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## English Composition As A Happening

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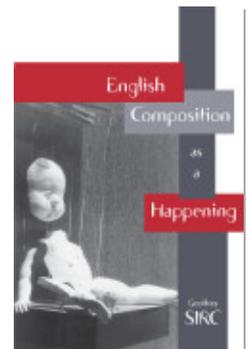
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### 3

## SCENES FROM LATE SIXTIES COMPOSITION

*But at times such as  
these late ones, a moaning in copper beeches is heard, of regret,  
not for what happened, or even for what could conceivably have  
happened, but  
for what never happened and which therefore exists, as dark  
and transparent as a dream. A dream from nowhere. A dream  
with no place to go, all dressed up with no place to go, that an axe  
menaces, off and on, throughout eternity.*

John Ashbery

#### SCENE ONE:

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG'S *LINOLEUM* (APRIL 1966, WASHINGTON, D.C.)/  
HAPPENINGS

Washington, D.C., April 1966, at a six-day arts festival (designed to be an extravaganza of the most progressive work in theater, dance, and film, and given the suitably pop title of the NOW Festival). Over those six days, festival-goers saw performances by John Cage, the Velvet Underground, Robert Whitman, and Yvonne Rainer. On the opening night of the festival, though, they sat down to the following, a theatre-event entitled *Linoleum*: First, a dancer was seen seated on a Chippendale chair mounted on a rolling platform. She was wearing an old-fashioned wedding dress and in her lap was a pot of cooked spaghetti. Another dancer entered, dressed in a translucent plastic suit, looking like a futuristic lab tech. Adding to that impression was the Fresnellens mask she wore on her face: made of plastic magnifying material, it transformed her face into something out of a surreal dream. She would push the seated bride around on her platform, at times stopping to trace patterns on the floor with pasta. Another performer wheeled himself around the stage with his hands, lying prone in a rolling cage filled with a half-dozen live chickens. He, too, would cease his movements every so often; in his case, to eat fried chicken. Then, shuffling forward in stutter-steps, came another dancer, standing in the middle of a wire-spring bed frame (later in the performance, this dancer would don a strange-looking plaster and wire mesh body covering shaped like a cross between an egg and a haystack).

Finally, there appeared the work's creator, Robert Rauschenberg, also wearing a magnifying mask and plastic suit, described by one writer as "look[ing] like a kind of *commedia del' arte* astronaut" (Sundell 16). He came out and drew chalk outlines around some small, battery-powered, ambulatory sculptures scattered throughout the performance space. As soon as Rauschenberg finished outlining one, it would begin moving. During the performance an American flag on a flagpole was unfurled by Rauschenberg; it kept being unrolled and unrolled, as it was a specially made flag about twenty-some feet in length. The excess was later trimmed off. Throughout the dance, a laundry-filled clothesline was unfurled, and on it was projected Rauschenberg's film, *Canoe*, which he had spliced together from found footage of air force maneuvers and recreational water sports. Rauschenberg's suit had been specially wired, making sounds which varied according to his proximity to a receiver concealed in the flagpole onstage, and which, together with the film's soundtrack, created the score for this piece.

Now, *this* is composition. In its explorations of technology; its collaborative nature; its use of imaginative materials, juxtaposed in interesting, poetic ways (as well as its faith in an audience's ability to make sense of the resulting text); its structure as more performative gesture than hierarchical form (working by intuition and impression rather than by received standards); the homemade aesthetic nature of the piece; and its boldly naive desire to try to make something other than just another dull piece of art, it represents everything I value in composition. And my challenge as a teacher becomes trying to establish a performative space inflected according to such exciting possibilities. What appeals to me most about *Linoleum*, besides the audacious poetic imagery, is the sense that standards and rules have been actively questioned, so that a newly evocative composition can be attempted. *Linoleum* is part of that radical era in visual and performing arts known as the Happenings, which arose out of a feeling in the mid-Fifties familiar to the avant-garde: namely, aesthetic dead end. This was especially true for painters at the time, given the rigid, formalist theory of Clement Greenberg that held such sway, his attempt to rid painting of any effect (such as the literary or sculptural) that wasn't exclusive to it alone, resulting in flatness as the new artistic standard. Artists chafed under such limitations, feeling alienated from what was now accepted work in the Gallery. So, for example, the young American painter Allan Kaprow, creator of one of the first "official" Happenings (18

*Happenings in 6 Parts*), intimately confesses in a 1959 literary review, "I have always dreamed of a new art, a really new art" (Kirby *Happenings* 53). Or French painter and poet Jean-Jacques Lebel, searching for a new "language and long-range technique": "This new language, by the frank way in which it put the question of communication and perception, by its resolution to recognize and explore the forbidden territories which had hitherto halted modern art, had to force a complete re-examination of the cultural and historical situation of art. This language is the Happening" (268–269). Another painter turned Happenings artist, Carolee Schneemann, begs in her notebooks for sheer intensity, for an art that moves: "Notice this insistence on Motion. We cannot capture, hold a moment (impressionism), repeat the moment's verbal content (theater), capture the action itself (futurism): we intensify the perceptions of change, flux, and release them in juxtapositions which grind in on the senses. It is intimate and intense. Happenings: raw, direct, no intermediate crafting, fabricating" (*Meat Joy* 56). Or Oldenburg, another artist, like Kaprow and Schneemann, from a different medium (drawing, sculpture), drawn to the excitement of a new genre: "the 'happening' which was in the beginning a very limited form is bearing fruit as a new physical theater, bringing to the dry puritan forms of the U.S. stage the possibilities of a tremendous enveloping force" (83).

To help them work out a grammar for a new art, the disenchanted looked to the man who remains the most radical formal innovator in American art, and the antithesis of Greenbergian formalism, Jackson Pollock. Kaprow's dreamy desires had led him, two years after Jackson's death, to publish, in the *Art News* of Oct. '58, a poignant reflection on Jackson's legacy, an article that became the Rosetta Stone for those involved in Happenings. Kaprow began by paying homage to the overarching influence of Jackson's mythic status; in almost religious tones he speaks of young vanguard artists as a kind of mystical body of Action Painting: "We were a piece of him; he was, perhaps, the embodiment of our ambition for absolute liberation" (24). But the article is more than hero worship, as Kaprow proceeds to analyze Jackson as avatar of a meta-formalism, one who dispensed with "the idea of the 'complete' painting," in favor of composition as environment, which "gives the impression of going on forever" (26). "What we have then," Kaprow realized, "is a type of art which tends to lose itself out of bounds, tends to fill our world with itself. . . . Pollock's near destruction of . . . tradition

may well be a return to the point where art was more actively involved in ritual, magic and life than we have known it in our recent past” (56). When one followed Jackson out of bounds, one was led into the world, into the materiality of Forty-Second Street. Such an aesthetic meant the stuff of art could be found anywhere: Oldenburg, for example, claimed, “A refuse lot in the city is worth all the art stores in the world” (Hapgood 61n). A textuality of the available is fitting for an art inspired by Jackson, who caused a sensation by using relatively cheap enamel house paint and aluminum fence paint in place of academy-preferred oils. Hence, *Linoleum*, and hundreds of other performance works like it, by artists who went out of bounds to pursue new dreams.

Happenings were, as Allan Kaprow defined them, “events which, put simply, happen” (“Happenings” 39). They were environments, situations, any kind of non-theatre—created, most often, from piling on poetic images (like Rauschenberg’s above), but occasionally out of a kind of Zen minimalism, (e.g., George Brecht’s event-scores, mentioned earlier) or simply from a heightened reappreciation of spaces already there (Wolf Vostell’s *Cityrama*, for example, in which participants tour the bombed-out ruins of Cologne, according to Vostell’s itinerary: e.g., “stand on the corner [of Luebecker Street and Maybach Street] for about five minutes and ponder whether six or thirty-six human beings perished during the night of the thousand-bomber air raid,” [Kaprow *Assemblages* 244]). Implicit in Happenings was a faith in the ability to locate meaning everywhere; it was an art more concerned with consumption than actual production. What was more important was the process of appreciation and awareness involved in a textual encounter rather than the commodified product or artwork. As Ann Halprin put it: “There is something going on all the time all around. It’s just a matter of being aware—of looking and hearing and putting things together. Something is always happening” (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 67). Or John Cage: “Theatre takes place/ all the time wherever one is and art simply/ facilitates persuading one this is the case” (*Silence* 174). To show art as everyday, Happenings were composed according to the element of chance (Cage, for example, composed according to the hexagrams of the *I Ching*; with Rauschenberg, it was whatever happened to be available), setting in motion events that might enhance our humanity. Even though Happenings might “appear to go nowhere and do not make any particular literary point,”

the participant in them “feels ‘here is something important’” (Kaprow “Happenings” 39).

Happenings took cross-disciplinarity to the point of in- or de-determinacy. Take the attitude of Rauschenberg, who worked in both performance and painting: “I don’t find theatre that different from painting, and it’s not that I think of painting as theatre or vice versa. I tend to think of working as a kind of involvement with materials, as well as a rather focused interest which changes” (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 80). The Happenings, then, were non-theatre artists telling Broadway, telling professional theater—telling the history of performing arts, really—“we can put on an interesting production, too.” Soon more and more painters and dancers and other artists were lending their energy to the burgeoning Happenings movement, so that in 1962, cultural vanguardist Susan Sontag could bring the breathless news of “a new, and still esoteric, genre of spectacle” appearing with greater frequency on the New York scene, “a cross between art exhibit and theatrical performance . . . tak[ing] place in lofts, small art galleries, backyards, and small theaters before audiences averaging between thirty and one hundred persons” (263). These artists, desperate to forge some exciting new genre with whatever materials they could scrounge, enjoyed the heady freedom of working without rules. Witness dancer Steve Paxton’s comments on Rauschenberg’s *Map Room II*, a performance in which he participated:

*Map Room II* seemed to be a performance-Combine, Rauschenberg’s tendency to three-dimensionalize his work finally arriving in four-dimensional expression. . . . [It] was not intended to be a dance as such. It was made for a festival of “Expanded Cinema,” which might have meant anything. It was a sign of the times that he, and the other artists involved, were not fazed by the term. Rauschenberg seemed to be trying to follow instructions on the one hand, while on the other delivering works for which no previous instructions existed. (266)

The formative context of the Happenings was richly multiple. Besides Pollock, Happenings artists drew on movements like Bauhaus and Dadaism for inspiration, as well as individuals like Dali, Duchamp, and Schwitters. Ken Dewey identified Kaprow as the single individual who took these influences and themes (“all the casual, instinctive, and scattershot contacts”), realizing “here was something of independent interest,” and “ma[d]e it stick as a separate form,” to the point where Dewey

could say (in 1965), “what we have now are ‘forms’ coming almost at the rate of synthetic chemicals . . . new methods and new techniques of articulation: ways in which people can express themselves” (208). Kaprow himself traced these “action”-oriented origins for Happenings:

Futurist manifestoes and noise concerts, Dada’s chance experiments and occasional cabaret performances, Surrealism’s interest in automatic drawing and poetry, and the extension of these into action painting. All focused in one way or another on the primacy of the irrational and/or the unconscious, on their effect upon undirected body responses, and on the elimination of pictorial and other professional skills as criteria of art. Thus the idea of art as “act” rather than aesthetics was implicit by 1909 and explicit by 1946. (“In Response” 219)

The most commonly agreed-upon point of actual origin for the Happenings is Cage’s *Theater Piece #1*, often referred to as the first Happening, a mixed-media performance piece he organized while a member of the faculty at Black Mountain College in the summer of 1952. It took place in the College’s dining hall, the chairs of which Cage had re-arranged into four equal triangular groups, formed by X-shaped aisles, with different performance spaces dotting the entire hall. Above the space, Rauschenberg hung some of his white paintings in the form of a cross. With simultaneous events occurring throughout the space, there would be no central focus on the piece, no best seat in the house: “Now, they are all equally good,” Cage cracked (*Harris Arts at Black Mountain* 228). Cage planned the piece after lunch one day and presented it that evening, no rehearsals. Each performer was given a specific time bracket, determined by chance, in which to perform. Harris describes the scene, allowing for the way witnesses’ memories have become cloudy:

A general summary of recollections places Cage on a ladder reading either his Meister Eckhart lecture, lines from Meister Eckhart, a lecture on Zen Buddhism, the Bill of Rights, or the Declaration of Independence; [M.C.] Richards and [Charles] Olson reading at different times from another ladder; [Merce] Cunningham dancing in and around the chairs—he was joined in his dance by a dog, who as an interloper, created his own time brackets; Rauschenberg either standing before his paintings or playing scratchy records of Edith Piaf and others at double speed on an ancient wind-up phonograph with a horn loudspeaker; [David] Tudor playing a prepared piano and a small radio; and either Tim LaFarge or Nick Cernovich (possibly both) projecting movies and still pictures upside down on slanting surfaces at

the end of the dining hall. The performance ended with the serving of coffee in cups that had been used as ashtrays during the performance. (228)

Cage's piece was a natural outgrowth of the Black Mountain aesthetic; the school created an atmosphere that would breed a radical redefinition of the theater. For example, in 1936, Black Mountain administrator and painting instructor Josef Albers invited Bauhaus artist Xanti Schawinsky to teach "Stage Studies," and rather than a conventional course in dramaturgy, Schawinsky taught "an investigation into the interaction among essential phenomena such as time, sound, space, movement, and light as manifest in a theatrical setting" (Spector 230). Spector teases out the key performance strategies in Cage's piece, which strongly influenced subsequent artistic practice (and become a good benchmark against which to measure our own compositional criteria): "the use of chance operations and improvisation, the coexistence of independent elements, the employment of projected slides and film, the centrality of the audience, and the lack of any coherent, overarching theme" (230). The response to such an unconventional work (frustrating, as it does, received critical apparatus) was predictable:

Edgar Taschdijan recalled that, when Cage declared that music "was not listening to Mozart but sounds such as a street car or a screaming baby," he decided that he preferred the music of croaking frogs or the wind whistling through the trees to the commotion of the performance and left. Lou Harrison noted that he found the Happening quite boring, and Viola Farber overheard Johanna Jalowetz remark after the performance, "This is the Dark Ages." (Harris 228)

Such responses are in keeping with the de-determined aesthetic of the work, one oblivious to such traditional criteria such as *boring* or *entertaining*, even using *boredom* strategically to find a really new art (as well as a really new response to it). Rauschenberg: "I'd like it if, even at the risk of being boring, there were an area of uninteresting activity where the spectator might behave uniquely. You see, I'm against the prepared consistent entertainment. Theatre does not have to be entertaining, just as pictures don't have to be beautiful" (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 85).

