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## English Composition As A Happening

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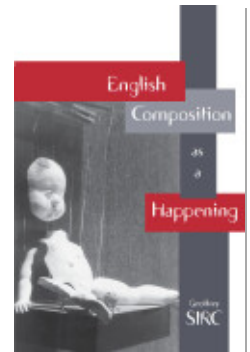
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## THE STILL-UNBUILT HACIENDA

I suppose the reason none of us burn incense in our writing classes any more is because of the disk drives. Smoke's not supposed to be good for them, right? But what about the sounds, the candlelight, the students on the floor, the dark? What about that *other scene* of writing instruction? Where has that gone, the idea of the writing classroom as blank canvas, ready to be inscribed as a singular compositional space?

The next class was held in the same room; only this time I made a few alterations in the physical arrangements. There were no neat lines of folding chairs. The students sat, stood, or lay wherever they wished. When everyone was comfortable, I closed the drapes, turned off the lights, lit one candle in the middle of the room and a few sticks of incense, and played the same music as before [Ravel's "Bolero," Strauss's "Zarathustra," some Gregorian chant, selections from the Association, the Doors, Steppenwolf, Jefferson Airplane, Clear Light, Iron Butterfly, Simon and Garfunkel, and others]. The class just listened to music in the dark with the flickering candle and the scent of incense permeating the room. Again, when the period was over, the students were asked to pick up their books and leave. Some of them did not want to. (Lutz, "Making Freshman English" 38)

I begin with this souvenir—from William Lutz's 1969 writing class—because I want to reflect on the novel textures that might be brought to Composition's current course designs, the possibilities that exist for altering the conventional spaces of a writing classroom, allowing the inhabitants a sense of the sublime, making it a space no one wants to leave, a *happening* space.

Because designing spaces, I think, is what it's all about. It's a matter of basic architecture: Robert Venturi has shown that simplified compositional programs, programs that ignore the complexity and contradiction of everyday life, result in bland architecture; and I think the reverse is true as well, and perhaps more relevant for Composition: bland architecture (unless substantially *detoured*, as Lutz's) evokes simplistic programs. The spaces of our classrooms should offer compelling environments in which

to inhabit situations of writing instruction, helping intensify consciousness in the people who use them. Can such intensification happen in a conventional writing classroom? The architectural design for the conventional classroom has become soberly monumental, charged with the heavy burden of preserving the discursive tradition of “our language . . . the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community” (Bartholomae, “Inventing” 134). We erect temples to language, in which we are the priests among initiates (of varying degrees of enthusiasm), where we re-live the rites of text-production for the *n*th time, despite the sad truth that the gods have fled so long ago that no one is even sure that they were ever there in the first place (in Composition, the gods are called, variously, *power*, *authentic voice*, *discourse*, *critical consciousness*, *versatility*, *style*, *disciplinarity*, *purpose*, etc.).

Or better, what we build are Museums, peculiar sorts of cultural temples in which students are “invited” in to sample the best that has been thought and expressed in *our language* and maybe even, like the art students we see poised in galleries with their sketchbooks and charcoals, to learn to reproduce the master’s craft. Bartholomae and Petrosky, for example, seem to be only half-joking when they describe what motivated them (and, by extension, what they see as motivating many teachers) to use a canon of readings in their writing classrooms: “We thought (as many teachers have thought) that if we just, finally, gave them something good to read—something rich and meaty—they would change forever their ways of thinking about English” (*Ways of Reading* iii). Once they realized their true purpose—to teach students what to do with the reading material—they resumed the previous task of choosing rich and meaty content (“the sorts of readings we talk about when we talk with our colleagues,” “selections . . . that present powerful readings of common experience, that open up the familiar world and make it puzzling, rich, and problematic” [iv]). (Mention must be made of a popular subset of composition reader, the multicultural reader, which presents the same sort of canon, only now more politically correct—like those museums that have re-hung their permanent collections to better reflect America’s diversity. So, for example, John Repp selects the pieces for his collection *How We Live Now: Contemporary Multicultural Literature* according to the same tenets as Bartholomae and Petrosky: providing “imaginative literature to excite readers, inspire writers, and enliven classrooms”; readings “deeply satisfying and deeply disturbing at the same time,” but overall, “so eloquently

multivoiced” [*v-vi*]. A fine goal, perhaps, but the curated shows always seem to feature the same artists. We await the multicultural reader featuring a Tupac retrospective.) Underlying this trend in the Modern-Composition-Reader-as-Museum is Modernism itself. The Modern student’s chief need is an awareness of tradition, which, in itself, comprises a sobering (not to mention Eurocentric) task—as Eliot wrote,

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, . . . and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (14)

This consciousness of the past is something that must be nurtured throughout the writer’s career; as Eliot phrases it (sounding much like Bartholomae when he speaks of the student’s need to learn “the peculiar ways of knowing . . . that define the discourse of our community”), “what happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is far more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (17). Eliot, we know, tells not quite the whole story, or perhaps he is so clear on what he means himself that he feels no need to qualify the phrase “the whole of literature,” because certainly, to the modernists, the whole of literature they’re concerned with is not the entire whole. Leavis, for example, makes it clear that only some work is museum-quality; other work can’t be bothered with. Indeed, since “the field is so large and offers such insidious temptations to complacent confusions of judgment and to critical indolence,” “some challenging discriminations are very much called for” (9). Thus, Leavis offers what can be taken as the selection criteria for the contemporary Composition reader:

It is necessary to insist, then, that there are important distinctions to be made, and that far from all of the names in the literary histories really belong to the realm of significant creative achievement. And as a recall to a due sense of differences it is well to start by distinguishing the few really great—the major novelists who count in the same way as the major poets [in Composition, we might add “and major essayists”], in the sense that they not only change the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers, but that

they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote, awareness of the possibilities of life. (10)

If we are unhappy with the dry modernist enterprise of college writing (formal, autonomous, univocal, meaning-driven), we need to remember the way the modernist tradition is reproduced: “those institutions that are the preconditions for and shape the discourse of modernism . . . can be named at the outset: first, the museum; then, art history” (Crimp 108). And we must remember how those institutions consciously fight against exciting possibilities: “it is not in the interests of the institutions of art and the forces they serve to produce knowledge of radical practices” (Crimp 153). Our pedagogical, then, is the curatorial; we teach connoisseurship. Take, for example, the way Richard Rodriguez’s reading of Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* becomes, for Bartholomae and Petrosky, the masterly style, a manner to be replicated, “a way of reading we like to encourage in our students” (*Ways of Reading* 3). The composition readers themselves, as we have seen, are miniature museums, *bôîtes-en-valise* without the irony, portable permanent collections or corporate-sponsored temporary exhibits of our Greatest Hits. As instructors, our classroom activities combine the docent’s tour (explaining how the great masterpieces are put together) with the hands-on workshop of family day (now that the gallery-goers understand how the masterpieces work, they get to try to make one). The scene of classroom writing is peculiarly overdetermined, then, as Gallery—as physical space in a larger institution (Museum/University), lying on the cusp between the curatorial and the commercial.

But the very *architecture* of the Museum, as some artists and theorists discovered, fights against the possibility of radical meaning in the way it predetermines the art which fits, the art that can be exhibited in (and, hence, created for) its space. Writing instructors, then, feeling constrained by the structural determinants of the spaces (even virtual ones) in which they practice, might do well to recall that moment in the broader cultural field of composition when artists finally abandoned the narrow, predictable constraints of the Gallery’s architecture. Like Lutz in our own field, these practitioners felt the need for different, more evocative, spaces. Allan Kaprow, for example, realized the cause-effect relationship between architectural space and the artwork produced to “mean” in that space: “at root paintings, etc. could not possibly exist in their form up to the present without the psychological

and physical definition of space given to them by Architecture” (*Assemblages* 153); the design of the gallery room, he reminds us, “*has always been a frame or format too*” (154). Those compositional formats—either the framed picture or the proscenium-delineated stage—are too accreted with associations; performance historian Richard Schechner captured the sentiment: “The single-focus stage and the framed picture are identified with the billboard and the press, and rejected” (“Happenings” 218). Kaprow was one of a group of neo-avant-garde visual and musical artists (including John Cage, Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, Robert Whitman, La Monte Young, Ann Halprin, Red Grooms, *et al.*) of the late fifties and early sixties who realized how the received design of the space in which their work appeared resulted in conventional product. And so these artists (compositionists-in-general, we might now name them) realized they would have to reject the architecture of that space, “ignoring the house in which they have for so long been nurtured” (Kaprow, *Assemblages* 153), if they wanted to produce a truly different composition. They practiced an art which interrupted the passivity of the spectator so that, as McLuhan & Fiore put it, “the audience becomes a participant in the total electric drama” (101). It was an art that frustrated conventions in order to allow other meanings to surface. It involved a re-appreciation of everyday material in order to complicate the distinction between art and life. This attempt resulted in new compositional forms: *Assemblages*, *Combines*, *Neo-Dada* works, and, most genre-blurringly, the *Happenings*.

