

*"The line between the Happening and daily life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible."*

*Allen Kaprow*

## Synopsis

What began as a challenge to the category of "art" initiated by the Futurists and Dadaists in the 1910s and 1920s came to fruition with the performance art movements, one branch of which was referred to as Happenings. Happenings involved more than the detached observation of the viewer; the artist engaged with Happenings required the viewer to actively participate in each piece. There was not a definite or consistent style for Happenings, as they greatly varied in size and intricacy. However, all artists staging Happenings operated with the fundamental belief that art could be brought into the realm of everyday life. This turn toward performance was a reaction against the long-standing dominance of the technical aesthetics of Abstract Expressionism and was a new art form that grew out of the social changes occurring in the 1950s and 1960s.

## Key Ideas

- A main component of Happenings was the involvement of the viewer. Each instance a Happening occurred the viewer was used to add in an element of chance so, every time a piece was performed or exhibited it would never be the same as the previous time. Unlike preceding works of art which were, by definition, static, Happenings could evolve and provide a unique encounter for each individual who partook of the experience.
- The concept of the ephemeral was important to Happenings, as the performance was a temporary experience, and, as such could not be exhibited in a museum in the traditional sense. The only artifacts remaining from original Happenings are photographs and oral histories. This was a challenge to the art that had previously been defined by the art object itself. Art was now defined by the action, activity, occasion, and/or experience that constituted the Happening, which was fundamentally fleeting and immaterial.
- The purpose of Happenings was to confront and dismantle conventional views of the category of "art." These performances were so influential to the art world that they raised the specter of the "death" of painting.

## Beginnings

Happenings were inspired by the performances of **Futurists** who would enact short avant-garde plays and read their manifestoes and poetry on stage. The Futurist tendency to break the "fourth wall" and elicit audience participation became a central idea in the Happening: the absence of boundaries between the viewer and the artwork meant the artwork became defined by the action as opposed to the physical, or resulting, object.

The **Dadaists** who declared that art did not have to meet expectations about what "art" was supposed to look like also influenced the artists who created Happenings. Additionally, the Dadaist use of the element of chance heavily guided the evolution of Happenings as an art form. The ideas of composer **John Cage** and the teachings of instructors at

Black Mountain College including Josef and Anni Albers, Merce Cunningham, Robert Motherwell and Buckminster Fuller further impacted the views of Happenings artists in their belief that learning should be a continual process, with no distinction between making or learning about art and routine aspects of day-to-day life. There was an emphasis on the perpetual state of learning and creating; an appreciation for the prosaic, which influenced many artists of the time, particularly Allan Kaprow, who coined the term "Happening" while describing performance events that had taken place on George Segal's farm in 1957.



These aforementioned theories and ideas led to the creation of the Happening which was a combination of performance and installation art. Happenings fully evolved from Kaprow's "environments," which were installation pieces that involved large sculptural collages. After taking John Cage's class Kaprow introduced the element of sound into his work and from there came the first Happening came by Kaprow. It was untitled and performed at Voorhees Chapel at Douglass Campus on April 22, 1958.

## **Concepts and Styles**

The audience participation in Happenings incorporated the aspect of chance, as anything could happen at any time and each performance would be completely unique from the one before. This was the critical difference between Happenings and other performance art of the time, which emphasized a more theatrical and repeatable ethos. Happenings could be enacted anywhere; sometimes they were staged in galleries, but they were just as often in a theater setting, on the street, on a farm

or even in one instance, a cave.

Happenings were both large-scale and elaborate or small and intimate depending upon the artist. For example Allan Kaprow had started out looking for a way to extend the action painting beyond the canvas and into the space of the viewer. He achieved this by building environments for viewers to be inside of and adding in sound and various objects for the viewer to interact with. Robert Watts also created pieces similar in size and scale, utilizing created environments that the audience would partake in.

Happenings artists such as George Brecht worked in a smaller scale. He created games that the viewer interacted with and Brecht wanted these pieces to reflect Zen Buddhist philosophical ideas. Brecht would also write "event scores" where he would leave directions as to what the viewer should do which then turned the viewer into the performer. As with many movements, Happenings artists each brought a slightly different viewpoint to the table and approached the creative process with their own personal agenda.

## **Happenings and Fluxus**

There was much cross-over between Happenings artists and the Fluxus group; Allan Kaprow and George Brecht especially were involved in both movements. It is therefore difficult to definitively categorize them as two absolutely separate entities especially because Fluxus held several events at Rutgers University where Happenings had originated. Happenings usually involved artists who would later become known as the "Rutgers Group:" Allan Kaprow, George Segal, Robert Watts and George Brecht. Fluxus emerged in New York led by artist **George Maciunas**, and there were also Fluxus groups in Europe and Japan. The Happenings artists were not part of an organized group with a leader like the Fluxus group and the term Happenings is not the name of a movement but the name of certain performance pieces.