The desired effect of this kind of aesthetic, one which put everything under erasure, was simply an increase in awareness, a heightened consciousness among the participants, a re-tuning of perception. Perhaps it was postwar commodity malaise, but these artists all felt the world needed

re-enchanting, life had lost its sense of innate wonder. These were artists who wanted to change the world, one sensibility at a time. “My art,” Rauschenberg said, “is about just paying attention—about the extremely dangerous possibility that *you* might be art” (Spector 227). He summed up the thrill of composition without a net, the excitement of potential transformation: “What’s exciting is that we don’t know. There is no anticipated result; but we will be changed” (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 99). Cage, too, felt he had achieved his compositional goal because, “Many people have told me after a concert that they notice changes in perception of everyday life” (Kirby and Schechner 65). And from the manifesto “Static” written by Swiss avant-garde sculptor Jean Tinguely (with whom Rauschenberg collaborated): “the only certainty is that movement, change, and metamorphosis exist . . . our only eternal possession will be change” (Spector 239). For Kaprow, increasing awareness among his Happenings participants meant interrupting, as much as possible, the standard flow of art and life, in order to allow new perceptions to flourish. He felt his “job as an artist [was] to make dreams real” (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 129). It is this smudging of the traditional demarcation between art and ordinary life that most distinguishes the Happenings, whose artists felt a real synergy between the composed and the extant. Kaprow, for example, felt, “*The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible.* The reciprocity between the man-made and the ready-made will be at its maximum potential this way. Something will always happen at this juncture which, if not revelatory, will not be merely bad art—for no one can easily compare it with this or that accepted masterpiece” (*Assemblages* 188–189).

As Greenberg kept insisting, Modernist composition meant limits; but if people didn’t want conventional limits in their life, why would they want them in their art? With the two (art and life) indistinct, an expansiveness resulted. Cage gives a sense of this: “From a musical point of view . . . one thing makes everyday life far more fascinating and special than, say, concert life. That is the variety of sound with respect to all the other things, including space. . . . [I]n our everyday life sounds are popping up, just as visual things and moving things are popping up, everywhere around us” (Kirby and Schechner 65). And so he claimed, “I try to discover what one needs to do in art by observations from my daily life. I think daily life is excellent and that art introduces us to it and its excellence the more it begins to be like it” (Kirby and Schechner 55). Carolee Schneemann wrote in her journal of “our lives themselves as material, stuff for our art or our lives as art containers/ or life the way

we shape or discover it being a form of art, the happening an intensification of our actions in life. The distinctions here swinging between intellection/perception/action” (56). Beyond just an aesthetic choice, there was the sense that by fusing art and life, something ontologically important was happening. If artistic creation could be made like life, and life like artistic creation, it meant that cultural transformation—the dream of the Paris Commune—was possible.

And so, as potential material for composition, in terms of their ability to blur art and life, the Duchampian readymade became useful. Kaprow would claim, “A United States Marine Corps manual on jungle-fighting tactics, a tour of a laboratory where polyethylene kidneys are made, the daily traffic jams on the Long Island Expressway, are more useful than Beethoven, Racine, or Michelangelo” (*Assemblages* 190). The need for new materials is paramount, materials that can produce shock and wonder, that are guaranteed, just by their presence, to result in something different; materials available almost anywhere—even, as Jackson discovered, from the general store down the road, or even lying around on the ground: a burnt-out match, a dead bee. Anything, as long as it could lift the veil among participants, re-enchant reality to the point where one realizes the presence of that other world that exists in this one. Some of the most instructive texts on the banal splendor of Happenings materiality are catalogs featuring photographs of Rauschenberg performances. Those images from his theatre work—turtles with flashlights strapped to their backs, crawling among stiffly posed dancers; performers pushing shopping carts filled with alarm clocks through the audience; people rolling across the stage in a row of tires; rollerskaters in gray sweatsuits, the parachutes they wear as backpacks billowing out behind them; dancers wearing birds in bird cages around their waists; Rauschenberg himself, in a white dinner jacket, strumming a ukulele, gradually enveloped in the steam from a bucket of dry ice strapped to his waist—are incredible, sublime snapshots from the expanded poetic field. Sundell writes,

Photographs of Rauschenberg’s theater pieces reveal the same kind of mysterious and powerful images that he was able to create with similarly ill-assorted objects in his Combines. The raw material is often identical: objects which embody a sense of the past and the erosion of wear; others, mass produced and banal, which are the stuff of our everyday experience; jerry-built contrivances of unidentifiable utility; animals; the human body in motion. . . . As in the Combines, subliminal visual and metaphoric associations bind together the most unlikely conjunctions of disparate matter. The works were

performed to a combination of ambient sound, often the electronically amplified noise made by manipulating one of the props, and scores composed of a collage of taped music and sound-tracks from film or video. (14)

In both the stage properties for his performances, as well as in his Combines, Rauschenberg practiced an inclusive, quotidian materiality: “a pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric” (Hapgood 18). There is a poignant beauty open to those who use the domestic or discarded over the rarefied; it furthers the desired slippage between art and life, generates that charged dynamic which Kaprow referred to as “a continually active field, whose outlines are very, very uncertain so that they blend in and out of daily life” (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 109). But more importantly, legitimating the commonplace as substantive compositional material affords the status of artist to those who might otherwise find the rarefied nature of conventional materials a barrier to creation. It means reduction (really, expansion) of the compositional scene to a simple, available aesthetics of the perceptual (rather than textual) field; with stylistic principles nothing more than a basic combinatory therein for poetic effect. It puts the emphasis on the ultimate force of the work (Jackson’s *statement*) and not on the formal or conventional qualities. This is Cage as Venturian architect of the everyday: “We must get ourselves into a situation where we can use our experience no matter what it is” (Kostelanetz 58). It’s fast-food aesthetics, hermeneutics-to-go, street-criticism, an urban style where you don’t need any more than you can carry in the subjectivity-equivalent of a purse or backpack. An open-ended materiality puts the possibility for a Happening, then, potentially anywhere.

Anywhere, to be sure, but some spaces proved more conducive than others. The less already-determined the better, though, and so the Happenings artists were anti-architects when it came to the Gallery. The descriptions of the environments they installed within (and outside of) institutional spaces shows their work could not be circumscribed by received standards. Their art had uses beyond the Gallery’s strictly curatorial or commercial parameters. For example, a description of Robert Whitman’s attempt to reconfigure the Reuben Gallery’s space for his work entitled *The American Moon* (1960) shows how the institution’s aesthetic is deconstructed by the Happenings—in large part at the physical, spatial level: “in order to carry out the first ‘gravity-defying event,’ actors would have to wear some sort of harness and be suspended from a horizontal rope or cable while they ‘walked on air’ with perhaps only

their legs visible to the spectators. In an attempt to achieve this, large bolts were sunk into the gallery wall to anchor a line” (Kirby *Happenings* 138). Or Kaprow’s *A Spring Happening* (1961), for which he also had to radically rework the traditional exhibition-space: “When arriving spectators entered the store[front gallery] with its glass display windows at either side of the door, they found the smaller front section partitioned into a lobby by a seven-foot wall of muslin sheets. One narrow section in the left side of the cloth wall was black. Above the black curtain a man could be seen, apparently walking on some sort of high platform, making arrangements for the performance” (Kirby *Happenings* 94). The space was so charged by shock and surprise, in fact, that “when the black curtain was pulled to one side, and they were asked to enter, many of the people who had made reservations for *A Spring Happening* did not want to go into the narrow, gloomy tunnel; some refused . . . a few made a point of waiting until they could be the last ones—and therefore close to the exit curtain—in the event that the enclosed space became intolerable” (Kirby 94). After being disoriented by the tunnel-like space of narrow blackness, lights would go on and off in short regular intervals. Then a light went on in a red-painted space opposite the tunnel, which participants could view through slits in the muslin. They saw a construction made of chicken wire, newspapers, and cardboard. Through the course of the Happening, booming crashes could be heard, as a man above threw barrels down onto a tile floor; a tape was played of electronic machines making a low rumble; all lights went out, and a bell was heard striking at various points throughout the space; the lights began to flash irregularly again, and the chicken wire construction began to shake violently; the sound of a power saw was heard. The performance went on like that—including performers jousting with tree branches, a floor polisher running back and forth on the roof above the participants’ tunnel, shadows moving across the muslin wall, drumbeats sounding. Finally, as Kaprow’s impressionistic performance-notes read, “car horn starts constant sound, lawn mower starts, pushed by tar paper figure, moves through all eight rooms cutting swath through leaves blowing them all over” (Kirby 93). It was his desire to evoke scenes and impressions beyond the constraints of the gallery walls that led Kaprow to, more often than not, create Happenings for outdoor spaces.

Beyond merely material considerations, Happenings abandoned formal, generic conventions. Traditional narrative or theatrical constraints were inapplicable. The Happening, as performance art historian and

occasional Happenings creator Michael Kirby reminds us, is “non-matrixed” (*Happenings* 16), i.e., not underscored by classical theatre’s time/space/character frame, conventions that control the shape of the drama. Its form was often the result of juxtaposition, a catalogue of sounds, dialogue, objects, and images—database as *de facto* form. Oldenburg’s modesty in materials was matched by his basic formal technique; he used parataxis in his Happenings to pile up interesting images until he achieved the disorientation that might lead to a heightened state of awareness: “I throw up images one after another or on top of one another and repeat them until it is evident I am asking, ‘What are they, or what do you think you are watching?’ My theatre is therefore undetermined as to meaning” (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 154). The goal was life as it unfolds and forms itself in the moments of our existence. Kirby referred to the “compartmented structure” of Happenings as in direct opposition to Modernism’s thesis-oriented “information structure” (13). The title of Kaprow’s *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, or Yvonne Rainer’s *Parts of Some Sextets* (1965), suggests this no-brand, generic textuality. A paratactic structure can mean numerous tableaux in a composition, some dominated by physical and/or sonic rather than verbal effects, the work becoming a kind of iconic strip mall. The Happenings grammar is an a-logic (which makes it almost anathema to traditional Composition), one in which an author’s “private idea structure” does not need to be articulated unambiguously by being “transformed into a public information structure” (Kirby *Happenings* 20). In her work, Rainer treated composition in terms of structural problems that needed solving, which she accomplished by applying a basic temporal pattern to the work, while incorporating unconventional materials: “I resorted to two devices that I have used consistently since my earliest dances: repetition and interruption. . . . So it began to take shape in my head: dance movement of various kinds; activities with mattresses; static activities (sitting, standing, lying); continuous simultaneous actions changing abruptly at perhaps thirty-second intervals, sometimes the whole field changing at the same time, sometimes only a portion of it, but every thirty seconds something changing” (162, 163). Such a method is text as assemblage, which results in a text less loaded, less peculiarly styled. Desire to escape the matrix of conventional grammar and syntax led Dick Higgins to develop his *Graphis* series: “The Graphis series is the result of a feeling that conventional theatre notation in which one action follows another leaves untried an enormous variety of techniques

that could enrich our experience. . . . With the *Graphises*, I was trying to set up a form that was unsemantic, even choreographic, in conception if not in execution” (Higgins and Eisenhauer 123). So he came up with the idea of the *Graphis*, a loosely-delineated, notational performance sketch, a kind of broadly outlined, situational encounter-space-as-theatre, in which various contexts, characters, or concepts are plotted on a kind of web-like graph corresponding to the performance space. Performers would move through the cycle of notations (according to a complex series of cues). The conceptual score for *Graphis 82* (1962), for example, is no more (or less) than a bunch of curvy, squiggling lines—looking like the first or second layer of a Pollock drip canvas, or a situationist psychogeographic map; an action-text, then, a prose web—overwritten here and there with node-words like “lungs,” “lute,” “lover,” “lizard,” “macaroni,” which were taken from a Puerto Rican dream-book. For example, a performer would come upon the space for the notation “lungs,” and have to develop an interpretive action or idea for that (say, breathing). In Letty Eisenhauer’s words, the *Graphis* performance-text grows, when operationalized, into a piece of “complexity, confusion, and visual richness. . . . The more keen the imagination and industry of the performer the richer the piece” (Higgins and Eisenhauer 125, 127). The complexity and confusion were not edited out of Happenings composition because the guiding principle of inflection was the wonderful, the marvelous. As Robert Whitman put it, “[Y]ou could talk about what happens when some person doesn’t know what in the hell he’s seen, but is excited by it. He doesn’t know what it means, but he really doesn’t find that important. Something has happened; he’s had an experience that’s different. He’s discovered a world that he didn’t know existed before. That’s a good thing” (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 238). La Monte Young put the Happenings’ bottom-line principle most sublimely: “My own feeling has always been that if people just aren’t carried away to heaven, I’m failing. They should be moved to strong spiritual feeling” (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 218).

SCENE TWO:

ERNECE KELLY’S *MURDER OF THE AMERICAN DREAM* (APRIL 1968, MINNEAPOLIS)/  
ENGLISH COMPOSITION

To see whether a compositional scene of such textual possibilities and deeply human ends caused any simpatico ripples in our own compositional field, we could unconsign the history of our own field’s

avant-garde, starting, perhaps, with CCCC 1968, which was held in Minneapolis that year, April 4–6, right on the eve of May '68. Sherry Turkle is an interesting historian for that charmed month of May '68, and her chronicle of those heady days in France holds true for CCCC. Turkle speaks of a time when “the struggle and the search was less for new governmental forms than for oneself. French bureaucratic society had called forth its antithesis: an antistructural movement which created the context for a radical exploration of the self and a new, more encompassing mode of human relations” (69). It was a time when even common graffiti spoke of how “politics had to be made by ‘reinventing language’ and that it had to be made in every person” (70); when both inner and outer experience were fused around language and desire: “During May, social challenge came to be viewed as analogous to the analytic experience: as a liberating ritual whose goal is to trace a way back to a truthful idiom. And this would require the liberation of language. People spoke of May as *la prise de la parole*, ‘the seizing of speech,’ and of *l’imagination au pouvoir*, ‘power to imagination’” (72).