As we saw with Lutz’s attempt to re-style his pedagogical space, compositionists in the field of writing theory and practice in the 1960s were caught in the same frustrating dilemma the *Happenings* artists were—their desire to do interesting work thwarted by the constraints of conventional forms, spaces and materials. The radical gestures of the *Happenings* artists were not lost on writing teachers, and so articles began to appear (by Lutz, Macrorie, and Coles, among a host of others less widely remembered today) which applied these gestures (either directly or, more ambiently, in spirit) to the writing class—initially, and not so remarkably, at the level of architecture:

The classroom as presently structured does not provide the environment in which anything creative can be taught. Physically the room insists on order and authoritarianism, the enemies of creativity: the teacher as ultimate authority in front of the room and the students as passive receptacles at his

feet. The unbridgeable gap (generation and otherwise) is physically emphasized. (Lutz “Making Freshman English” 35)

Such articles rhymed with similar sorts of texts appearing in the larger culture—everything from the situationists’ tract “On the Poverty of Student Life” to Jerry Farber’s *The Student as Nigger*—which critiqued education for its received nature, its dull curriculum, and its passionless tone. Farber, for example, also begins his critique of school—as the place where “the dying society puts its trip on you” (17)—by questioning the institution’s architecture:

Consider how most classrooms are set up. Everyone is turned toward the teacher and away from his classmates. You can’t see the faces of those in front of you; you have to twist your neck to see the persons behind you. Frequently, seats are bolted to the floor or fastened together in rigid rows. This classroom, like the grading system, isolates students from each other and makes them passive receptacles. All the action, it implies, is at the front of the room. . . .

But why those chairs at all? Why forty identical desk-chairs in a bleak, ugly room? Why should school have to remind us of jail or the army? . . . You know, wherever I’ve seen classrooms, from UCLA to elementary schools in Texas, it’s always the same stark chamber. The classrooms we have are a nationwide chain of mortuaries. What on earth are we trying to teach? (24–25)

One of the Composition-specific articles in this genre of radical sixties pedagogy, one which I have never been able to forget since the day I first read it in the dimly-lit stacks of my university’s library, was written in 1967 by a young graduate teaching assistant at the University of Oregon, Charles Deemer. His article, “English Composition as a Happening,” did what many of these articles did, but did it in a formally compelling way (the article is a collage of brief sound-bite snippets, alternating between Deemer’s own poetic reflections-as-manifesto and quotations from Sontag, McLuhan, Dewey, Goodman, and others), and Deemer’s ideas seemed to catalyze my own discontent with what passed for Composition during the 1980s. As I read further back into the field, saw the basic questions of language, respect, and student interest these earlier practitioners tried to answer, current books and articles (which were written as if such questions didn’t need to be answered every time one planned a course) began to sound increasingly hollow. I began to realize that something questionable happened in our field in the late seventies and early eighties: our insecurity over our status as a valid academic field led us to entrench ourselves firmly in professionalism. To establish Composition

as a respectable discipline, we took on all the trappings of traditional academia—canonicity, scientism, empiricism, formalism, high theory, axioms, arrogance, and acceptance of the standard university department-divisions. We purged ourselves of any trace of kookiness, growing first suspicious, then disdainful, of the kind of homemade comp-class-as-Happening that people like Lutz tried to put together:

At the beginning of the second class of the semester, I gave each student an index card and instructed him not to read it until told to. Then, at a given signal, each student read his card and performed the activity described on it [e.g., Go to the front of the room and face the class. Count to yourself and each time you reach five say, "If I had the wings of an angel." . . . (Or) Be an ice cream cone—change flavor]. At the end of three minutes, a student who had been designated time-keeper called time. I asked the students to sit down and write as much as they could describing what had just occurred in the classroom and their reaction to it. (36–37)

We became Moderns. But I couldn't stop thinking about, for example, Ken Macrorie, and this book of his, *Uptaught*, which read like Kurt Vonnegut's long-lost foray into Composition Theory. How did we go from a book like Macrorie's, urging "that teachers must find ways of getting students to produce (in words, pictures, sounds, diagrams, objects, or landscapes) what students and teachers honestly admire" (186), to meditating on "Texts as Knowledge Claims: The Social Construction of Two Biologists' Articles"? Suddenly, spirit, love, adventure, poetry, incense, kicky language, and rock 'n' roll were gone. The forms and constraints seemed overwhelming, the huge gray University walls had grown tall and imposing, keeping the revelers out. As I read further through this new epistemic, Modernist Composition, I noticed something else—call it Composition's material restraint, the phenomenon by which a *de facto* "Composition Canon" forms, with the same names cropping up not just in anthology tables of contents, but in "Works Cited" lists. As article after article appeared, one could trace the waxing and waning of theoretical trends: Langer, Polanyi, Vygotsky, Odell, Emig, Berthoff, Bruffee, Bartholomae, Berlin, Anzaldúa, Foucault, and Freire. This narrow-banding is curious for a discipline that trumpets the value of linguistic richness. The texts surrounding the Happenings proved richer, more seductive to me, in the way they dealt with the same material and institutional concerns I had as a writing teacher. As I read further into them, I began to read the texts surrounding the artists who



prefigured the Happenings—Duchamp and Pollock—as well as the texts of those they prefigured—the Conceptualists, the Minimalists, the Neo-Dadaists. And through it all I continued to listen to popular music (a key thread in the material of *Comp '68*). The truth of materialism hit home. There was all this wonderful stuff—raising and reflecting on key compositional issues—that wasn't making its way into our journals, and yet an article on how a biologist writes was. Frankly, I don't care how a biologist writes. I assume it's pretty conventional stuff, thoroughly implicated in the traditional departmental divisions that stultify the academy. If the folks in biology want to get together with me and talk about how to re-evaluate the form and subject of biology, I'm there. The way such writing represents the entrenched disciplinarity of academia makes it of dubious value as part of a material sublime. I think of what the idea of composition is: an opportunity to reflect on textuality, its craft, wonder, problems—obviously that should be at the center of any idea of academics; but thanks to the epistemic turn we are simply the eager lapdogs of the big-ticket disciplines. Our self-imposed formal and material subservience marks a sad betrayal of the spirit of verbal risk and writing-as-life that marked the best of our history.

Post-Happenings Composition never ever asks (as *Comp '68* did so often) “What's Going On?” To remove any doubt about precisely what was going on, Composition undertook the classical modernist project of self-definition. Bizzell and Bartholomae helped usher in these attempts to articulate exactly what we could claim with certitude about Composition. Lindemann, influenced by these epistemic compositionists, offers perhaps the clearest summative view of the field, one which shows its newly narrowed status of allowing students practice in pre-professional discourse: “Freshman English offers guided practice in reading and writing the discourses of the academy and the professions. That is what our colleagues across the campus want it to do; that is what it should do if we are going to drag every first-year student through the requirement” (312). Composition, then, implicates itself in the contemporary re-figuring of education as training for work rather than intensification of experience. As Frank McCourt realizes, reflecting back with deep sadness on his many years teaching high school in New York City:

There's no vision. Education's just a branch of industry and commerce. It's about scores, scores, scores—and all of this is designed to supply a workforce. We really don't give a s—about the minds and feelings of the kids. . . . In my

eighteen years at Stuyvesant High, only one parent ever asked me, 'Is my child enjoying himself?' One. ("What I Learned in School" 60)