Happenings and Fluxus both integrated the use of audience participation to contribute to the outcome of the art, however they differed in several significant ways. Happenings is not the name of a movement but the name of certain performance pieces that were generally more complicated and outlined than Fluxus events, like an improvisational theatrical work that involved the audience. They were more expressionistic and symbolic than Fluxus performances. Fluxus events were usually loosely outlined or not outlined at all. They involved a sardonic sense of humor often leaving the viewer in the position of being the victim of a practical joke. For instance one Fluxus piece consisted of sending out invitations to nonexistent performances where the viewer would arrive to find nothing.

## **Later Developments**

Happenings culminated with the infamous 1963 Yam Festival, a month-long series of events held on George Segal's farm and in other locations in and around New York. After this event, Happenings began to dwindle in the mid sixties as other new art forms and theories gained

prominence, such as conceptual art, body art and feminist art. Nevertheless, most of these newer movements had some roots in Happenings in their emphasis on interaction and embodied experience.

## *Original content written by Tracy DiTolla*

### QUOTES

"My art is the result of a deeply personal, infinitely complex, and still essentially mysterious, exploration of experience. No words will ever touch it." - George Brecht

"Words, sounds, human beings in motion, painted constructions, electric lights, movies and slides - and perhaps in the future, smells - all in continuous space *involving* the spectator or audience; those are the ingredients. Several or all of them may be used in combination at any one time, which permits me a great range of possibilities." - Allan Kaprow

"It was a dissatisfaction with the limitations of pure abstract painting. Nobody knew what the work could or should look like. Each individual's freedom was encouraged. Since nobody knew what the new art should look like, each of us was free to invent our own solution." - George Segal

### Key Artists:



#### **Allan Kaprow**

Allan Kaprow was an American painter, collagist, assemblagist and performance artist. Working in the styles of Fluxus, Installation and various other mixed-media styles, Kaprow was best known for trailblazing the artistic concept "happenings," which were experiential artistic events rather than single works of art



#### **John Cage**

John Cage was an American composer and conceptual artist who incorporated chance, silence, and environmental effects into his performances. An

important art theorist, he influenced choreographers, musicians, and the Fluxus artists of the 1970s.



### **Carolee Schneemann**

Carolee Schneemann is an American visual artist, known for her discourses on the body, sexuality and gender. Her work is primarily characterized by research into visual traditions, taboos, and the body of the individual in relationship to social bodies. Schneemann's works have been associated with a variety of art classifications including Fluxus, Neo-Dada, the Beat Generation, and happenings.



### **George Segal**

American sculptor and painter George Segal was most known for his life-size plaster cast figures, often in monochromatic white. He worked with artists such as John Cage and Allan Kaprow at Rutgers University in the 1950s and 60s; Kaprow's famous "happenings" performances first took place on Segal's farm in New Jersey.



### **George Brecht**

George Brecht was an American conceptual artist and avant-garde composer as well as a professional chemist, who worked as a consultant for companies including Pfizer, Johnson and Johnson, and Mobil Oil. He was a key member of, and influence on, Fluxus.



### **Robert Watts**

Robert Watts was known for his work within the Fluxus and proto-Pop movements. The American artist taught at Rutgers college in the 1950s, where he interacted closely with artists such as Allan Kaprow and Roy Lichtenstein.



### **Geoffrey Hendricks**

Geoffrey Hendricks is an American artist and educator commonly associated with the Fluxus movement of the 1960s, and for which he remains active today, staging Happenings and exhibiting his painting and installation work. Hendricks is a self-described "cloudsmith," referencing the motif of sky imagery in much of his work.



### Robert Whitman

Robert Whitman, an American theater and sound artist, creates sculpture and installation works integrating various technologies. He was part of the group of artists that included Claes Oldenburg and Allan Kaprow, who were creating pioneering performance works in the 1950s and 60s.



### Al Hansen

Al Hansen was a Norwegian-American artist associated with the Fluxus movement. Best known for his staged Happenings and performance pieces, Hansen's most well known work was the Yoko Ono Piano Drop, in which he dropped a piano off a five-story building. Hansen was also a close friend to and colleague of such artists as John Cage, Nam June Paik, Yoko Ono and Andy Warhol.



### Dick Higgins

Dick Higgins was a British-American Fluxus artist whose mediums included poetry, essays, music composition and printing. Higgins famously coined the word "intermedia," in reference to his interdisciplinary approach to this work. Higgins is best known for his avant-garde Danger Music composition.

## Major Works:



**Artist:** Robert Whitman

**Title:** American Moon (1960)

**Materials:** Cloth, paper, clear plastic, wood and cellophane tape

**Description:** *American Moon* by Robert Whitman was first performed at the Reuben Gallery in New York. The piece consisted of six paper tunnels that radiated outwards from the performance area in which the audience would sit to watch piles of cloth being moved accompanied by various sounds. Curtains with grids of paper were then hung in front of the tunnels and a movie was projected onto them while performers made slight movements to the cloth causing distortions in the movie. At the end of the screening the

tunnels were ripped down and the curtains removed. Lights flashed as figures rolled on the floor, a giant plastic balloon was rolled around and someone swung on a trapeze, all to a soundtrack of a vacuum cleaner. Whitman called these works "abstract theater" as abstracted sounds and images were a significant aspect of his work. In the variety of frenzied activity, Whitman claimed his work was much like a three-ring circus.