*Power to the imagination.* That could have been the slogan of the Happenings artists. . . . And so, touring the scene of CCCC '68, a site of the language arts, we might wish to see the field caught up in that cultural spirit of the liberation of language, see how well the avant-garde tendencies of a radical populist composition like the Happenings rhymed, if at all, with thinking in writing instruction. We could start our retrospection with the “official” fieldnotes to the scene, the CCCC '68 Workshop Reports. (What a concept, first of all: a textual trace of the everyday at the CCCC. Populist thinking, as I write this, is trying to recapture that spirit [e.g., CCCC On-line and those various discussion groups that post anecdotal commentary on the conference], but such attempts have yet to equal the stature of the institutional fixture that the CCC Workshop Reports had.) Those Comp '68 Reporters, recording the passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in time, reveal themselves as provocative pedagogues, suggesting welcome new parameters for text-events—sounding very much, in fact, like Happenings artists. The textual traces of their workshop-events were open-ended, charged; work(-as-text) was allowed to be definitively unfinished, as long as it had a buzz: “a spirited, though not easily summarized discussion” (241); “interesting but not immediately applicable” (240); “we of course reached no conclusions, but we did have a lively discussion” (245). The avant-garde’s suspicion of the academic can be seen—in Session “4A. The Uses of Stylistics in

Composition Classes,” for example, “Some participants seemed to have a traditional hesitancy about rhetoric and stylistics as mere sophistry” (242); or Session “6B. Research in Composition,” which suggested “eliminating as much as possible the dangerous aspects of research in composition, i.e., the bias or misunderstandings caused by current measuring devices attempting to measure things considered by some to be immeasurable” (244). At CCCC ’68, they were eager to talk intensity at the expense of the formal, concerned as they were about “students who become especially interested in their work” (245) and “the consensus that correctness was only minutely important” (245). They were feeling *la prise de la parole*. For Workshop “5B. Trends in Freshman Composition,” “the trend receiving the most attention” was a radical re-thinking of the whole enterprise, “the reassessment of one’s own objectives in teaching composition. Indeed, one participant asked, ‘How do you know you’re doing anything that’s right?’” (242). Of course, there was much that was not at all Happening about that year’s CCCC: talk of the “non-writer” and how literary analysis or criticism should be “discouraged except in special cases of more perceptive writers” (241), or the felt need among some for “materials . . . devoted to specific types of composition assignments as well as evaluative discussions of texts” (241). But most important, a critical mass of compositionists came together in April of 1968 to consider the possibility of total systemic failure: “Much recent research seems to indicate that students write equally well whether they take a freshman composition course or not—an observation lamented by those present” (246). In fact, that session on “Research in Composition” gave much discussion to a theme prevalent at that time (at all times, it seems), “dropping completely the freshman composition program” (244).

No surprise that CCCC 1968 can be read as a testament to loss, given the historical reality (the far greater loss) of April 4, 1968. Perhaps the most eloquent statement ever made about how and what we lose in Composition Studies was made at that conference when Ernece B. Kelly stood up, the day after Dr. King’s assassination, and read “Murder of the American Dream” to the Minneapolis crowd, a short paper on why she was just not having it any more, why she had to leave the conference early. As Kelly saw it, Composition at the time was anything but avant-garde. In her talk, she describes what it’s like to sit and watch a tedious performance endlessly unfold during CCCC conventional performances (“I have listened to and have watched the playing out of the kind of drama that continues to be played out each day in this nation . . . a

drama which is called variously ‘we’re making progress’ or ‘but things *are* improving’ or ‘we’re going as fast as we can’” [106]), all the while knowing that stale drama is really a *trauerspiel* of the loss of hope and opportunity (“the loss of a dream” [106]) when it comes to the status of Black voice and Black style in college writing (and the academy in general). Irmscher was profoundly moved by Kelly’s piece, enough so that he published it in the May 1968 *CCC*, noting how well it captured the loss (“Her words suggest how lacking communication is . . .”) and hoping her piece might lead us somewhere we weren’t, “open channels of communication we do not now have” (“In Memoriam” [105]). The April 1968 conference was purgative, a watershed moment for Kelly, a dislocation/relocation—she came as an English instructor, she says, and she left as a Black woman. Her paper focuses on the cultural counter-trend working against power to the imagination, the academy’s pressure against non-traditional style: “I am tired, very tired of being the object of studies, the ornament in professional or academic groups, the object to be changed, reshaped, made-over. I feel sure that thousands of Black students would echo those words” (108). Perhaps Kelly had earlier attended one of the less happening Workshop Sessions, “9A and 9B. Dialect Studies and Social Values,” for in her own talk she gritted her teeth about how the conference had met that year, in part, “to discuss the dialects of Black students and how we can upgrade or, if we’re really successful, just plain replace them” (106–107). Part of mourning the truth and spirit of Dr. King, for Kelly, was bemoaning the loss to Composition of “the richness and values of the language of the Black ghetto” (107). But those Dialect Studies workshop participants were certainly not mourning the loss of ghetto richness, they were conspiring to supplant it, their report noting the participants’ views that “standards of usage were valuable in themselves, that ‘taste’ ought to be taught and nourished,” adding as well that “the popular position was the current one supporting the addition of a standard dialect to the non-standard (still sometimes *sub-standard*) speech of the disadvantaged student” (247). (By “disadvantaged,” it was meant “especially Negro students, and the approach that should be taken toward their training in language use” [247].) Their claims were made according to real-world imperatives, education now conceived, not as being carried away to heaven, but as preparation for future employment: “students had to be made ‘employable’ by their education and . . . ‘standard English,’ however that came to be precisely defined, was the kind of speech that made the

right impressions in a job interview” (247). However, there were some true Comp '68 types in the crowd at Sessions 9A and 9B to inform the group otherwise: “One participant pointed out that there was a growing feeling that ‘black is beautiful’ and that any attempt to ‘whiten’ the dialect of a ghetto Negro was not in the end going to solve any problems. . . . She was supported by another speaker who reported that teachers in Detroit were becoming disenchanted with the bi-dialectal approach” (247). Maybe this disenchantment pervaded the sensibilities of many at CCCC '68; maybe that's why, though she wants to end her cold appraisal with hope, Kelly closes her presentation with “But I think not” (108).

Over in the *English Journal* in May 1968, Macrorie was voicing the same feelings of loss as Kelly, turning away from the same tired impulses: “We ask students never to judge ideas or events out of context, but fail to see our composition classes in any larger world. That is why they are such astonishing failures” (686). Even though the fate of Black students' language put the issue into stark relief, Macrorie knew the waste of young peoples' linguistic richness knows no color. Macrorie could already feel the high walls of Composition's Museum being erected, separating its activity from the larger world, reinforcing rather than blurring the boundaries between art and life. Yet he knew the vernacular value of *la prise de la parole*, of students “communicating with each other and with administrators and teachers in dozens of new ways” (686), so he begged his readers to “look for what is good in [student papers]. . . . Bring [a student] out of his doldrums of fear by honest praise for what he has done well, if only a sentence or paragraph” (692). But such troop-rallying enthusiasm can't hide the fact that Macrorie, like Kelly, was a panic-theorist; they both saw the explosive results of trying to deny discursive alternatives: for Kelly, the sad reality of personal, linguistic richness wasted by CCCC's simulation-drama was that “that very drama is a prelude to continued violence” (106); and Macrorie anticipated student desire and tedium “turning our schools into the shambles remaining after revolutions” (686). The Happenings artists spoke to such disaffection; they existed in large part to reveal the richness in the common, seemingly substandard nothing, as opposed to the overly-determined dullness of official somethings. Cage put best the rationale for this new compositional program of delight in the everyday:

For some things, one needs critics, connoisseurs, judgments, authoritative ones, otherwise one gets gypped; but for nothing, one can dispense with

all that fol-de-rol, no one loses nothing because nothing is securely possessed. When nothing is securely possessed one is free to accept any of the somethings. How many are there? They roll up at your feet. . . . [I]f one maintains secure possession of nothing (what has been called poverty of spirit), then there is no limit to what one may freely enjoy. (*Silence* 132)

And so it is no surprise that the kind of frustration felt by Kelly and Macrorie over the way formal and institutional constraints limited the amount of discovery and wonder in a classroom, and an equally similar desire to intensify perceptions in order to appreciate students' alternative verbal style, led some compositionists of the era, chief among them Charles Deemer and William Lutz, to turn to the grammar of the Happenings for Composition pedagogy, in search of a way to transfigure "the regular sterile classroom" (Lutz "Making Freshman English" 38).

Deemer's article, appearing in the November 1967 issue of *College English*, was written while he was a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Oregon. The article reads like a manifesto: interspersed with bits of text excerpted from radical works by McLuhan, Dewey, Russell, and others, are Deemer's own stirring rationale and method for reinventing writing instruction. Formally, as well as conceptually, it remains one of the best things in Composition's canon. He uses a Paul Goodman sample to set his context: education defined as "a kind of inept social engineering to mold, and weed out, for short-range extrinsic needs"; it's "in the bureaucratic death-grip . . . of a uniformity of conception and method" (in Deemer 121). Such rhetoric returns us at once to this bracing era in educational reform, when entire histories of education were tossed out like a bag of stale chips. Compare Deemer's with a similar manifesto, Jerry Farber's "The Student and Society": "School is where you let the dying society put its trip on you. . . . Our schools teach you by pushing you around, by stealing your will and your sense of power, by making timid square apathetic slaves out of you—authority addicts" (17). Speaking himself of the conceptual and methodological rigidity of the school system, Deemer calls English composition "the rigid child of a rigid parent" (121). Typical of the era, too, a generation-gap chasm was thought to be inscribed in the classroom's very design: "the generation behind the podium forever out of touch with the younger generation in the lecture hall" (123). The standardized dullness of Composition was all the more galling for Deemer because he saw how it could be "the most influential" of all college courses, a course

central to the very basis of college, “an introduction to what the University is about” (122). Or, as he corrects himself, what the University “should be about” (123). Deemer’s desire was to subsume the too distinctly fragmented young/old, active/passive, teacher/student, teaching/learning dynamic of Composition into one undifferentiated impulse (termed now *experience* [122]), in much the same way that Happenings tried to fuse artist and audience into *participant*. He’s uncomfortable with the very word *teacher*, always putting it in quotation marks and making asides about the need for a new word for what it represents (122).

So the Happenings became his pedagogy. He shared their same ultimate goal—intensity, the student/audience “actively aware and participant” (123). They shared dramatic strategies as well: Since “shock and surprise are essential features of the happening,” Deemer felt they should be “frequent moods” (124) in the composition course as well, helping to jar students out of the tired discursive roles they had fallen into. Deemer knew that students, conditioned by the narrow-bandwidth of university classroom practice, might find his methods odd: “For the student who, *in the classroom*, is not used to participating in any experience at all, the clarity of shock will be quite dramatic when a real experience is presented to him” (124). (*When the black curtain was pulled to one side, and they were asked to enter, many of the people who had made reservations did not want to go into the narrow, gloomy tunnel; some refused.*) Like the situationists, he advocated definite, constructed experiences that the (intensified) student could write out of, knowing students rarely have any wild times in the standard academic real. To change the classroom performance, Deemer not only altered the conception of the performers, but the performance space (speaking from a different part of the room: “the rear . . . or through the side window” [124]) and the script as well (“discuss theology to Ray Charles records” [124]). He consciously offers no specific curriculum for composition-as-a-Happening—simply the rationale, goal, and some broadly sketched strategic moves. He knows for a true Happening to work, it must be a site-specific work shaped by individual teachers and their student collaborators. And the conceptual rewards go beyond the pedagogical alone, as the original Happeners found the greatest gains among their participants to transcend mere theatre: it is, after all, according to Deemer, a matter of “Life over death” (125); namely, “the reengagement of the heart, a new tuning of *all* the senses . . . the first step toward poetry” (125). Wolf

Vostell's aim was the same as Deemer's. Explaining his reliance on the de-contextualizing/re-collaging technique of *décollage*, Vostell could be Deemer: "I'm concerned with enlightening the audience through *décollages*. By taking everyday occurrences out of their context, it opens up for discussion the absurdities and demands of life, thereby shocking the audience and prompting them to reflect and react" (Berghaus 323–324). Similar to Kaprow, Whitman, et al., Deemer knew space was at the core. He marveled, for example, at the way Timothy Leary could instantly restyle a traditional space "by symbolically stripping out of his establishment gear to preach by candlelight from a stage floor" (124), making the space McLuhanistically *cool*.

Space was the point at which Bill Lutz began his own attempts to make first-year writing a Happening. Lutz, too, doubted anything truly creative could occur in the traditional classroom, given the formal and conceptual limits implied by the space as studio/gallery. "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" (35). Beyond just the Gallery's determinant space, it's the pervasive institutional power of the Museum itself: "Ultimately Freshman English as a Happening calls for the complete restructuring of the university. We would have to break such academic chains as grading systems (including pass-fail) and the absolute authority of the teacher" (35). Lutz, who first delivered his 1971 *CCC* article as a 1969 *CCCC* paper, catalogues into the published version remarks made in a letter from a friend of his, a University of Wisconsin TA, who heard Lutz present the original paper. That TA articulates the structural auto-erosion needed for first-year comp to become happening: "if enough people let the walls down around themselves and manage in a few isolated places to knock a few institutional walls down, we may really get to have courses like the kind you envision" (35). So small, local gestures are the key. That Wisconsin TA goes on in his letter to theorize a site-specific formalist shift, a new local materiality. "Juxtaposition of the sacred and profane . . . hard core pornography next to pictures and poems about real intense love. If it were legal, we should put joints in the binding. An essay on the birth control pill should include a birth control pill. . . . [Students] seem to flow into each other, and nobody seems to talk coherently anymore. It's juxtaposition, not composition. English Juxtaposition 101" (36).