Strict boundaries have become maintained in Composition, a separation of (profession-oriented) academy and life, one discipline from another, the specific discourse from a broader lived reality. This is not Freshman English as a Happening, this is Freshman English as a Corporate Seminar. Happenings were all about blurring the boundaries between art and life. They underscored what Cage maintained, which was that "what we are doing is living, and that we are not moving toward a goal, but are, so to speak, at the goal constantly and changing with it, and that art, if it is going to be anything useful, should open our eyes to this fact" (Kirby and Schechner 60). A view such as Cage's marks a de-determination of art, wholly at odds with post-Happenings Composition, which maintains very clear, Leavisesque distinctions between writers, texts, and contexts, so that students can join the Great Tradition. Composition, in this view, styles students to "enter the conversation of the academy and begin to contribute to the making of knowledge . . . guiding students in those uses of language that enable them to become historians, biologists, and mathematicians" (Lindemann 313). A Happenings spirit is more like that laid out by Fluxus founder George Maciunas, in one of his manifestos (the Fluxus artists being as interested as Cage and the Happenings artists in radically rethinking conventional form and content), which implies a Composition centered on amusement, Freshman English as Fluxjoke:

AMUSEMENT FORGOES DISTINCTION BETWEEN ART AND NONART, FORGOES ARTIST'S INDISPENSIBILITY, EXCLUSIVENESS, INDIVIDUALITY, AMBITION, FORGOES ALL PRETENSION TOWARDS SIGNIFICANCE, RARITY, INSPIRATION, SKILL, COMPLEXITY, PROFUNDITY, GREATNESS, INSTITUTIONAL AND COMMODITY VALUE. IT STRIVES FOR MONOSTRUCTURAL, NONTHEATRICAL, NONBAROQUE, IMPERSONAL QUALITIES OF A SIMPLE NATURAL EVENT, AN OBJECT, A GAME, A PUZZLE OR GAG. ("FLUXUS" 94)

The reason the teaching of writing is permeated by dissatisfaction (every CCCC presentation seems, at some level, a complaint) is that we—bad enough—don't really know what teaching is, but also—far worse, fatal, in fact—we haven't really evolved an idea of writing that fully reflects the splendor of the medium. (Somewhere out there, for

example, is a prof for whom “memo” as a verb is still a big deal.) We have evolved a very limited notion of academic writing (or any genre, really). Our texts are conventional in every sense of the word; they write themselves. They are almost wholly determined by the texts that have gone before; a radical break with the conventions of a form or genre (and I’m not speaking here about the academic convention of the smug, sanctioned transgression, e.g., Jane Tompkins) would perplex—how is *that* history writing? what community group would need *that* for its newsletter? how is *that* going to help you get a job? A Happenings spirit would begin at the point of Elbow’s “life is long and college is short” queasiness with academic writing (“Reflections on Academic Discourse” 136).

To de-determine form and content means that the writing can just be; or, as the title of one of the key CCC ’69 pieces puts it, “this writing is”(Litz). The Happening artists’ basic rule was indeterminacy: nothing is previously determined, neither form nor material content; everything is under erasure. The only given, a kind of non-axiom, is the one stated by Rauschenberg, who cared not at all about control or intention, only change: “What’s exciting is that we don’t know. There is no anticipated result; but we will be changed” (Kostelanetz, *Theatre* 99). Once all the conventions are re-thought, the compositional scene becomes simpler, more an issue of basic being, wonder, the human heart, change. Take Happenings artist Ken Dewey’s de-determination of the idea of *theatre*. “The further out one moves, the simpler one’s understanding becomes of what theatre is. I now would accept only that theatre is a situation in which people gather to articulate something of mutual concern” (210). Dewey shows a basic, unoccluded desire for communion. That, along with passion, beauty, lyricism . . . why is that *not* our core? Why do we *not* insist on it? Despite all the lip service we give to empowerment in our ideological curricula, we don’t really believe in the power of a composition to change the world. We have a concept of audience as construct, not as lived. Which allows us to develop all these step-by-step heuristic-templates to turn the rhetorical situation into a parlor game.

When you consider the expectations and interests of your readers, you naturally think *strategically*, asking yourself questions such as these:

- To what extent are my readers interested in and knowledgeable about my subject?
- What formal and stylistic expectations will my readers bring to my essay?

- What other aspects of my readers' situations might influence how they respond to my essay?
- How can I use my understanding of my readers' expectations and interests when I make decisions about the content, form, and style of my essay? (Ede 56–57)

When there's really only one heuristic that matters: the person who reads this—and it is one specific person, saturated in lived desire—will that person be changed? We think only in the abstract about how some peculiarly over-crafted college essay or some genre of “real world” writing can change a generic reader. We need to keep in mind how, not in the “real world” but in life, any small fragment has the power to truly change a person, not just (and probably not at all) some heuristic-generated, audience-strategized, oddly-voiced form that results in that weird sort of “prose-lite” essay they publish in those magazines available in the seat backs of airplanes. We need only remember what Salter tells us: “the power to change one's life comes from a paragraph, a lone remark. The lines that penetrate us are slender, like the flukes that live in river water and enter the bodies of swimmers” (161).

Rarefying materials, as Composition does (the middle-brow preciosity or academic aloofness that drives the reading selections we anthologize), only makes the possibilities for Happening Composition more remote, particularly for students. Material access is an issue, and many of the Happenings artists relied on what was available in the trash for their stage properties. It became a theoretical principle for someone like Cage: “I was already interested at that time in avoiding the exclusion of banal elements. . . . I've always been on the side of the things one shouldn't do and searching for ways of bringing the refused elements back into play” (Kirby and Schechner 60). Or take that flower garden Cage writes about: “George Mantor had an iris garden, which he improved each year by throwing out the commoner varieties. One day his attention was called to another very fine iris garden. Jealously he made some inquiries. The garden, it turned out, belonged to the man who collected his garbage” (*Silence* 263). Not only material differences, but formal ones as well, as part of the production necessary for new ideas. La Monte Young offers a simple example of the new text grammar (actually not really new, just basic undetermined juxtaposition) guiding his “Lecture 1960”: “The lecture is written in sections. . . . Each section originally was one page or a group of pages stapled together.

Any number of them may be read in any order. The order and selections are determined by chance, thereby bringing about new relationships between parts and consequently new meanings”(72). Many of these new genres arise, following the de-conventionalization of the form, from an allegorical reading, seeing one form through the lens of another. According to Dewey, “It should have been made clear that Happenings came about when painters and sculptors crossed into theatre taking with them their way of looking and doing things” (206). So La Monte Young looks at the traditional lecture through the lens of a random generator. Or take Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, who worked out the form for his Happening *The Tart, or Miss America* (1965) by trying to apply the idea of collage to theatre. I like such practices as Young’s and Higgins’s, as they involve reading texts in (at least) two ways. Is Young’s creation a lecture or performance art? Is *The Tart* (with a list of characters including butchers, doctors, steelworkers, electricians, and a chemist) choreography or sociology? Is this book of mine composition, art history, basic writing theory or cultural studies? Sometimes I’m not sure if the first-year writing course I teach is a course on rap, writing, or technology. Anyway, I like how that blurring messes up a stable reading; it energizes a text or scene, preventing it from becoming fixed.

I would like, then, to return to that point of disenchantment with established spaces and the desire for new forms, a disenchantment and desire that was felt historically in all fields with the idea of *composition* at their center. Much of what I hear in conferences and conversations suggests that we have already returned to a desire for something else (if we’ve ever really left—Composition Studies as a perpetual scene of disenchantment). Contemporary Composition, as Lindemann shows, is still inflected by that epistemic turn taken in the 1980s, convincing me we need to remember what we’ve forgotten, namely how impassioned resolves and thrilling discoveries were abandoned and why. I’d like, then, to retrace the road not taken in Composition Studies, to re-read the elision, in order to remember what was missed and to salvage what can still be recovered. This, then, is a negative-space history, one that reverses the conventional figure-ground relations to find the most fruitful avenues of inquiry to be those untouched or abandoned by the disciplinary mainstream. The disruptive/restorative dynamic of my project means both rediscovering the usefulness of some of the materials of Composition that have faded from our conscious screen, and forcing a comparison of

