. I'll just say a few words today about *Paradise Now*, which was a sort of exorcism with rites, visions, and actions. And one of them was called the "Guerrilla Theatre Rite". Another rite was the "Universal Copulation Rite". And they had a legend, there was a legend around them for all these very shocking things, actors naked on stage and committing copulation. In a way, it was true. In another way, it was the exaltation of the sacred functions of the body. It had nothing pornographic about it.

And if you remember, Whitman, with his celebration of the human body, I would say that the Living Theatre turned back to this sacred sense of what is physical. And in a sense, what they said and repeated and showed on stage was that violence and the sacred could be brought together. And what was sexual and what was religious could also be brought together.