For his own local detournement of the scene of writing instruction, Lutz replaced standard classroom activities with small-scale Happenings, Deemerian constructed situations, in order to “create an experience about which the student can write . . . in contrast to the usual method of having the student read about an experience someone else has had and then write a theme about it” (36). His first attempt (which he cribbed from the University of North Carolina’s 1968–69 FYC Instructor’s Manual) was a variety of small event-scores for students to enact, reminiscent of George Brecht. Students received note cards and had three minutes to perform their individual events, then they wrote about what had transpired in the classroom. Activities included:

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.”

Go to the front right corner of the room and hide your head in it. Keep counting to yourself and on every third number say loudly, “Home.” . . .

Be an ice cream cone—change flavor. . . .

Walk around to everyone in the room and pat him or her on the back lightly and say, “It’s all right.” Stop occasionally and say, “Who, me?” (37)

The tasks given the students remind one of the exercises offered art students in Eric Fischl and Jerry Saltz’s *Sketchbook with Voices*, where those desiring to find new formal solutions to problems are advised, first (in the words of Larry Rivers and Frank O’Hara) to “Empty yourself of everything” (13), and then invited to undergo a series of tasks suggested by a variety of artists. For example, Jennifer Bartlett suggests the student “Do something that attacks the notion of originality” (132); John Baldessari asks, “What is the smallest drawing that you can make? Make a drawing on a piece of confetti” (49); David Salle offers, “Spend a day talking only in rhyme” (25); Cindy Sherman, “Do your own work but use someone else’s clothes” (39); and Dorthea Rockburne, “Try to make something so beautiful it hurts” (43). Like such exercises, Lutz’s events had the desired goal of a deeply felt interrogation of compositional form. And, according to Lutz, they succeeded: the resulting classroom megatext—each student’s different activity combining into a *de facto* whole during the three-minute period—prompted a discussion of “whether there was a principle of order in operation which they had not seen,” culminating in a consideration by the group of “What do we mean by order in writing?” (37).

The success of his initial effort led Lutz to attempt another classroom Happening which resulted in his class being held in a room in the student union, one Lutz had subtly altered to turn into the kind of space in which young people smoked pot in the Sixties (drapes closed; lights off; candle and incense lit; music playing, a combination of rock and head-trip classical such as *Also Sprach Zarathustra* [theme from *2001*] and *Bolero*). For the entire period the class just grooved in the candle-lit, scent-filled dark. Lutz felt he'd put together a successful class that day because his students were carried away to heaven: "when the period was over the students were asked to pick up their books and leave. Some of them did not want to" (38). As Happener, Lutz's goal ("I want to make the student respond directly to his own experience and not someone else's" [36]) sounds like Jean-Jacques Lebel's, who wanted his performances to transform his participants' "old ways of seeing, of feeling, of being" (Berghaus 352), reflecting what Berghaus sees as one of the central tenets of the Happenings: "The Happenings artist is not content with interpreting life, but offers a direct experience of life and allows us to participate in its unfolding in the reality of our existence" (352). In subsequent classes, Lutz tried other methods of altering the classroom to intensify direct experience, including collage, light shows, conducting class discussion in a circle (only with students' backs to the center), asking students "to paint a poem" (which led the class to reflect on whether "the ordering of an experience on canvas [is] the same as ordering that experience on paper with words"), and "rolling around in a room filled with sponge rubber" (38). English Composition as a Happening means turning the writing class into a Lebellian Festival of Free Expression, referring to that series of multi-media events Lebel staged in Europe, which featured everything from a badminton game played with fluorescent racquets, through poetry and films, to a naked woman on a motorcycle roaring through the auditorium (along with more intimate, body-oriented activities). Just as Lutz's students were loathe to leave their newly-charged wonder-space, Berghaus describes the scene after Lebel's *Second Festival of Free Expression* (1965): "Finally, a huge plastic tube in the form of a serpent was inflated, the motorcycle left the hall, and the film screening came to an end. However, the audience carried on with the Happening for another one-and-a-half hours" (357).

Both Deemer and Lutz hoped students might leave the (already-w)rote tedium of conventional expression to experience communication-degree-zero, and for those today also struggling for a way to kill all

tedium in their composition classes, the bold naivete of such gestures is endlessly touching. There are several others we could cite here who tried to bring shock and surprise into the Late Sixties' writing class, but it is worth spending some more time on two in particular.

Ken Macrorie is a compositionist not normally associated with the Happenings movement but one whose practices are very much in the spirit of radical performance. His pedagogy advocated leaving the gallery-space ("ask students to place themselves outside of class anywhere they can be alone and quiet" ["To Be Read" 686]); he urged a splashing of all kinds of writing, a fluxus of text—from freewrites, to wordplay, to news articles, to journals, to stories, to sound effects, to parody, to the "record [of] short fabulous realities" (688). It was a curriculum geared to "doing something different for [the student]" (692), in which text would flow like molten metal, the teacher unconcerned as to definable shape or mass, the only evaluative criteria being "the amount of discovery and wonder it contains" (692), i.e., how much light was captured, shimmering there on the surface. His course was run, then, according to the same imperative found in the script directions for Ken Dewey's *Happening, City Scale* (1963): "THE EVENING SHOULD GET MORE AND MORE EXPLORATIVE" (Dewey, Martin, and Sender 179–180). Macrorie summed up his entire quasi-Happenings aesthetic in his 1970 text *Uptaught*, a kind of teaching portfolio as travelogue, detailing his long, strange trip to reach a pedagogy-as-potlatch, where no one needs reshaping, the classroom enterprise being a "time to pursue some truths, when student and professor share their expert knowledge and their experience" (168). His book is a panic-text, apocalyptically reading the scene of instructional theory in writing against the crisis-moment represented by the late 1960s. (It begins, for example, as police in riot gear march off to bust up a student sit-in on Macrorie's campus; he voices his disgust that professors decided not to support the students, or even show interest in the protest, a symptom of how professors "have made the university sick unto death" [2].) Macrorie starts by tracing his own complicity in a system of college writing that results in students producing "mechanical exercises," "all dead" (6). The stock college writing scene (*themewriting*, as Coles will later call it) proved for his students "an insulated act which produced writing no one except a schoolmaster ever read, and he only if forced to" (6). Composition, then, had become as sterile and lifeless as painting for the Happenings artists. Early in the book's chronology, he gets Paul Goodman to judge a campus writing contest, but no prize is

awarded because the writing was all so dull. Goodman's comments to that effect help Macrorie form his aesthetic criteria: writing that's "spirited . . . [that] sends me" (17). The same sort of passionate conviction that drove Cage, that daily life was excellent and that composition's purpose was to introduce us to it and its excellence, drove Macrorie: "My students were alive . . . humorous . . . but they wrote dead" (10–11). Macrorie's book is pervaded with the sort of collective, participant spirit of the Happenings, perhaps, because he aggressively loves and admires his students, wants to intensify them and wants to be intensified himself by the encounter the class represents: "Most students are not my equal in experience or knowledge of literature and writing. But in some aspects of each, they may be my superior. I will never know until I let them bring forth themselves full of their own experiences and ideas and feelings, as they are forced to let me bring forth myself" (68). This is a curriculum of *s'exposer, se toucher*. Macrorie spends the book chronicling his attempt to trace a way back to a truthful idiom for his students and himself. He wants to get his students' embodied lives on paper; the grains of their voices, heard in "the bones of the ear" (16); papers with "spirit . . . not written by a drudge" (*Searching* 88). His organizational pattern reads like a Vonnegut novel: short pithy bits of gimlet-eyed common sense.

#### *Models*

The professor who wants his student to increase his "sensitivity to art, to people, and to language," calls his textbook *A Program for Effective Writing*.

There is no word the student has heard more and been impressed with less than *effective*, unless it be *important*. (51)

#### *Real Evaluation*

A senior student came into my office to tell me how he looks forward to getting out of school so he can once again read with pleasure. He should have put that down in his teacher evaluation. (103)

Encrusted within Macrorie's own prose are not only samples of student papers (a technique he tried as editor of *CCC*), but transcripts of class discussions, and bits and pieces of campus dialogue; the whole work, then, becomes a catalogue of Late Sixties College Composition. One delights in how well his book captures a scene, a lived moment in time. So, for example, four college dropouts stop by his office one afternoon to shoot the shit, vent their frustration, and Macrorie records some of it for us (one, named Brad, says, "I don't give a damn

whether the university is burned down or the country goes smash. I couldn't care less. What would be lost?" [152]). Macrorie might have edited *CCC*, but he never really represented the discipline, of course. I think he was misread by even his strongest supporters; his notion of "Engfish," for example, that "feel-nothing, say-nothing language . . . devoid of the rhythms of contemporary speech" (18), was mainly used by the discipline as an editing heuristic to get students to eliminate wordiness, rather than to radically inject life into prose, to transform it into, say, *objects which embody a sense of the past and the erosion of wear, the stuff of our everyday experience; jerry-built contrivances of unidentifiable utility; animals; the human body in motion*. He reaches a point, at the book's end, where he sounds particularly like Joseph Beuys, hoping to change the world through an ethics of heart-and-soul and personal creativity: Every student, he claims, "is capable of seeing the world, human and natural, in a way valuable to others. And capable of learning from others to see it even more sharply" (186).

The compositionist in our field who most poetically embodied the Happenings aesthetic (though by no means affiliating himself with the movement) was Bill Coles. Beginning in 1967 (with "The Teaching of Writing as Writing," which appeared in the same issue of *College English* as Deemer's), he wrote a series of works that expressed his desire to do something different in a writing classroom: to reconfigure the space around "the teaching of writing as art . . . [where] it is not writing that is being taught but something else . . . a way of teaching what cannot be taught, a course to make possible what no course can do" ("The Teaching" 111). Coles's goal was the Happenings' goal—heightened awareness, specifically adapted for a writing class: "intensif[ying] a student's awareness of the relationship between language and experience" ("The Teaching" 111). When he writes about his course's aim, he sounds like Harold Rosenberg: "writing conceived of not as a way of saying something but as something being said, as an action, an extension of being at a moment in time. . . . My object is to keep things open, to pursue an idea in such a way as to allow a student to have ideas of his own, to find himself in the act of expression, to become conscious of himself as becoming" (111–112, 113). Or, as Kaprow put it, "To the extent that a happening is not a commodity but a brief event . . . it may become *a state of mind*" ("Happenings" 62). Coles stripped his materials down to a sequence of text-events: conceptual problems or questions to work through, like an Ann Halprin dance workshop, as participants establish an ethic and a

vocabulary. Coles generated the sequence of topics for this text-stream according to the principle of “nonsense”: “at times they look as though they are creating a sequence, just as at times they look meandering or discontinuous” (“The Sense of Nonsense” 27). Then Coles begins to weave in a range of readings (e.g., Salinger, Darwin, Nicola Sacco, Edward Gorey) which help students further both their ideas and their craft. He created tension between form and formless, pursuing “a peculiar fusion of pattern and anti-pattern, of ordered disorder” (28)—such Zen-like language again recalls Kaprow, who, for example, called his 1964 Happening *Eat* “a reciprocal rhythm between the stable and the unstable” (Kirby “Allan Kaprow’s *Eat*” 49). Contexts in a Coles classroom would be set up and abruptly reversed in order to “mockingly invalidate the pat answer, the conventional response,” so as to allow something more powerful to percolate: “the wispy suggestion of a meaning which cannot quite be realized, the sense of a sense that is never absent at the same time it is never quite there” (“The Sense of Nonsense” 28). The hope for the participant in his class, “a new awareness of the possibilities of language and of himself as a language user” (“The Sense of Nonsense” 28). His argument—that “nonsense creates its own universe; it is its own point and message” (28)—underscores how much he thought of his assignment sequence as providing students an experience that was different, evoking a world for students they didn’t know existed before (at least in the college classroom). The metaphors he uses to delineate his course’s dynamic reveal Coles as Mayor of a Secret City, concerned about his citizens’ progress through the alleyways of desire: he speaks of “lead[ing] students down dead-end streets,” “block[ing] easy escape routes,” “butting up blind alleys” (29). The subject of the course was “language” (28), he said, but language as transport from one world to another (“the dead security of an inherited conception of language which will not meet the world they are asked to experience in the course” [29]), a world which phase-shifted in and out around the class-dwellers—now seeming so real, now gone—but real enough that his students would want to fight hard to hold it fast. Coles wanted students to seize speech, to walk out of his semester-long happening not only with a new awareness concerning language, but with a sense of “freedom—from me, from the course, from an earlier self” (34). As such, his aims are perfectly in keeping with the Happenings: if a student wasn’t carried away to heaven, didn’t leave his class “better equipped to create worlds reflecting what he most wishes to be” (*The Plural I* 181), Coles knew he’d failed.

His major work, *The Plural I*, is a summative description of that late Sixties class he wrote about in various pieces throughout the late Sixties and Seventies. It attempts to recreate that class, through course materials and assignments, student writing and classroom dialogue, on a week-by-week basis. Each chapter, then, is a series of after-the-fact Happenings, writing textbook as event-traces. Coles's intense desire to transform old forms and selves results in the brutal bluntness in his methods with students. From the depiction of one classroom interchange:

"Couldn't you have gone into some of this on this assignment if you'd really wanted to?"

"I don't care to go into my personal life that way."