our field with the avant-garde tradition in post-WWII American art, running that story through our own traditional, disciplined history—or better, showing our history as already-ruptured, permanently destabilized by our attitude toward (really, ignorance of) the compositional avant-garde. My key compositional theorists—Pollock, Duchamp, the situationists, the Happenings artists, punks—are non-compositionists as our field would define such; and my favorite field-specific theorist-practitioners are those now out of fashion, like Macrorie and Coles, or ones never more than minor figures, like Deemer. My re-reading of the field is really an allegory: reading composition through a particular thread (the Happenings movement, broadly defined) in twentieth century art history. Call it “writing instruction as electric drama,” maybe. Of course, what I’m really doing is re-writing Charles Deemer’s original 1967 *College English* allegory. Allegorical criticism—in the way allegory tells one story, but tells it as read through (or in) another—is a useful method by which to read our past, particularly for an historical review like mine, which desires to re-affirm the value in an all but forgotten era of Composition Studies, in the hope of finding an alternative to the current tradition. According to Owens, “what is most proper to [allegory is] its capacity to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear. Allegory first emerged in response to a . . . sense of estrangement from tradition” (203). Allegory, then, serves as the perfect strategy by which to return to that stirring moment in our history, in the hopes of recapturing its intensity, because, as Owens continues, the “two most fundamental impulses” of allegory are “[a] conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present.” Seeing the field of writing instruction through the broader compositional allegory of art-in-general connects back to Irscher, who also suggested an art analogy as an approach to rhetorical theory, urging a focus on those artists who could de-familiarize rhetoric and change perception: “In matters of experimentation with established principles and processes, the other arts are particularly instructive, for artists continually seek to overcome the limitations and traditional agencies of their medium. . . . We can learn about rhetoric particularly from those artists who have modified our modes of perception, for what each has done is to change, sometimes radically, one or more of the components in the rhetorical paradigm so that interaction no longer occurs in familiar ways” (“Analogy” 354). A field like ours—where articles and monographs and textbooks all say basically the same thing, draw materially on the same sources—exists in much the same

state as the art world in 1964, described by Harold Rosenberg as “sealed up in itself” (“After Next” 70); an allegorical reading is perfect for such a field, offering immediate fracture. Barthes, as well, affirms the heuristic power gained from the prose/painting allegory: “Why not wipe out the difference between them,” he asks, “in order to affirm more powerfully the plurality of ‘texts’” (S/Z 56).

Some have seen an effort such as this, recouping the possibilities of an avant-garde in permanent tension with the academic, as the ongoing drama of contemporary art. Foster introduces his own version of such a recuperative history in his study of American art: “[T]his book is not a history: it focuses on several models of art and theory over the last three decades alone. . . . [I]t insists that specific genealogies of innovative art and theory exist over this time, and it traces these genealogies through signal transformations. Crucial here is the relation between *turns* in critical models and *returns* of historical practices: how does a *reconnection* with a past practice support a *disconnection* from a present practice and/or a development of a new one?” (x). Irmischer, then, was uncannily prescient: the history of our Composition, its failure to exploit its most radical practices, can be read saliently through the lens of the visual arts. But it is no wonder that Irmischer was ineffective (and is presently in need of reconsideration), for as Foster continues: “the avant-garde work is never historically effective or fully significant in its initial moments. It cannot be because it is traumatic—a hole in the symbolic order of its time that is not prepared for it, that cannot receive it, at least not immediately, at least not without structural change. (This is the other scene of art that critics and historians need to register: not only symbolic disconnections but *failures to signify*)” (29).

My book, then, is a kind of destiny, an inevitable rendezvous, a turning inside-out of the shadow-space of Composition, an accounting of our *other scene*, our *failures of signification*. I plan to re-open our traumatic wound in order to review the symbolic order that it ruptured, to reconsider the structural change it suggested. The interesting questions about composition asked in the visual arts only began to be asked in our specific compositional field: for example, as the visual arts struggled over the notion of what can count as *beauty*, Composition Studies shrunk from the task, falling back on the attempt to establish “what makes writing good” along very conventional lines. Other crucial issues exhaustively theorized in the more general notion of composition seen in the visual and performing arts include: acceptable materials and content;

the question of process (even process-as-product, text-as-performance) as opposed to the product/work as commodifiable; the place of the viewer as meaning-maker (the viewers make the pictures, Duchamp said), which Composition finesses with a disembodied notion of audience; indeed, the whole notion of the body; genres, and how far they can be blurred; academic conventions and institutional frames as disciplinary constructs to be worked against; site-specificity (as opposed to our sense of composition as a deracinated meaning-event, embedded with enough context so the work can be endlessly reactivated); and the general blurring of art and life. The narrowness of our Composition can be measured by how much we have shrunk from considering such issues.

It's worth tracing briefly how the history of writing instruction parallels (and where it departs from) that of the visual arts. Assume a composition-in-general, defined as the production of a work that responds to some problem, some exigency. The work itself might be thought of as having a form and content, being made of certain materials to which certain techniques are applied. That work, then, is judged according to certain criteria. In Pre-Modern art, the problem was representation: whether Altamira cave-painters or Renaissance *maîtres*, artists had as their goal the rendering of a realist image (as aesthetics evolved, we might add *beauty* as another part of the problem being worked out in such composition). The content for the image was entirely conventional: the animals the cave-painters wanted to hunt or the religious icons the Renaissance artists wanted to praise. Rendering techniques also became standardized, from two-dimensional art to chiaroscuro and perspective. Materials, too conformed to convention—again, whether we're talking about how cave painters used burnt wood and blood or how later artists mixed their own pigments (making the studio scene standard, because painters had a difficult time, until pre-mixed tubes of paint became available in the nineteenth century, mixing colors *en plein air*). The paintings were judged mainly on how well they corresponded to the accepted standard. De Kooning captured the thoroughly conventional nature of the art of this era in a comment on Titian: "But he kept on painting Virgins in that luminous light, like he'd just heard about them. Those guys had everything in place, the Virgin and God and the technique, but they kept it up like they were still looking for something" (Kimmelman "Life is Short" 22). Rendering or representation coalesced Pre-Modern writing instruction: the problem being the clear rendering



or reproduction of the target language (in our case, Edited American English). Things got especially worrisome when the student couldn't achieve that clarity; so Adams Sherman Hill complains of flawed representation in 1879, of "manuscripts written in an examination room . . . disfigured by bad spelling, confusing punctuation, ungrammatical, obscure, ambiguous, or inelegant expressions . . . blunders which would disgrace a boy twelve years old" (Connors "Basic Writing Textbooks" 260). The materials, besides pen and paper and language, were textbooks, "filled with grammatical and mechanical rules and exercises" (Connors 261), and the technique those materials reinforced was "to atomize writing into small bits and to practice these bits. . . . [The textbooks] break writing down into a set of subskills and assume that conscious mastery of the subskills means mastery of the writing" (262, 265); so copying and drills became standard. The form/content was determined by the expressive, topic-sentence paragraph. And the excellence of the work was judged in large part on the correctness of its correspondence to the standard, on the presence or absence of formal errors.

The Modernist era in art is best described by Clement Greenberg. Briefly, Greenberg associates Modernism with the impulse in Western culture "to turn around and question its own foundations" ("Modernist Painting" 67). Self-reflexivity marked the turn in art, for Greenberg, from the Old Masters to the Moderns: "Realistic, illusionist art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art. Modernism used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting—the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment—were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Modernist painting has come to regard these same limitations as positive factors that are to be acknowledged openly" (69). So the Modern painters under the spell of Greenberg worked to identify those properties of painting exclusive to itself. Representation became dispensable, since other arts were also representational; hence, art that was truly Modern had to be abstract. The materials, for the most part, were still oil on canvas (even if radically thinned, as Morris Louis favored). What also made a painting truly a painting (and one had to speak of the Modernist picture *qua* picture: "one sees a Modernist painting as a picture first" [70]) was its flatness on a canvas (anything else became three-dimensional, hence sculptural). Perhaps the only thing that didn't change from the Pre-Modern to the Modern was *excellence* as a criterion—particularly in historical or traditional terms (as