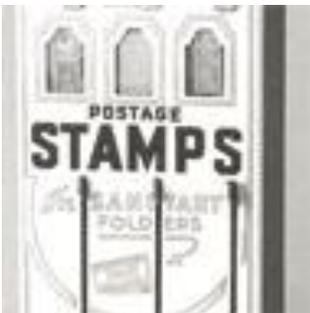


**Artist:** Allan Kaprow

**Title:** Yard (1961)

**Materials:** Tires

**Description:** *Yard* by Kaprow involved the random scattering and piling of tires over the floor and an invitation to visitors to climb over them. This piece was supposedly in response to Jackson Pollock's "drip" paintings: the incorporation of chance as a mainstay of the work, but with a certain amount of control left to the artist. Just as Pollock had a certain amount of power over his drip paintings, aesthetics were still very much subject to chance. Here Kaprow used the tires as Pollock used his paint. The result- a haphazard pile of tires nevertheless circumscribed into a semblance of compositional order- is a three-dimensional translation of Pollock's practice. Kaprow's pieces often involved materials from everyday life, including people; Kaprow stated, "Life is much more interesting than art." *Yard*, like many Happenings, has been recreated several times since Kaprow's initial installation, and each time a unique artwork is produced.



**Artist:** Robert Watts

**Title:** Stamp Vendor (1961)

**Materials:** Commercial stamp dispenser and paper

**Description:** *Stamp Vendor* involved stamps that artist Robert Watts created and placed inside of actual stamp dispensers that Watts "borrowed" from the United States Post Office. The "borrowing" (stealing) was in protest of certain policies of the United States government at the time Watts deemed oppressive. The stamp dispensers were put on display in exhibitions and viewers could purchase the stamps by placing coins in the coin slots. The stamps, designed by Watts, had different images on them ranging from gas cans to nude women. This piece differs from many other Happenings for the smaller,

more intimate scale and for the fact that the viewer was interacting with an object as opposed to a person. Also, unlike many other Happenings that eschewed the traditional art object, it should be noted that by interacting with the *Stamp Vendor*, the viewer was then able to take with them a work of art: the stamp created by Watts.



**Artist:** Allan Kaprow

**Title:** Eat (1964)

**Materials:** Wine, apples, bananas, hot plate, wood, bread, jam, potatoes

**Description:** Allan Kaprow's *Eat* took place in the Bronx, in caves that used to be part of an old brewery. Visitors could make one-hour reservations through the Smolin Gallery to view the piece, which was a participatory, sensory, gustatory experience that involved repeated audio. When the viewer walked in he was confronted with a man's voice repeating, "Get 'em!", two girls offering varieties of wine, banana bunches and apples tied to strings and hanging from the ceiling, a girl frying bananas on a hot plate, bread and jam in an enclosure that one could only get to by climbing a ladder, as well as the man (who was repeating, "Get 'em!,") handing out pieces of salted boiled potatoes. The viewer was free to eat any of the food in the exhibit. Not only did the viewer mold the experience to his or her personal choices, but they also had the ability to change the piece for the viewer that came in after them. The complicated imagery, opportunities for participation, and uniqueness of the staging make *Eat* a typical Happening.



**Artist:** George Brecht

**Title:** A Chair with a History (1966)

**Materials:** Chair and book

**Description:** *A Chair with a History* by George Brecht consisted of a chair that he bought and a red leather bound book placed on the seat of the chair. The viewer was invited to add to the "history" of the chair by sitting in the chair and recording the events taking place in the leather bound book. Brecht was greatly influenced by Marcel Duchamp's views on chance, clearly seen in this piece: whatever is recorded in the book has no relation to the artist's intentions or goals and is entirely in the hands of the viewer. Brecht's projects were often more intimate in scale than other artists who put on

Happenings, as seen here with the piece entirely focused on a simple chair, the solitary act of sitting and writing, and the focus on a single person's experience.



**Artist:** Dick Higgins

**Title:** The Thousand Symphonies (1968)

**Materials:** Machine-gunned music paper

**Description:** *The Thousand Symphonies* by Dick Higgins is a portion of compositional paper that has been shot with a machine gun at a rifle range. The bullet holes became the "notes" that would be played by an orchestra. The original orchestra performance of *The Thousand Symphonies* was conducted by Philip Corner at Douglass College, the women's residential college at Rutgers. The element of chance is represented here by the unpredictable placements of the bullet holes as well as, to a smaller extent, the decisions made by the conductor when the piece was performed. Music was an element of Futurist and Dadaist work and had an obvious influence on this piece.