"Or is that just a cop-out?" (*The Plural I* 39)

But the almost bitter cynicism that wafts in and out of Coles's book obviously stems from the avant-garde's desperate frustration with the emptiness of current culturally sanctioned forms, the "Perfect English Paper (Clear, Logical, Coherent, Empty)" (39). He's not interested in writing that simply makes points; almost Fluxus-like, he advocated a kind of poetic concretism, short touching realities, "writing . . . which created the illusion of something like human beings involved in human experience" (50). So *voice* is a major concept for Coles (as it isn't for post-Happenings Composition); Coles wants writing with a personal style and sensibility, "as though [the writer] were someone you could talk to" (111). What Coles offers his students is a Happening without the wild trappings or costumes. It's a kind of distilled Happening, the coming together, the immersion into craft and meaning and life, the possibility of being changed. It's an action pedagogy: he thinks about "the *activity*" (134) of his class, what they've written/read/discussed/done together enables them to do; it's a matter of the ongoing situational aggregate that develops, "the creation of an atmosphere, a tone" (134). Like Jackson, the site of composition is there, in the air, above the paper. His book makes a writing teacher realize that, in the end, this is college composition: the situations we give our students, the meanings they make and the responses we have to those meanings, then the insights we share with interested others about those situations and meanings (which go to further shape the situations we give . . .). At the conclusion of his book, he knows he's succeeded from the spontaneous end-of-term Christmas party/love-in (complete with parodic, though sincerely meant, carols and gifts) his students stage for him.

Both Macrorie's and Coles's were pedagogies of the everyday, of simple human truths (or short fabulous realities) expressed in a kind of American Plainspeak. This materiality of the commonplace, or found materiality, is central to the Happenings. Take Rauschenberg's *Spring Training* (1965), in which "a watermelon wrapped in a small carpet bearing the image of John F. Kennedy was carried around the stage by a dancer wearing a portable screen onto which slides of canned food, the city skyline, and the Empire State Building, among other things, were projected" (Spector 236). This is an aesthetic of the everyday as juxtaposed, poeticized. Also in that work, Rauschenberg attached small flashlights to thirty turtles and set them loose on stage; the effect, Rauschenberg felt, "was simply more interesting than conventional stage lighting and [he] compared it to 'leaving the TV on in a room with the sound off' in order to create a kind of oscillating illumination" (Spector 237). Such a compositional strategy makes blatant its material logic, but rather than predetermined (often, rarefied) materials deciding the textual outcome, it's in-filling a space with easily available material. Rauschenberg discusses the creation of *Map Room II* (1965): "There was an old sofa on the stage there. I think I make theatre pieces very much the way I make a painting, which is that I simply have to put something into the space. The sofa already occupying part of the space gets to be a member of the cast" (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 83–84). This is information-search, not as a discerning review of the key texts, but as dumpster-diving. It adds a layer of delight to the process. The way Calvin Tomkins describes Rauschenberg's invention-stage heuristics for his Combines and Theater Events, it's the data-search as beach-combing: "Collage for Rauschenberg was a perpetual adventure. It was fun to search the beach or the city for objects he could use. He was always surprised by what he found, and the objects themselves never failed to suggest new possibilities. combinations he might never have thought of otherwise" (88). Besides just sheer availability, the commonplace offered a genuine difference, an ability to reconnect with the enchanted everyday, that never-absent-never-quite-there sense of life. Composition as commonplace meant art as life and life as exciting: the scene of textual activity became just hanging on the beach or street, attentive to stuff, open to being thrilled. Such an attitude was born out of a conviction that rapturous art could no longer be made from the conventional. So Kaprow, for example, drifting among neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, movies, in search of some entirely unheard of happenings. After Lutz, Happening Composition is candlelight-flicker as course material.

Happenings compositionists in our field afforded that basic materiality to students, who were often encouraged to comb through the stuff of their life to find a genuinely touching moment. “If the truths are no more than that Dad helped you learn to ride a bike when Mother, sister, and Sherry didn’t,” Macrorie told students, “that’s what’s expected of you—the deeply felt truth of that experience” (*Searching* 31). The key is close observation, reflection, searching for some heightened sense. Robert Whitman’s compositional strategy might best be termed *living*: “It is in the nature of what we do to listen to people and watch them and see what they are doing, respond to them. If I am making an object and I want to find the story of that object, one way to do it is to see what people do when they are involved with it, have people involved with it, and be involved with it myself” (Kirby *Happenings* 136). Macrorie’s, too: “In part, writing is designing or planning,” he acknowledges, but the other part is “watching things happen and discovering meaning” (*Searching* 38). Even when doing research, he advises a logic of the immediate, one designed, in the spirit of May ’68, to set up situations, encounters: “[see] how the other members of the class and persons in your community can help you” (89), “get first to living, speaking sources. . . . [S]how everyone how much knowledge resides in any group of people” (90). Of course, you can do this with a reading-centered course, too. In an information-rich culture, texts are perhaps the most easily available material. And allowing students opportunities to see where the seductive charms of texts lie seems very happening (there is always the Ray Charles backing track to help the discussion along, too). Most readers, unfortunately, offer students high-toned instructor-oriented readings that may do many things, granted, but rarely thrill. They almost never offer students a spectacular imaginary of writing, one that gets them wide-eyed about textual possibilities. Topics for composition are as close as our dreams: “At night when you’re beginning to slide off into sleep, and in the morning when you’re coming out of sleep, let your mind receive possible topics” (*Searching* 62).

The available often means the popular. One of Deemer’s sound-bites is a Bertrand Russell quote: “If the object were to make pupils think, rather than to make them accept conclusions, education would be conducted quite differently: there would be . . . more attempt to make education concern itself with matters in which the pupils feel some interest” (122–123). We might think, for instance, of Oldenburg’s affection for the materials of the popular, the quotidian: “The goods in the stores:

clothing, objects of every sort, and the boxes and wrappers, signs and billboards—for all these radiant commercial articles in my immediate surroundings I have developed a great affection, which has made me want to imitate them” (26). Popular culture was a defining staple of the pedagogy of Comp '68; articles in the “Staffroom Interchange” of the December 1968 CCC, for example, focused on the use of popular media: Dempsey, Maurer and Pisani told how they were “compelled . . . to revise [their courses] and add new material—everything from an experimental film to *Esquire* cartoons” (337); Altschuler explored the use of film: even if she did it out of a desire “to achieve traditional goals,” as her title implies, she still felt the need to defer to “student interest” (344). The Happenings, of course, pushed the use of the popular beyond simple content; they sought their grammar and style there as well. Cage, for example, advocates a compositional grammar “following established film techniques” to re-present temporality, using the film-frame as “the basic [compositional] unit” (*Silence* 5). Williamson was on the same wavelength; he advocated, as “an alternative to written composition classes . . . the film-making class. By making films, the student will still get exercise in what is generally agreed upon as the end of composition classes: clear thought and effective expression” (134).

Certainly, I'm aware that many composition teachers today use the popular, but I wonder just what formal and conceptual liberties students have in writing on it, whether, for example, they can use a Cage/Williamson grammar. Students who use a textbook like Allison and Blair's *Cultural Attractions*, *Cultural Distractions* get to read Public Enemy lyrics and Jill Nelson on Tupac's death, but then, at the end of that unit (after answering the stock “Reading Reflections” questions), they write a very traditional comparison paper. Sometimes, though, a writer's point is nothing more than that they really love Tupac's music, the deeply felt truth of that experience. But that's not enough for Composition: when students get to write on something cool like rock 'n' roll, it must be on rock 'n' roll as something more, something epochal, something befitting inclusion on the Gallery's walls. So they write about how music is “an agent, a shaping force in our lives, that it is more than an expression of thoughts and feelings, that it does more than articulate what is already ‘naturally’ there” [Bartholomae and Petrosky *Ways of Reading* 725]). To articulate what is naturally there would mean the popular as what helps us pass the time, pop as the soundtrack to our lives. But tracing passages, becomings, contingencies—limning a life as it is

lived at some moment to a pop song—is not Modernist Composition’s interest at all. Quite the opposite, in fact, as such abstract terms as “agent” and “shaping force” imply something outside the realm of love, sadness, delight, death, or any terms which describe a decisive moment in very real time. As Lefebvre reminds us, the “manifest expulsion of time is arguably one of the hallmarks of modernity” (*Production of Space* 96). The passage, the encounter, the situation, the temporal—that was the great underlying structural dynamic of the Happenings. It’s text as becoming: a record, perhaps, of nothing more human than that Dad helped you learn to ride a bike. Ann Halprin was creatively stuck (“I wasn’t very stimulated. . . . I wasn’t excited about anything”); she was too constrained by the tradition: “I wanted to explore in a particular way, breaking down any preconceived notions I had about what dance was, or what movement was, or what composition was” (“Yvonne Rainer Interviews” 137). This leads her onto Jackson’s bridge of experimentation: “Because I didn’t know what I wanted to do, or what I wanted to teach, we set up a workshop situation in which I gave myself permission to explore. Even though I was the catalyst of the group and somehow or other the teacher, I still made it very clear that I wasn’t teaching in the usual sense. I didn’t feel that I had to know an answer and teach it to somebody” (137).

To explore, she turns to the banality of temporal encounters: “I began setting up situations where we could rely on our improvisational skills” (137–138). Working through one piece, *Apartment 6* (1965), a work for three persons that grew out of a very Macrorian desire for deeply felt truth, “a desire to find out more about the human interior” (154), Halprin realizes, “It wasn’t until the last, the sixteenth, performance that I felt we had captured what we wanted to do, which was to simply have two hours on that stage of a real-life situation, in which you as a performer and you as a person were completely the same thing” (158). Real-life situations, then, as the ultimate text. This falling back on the basics of situation, of baseline experience, this text-as-passage, allows not only a blurring of art and life, but a blurring of genres as well, every compositional form/genre indistinct, subsumed by the rhythm of temporal movement. As Cage put it, “Time was a common denominator between dance and music, rather than being specific to music as harmony and tonality were. . . . [Dancers] could make a dance in the same structure that a musician was using” (Kirby and Schechner 59).

Genres need blurring, collapsing, because Composition as a Happening demands new syntaxes for essayist prose. It means something like Rauschenberg's Combines as our model of organization, works described by Michael Kirby as "pieces that seem to be personal journals filled with emotionally weighted statements that are not intended to have an explicit meaning or a logical clarity to the observer" (*Happenings* 40). A new organizing principle, then, one inflected according to the inner statement rather than the outer form. Technique, Pollock reminded us, was "just a means of arriving at a statement" (Wright). Jackson's formal logic, the all-over style, became useful to Happenings artists in the way it frustrated a traditional formal reading. Halprin learned to re-formalize her Happenings, focusing on the inner truths of individual gestures: "There was a deliberate avoidance of any beginning, middle, or end, and of fixed time. Instead, we used intervals of action followed by intervals of stillness. Hopefully, everyone in the audience would be able to perceive each element individually and yet discover relationships and events meaningful to his personal experience" (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 67-68). Oldenburg, too, unlearned formal hierarchies in his Happenings: "Well, one action has neither more importance than another, nor a longer duration. I am trying to create a sense of simultaneous activity, as if you could see in one glance all that was going on in a building" (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 154). This is text as *a continually active field*. There is no formal privileging; Rauschenberg felt, "My main problem in constructing a program of a piece is how to get something started and how to get it stopped without drawing particular attention to one event over another. . . . The shape that it takes should simply be one of duration" (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 90). If, as Deemer said, English Composition as a Happening means "taking the first step toward poetry" (125), then contemporary poetry's influence on the Happenings gives us another indicator of syntactic freedoms that must be allowed. "Certainly the general tendency in much modern poetry to base structure on association and implication rather than on traditional formal patterns and sequential logic is a precedent for Happenings" (Kirby *Happenings* 41). As in poetry, significant form can be no more than words or phrases; from Kirby's description of Red Grooms's *The Burning Building* (1959): "A man's voice from behind the set to the left and the girl seated in the chair on the raised platform began to alternate short staccato words and phrases: 'Abraham Lincoln,' one might say; 'Dick Tracy,' the other would

answer. Names of states and of comic strip characters were the most common material, randomly mixed. The series had the rhythm and incisiveness of a football quarterback calling signals" (*Happenings* 130). Leave it to a Big Ten teaching assistant to know the score. It's English Juxtaposition 101, in order to capture the everyday. It's the art of juxtaposition, a key strategy to get that multifarious quality, the "x" factor. And not a juxtaposition that inflects one element according to another. Just a simple overlay, the infra-thin frisson of information brushing against information. And "By that brushing," Cage claims, "we will be made aware of the world which itself is doing that" (Kirby and Schechner 71). Cage's process in creating *Theatre Piece* (1960):

I had been commissioned to write a piece for two prepared pianos, but I introduced an "x" concept of auxiliary noises. Thus I had other groups of noises: one was produced inside the piano, one was produced outside the piano but on it, and then there were noises separated from the piano—whistles. The parts are not in scored relation, they are independent of one another. Then I wrote a lecture to go with them, involving combing the hair and kiss sounds and gestures that made the lecture theatrical. (Kirby and Schechner 61)

SCENE THREE:

LA MONTE YOUNG'S *COMPOSITION 1960 #5* (UNPERFORMED)/

NEW CRITERIA

Post-Happenings Composition, though, returned to the "habits of correct usage" mindset charted by Albert Kitzhaber in his study of college composition (x). In fact, it took error to the next level: it was more than a matter of what makes writing good; in this era of successful writing, writing with power, it became a question of what makes writing better. Error? Given the Happening's "homemade, unsophisticated technical quality" (Kirby *Happenings* 41), it has to be able to absorb the inevitable errors, not futilely try to eradicate them. "The way to test a modern painting is this: If/ it is not destroyed by the action of/ shadows it is a genuine oil painting./ A cough or a baby crying will not/ ruin a good piece of modern music" (Cage *Silence* 161). Static, then, as integral. Happening compositionists, for example, could never author a book like *On Righting Writing*, one of Composition Studies' turn-texts, helping mark the shift from Happenings to post-. The goal was to enjoy, to be intensified—not to judge. "Whitman considered all sounds that occurred, whether intentional or 'accidental,' part of a noise pattern

that was an integral element of the Happening. Sound of various sorts was a natural concomitant of the visible occurrences in [the Happening], but equally as prevalent were the sounds made by the performer-stagehands as they made unseen adjustments and preparations” (Kirby *Happenings* 143).