beautiful, pleasing, inspirational, well-wrought)—to judge the work; as Greenberg noted, sounding like his fellow-Moderns Eliot and Leavis, “Without the past of art, and without the need and compulsion to maintain past standards of excellence, such a thing as Modernist art would be impossible” (77). Bartholomae, our field’s most articulate Modernist, shows how the Modernist program translated into Composition theory and pedagogy. Self-reflexivity ruled: the problem became not so much expressionist representation as analytic criticism; particularly, as in the Greenbergian investigation of the essential elements of painting, this meant a formal inquiry into the medium (academic discourse) and its conventions, finding, for example, “the rules governing the presentation of examples or the development of an argument” (“Inventing” 135). The materials, newly delimited—our flat, abstract, oil canvases—are now what is strictly specific to college writing, the university continually re-invented (as the same traditional thing). So the student must work, technique-wise, on “assembling and mimicking [the university’s] language,” and the form/content of one’s work becomes “the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community” (“Inventing” 135, 134). We can speak now of what is exclusive to Composition, of the field’s “historic concern for the space on the page and what it might mean to do work there and not somewhere else . . . composition as a professional commitment to do a certain kind of work with a certain set of materials” (“What is Composition?” 18, 22). Criteria no longer invoke sentence-level correctness; Bartholomae tellingly moves beyond error, as he seemingly abandons representation for criticism—but formalists, of course, never fully abandon representation. The new criterion is a kind of meta-representation: how well the work mimics the original critical text that has interrogated the tradition; how well, that is, the students “take on the role—the voice, the persona—of an authority whose authority is rooted in scholarship, analysis, or research” (“Inventing” 136). What is represented, then, is the newly refigured discourse. So, in *Ways of Reading*, for example, Bartholomae and Petrosky urge the student who has just read a selection from *Mythologies*, “As a way of testing Barthes’s method, and of testing the usefulness of his examples, write an essay (or perhaps a series of ‘mythologies’) that provides a similar reading of an example (or related examples) of American culture—MTV, skateboarding, the Superbowl, Pee Wee Herman, etc. You might ask, ‘What would Barthes notice in my examples? What would he say about these significant features?’” (36). This is writing

as iterative gesture, typical of Modernist Composition (Lindemann's students, for example, "examine the texts they encounter in the academy [in order to] creat[e] texts like those they read" (314).

Happenings artists reacted to the Modernist program. The problem became not the conventional, but rather how one does something unconventional, sublime, exciting. Any material and technique was allowed, if it could produce something exciting. Form and content were equally open; as Minimalist Donald Judd put it: "Any material can be used, as is or painted" (184). The only relevant criteria was one we can also take from Judd: "A work needs only to be interesting" (184). Whether you call this postmodern or (as I prefer) avant-garde, there is very little correspondence for it in Composition Studies. Deemer, an obvious parallel, sees the problem as one of boredom resulting from conventional composition; the aim is for the teacher to "shock the student" (124). It's pedagogy as dare (Composition prefers the truth of resemblance), gambling on the sublime, "the reengagement of the heart, a new tuning of *all* the senses. Taking the first step toward poetry" (125). Materials had to be different, other: "Let [the class] discuss theology to Ray Charles records" (124). Deemer is very purposeful in his article not to describe technique too carefully, because he wants to disrupt the notion of correspondence and reproduction found in the Modernist and Pre-Modernist writing space; he wants to preserve risk: "It is with reason that I have neglected to present a more explicit blueprint for the happening after which to model a reconstruction of English Composition. In the first place, happenings happen; they are not passed down from one to another. Spontaneity is essential. Each 'teacher' must inspire his own happening" (124). Lutz's class, then, described earlier—which also used popular recordings, and had students practice almost meditative techniques while they listened, in order to bring about a sublime state—becomes a record of his own journey (as "teacher") to spontaneity and inspiration. We can consider avant-pop theorist Mark Amerika to see how these ideas might play out in a writing class. Amerika's project starts with tradition itself—particularly the conventional, media-saturated consumerist culture, and how it seems to preclude the sublime—as the problem; for Amerika, the struggle becomes "to rapidly transform our sick, commodity-infested workaday culture into a more sensual, trippy, exotic and networked . . . experience." An avant-garde technique has nothing to do with the formal, replicable, critical methods that serve to represent a discourse or

produce a strong reading; rather it is a radically de-determined ambient interaction with cultural information. Text-selection replaces text-production: “Creating a work of art will depend more and more on the ability of the artist to select, organize and present the bits of raw data we have at our disposal” (Amerika). Techniques now include, besides the standard freewriting, listing, drafting, etc, appropriating, sampling, copying, cataloging, scanning, indexing, chatting, and audio/video-streaming (think of these as a new list of gerunds to supersede Bartholomae’s *knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing*). If a Happening or Duchamp’s *Large Glass* or a Rauschenberg combine-painting or a Beuys multiple or a Koons sculpture are typical examples of avant-garde art, we might think of synchronous/asynchronous conversation transcripts, Story-Space hypertexts, Web pages, emails, or even informal drafts as species of avant-garde composition. Since the compositional arena is now more broadly cultural, which implies post-typographic, the “space on the page” has been ruptured, as well as concomitant standards of evaluation; according to Amerika:

By actively engaging themselves in the continuous exchange and proliferation of collectively-generated electronic publications, individually-designed creative works, manifestos, live on-line readings, multi-media interactive hypertexts, conferences, etc., Avant-Pop artists and the alternative networks they are a part of will eat away at the conventional relics of a bygone era where the individual artist-author creates their beautifully-crafted, original works of art to be consumed primarily by the elitist art-world and their business-cronies who pass judgment on what is appropriate and what is not.

Notions of correspondence (whether to a representational standard or a discursive tradition) are irrelevant; Arthur C. Danto caught this spirit of the inapplicability of traditional aesthetics to the avant-garde composition when he titled an essay on post-modern art “Whatever Happened to Beauty?”

So the parallels between writing instruction and the visual arts, both seen as composition, are compelling. The allegory I present in this book—looking at the spaces of writing instruction through/as spaces associated directly and tangentially with the Happenings movement (including its pre- and post-history)—might best be thought of as Materialist History of Composition Studies as Gallery Tour. Benjamin has defined historical materialism as rupturing the seamless, epic narrative of history at many points—or rather, seeing historical works as

always-already ruptured, permanently destabilized, as “incorporat[ing] both their pre-history and their after-history in virtue of which their pre-history, too, can be seen to undergo constant change” (*One-Way Street* 351). It is the dynamic Hal Foster uses to describe the movement of the historical and neo-avant-garde: “a continual process of protension and retension, a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts” (29). I want to tour the spaces of several galleries, spaces made from the ruptures in Composition’s history—inspect the wreckage, in order to show the promise of the Happenings for Composition as well as the huge gray *longueur* of its pale post-Happenings replacement, Eighties Composition. In so doing, I hope to begin a reconfiguration of our field’s pre- and after-history; my project is best defined as an alternate history. But where to begin our gallery crawl? Several theorists have already begun a materialist reading of the works of Composition Studies. Harris, for example, revisited the primal scene of the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar, finding a gap through which to view the present: “Rather than read Dartmouth as the scene of a heroic shift in the theory and practice of teaching, then, I want to look at it as a moment in which the conflicts that define English studies were dramatized with unusual clarity . . . [so] we can begin to map out some of the contested terms and ideas that structure our work in English today” (“After Dartmouth” 633). And Faigley has pried into the key date of 1963 (when important papers were presented at the conference on College Composition and Communication and both *Themes, Theories, and Therapies* and *Research on Written Composition* were published) to understand why, although “the disciplinary era of composition studies comes with the era of post-modernity . . . there is seemingly little in the short history of composition studies that suggests a postmodern view of heterogeneity and difference as liberating forces” (14). 1963 and 1966 are interesting dates, coinciding with the high times of the Happenings, but since, for the purposes of this discussion, I’m more interested in looking at Galleries and Museums than Conferences or Seminars, I’d like to push my time-travel’s starting point back a bit further, to 1962, to a fateful moment in art theory, in composition theory; a moment as fully conflicted as Harris’s or Faigley’s; a Gallery-setting in which two competing compositional philosophies clash: a conceptual struggle between the idea of composing serious, substantive work that authentically replicates the form and content of the historical, disciplinary tradition, on the one hand, and the anti-school of thought that’s satisfied to create little bits

of seemingly worthless nothing that simply give pleasure and intensify one's life. The first stop on our gallery tour, then, returns us to 1962, to that very clash-site, and allows us to take as our arch-compositionist Robert Childan, the owner of that ur-gallery, American Artistic Handcrafts Inc.