The idea is to work not on righting the writing, but on digging the writing, to perceive it as omen, as change, and see what it gives you, what it offers you, what it teaches you. The rest is fetish for aficionados. Conventions are not only beside the point, they’re to be actively avoided. In French, Happenings were called *décollages*, and the artists were *décollageurs*. *Colle* meant glue or paste, so Happenings implied unsticking. The indeterminate nature of Happenings means, for example, La Monte Young’s Cagean definition of music as “anything one listens to” (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 203). Composition as a Happening unsticks writing then, (de)defining it as anything one reads.

The Happenings’ bet was that new formal criteria could bring about perceptual change. Young planned his *Composition 1960 #5* for a concert of contemporary music at Berkeley. The piece calls for a butterfly (or any number of them) to be set loose in a performance space. The piece is over when the butterfly flies away. The director of the concert program told him it was “absolutely out of the question” (“Lecture 1960” 74). When Young wondered why, what harm there could be in releasing butterflies into an auditorium, one his friends speculated that perhaps the director “thought it wasn’t music” (74). Even a colleague of Young’s wrote to him saying he didn’t understand the piece. Young wrote back: “Isn’t it wonderful if someone listens to something he is ordinarily supposed to look at?” (76). Macrorie’s aesthetic in the “I-Search” papers, for example, is to have students write something—information sources—they are only supposed to check out from the library. Deemer suggests a classroom text (Ray Charles music) that’s only supposed to be listened to back in the dorm. New textual methods imply new criteria, much different than those that would seem fitting for the chief premise of the course as Kitzhaber spells it out historically: “The course exists to provide immediate therapy for students whose academic future is clouded by their inability to manage the written form of English with reasonable ease, precision, and correctness. According to this argument the course must remedy deficiencies of high school training in English and develop each student’s writing skill to the level of competence required by college work” (2).

But according to La Monte Young, *What Makes Writing Good* is also *What Makes Writing the Same*. Young is more interested in *What Makes Writing New*: “Often I hear somebody say that the most important thing about a work of art is not that it be new but that it be good. But if we define good as what we like, which is the only definition of good I find useful when discussing art, and then say that we are interested in what is good, it seems to me that we will always be interested in the same things (that is, the same things that we already like). I am not interested in good; I am interested in new—even if this includes the possibility of its being evil” (73–74). Jean-Jacques Lebel knew only too well the force of Kitzhaber’s claim, especially in terms of what it meant for the response to Happenings composition: “Art as it evolves, both historically and spiritually, has to face a reaction similar to that which neutralizes the reform of social structures” (268). But the conservative reaction—say, in terms of a professional view taken of things like surface correctness—fights against the deep perceptual change, the focus on inner view, that Happenings were after. Kaprow knew this: “I have not so much given up professionalism as an evil as I have questioned its meaning. No one knows what good craftsmanship is anymore. . . . Each of us is finding that the professional side of our background is not bad but limiting . . . [that] that part no longer has a purpose” (Schechner “Extensions” 226–227). He urges the would-be creator to “give up your training the way saints gave up their worldly lives” (227). The best professional experience needed to do Happenings, according to Kaprow? Be “ripe for a crisis” (227). There comes a point, Kaprow knew, where *Composition*’s obsession becomes a question of *What Makes Writing TOO Good*: “extremely slick presentations are fascistic because not only do they expect people to be . . . passive . . . but they tune up the information to such density and intensity that everyone’s cowed. Some people like to be beaten” (228).

We can get carried away with technologies in terms of their control over inhuman slickness, but we must leave behind the masochistic exercise and get back on the pathway to the deeply felt truth. Beuys, too, was adamantly opposed to the fascism of the surface. As art and theatre historian Günter Berghaus describes it, Beuys’s was a desire for a rhetoric grounded in the earthly: “Beuys was extremely skeptical of modern science and felt that technology, in its present application, was reducing human creativity; people mechanized by machines and conditioned by the electronic media had become victims rather than masters of their

environment. Beuys drew on the organic warmth of natural materials and used many metaphors of energy and transformation to indicate his desire for a return to a close and immediate contact with the earth” (327–328). In his journal, Oldenburg reflects on the quotidian sculptured objects (e.g., ice cream bar, chocolates in box, blouse, white gym shoes) he’ll make to stock the shelves of his gallery/emporium, Ray-Gun Mfg. Co., for his series of Happenings done in *The Store* (1961): “I want these pieces to have an unbridled intense satanic vulgarity unsurpassable, and yet be art. To work in total art is hard as hell” (7). So, abandon working in total art, obviously; don’t be afraid of a little vulgarity. It’s Macrorie’s urgent plea about praising anything at all good in a student’s text. If nothing, try again. Bring him out of his doldrums or fear by honest praise for what he has done well, if only a sentence or paragraph” (“To Be Read” 692). Composition is loath to do that, of course, loath to move from What Makes Writing Good to, say, What Makes Writing OK. “Possibly art is doomed to be bourgeois,” Oldenburg acknowledges (8), and possibly Composition is, too. Kaprow, though, sounds very Macrorian: “any avant-garde art is primarily a philosophical quest and a finding of truths, rather than purely an aesthetic activity” (Kaprow *Assemblages* 207–208). It’s composition more as performative gesture than ultimate text, focusing on the implicit statement. Ken Dewey: “I would say that my training had convinced me that in order to get the play on right, you had almost to forget about the text to get at whatever it is underneath there—the organic thing that unfolds itself and follows a progression. Stanislavsky referred to it as the sub-text . . . I feel it more as a gesture” (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 167).

Macrorie picked the right guy to judge that writing contest of his. Just why *aren’t* Paul Goodman’s criteria used more often to evaluate writing, criteria including, among other things, “sends me . . . unique attitude, warm feeling . . . [non-]brainwashed . . . radical . . . indignant . . . compassionate . . . [with traces] of careful, painful perception, personal suffering, or felt loyalty and disgust” (*Uptaught* 17)? The joke of it is, as Greenberg revealed, those are the secret desire-criteria of Modernism anyway. When Cage lists the emotions Rauschenberg evokes in him, it reads like a primer for a Happenings aesthetic: “the feelings Rauschenberg gives us: love, wonder, laughter, heroism . . . , fear, sorrow, anger, disgust, tranquility” (*Silence* 101). Such feelings are in large part a result of the wide-open materiality of Rauschenberg’s work, and Cage catches what Leo Steinberg has termed the flatbed effect of

Rauschenberg's work (surface as repository of cultural artifacts) when he says of a combine-drawing's imagery, "it seems like many television sets working simultaneously all tuned differently" (105). We can't say as interesting things about English Composition's (mega)textu(r)al formation as we can with a Happenings architectonics: "every field of art . . . has had some formative influence on Happenings," Kirby acknowledges (*Happenings* 42). La Monte Young took this cross-disciplinary nature perhaps the farthest: "[D]uring my entire Berkeley period, I was constantly talking to people about the form of the wind and the form of fires. Also, I was talking at that time about the sound of telephone poles, and I liked to quote these words from Debussy: 'Listen to the words of no man, listen only to the sound of the winds and the waves of the sea'" (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 192). Happenings become metaphors for thinking differently about the entire compositional scene, from exigency, through materials, to evaluative criteria.

For Kaprow, the implications in Jackson's painting were clear: they led, "not to more painting, but to *more action*" (220). The locus was not the museumified object, but the human, physical act. In Germany at the time, there was the ZERO group, whose name meant to represent "a zone of silence and of pure possibilities" (Berghaus 318). Otto Piene, one of the group's founders, spoke of the "Zero Happenings" they put on: "the event structure permits an exchange of experience between artist and viewer, not possessions. The event as work of art—as process art—is largely anti-materialistic" (Berghaus 318). It's writing as experience-exchange, text as process-action. That compositional notion was popular throughout Europe, seen most obviously in Beuys's concept of Social Sculpture, an "extension of the definition of art beyond the specialist activity carried out by artists to the active mobilization of every individual's latent creativity, and then, following on from that, the moulding of the society of the future based on the total energy of this individual creativity" (Tisdall 207). Speaking of the works of the Paris Action performers, Pierre Restany (the central critic of the *Nouveau Réalisme* school, of which the Action performers were a part) noted, "These action-performances are demonstrations, the purpose of which is to provoke the direct, spontaneous participation of the public in the process of group communication" (Berghaus 314). And, from Piero Manzoni's 1957 manifesto entitled "The Concept of Painting": "[Painting] is no longer valid for what it recalls, explains or expresses (it is more a question of what it finds), and it neither requires nor is able to be explained as an allegory of a physical process: it is valid

only insofar as it is: being” (Berghaus 316). About Manzoni, Berghaus remarks: “The actuality of living and being mattered more to him than symbolic communication. In 1960, he wrote: ‘There is nothing to be said. There is only to be, there is only to live’” (317). The text, then, as in-process, as still-formative, as the creator. Beuys chose materials (like fat, dead animals, batteries, chemicals) so that his sculpture would be “not fixed and finished. Processes continue in most of them: chemical reactions, fermentations, colour changes, decay, drying up. Everything is in a *state of change*” (Tisdall 7). And in his notebook, Oldenburg wrote, “It is important to me that a work of art be constantly elusive, mean many different things to many different people. My work is always on its way between one point and another. What I care most about is its living possibilities” (51).

This is a central Happenings tenet of Deemer, Lutz, and the rest: that writing is a lived genre, that composition is much more than text processing, it’s a way of being. Deemer often cites Dewey (who was also a major influence on Kaprow, as well) on this theme: education as “a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (Deemer 123), or education “conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience” (123). And so for Deemer, English Composition becomes this mutual experiencing-together, a co-revitalization. Composition “should actually instruct in nothing, in the sense that a ‘teacher’ reveals and a class digests. What does a ‘teacher’ know? He is merely human” (123). And I doubt whether Lutz was even half-joking when he claimed that to rethink writing instruction, “We need to look anew at the student, the role of the teacher, the classroom experience, the process of writing, human nature, original sin, and the structure of the universe” (35). In their class immediately following that mellow candle-lit groove held in the darkened Student Union room, Lutz’s students reflected on what such an attempt at a Happenings class taught them about composition; it was the fact of writing as heightened existential trip: “We discussed being sensitive to the world around ourselves and being aware of using many of the senses we somehow or other take for granted. The writer, the students decided, must use more than his eye” (38).

In a true action curriculum, every one in the rhetorical scene becomes a do-er, to the point of eliminating, as some Happenings artists did, the audience. Deemer, complaining of “the present fragmentation of the classroom unexperience (as Cummings might say) into ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’” (122), turned to the Happenings to realize his goal of

pedagogy as reengagement, “To remove the ‘teacher’s’ authority. To engage the student’s active participation” (123). Kaprow was the most famous advocate of a totally participatory theatre: “A Happening with only an empathic response on the part of a seated audience is not a Happening but stage theatre” (*Assemblages* 196). This is Beuys’s dream of everyone an artist coming true by default. For Kaprow, the form was ultimately not as important as the doing, the *operation*:

When we think of “composition,” it is important not to think of it as self-sufficient “form,” as an arrangement as such, as an organizing activity in which the materials are taken for granted as a means toward an end that is greater than they are. This is much too Christian in the sense of the body being inferior to the soul. Rather, composition is understood as an operation dependent upon the materials (including people and nature) and phenomenally indistinct from them. (*Assemblages* 198)

New technologies, forms, and genres were needed, then, to work against old, accreted forms and allow composition as participatory performance rather than ritual representation. For this was the basic textual difference between the Happenings and more conventional media, this difference between text as the suggestion of an almost-realized meaning and text as the reproduction of an extant reality: text as becoming and text as became. So Berghaus notes the difference between *presentation* and *representation* in his discussion of the European Happenings artists. These artists, influenced by the school of European Pop Art called *Nouveau Réalisme*, were among the global group of Late Sixties artists interested in consciously disrupting traditional high/low distinctions in their art. As Berghaus describes them,

They formed their collages or assemblages from found and processed fragments of reality and materials not commonly associated with high art. The appropriation of objective elements of the everyday world and their *presentation* in compressed objects that expressed the material poetics of reality followed a completely different philosophy from the *representation* of reality through the means of conventional realism. They elaborated a new methodology of perceiving and representing the objective quality of contemporary urban life. (313)

To capture Berghaus’s *presentation/representation* distinction, a crucial one for the art of the Happenings, we might use familiar examples from American art and consider the difference between Rauschenberg’s *Monogram* (1955–59) and a painting by Andrew Wyeth. Or, in terms of

the point I'm ultimately trying to make, the difference between a student riffing in an email message on a lyric by Tupac and a conventional academic essay on some traditional disciplinary topic. In his 1964 novel, *The Penultimate Truth*, Dick continues his preoccupation with the theme of simulation, speaking of what he calls "the 'genuine simulated silver' business . . . the universe of authentic fakes" (33). The works and performances I'm subsuming under the name "Happenings" all have this in common: an attempt to move away from simulation; a presentational art, rather than the re-presentational. The parallels between a regimented, rule-driven representationalism and a corresponding social order were obvious to Farber.

Which rule they make you follow is less important than the fact that there are rules. I hear about English teachers who won't allow their students to begin a sentence with "and." . . . The very point to such rules is their pointlessness.

The true and enduring content of education is its method. The method that currently prevails in schools is standardized, impersonal and coercive. What it teaches best is—itself. If, on the other hand, the method were individual, human and free, it would teach that. It would not, however, mesh smoothly into the machine we seem to have chosen as a model for our society. (20)

English Composition as a Happening implies new presentational acts, new thoughts, and a pleasure in the doing. There is no already-decided life being ritually, dutifully (re-)enacted. Books like *The Plural I* and *Uptaught* are like a series of stained-glass windows depicting the stations of Comp '68's cross, the stages in these pilgrims' progress to redeem writing instruction. In one of his tableaux, Coles depicts his attempt to rip the veil off of collegiate theme-writing for his students. Brecht-like, he reveals the machinery behind the institutionalization of college composition, exposing it as simply "a technique . . . a trick . . . a game you can learn to play" (36).

"OK, let's play it. Let's see whether you can play it with any subject and whether anyone can play. Let's play Themewriting."

I asked someone to give me a word, any word. "Man," he said to giggles. Then I asked someone else for another: "black." A third student gave me "TNT." I got them on the board and asked who could put them into a sentence that would write a Theme.