Childan and his gallery are figures in Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, an "alternate world" science-fiction novel, the premise of which is to chronicle what history would have been like in the years immediately following America's defeat in WWII. How that alternate history relates to Childan is that the Japanese, who occupy the western half of the U.S., have become insatiable collectors of authentic American artifacts. Childan's gallery is one of the most elite on the West Coast; it sells "no contemporary American art; only the past could be represented here" (9). His customers' passion for the historicity contained in 'original' artifacts has become obsessive, as seen in an exchange between Childan and a Japanese couple visiting his gallery. Childan breathlessly informs them of some choice items he expects to receive.

"I am getting in a New England table, maple, all wood-pegged, no nails. Immense beauty and worth. And a mirror from the time of the 1812 War. And also the aboriginal art: a group of vegetable-dyed goat-hair rugs."

"I myself," the man said, "prefer the art of the cities."

"Yes," Childan said eagerly. "Listen, sir. I have a mural from WPA post-office period, original, done on board, four sections, depicting Horace Greeley. Priceless collector's item."

"Ah," the man said, his dark eyes flashing.

"And a Victrola cabinet of 1920 made into a liquor cabinet."

"Ah."

"And, sir, listen: *framed signed picture of Jean Harlow.*"

The man goggled at him.

"Shall we make arrangements?" Childan said, seizing this correct psychological instant. (10)

Many in that alternate reality remain skeptical in the face of "the ever-growing Japanese craze for Americana" (31). To impress on a young woman that "this whole damn historicity business is nonsense[, t]hose Japanese are bats" (34), a cynic produces two identical Zippo lighters and challenges her to "feel" the historicity in one:

"Listen. One of those two Zippo lighters was in Franklin D. Roosevelt's pocket when he was assassinated. And one wasn't. One has historicity, a hell

of a lot of it. As much as any object ever had. And one has nothing. Can you feel it?" He nudged her. "You can't. You can't tell which is which. There's no 'mystical plasmic presence,' no 'aura' around it." (64)

That man sees the absurdity in "historicity" because the object itself, if it has any worth, should be valuable for the idea it represents, the statement that it makes, not for its status as fetish. But with modernity, use-value gives way to symbolic exchange. The object is intentionally invested with a verifiable aura, signifying authenticity; its *originality*, then, only exists in its certifiability:

"That's my point! I'd have to prove it to you with some sort of document. A paper of authenticity. And so it's all a fake, a mass delusion. The paper proves its worth, not the object itself." (65)

The above exchange between Childan and his customers shows the seductive control exercised by the fetish-object and the documentation-apparatus surrounding it.

The pressure to own 'original' artifacts (and the rewards to be made selling them) gives rise in Dick's novel to an underground of forgers, specializing in the reproduction of 'authenticity.' Childan realizes the limited life-span of the historicity business when a patron, a connoisseur, notes that an 1860 Army Model Colt .44 he is selling is imitation and asks, "Is it possible, sir, that you, the owner, dealer, in such items, *cannot distinguish the forgeries from the real?*" (58). The object itself is an artifact of a production system, made according to operative criteria (what Baudrillard calls "the metaphysics of the code" [*Simulations* 103]); and because the code can be re-activated, the object can be re-produced. But the aura can't. The aura can only be put there by a master's own hand. As such, as *something*, it can be discerned, measured. According to Crimp, the aura is "that aspect of the work that can be put to the test of chemical analysis or connoisseurship" (111). Indeed, the technician who finally determines the status of Childan's counterfeit Colt .44 through such analysis underscores Crimp:

It's a reproduction cast from plastic molds except for the walnut. Serial numbers all wrong. The frame not casehardened by the cyanide process. Both brown and blue surfaces achieved by a modern quick-acting technique, the whole gun artificially aged, given a treatment to make it appear old and worn. . . . It's a good job. Done by a real pro. (59)

Without an aura, the work has no institutional value: “the museum has no truck with fakes or copies or reproductions. The presence of the artist in the work must be detectable; that is how the museum knows it has something authentic” (Crimp 112). But in the age of mechanical reproduction, the aura has a tough time of it, according to Baudrillard: “In its indefinite reproduction, the system puts an end to the myth of its origin and to all the referential values it has secreted along the way” (*Simulations* 112). The knowledge of how tenuous the notions of originality and authenticity are, how easily production becomes reproduction, persuades Childan to begin dealing in a different art: handmade jewelry. Even though the handmade pieces seem like “miserable, small, worthless-looking blob[s]” (172) to a Japanese connoisseur, Childan cynically realizes “*with these, there’s no problem of authenticity*” (145). Gradually, Childan’s cynicism about the jewelry is replaced with real enthusiasm. Toward the close of the book, when a Japanese aficionado of historicity, Mr. Tagomi, enters his gallery, looking for “something of unusual interest” (219), Childan proudly shows him the worthless blobs of jewelry, affirming to his customer (who feels “they are just scraps”): “Sir, these are the new. . . . This is the new life of my country, sir. The beginning in the form of tiny imperishable seeds. Of beauty” (219). Childan warns Tagomi “the new view in your heart” (220) afforded by the cheap-looking pin does not come at once. Tagomi, unconvinced, nevertheless takes Childan’s recommendation. Later he realizes Childan’s truth, the truth of form’s other scene—its *informe*.

Metal is from the earth, he thought as he scrutinized. From below: from that realm which is the lowest, the most dense. Land of trolls and caves, dank, always dark. Yin world, in its most melancholy aspect. World of corpses, decay and collapse. Of feces. All that has died, slipping and disintegrating back down layer by layer. The daemonic world of the immutable; the time-that-was.

And yet, in the sunlight, the silver triangle glittered. It reflected light. Fire, Mr. Tagomi thought. Not dank or dark object at all. Not heavy, weary, but pulsing with life. The high realm, aspect of yang: empyrean, ethereal. . . . Yes, this thing has disgorged its spirit: light. And my attention is fixed; I can’t look away. Spellbound by mesmerizing shimmering surface which I can no longer control. No longer free to dismiss. (223–224)

Childan’s gallery is a good starting point from which to allegorically view *Composition Studies* of the past thirty-odd years because of the



implications involved in our field's gradual rejection of that yin world of collapse and decay in its instructional theories, emphasizing instead an ethereal, code-driven, textual re-representation of authenticity and authority. The story told by American Artistic Handcrafts Inc. recurs too frequently in Composition Studies. It's the same story told in every museum's gallery: work is either a classic, desired piece (assuming it's not fake, plagiarized) or it's crude, worthless, fecal—in our galleries, for example, we teach either writers or students (and students' work can be either strong or weak). A re-appreciation of a Happenings aesthetic can reveal what our strictly empyrean formalism misses, the other scene of its vision. What we learn from Childan and Tagomi is the potential effect of a delay in standards: deferring the quick dismissal of aura-less trash, staring a bit longer, watching the light catch, opening ourselves to the new view in our hearts. Work of true beauty and artistic power, it seems, can be crafted in very basic ways from seemingly degraded materials, paying little or no attention to formal or historical tradition. Childan and Tagomi learned a Happenings lesson: to follow a work where it goes; to turn off expectations and be open to meaning, intensity, beauty. I think of Braque, who knew he was finished with a painting when nothing remained of the original idea. Composition's definition of finished writing, on the other hand, is when the original intention is perfectly realized.

And so this book, which I write out of the lull I feel in contemporary Composition Studies, a disenchantment, which I would locate both in theory and pedagogy. What should be the central space for intellectual inquiry in the academy has become identified as either a service course designed to further the goals of other academic units or a cultural-studies space in which to investigate identity politics. An enthusiasm has been lost, particularly among those entering the profession. Even the newest technologies for composition are rapidly succumbing to this lull—witness collections on what makes writing good in the digital age, taxonomies of email, or standards for evaluating web pages. The cause of our current stasis? Doubtless the major influence has been Composition's professionalization, its self-tormented quest for disciplinary stature. The price we have paid for our increased credibility as an academic field has been a narrowing of the bandwidth of what used to pass for composition. In figuring out our place among the disciplines, we have made the notion of disciplines paramount—what we talk about when we talk about writing is writing-in-the-academy or “real-world” writing that reflects (legitimizes)

academic departments. This streamlining of the previously disparate narratives of Composition means that less and less do our genres represent a kind of expressivist or art-writing, a writing for non-academic (or non-ideological) goals, that “first step toward poetry.” To counter, then, here is my brief journey into the tenets and figures of a group of avant-garde artists who, for want of a better term, I loosely group around the concept “Happenings.” It is meant as both disruptive and restorative: to interrupt the uncritical acceptance of Composition as currently institutionalized by recollecting the more open-ended, poetic theories of form and content, congruent with developments in other compositional fields, which remain our forgotten heritage.

If you desire a brief explanation or outline for what’s to follow: Marcel Duchamp is first discussed as an acknowledged influence on Happenings composition: not merely for the negationist impulse of dadaism (Happenings as neo-dadaist art), but for the totality of his composition theory: the handmade artwork, connoting aura, intentionality and originality vs. the chosen, pre-manufactured readymade (evoking Benjamin’s ideas of mechanical reproduction); the idea of the conceptualist, or artist-in-general; the concept of the text as catalogue (the *Green Box*, a catalogue of Duchamp’s ideas and directions, as text, giving rise to notions of hypertextuality). Duchamp’s enormous impact on twentieth-century art in general, the way he caused artists to re-articulate conceptions of beauty, form and criteria (e.g., Judd’s sole criteria that the “work need only to be interesting”), has had shockingly little effect on Composition Studies, doubtless contributing to our relatively marginal position as theorists and practitioners of form and language. Then, a discussion of Jackson Pollock, whose Abstract Expressionist gesture played a major role on the thinking of the Happenings pioneers (Allan Kaprow, for example, acknowledged the impact of Pollock’s “diaristic gesture” [26] and the way the canvases “ceased to become paintings and became *environments*” [56], on his own Happenings). Emphasis will be given to Pollock’s ideas on process (as “action painter”); his insistence on the statement in a work over its form; and the way his paintings (especially the drip paintings) produce a new sort of all-over, infinite text, as opposed to an image-text carefully composed to acknowledge frame-borders. Chapter three will offer a two-tiered retrospective (in terms of mainstream art and the specialized field of writing instruction) of historical Happenings Composition; an anti-gallery tour of compositional spaces, reviewing both the formal, material, theoretical, and institutional

constraints against which artists/compositionists worked to forge a new practice. Chapter four focuses on the spatial, architectural, institutional context—the Museum and the Gallery; the University and the Classroom—which Happenings compositionists strained so consciously against. To theorize institutional restrictions at the basic level of architecture, I will draw on the ideas of the situationists, contemporaries of the Happenings artists. The situationists represented the avant-garde of architectural theory, offering a poetics of architecture, one which railed against the clean lines of Modernist forms and demanded exotic spaces and buildings capable of housing passionate dream-scenes. The situationist impulse—the imperative for a new architecture, a new urbanism; the need to engage zones of passion and poetry—was that of the Happenings: a need for a new intensity. The situationist Ivan Chtcheglov’s *cri de coeur* could have come from a Happenings manifesto:

And you, forgotten, your memories ravaged by all the consternations of two hemispheres, stranded in the Red Cellars of Pali-Kao, without music and without geography, no longer setting out for the hacienda *where the roots think of the child and where the wine is finished off with fables from an old almanac*. Now that’s finished. You’ll never see the hacienda. It doesn’t exist. *The hacienda must be built.* (Knabb 1)

It reminds one of Kaprow’s similar call for a new architectonics of passion, the way no material was off-limits if it could lead to construction of poeticized spaces:

Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things which will be discovered by the present generation of artists. Not only will these bold creators show us, as if for the first time, the world we have always heard about but ignored, but they will disclose entirely unheard of happenings. (“Legacy of Jackson Pollock” 56–57)

The next chapter explores the turn our field took from the 1960s to the 1980s, particularly in the way we abandoned this neo-avant-garde direction, while it remained a recurring preoccupation of other compositional fields. The dangers of academicization and institutionalization were not felt as acutely in Composition of the late 1970s. We turned away from the expressionist concerns of process to a taxonomizing of academic forms and contexts. While the visual arts kept unresolved the question of the frame and the museum (formal, institutional tensions), Composition

Studies cheerfully accepted both as givens—the specific, contextual constraints of a given work would unproblematically frame it, and the larger institutional setting (the academy and/or the professions) was never in doubt. Specifically, this chapter offers a reverse-image of our abandonment of the neo-avant-garde, in examining how the popular (that peculiar, post-Happenings, dadaist-inspired, negation-soundtrack of the popular known as punk) was excised from our theory (quite the opposite of the Happenings Compositionists, for whom the popular was crucial material). The Conclusion will begin to theorize the Happenings Redux: how the tenets of the neo-avant-garde can be returned to a position of useful material in our field; how we can retain a kind of neo-expressivist goal of spiritual, conceptual intensity; and how the goal of composition as art-in-general and the creation of a classroom environment where anything can happen would play themselves out curricularly.

The Happenings compositionists-in-general whom I like (and whom I learn from) have been absent too long from the history and practice of college composition. We have so much to learn from all of them: Pollock, with his idiosyncratic statement exuberantly crafted out of the everyday; Kaprow and Rauschenberg, Happenings artists proper (and their Fluxus colleagues, as well as their Performance Art descendants), with the dazzling, playful symbologies of their homemade rituals; situationists like Debord and Constant, with the labyrinthine traces of their psychogeographic ramblings through an urbanity refigured by passion; Duchamp, with his compelling redefinition of beauty; Johnny Rotten et al.'s brilliant compositions of hatred, made from the encaustic bile they dripped onto "official" culture; or John Cage, finding a profound text while staring at the side of a building in Manhattan or out of the window of a train traveling through Kansas. All of them locate composition, not in theory or an institution, but in a very specific, lived place of passion and desire. I find such grounding very much absent from Composition Studies. I mean, where is the sense of *this* in the epistemic era of Composition: of, say, gazing out the window of the St. James Hotel, and *knowing* no one can sing the blues like Blind Willie McTell? That would be a fascinating, complex project, limning the dimensions of the everyday-sublime. How can I, or my students, really be expected to be excited about having to do something like the following instead?

The mathematician Jacob Bronowski defined civilization as all activities directed at the future. Write a paper in which you explain the preparation

your education has given you for citizenship and for assuming your heritage as a member of civilization in the future. Do you feel prepared to become a guardian of our future culture and values? Why or why not? What role do the humanities play in your ability to deal with the future? (Weiner, *Reading* 244)

That's the kind of assignment Johnny Rotten needed only two words to write ("no future"). So what if it's the kind of writing they'll do at college? Elbow reminds us of the relative duration of academic-life to real-life. Just because the rest of the curriculum has banned enchantment in favor of a narrow conception of life-as-careerism that doesn't mean we have to go along, does it? Can't we be a last outpost? a way station for poetry, ecophilia, spiritual intensity, basic human (not disciplined) style?

I realize any recuperative history like this will smack of nostalgia and idealization. I suppose that's inescapable—if the art and theory of the era didn't have ideals I felt were valuable, I wouldn't look longingly back to compositional ideas I feel were abandoned too quickly. But please don't think my nostalgia for those kickier times blinds me to the problematic aspects of the Happenings theorists; there are aspects about them I find troubling. The reliance on naked women in many of their pieces has already been roundly criticized (Sandford *xxii*), and there's little I can add, except to note a few cautionary points before a narrow feminist reading sees the Happenings as colored on that score: an undressing of social conventions can often be literally articulated, a return to an intimacy with nature (as Happenings/Fluxus artists like Beuys wanted) can mean a warm sensuality about the body, and, finally, Lebel and others just as often featured nude males in their work as females. In general, there is often a wide-eyed fervency and righteousness about the theorists which can be at times touching, at times embarrassing. And at times, it can degenerate into an arrogant stridency that seems to mimic the very systems of artistic purity and discrimination the artists and theorists sought to overturn; for example, in his *Tulane Drama Review* interview with Allan Kaprow, Richard Schechner complains that "places like the Electric Circus and Cheetah have sprung up: pseudo-psychedelic turn-on, packaged Happenings . . . the Broadway of intermedia" (Schnechner, "Extensions" 227–228). Do we really want to say something happening can't occur in a commercial space *per se*? Even if a space like the Cheetah was a culturally mainstream distillation of the rawer art movement, it could still be a potentially cool place, as I recall, given the music and the crowd mix. Much better is Cage's attitude of bliss criticism when coming upon things he

doesn't much care for: when Richard Kostelanetz interviews Cage, he asks him if some theatre pieces are better than others; Cage dismisses the question: "Why do you waste your time and mine by trying to get value judgments? Don't you see that when you get a value judgment, that's all you have? They are destructive to our proper business, which is curiosity and awareness" (*John Cage* 27).