"The day that Man invented TNT was the blackest day in the history of humanity." . . .

How does one then proceed? Well, the opener, of course, set everything up. . . . With the sentence on TNT you'd talk first about peaceful uses of the explosive, in mining, railroading, etc., and then you'd turn to killing, particularly the killing of something called wimminenchilren, then to destruction by remote control, and finally to man's inhumanity to you know what with something like this as a windup: "In spite of the many benefits which the invention . . . great achievements . . . control of the environment . . . master of the universe . . . BUT, when weighed against . . . hideous brutality . . . only conclude . . . not master of himself." (36-37)

We still need to interrupt this tedious exchange. Disturbing cultural reification, literally changing the rules of the game through the materials and methods used, was the whole point of *Late Sixties Composition*. "Screwing things up is a virtue," Rauschenberg maintained (Kimmelman "Irrepressible Ragman" 26). Take Fluxus founder George Maciunas's set of altered ping-pong paddles: he made one with a hole in it, one with a can of water attached, a concave one, and one convex. The idea was, as Stiles put it, to

exhibit the importance of altering objects to redefine behavioral patterns. . . . [T]hey perplex the user and confound the body, requiring its realignment with conceptually implausible behavior as they upset physical and mental connections and conventions . . . insist[ing] that players reconsider the new demands of the game, the skills it once required, and the patterns the players once performed. In short, players must re-perform, must learn to reinvent mind/body orientations, abilities, and actions. (86)

English Composition as a mutual exchange of altered ping-pong paddles: we offer assignments and students offer texts, both honest, heartfelt attempts to interrupt the game of Themewriting, to insist the rules for verbal meaning-making in college and culture be re-thought. Every compositional occasion becomes a "first-time" writing, rather than a conventional routine to learn to represent.

We need, then, a new, plain-speak language for a new, basic-life pedagogy. Rauschenberg reflects on his compositional method in such a street-rhetoric:

The way I begin is by just having an idea and then if that idea isn't enough, I have another idea, and a third, and a fourth, and composition could be described as an attempt to mass all these things in such a way that they don't contrast or interfere with each other, that you never set up a sense of cause and effect or contrast like black or white; but that they either calmly or less calmly

just happen to exist at the same time. So one of my main problems in composing a piece is how to get something started and how to get it stopped without breaking a sense of the whole unit that more or less should look continuous and anti-climactic, or—I don't know the word for it when one thing simply follows another—progressive. Progressive relationship with the elements. (Spector 236)

The Happenings Era was a time of new discourses, new terminologies, created to describe the text-as-performative-gesture. Action painting, Combines, Fluxus Events, *Décollages*, and the Happenings themselves. Carolee Schneemann called her pre-Happenings works (1958–1963) “painting constructions” because, like some of Rauschenberg’s combines, they often had moving or motorized sections (10). Deemer’s decision to find “a new word for ‘teacher’” (122); also, Ken Macrorie’s neologistic attempts to recast the scene of college writing, his *Engfish* and *I-Searches*. We need these new methods, this constant de-determining of composition. Take the formal/conceptual method behind a piece like Cage’s essay “On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work.” The essay is very much a piece of scholarship on Rauschenberg and so might have fallen into an academic frame by a conventional default. But Cage alters the scholarly space immediately through the formal logic of the piece: the text is a series of commentaries of varying length (some long paragraphs, some a few lines), operationalized according to the heuristic Cage provides: “It may be read in whole or in part; any sections of it may be skipped, what remains may be read in any order” (*Silence* 98). The paragraphs themselves vary among poetically astute reflections (and even anecdotes) on Rauschenberg,

This is not a composition. It is a place where things are, as on a table or on a town seen from the air: any one of them could be removed and another come into its place through circumstances analogous to birth and death, travel, housecleaning, or cluttering. He is not saying; he is painting. (What is Rauschenberg saying?) The message is conveyed by dirt which, mixed with an adhesive, sticks to itself and to the canvas upon which he places it. Crumbling and responding to changes in weather, the dirt unceasingly does my thinking. He regrets we do not see the paint while it’s dripping. (99–100)

Certainly Rauschenberg has techniques. But the ones he has he disuses, using those he hasn’t. I must say he never forces a situation. He is like that butcher whose knife never became dull simply because he cut with it in such a way that it never encountered an obstacle. Modern art has no need for technique. (We are in the glory of not knowing what we’re doing.) (101)

more general epigrams,

Beauty is now underfoot wherever we take the trouble to look. (98)

Gifts, unexpected and unnecessary, are ways of saying Yes to how it is, a holiday. (103)

and self-conscious introspection,

*I am trying to check my habits of seeing, to counter them for the sake of greater freshness. I am trying to be unfamiliar with what I'm doing.* (106)

As for me, I'm not so inclined to read poetry as I am one way or another to get myself a television set, sitting up nights looking. (105)

What a hospitable, fascinating template such a strategy might be for students: a loose form in which to record comments about the subject under critical investigation, as well as more personal, reflective prose. Cage's is the performative text, not as representational (*This is not a composition*), but as presentational (*It is a place where things are*). Do we think our students are not like John Cage, don't have the sort of insight that might make such a simple textual arrangement come alive? But that was the pedagogical mission of Macrorie, Deemer and Co., letting them bring forth themselves full of their own experiences and ideas and feelings. Just like the postmodern Museum is now data-site, the Text can be best seen as catalogue, flatbed, a place where things are, a *passagen-werk*. As Oldenburg's *Store*: namely, a compendium of objects, loosely connected around a general function, existing—changing, even; as needs and values change—in space and time. From his notebook for *The Store*:

My piece is called a store because like a store it is a collection of objects randomly placed in space.

one's own body the form of change

keep form, even after making, in a situation of change  
 not only mechanical but psychological  
 moving sculptures are often all fixed  
 mine are not  
 the law of my work is time  
 change (51)

He referred to his performance work as “a theater of real events (a newsreel),” as “giving hair and muscles and skin to thoughts” (80). So

*The Store* (and all text) as storehouse of ideas, an experience-exchange, a warehouse in the American Psychogeographic.

Vostell's stated reasons for working in Happenings: they "present a do-it-yourself reality . . . and sharpen the consciousness for the inexplicable and for chance" (Berghaus 320). That consciousness-sharpening potential in a work is what Berghaus calls the *activating* component of a presentational Happening (320), and that's a good way to think about what I respond to in student prose, its power to activate some change in the writer and reader (beyond just mere pleasure or displeasure over whether certain formal conventions have been properly activated). Take the email message I was sent one day by my student Neal C. Ohm. The class had spent several sessions listening to songs by Tupac Shakur and discussing them, as well as reading interviews with the rapper and assorted articles about him. I ask my students to send me traces of their thoughts in email messages periodically through the course, and one day during our unit on Tupac, I received this haunting e-message from Neal:

What is the difference of our perception of 2Pac opposed to a 45 year old white male's? Not only thinking of you when I ask that (because you are very absorbing/open-minded) but my close-minded father. I asked my dad what he thought of 2Pac and it really disappointed me. He didn't speak from his heart, it was just a repeating (I could tell) from what he read/heard from the News. . . . To show him what I am doing with myself at school, and to mildly influence his one-sided opinion, I let him read the articles you gave us. I actually watched him read them, his facial expressions. What a change.

Neal's note is not exactly academic writing, but when I got it (as is the case with so many of the e-messages I get from students) the small kernel of reality Neal presented thrilled me. It came to me the way, as Kaprow describes, we stumble upon a small, charmed arrangement of simple imagery in the contemporary urbanscape, an arrangement which our perception re-figures into a kind of accidental shrine or fetish, containing all the charmed aura associated with such objects: "slip[ping] out of focus as quickly as it is seized upon . . . burst[ing] blatantly forth out of the nameless sludge and whirl of urban events, precisely where and when it is least expected" (*Assemblages* 164). It made me think of the worlds of both the students and the texts I choose, of the two meeting, and a change being enacted—in Neal's case I can see the change occur, one he tries to further exscribe into his life, his father's life, and mine. Neal becomes a Happener: bored with the cultural recirculation of tired,

meaningless forms (his dad's initial repetition of the media line on 'Pac), he plans a little Happening for his audience-participant, leading them through a tour of counter-media materials. Reading Neal's event-score lets me re-enter the action of his compositional scene; it is, as Coles put it, allowing oneself to "be pushed . . . to the edge of irresponsibility, to becoming as a reader what I never figured I'd have to become as a reader of student writing—not better, but more alive" (Coles and Vopat 328). La Monte Young gave the name *event-score* to his pieces, purposefully setting down very sparse scores for his work, so they could be idiosyncratically interpreted in performance. Student writing, then, as concrete, simply-structured event-score: the outline or proto-text for the way the final piece would be realized in one's re-activation of it (through reading, say, or discussion). It was George Brecht who first applied, in 1959, the term *event* to the field of performance. Stiles speaks of "his interest in 'the total, multi-sensory experience' that could emerge from a 'situation,' the 'event' being the smallest unit of a 'situation,'" achieving "maximum meaning with a minimal image" (66). It's English Composition as Fluxus Performance, the scoring methods of which are "predominantly textual in character and are distinguished by clarity of language, economy, and simplicity of words" (Stiles 66). I want to apply Stiles's terminology to student event-scores, seeing them as "practical initiations, invitations to unlimited, or 'open,' interpretation that plunge the reader into a conceptual performance of the text" (67). As Neal's email did for me.

Oldenburg, in describing his own work, also hovers around this notion of form as performative score: "The form here is not so much environmental as fragmental. . . . You are to imagine the missing, that is, what is called negative space or absent matter, counts for something. These are rips out of reality, perceptions like snapshots, embodiments of glances" (49). A possible technique: students move through an interesting collection of materials (rather than, as usual, a collection of essays)—the coursepack then becomes, say, a miscellany of quotations, pictures, poems, advertisements, brief excerpts from novels, cartoons, crossword puzzles, and many other things—then watching the textual progression that happens (even joining in, as I respond to those *e-pensées* I'm sent). Dancer Steve Paxton describes Rauschenberg's technique in performances such as *Linoleum*: "In his choreography, he animated people with tasks in images . . . by couching people within images and then allowing images to coexist, collide, or follow one another" (264). Writing Classroom, then, as Fluxus Festival, animating people with tasks in words,

music, and images. Oldenburg's aim with his work on the *Store Days* pieces provides a way of conceptualizing the work students might do in a writing course: "my aim is to develop under these concentrated circumstances a sort of kernel of infinite expansion . . . so that at the end of this season I shall have ten extremely powerful seeds" (83). Happenings composition, then, is students working, under the concentrated circumstances of a college term, on developing kernels, seeds, expandable data-chunks that can flourish later in interesting ways. That's a wholly different way of thinking about form; it means writing not as some verifiable end-form, but writing as growing, changing, maybe even culturally transforming (as Neal Ohm's message worked on me, deepening my appreciation of the true power of rap music in the lives of the current generation). Happenings Composition, then, *literalizes* that basic perceptual shift in the environment of artistic reception. The space of reading a composition becomes a Vygotskian zone of proximal development. The viewers do, indeed, make the pictures—the "pictures" being the experience, the situation, the theatre in which the work takes place; composition in the now-expanded field. Deemer, too, was focused more on "current media" than "the so-called academic essay" (122). He was an early prophet of the sound-bite, quoting McLuhan on how aphorisms were a much more epistemologically interesting form "just because they are incomplete and require participation in depth" (122).

This transformative intent of Composition as a Happening implies a very different conception of the audience than writing instruction traditionally holds, with its allegiance to the rhetorical triangle. Robert Whitman thought of the audience for his Happenings in terms of trying to evoke the sublimity of artistic expression he felt; anything else was beside the point: "you make available to them the same kind of perception you think you've seen somewhere . . . that thing that exists that you really can't define in any other way except through the piece. [It's] the difference between an artistic experience and something you can talk about; and the last has to do with philosophers and critics and people like that" (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 232). Rauschenberg maintained, "your audience is not a familiar thing. It is made up of individual people who have all led different lives" (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 85). For most of Composition, audience is not made up of individuals, most often it's an undifferentiated, predictable construct, the *reader*. Even concepts like *interesting* or *boring* become more difficult to predict rhetorically when the ultimate goal is perceptual transformation. Rauschenberg: "I'm also interested in that

kind of theatre activity that provides a minimum of guarantees. I have often been more interested in works I have found very boring than in other works that seem to be brilliantly done” (85). Happeners saw the audience as environmental rather than judgmental. Kaprow:

It is not that I object to painting or theatre or music or dance or anything like that. It is that I do not wish to be compared with them, because it sets up all kinds of unnecessary discussions. People say that you’re not doing this right, that you’re not doing that right. . . . [I]n what I call the normal environment, there are audiences all the time. If we get out and dig up a manhole cover in the street somewhere, as I gather some practical jokers do all the time, and if some people stand around and watch, as they do normally when people are working or something unusual is going on, then that group is a part of the normal environment. They are not audiences coming to watch a performance; they may just pass on very shortly to whatever they have to do. Whereas if we go to the theatre or the rodeo or the circus, we are sitting there not just to watch a show but to judge it with a whole battery of standards. (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 117–118)

In the interview in which Kaprow made that comment, his interviewer, Richard Kostelanetz, realized this implied a nonformal, nonconventional, situationist rhetoric, one interested in extension, in text as seminal: “[W]hat you are creating is a situation opposite that of a book. . . . [W]hat you want to do is create an entity that will in turn stimulate a variety of stories” (119). To achieve composition as a way of being, as action writing, informal writings become a key part of a Happening curriculum, as valid a (non-)genre as the formal essay. Halprin’s pedagogy was to explore movement/body possibilities in exercises and phrases that combined into a fixed dance, then it was off onto more experimentation. She called each exploratory phase a “jump.” For example, for one dance she was inspired to give every dancer a bamboo pole right before they went out to perform. “We had to do the dance that we’d always done, holding bamboo poles. . . . This was the beginning of our next jump. I became preoccupied with movement in relation to environment” (“Yvonne Rainer Interviews” 141). Composition as a Happening is a series of jumps through forms, problems, materials; exercises that would bring the writing into some new place. Halprin: “I wanted people to have tasks to do. Doing a task created an attitude that would bring the movement quality into another kind of reality. It was devoid of a certain kind of introspection” (142). Yvonne Rainer, who was once a student of Halprin’s, recalls,

“I remember that summer I was here with you and you assigned tasks. But as I understood it, the tasks were to make you become aware of your body. It wasn’t necessary to retain the task but to do the movement or the kinesi-  
 thetic thing that the task brought about” (142). So it is with the writing in  
 a Happening classroom: the actual text production is immaterial (*not nec-  
 essary to retain the task*), it’s the awareness (as writing body) the student  
 takes, the awareness of her creative skills. Such a pedagogical dynamic  
 recalls Coles, who wanted “to keep things open, to pursue an idea in such  
 a way as to allow a student to have ideas of his own, to find himself in the  
 act of expression, to become conscious of himself as becoming through  
 the use of language or languages” (“The Teaching” 113).