And take Kaprow himself, for example: besides crucial historical interest, many of his pieces contain genuine poetry, but at times he sounds like he's trying to become the Aristotle of the Happenings movement. It's one thing to affirm an open-ended tenet like "*The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible*" (*Assemblages* 188–189), but occasionally his critical theory results in a rigidity worthy of formalism: "*The performance of a Happening should take place over several widely spaced, sometimes moving and changing locales*" (*Assemblages* 190). That he adhered so strongly to this in many of his works ultimately limits them. Or take a comment he made on the sublime Happenings of George Brecht. Brecht wrote "sparse scores," as Kaprow calls them; zen suggestions printed out and given to people who want an opportunity to re-appreciate basic life: for example, "DIRECTION Arrange to observe a sign indicating direction of travel. • travel in the indicated direction • travel in another direction" (*Assemblages* 195). Kaprow shows an odd faithlessness in mass pedagogy by his comment on this work. He, of course, can appreciate the rarefied quality of Brecht's Happenings, but

Beyond a small group of initiates, there are few who could appreciate the moral dignity of such scores, and fewer still who could derive pleasure from going ahead and doing them without self-consciousness. In the case of those Happenings with more detailed instructions or more expanded action, the artist must be present at every moment, directing and participating, for the tradition is too young for the complete stranger to know what to do with such plans if he got them. (*Assemblages* 195)

It seems odd for an anti-tradition like the Happening to be spoken of in the privileged language of the VIP lounge. There is a will-to-genre there that disturbs; the *complete stranger's* work should be embraced for its potential, its possibilities: in fact, a stranger would have something important to add to a genre like the Happenings, whose project is, as Robert Whitman defined it, "the story of all those perceptions and awarenesses you get just from being a person" (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 224). Kaprow further reduces the full-blown nature of the Happening's unpredictability by prescribing

that those participating in a Happening “have a clear idea what they are to do. This is simply accomplished by writing out the scenario or score for all and discussing it thoroughly with them beforehand.” Tellingly, he adds, “In this respect it is not different from the preparations for a parade, a football match, a wedding, or a religious service. It is not even different from a play” (*Assemblages* 197). For one who bemoaned the Cheetah, his compositional grammar is strangely bound by extant realities; instead of trying to build the New Babylon (or even settling for a detournement of the city-space), he simply inserts his compositions into existent theatres (now broadly defined). So, “A Happening could be composed for a jetliner going from New York to Luxembourg with stopovers at Gander, Newfoundland, and Reykjavik, Iceland. Another Happening would take place up and down the elevators of five tall buildings in midtown Chicago” (*Assemblages* 191). The pieces often become derivative of each other, and sometimes seem to include Surrealism for its own sake. On another note, there’s a slight queasiness when one thinks of how often the final effect of Kaprow’s (and others’) Happenings was ecologically distasteful. This, for example, from Kaprow’s comments regarding *Self-Service* (1967).

Other of my Happenings have had far more dramatic and deliberate imagery.

The majority of events involved doing something and leaving it. For example, we set up a banquet in the Jersey marshes on the side of a busy highway—a complete banquet with food, wine, fruit, flowers, and place-settings, crystal glasses and silver coins in the glasses. And we simply left it, never went back. It was an offering to the world: whoever wants this, take it. So many of the things had just that quality of dropping things in the world and then going on about your business. (Schechner “Extensions” 221)

The world, I feel, is full up already; there’s enough intense, natural text to inspire already. This surreal overlay of wasteful excrement is unnecessary. At least Rauschenberg got his props from the garbage and re-used much of them in his Combine paintings and performances.

So, no, this is not wide-eyed, naive nostalgia. My project does not mark a reactionary reverence for old forms, but rather a crucial need to understand the irreverence, the disgust, for old forms, as well as the passion for rethinking forms. I certainly don’t want to “make love to the past” as Cage calls it (Kostelanetz *John Cage* 25). What I want is simply to reconsider a group of artists and compositionists who wondered why

texts couldn't be new, interesting, and transformative. Why they couldn't experiment with new materials and forms, blur disciplines and boundaries, and subsume the whole with a life-affirming humor. Mostly these artists wondered why their compositions couldn't strive for a sublimity in the participants that might, in some small way, change the world. I locate my interest, then, in the definition of the Happenings put forward by Jean-Jacques Lebel. They weren't meant to recover a lost world, he claimed, but to create a new one, "imperceptibly gaining on reality" (276). Cage speaks of how art can only offer so much, can only be so consumable, and then you need something new. He fails to understand "people attacking the avant-garde on the very notion that the new was something we should not want. But it is a necessity now" (Kostelanetz *John Cage* 25). The forms and techniques of the past are used up, "gone . . . finished. We must have something else to consume. We have now [in 1968], we've agreed, the new techniques. We have a grand power that we're just becoming aware of in our minds" (25). But in *Composition*, we barely began using that grand power before we abandoned it. I want to see how and why we failed meaningfully to employ those new techniques and what that might say about our current need. It's almost too heartbreaking to read the texts of the Happenings—the scripts, interviews, manifestos—so militant yet joyful, so righteous yet open, so convinced yet innocent. That the world hasn't changed overall in their wake takes nothing from them or their theory. They changed me. And others, too, I bet.

*English Composition as a Happening* is about the need to address deep, basic humanity in this modern, over-sophisticated age. The Happenings exist as one of the 20th century's periodic attempts to revive a spirit of primitive tribalism in modernity, the aesthetic collective as spiritual cult. Performances of Happenings seemed to occur out of a felt need for new collective spiritual rituals; in staging them, old technologies were renewed just as frequently as newer, more sophisticated ones were used. "Performance art, sometimes hardly distinguishable from a casual gesture, emerges like an artistic regression" (Molderings 176). Macrorie's theory, Coles's classroom work, Deemer's and Lutz's materials . . . reading them is like sitting in a circle and listening to a patient elder gently guide us on the vision-quest, using parables and jokes and truths. It's so retro, it's become avant-garde. Their pedagogy sometimes seems such a part of the fabric of life that it's hardly distinguishable from a casual gesture, much like the student writing they offer as exempla. Mariellen



Sandford reflects on the renewed interest in Fluxusart and Happenings in the Preface to her republication of the famous 1963 *Tulane Drama Review* issue devoted to the Happenings. She feels the recuperation of the Happenings in the decade following the 1980s makes spiritual sense; for her, this renewal of attention responds to “a healthy need for inspiration—the inspiration to break free of a decade that in many ways rivaled the conservatism of the years preceding the Fluxus and Happening movements” (xix). Such a project, then, is desublimatory, restoring certain repressed voices to a position of innovative commentary. It was the compositionists of the Happenings era who first felt this tension in our field between deeply humanist goals and the limits of academic conventions. Macrorie’s *Uptaught* chronicled “the dead language of the schools . . . [in which] nobody wrote live. Same old academic stuff” (11, 14). And Deemer felt composition to be “the rigid child of a rigid parent” (121); in order to transform that rigidity into a McLuhanesque “electric drama” (123), he urged the “shock and surprise” of the Happening, writing class now conceived of as the theatre of mixed means. The gist of my book is nicely expressed by a phrase from Thierry de Duve: “the paradoxical sense of the future that a deliberately retrospective gaze opens up” (*Kant* 86). I offer, then, these backward glances, in fervent hope: to capture the Happenings spirit for our own Composition, shaking off more than a decade of conservative professionalism; to fracture our field’s genres open for possibilities, risks, and material exploration, leading to a Composition in which faith and naiveté replace knowingness and expertise; to put pressure on Composition’s canon, recalibrating the field according to a general economy of the compositional arts—a destabilized site of various competing schools, undercut by an on-going, productive tension between the academic and the avant-garde; to liberate thinking in our field from the strictly semantic, re-opening Composition as a site where radical explorations are appreciated, where aesthetic criteria still come into play, but criteria not merely cribbed off an endless, formalist tape-loop. Put simply, to resume building Composition’s Hacienda.