SCENE FOUR:

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG’S *FIRST-TIME PAINTING* (1961)/

PROCESS

If writing becomes action, a way of being, Composition as a Happening  
 is Composition as Process: the form equals the making. If modernity tries  
 to banish time, Happenings art counters by being time-encoded. Rauschenberg  
 is again illustrative here, in the way he strove in his art to acknowledge  
 what Spector calls “the durational experience of life itself” (227–228). Cage  
 even called Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings* (1951) a “clock of the room,”  
 because of the way their plain white surface so vividly registered the minute,  
 gradual effects of a room’s changing light (Spector 227). Even more obvious  
 is Rauschenberg’s *First Time Painting* (1961), the Combine painting he did  
 onstage during an avant-garde performance concert, with a ticking clock  
 placed in it as a built-in marker of the real-time duration of the actual  
 composition. To further emphasize his process, Rauschenberg placed contact  
 microphones near the surface of the canvas so the audience could hear the  
 work’s production evolve. There is a boldness in Rauschenberg simply  
 deciding that here, now, during this performance, I will create; the work  
 becomes much more a record of the doing rather than a planned, tradition-  
 ally made artifact. Every text, then, as a new work, acknowledging the  
 inherent temporality of its creation. (Rauschenberg wanted that same  
 element of risk in the audience as well: “I’m really quite unfriendly about  
 the artist having to assume the total responsibility for the function of the  
 evening. I would like people to come home from work, wash up, and go to  
 the theatre as an evening of taking their chances. I think it is more interest-  
 ing for them” [Kostelanetz *Theatre* 85–86].) Such a process-defined  
 composition locates

the act of composing very presently, in the now. Neal's email to me about Tupac occurs in a social space far different from Composition's traditional academic timelessness, where students "need to understand the degree to which their writing is not their own," but "part of a tradition" (Bartholomae "What Is Composition" 26). Neal's note, wholly his own, is a journal entry from a life. The under-text is: "This happened to me, and it was interesting. I sat down and read these articles, about a rapper I had known about for a while—I even talked with my father about it—and all at once I could feel time and life intensely for a while." The product is simply a textual trace of its process, a behavior-record of a life, a meditative fragment from an ongoing, lived performance. It is a small canvas of action writing: compared to a well executed salon work, an academic essay, what Neal has done is "American and rougher and more brutal, but he is also completer" (Greenberg, in Friedman *Energy* 96). To talk about it, I find no terms in the discourse traditional Composition makes available; I can only turn to Greenberg on Pollock (sounding very much like Coles on Humphrey) and say Neal "points a way beyond the easel, beyond the mobile, framed picture, to the mural, perhaps—or perhaps not. I cannot tell" (in Friedman *Energy* 96). In any case, I witnessed it, and I changed. As such, it enacts what Kristine Stiles sees as the crux of Fluxus performance: it "compels a reevaluation of the human situation and provides revisionist forms for reevaluating intersubjective connections that enable us to rethink and, thereby, reenact the social world" (65).

The ultimate function of the work, then, is to invite re-entry into the process-site, to reactivate it and capture that sense of becoming. To be hopefully changed. The space of reception becomes the space of production: not a Museum but a transitional space, a passage. The "happening" is a perfect term because that is the very locus of the work: the changing, the occurring, the durational, the situation-ing, the social as a sculpting. In a 1968 interview, Cage speaks of "the world. The real. You say: the real, the world as it is. But it is not, it becomes! It moves, it changes! It doesn't wait for us to change . . . It is more mobile than you can imagine. You are getting closer to this reality when you say as it 'presents itself'; that means that it is not there, existing as an object. The world, the real is not an object. It is a process" (*For the Birds* 80). According to Stiles, it was Cage's combination of Eastern philosophy and Western phenomenology that "allowed the artist to stress behavioral processes as the critical elements that precede the objective state of art as a completed 'thing'" (66). Such

“behavioral processes” are rich, holistic. Nancy Spector, for example, speaks of Rauschenberg’s work, especially his situational work like the performance pieces and Combines, and notes how the work “exists literally in time or bears the layered traces of its production; it presents the body in motion or reacts to the motion of its audience members; and, above all, it seeks to invoke senses beyond the purely visual” (228). She notes, too, that in Rauschenberg’s performance pieces “the performative gesture or corporeal action was emphasized over the discrete aesthetic object” (238). This key focus, the performing body, is one Composition has historically downplayed: rarely has it gone beyond the relatively limited (and usually almost wholly cognitive) bodily metaphor of *seeing* to conceptualize both its production and reception. A more wholly carnated body (moving through banal time) was a central focus in the way process/product issues were theorized in the larger context of performing art history. Spector points out how so much of the performance-based composition of this era—Happenings, Fluxus, Cage, Rauschenberg, the Judson Dance Theater, Zero, and other American and European neo-dadaist groups—showed a “general shift away from the production of static objects toward the performative gesture experienced in real time” (239). In Composition Studies, the textual performance may have been done at some point in real time, but the aim is to establish that performance as somehow timeless, emblematic of all textual process in any space and time (this, of course, is the very rationale for composing process research). And process and product must be kept distinct (Sommers: “what one has to say about the process is different from what one has to say about the product” [154]). The performance quality of action painting tilts the discursive field around the compositional scene in the Fifties from Greenbergian critical reflection to a performative, process-oriented *thisness*. Structure is beside the point. The process, the doing (within an ethos of intensity) is everything. Cage recalls, “*Theatre Piece* [1960] was composed in terms of what I would call process rather than structure. When we do anything and bring it to a performance, it reaches to a point that becomes realization. At that realization point it can be viewed . . . as structured, though it wasn’t” (Kirby and Schechner 63).

Process becomes the indisputable fact of creation—persevering in the work, following a voice, tuning out the influence of interpretation. Composition has spent its time teaching students how to process the feedback given on products, subsuming process in interpretive commentary; rather, we should stress the hard work, the durational reality of

composing, the articulate reality of its doing. “The only defense against being trapped in someone’s idea of your intention is to keep changing your field and work very hard, so that the *fact* of your creation, which will always be the most important thing, always overshadows its interpretation” (Oldenburg 141).

Time-encoding means space-encoding as well, site-specificity, and it’s no accident, I think, that some of the most compelling Happenings-era Composition—like *Uptaught*, *The Plural I*, Lutz’s piece—are accounts rooted in a certain classroom group at a certain time. Many Happenings artists felt strongly about the non-iterable, site-specificity of their Happenings. Rauschenberg, for example, “categorically refused to have [his performance pieces] reconstructed, believing their ephemerality to be a constitutive factor in their existence” (Spector 243n). His most memorable performances all came out of the mix of a certain arbitrary, found set of materials, in a certain space, at a certain time. Rauschenberg’s first performance piece, *Pelican* (1963), for example, was a totally arbitrary accident: it was commissioned by mistake, when a pop art festival organizer unwittingly listed Rauschenberg on the program as choreographer rather than his real position on the tech crew (Paxton 263). The ad hoc nature of the piece continued in Rauschenberg’s compositional strategies. The festival was to be staged in a D.C. skating rink: “When I heard the piece would take place in a rink I said, why not use roller skates. I favor a physical encounter of materials with ideas on a very literal, almost simple-minded plane” (Spector 234). This is typical of Composition as a Happening. Deemer provides the caveat of site-specificity in his article: “It is with reason 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).

Kaprow, too, wanted Happenings performed only once, not “passed down,” so the process of that one performance, however ragged, became the sole text. “Aside from the fact that repetition is boring to a generation brought up on ideas of spontaneity and originality, to repeat a Happening at this time is to accede to a far more serious matter: compromise of the whole concept of Change” (*Assemblages* 194). Of course, current generations seem raised less on originality, but the concept of Change still holds sway in any transformative pedagogy. Here, process equals an engaged sense of self, an ethical-aesthetic way of being.

Radically different, it cuts far deeper than that notion of process Composition Studies began to fetishize in the post-Happenings era, one which determined “the processes that should occur on the way to the final draft . . . whichever kind of writing you are doing” (Elbow *Writing with Power* 7, 12). This notion of process was not so much a *living on the canvas* as it was a kind of replicable technique, like cross-stitching or preparing a hit of speed (later, of course, it was a kind of mental operational pattern, like the steps one takes in solving a cryptogram). But, as Jackson realized, technique is nothing to fetishize. Rauschenberg, when asked about technique, didn’t really know how to respond: “What do you want, a declaration of love? I take responsibility for competence and hope to have made something hazardous with which we may try ourselves” (in Cage *Silence* 101). All Writing, then, as Basic Writing; and Basic Writing as Basic Life.

## SCENE FIVE:

RICHARD SERRA'S *SPLASHING* (1968)/

## POST-HAPPENINGS

Ah, the Happenings. All dressed up in ice cream and candlelight, they had nowhere to go in Composition. Before we knew it, our goal went from participants in the electric drama reengaging their hearts to having students “appreciate the varieties and excellences of academic discourse” (Lindemann 311). Deemer gave up and went off to write plays. Macrorie and Coles directed their energies more locally, more creatively (Macrorie at writers’ workshops, Coles doing young adult fiction). And by 1976, Lutz had been absorbed by the CCCC Executive Committee, writing material that shows how far removed from the Happenings he’d become: reviewing a manual on doublespeak, Lutz ’76 is suddenly at a loss (“I am not sure exactly how to classify this book. It’s not a collection of essays but a collection of materials—quotations, pictures, poems, advertisements, brief excerpts from novels, cartoons, crossword puzzles, and many other things” [“Review” 97]); confessing the failings of his logical retinality: “Perhaps I like my books too linear, but when I am confronted with a page that consists of nine quotations ranging from people such as Bertrand Russell to Adolf Hitler, along with two cartoons, I am not sure what I would do with the material in class” (98). (Oh, why couldn’t he remember the meaning his students took from their Happening, how the writer, they decided, must use more than his eye?) He complains the collection contains “so many bits

and pieces that I suspect both students and teachers will have a difficult time making a coherent whole out of the material”; it’s simply “a source-book that provides raw material,” he says (98). One can’t help but think that the William D. Lutz who came upon the collection in 1970 could have built an entire pedagogy of disorientation around such purposefully destabilizing raw material, allowing students to comb through detritus and not come up with predetermined coherence. That was 1976, though, and those were different times in *Composition*. But the disappearance of the Happenings’ promise of a new path to poetry and intensity haunts the scene of *Composition* as no other departed guest has. It’s difficult to see *Composition* of the last thirty years as anything other than a retreat. “Perversions of Form” was the phrase that leaped to Lloyd-Jones’s mind in the brief retrospective of the field he gave at the 1997 CCCC in Phoenix.

One of the central moods of this book, then, is disappointment, particularly with what supplanted the all-too-brief era of Happenings *Composition*, that brand of academic professionalism that dominated the field theoretically in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Clement Greenberg, with his strict formalism, almost willed the Happenings movement. It was inevitable artists would chafe as art became more and more determined by theory. It’s the same with *Composition Studies*. No wonder compositionists became starved for formal richness (however kooky and home-grown) when college writing became, as Kitzhaber writes, a place for one “to fix, once and for all, the habits of correct usage and clear and orderly writing so that teachers in other departments need take no special pains about these matters” (x). Italian art historian Franca Mancini offers us a thumbnail sketch of criteria for neo-avant-garde genres like the Happenings and performance art when she speaks of “attempt[s] by twentieth century artists, from the historic avant-garde . . . to the present day, to overcome [the limitations of] their specific language and to interconnect with differing expressive languages—dance, music and the new technologies” (Talalay 5). In that brief phrase, Mancini hits the signature-style criteria of Happenings *Composition*: anti-conventional, expressive, discursively hybrid, and technologically innovative. This is not at all post-Happenings *Composition*, which is all about conventions; which sees its retreat from expressionism into academicism as some sort of progress; which prefers a purified, taxonomized monophony to hybridity; and consigns discourse on technology to a sub-realm of its discipline. What distinguished Late Sixties *Composition* is

that it reflected the dominant, heady-but-vital art movements of its time. Happenings Compositionists were looking for something startling, active, and non-traditional to wake the classroom up a little: say, the Beatles, “Eve of Destruction,” composition-as-film, the Happening itself. Can post-Happenings Composition say the same? In the 1976–79 era, for example, did it have punk or funk or performance art in it? Did it see rap music rising in the late Seventies/early Eighties? No, it elided such rich possibilities totally. And so I read Macrorie today as still delivering the news; I listen to his words the same way I listen to Bob Dylan or Miles Davis, as the still-hippest sounds. It’s hard to understand the general indifference that meets his work (or Coles’s, Deemer’s, et al.) today. I read him the way I do the situationists, (and as the situationists themselves read artists like de Chirico), as having painstakingly laid out bold, poignant blueprints for change, relegated now to libraries and footnotes. Meanwhile, we have class after class of students with their personal inner lives, desires, fears; their variety of interests and abilities; their sometimes strong, sometimes clumsy, sometimes tentative immersion into the material of language.

I wish I could name this as post-Happenings Composition: work from one of my favorite compositional spaces from the Late Sixties (and alas, another loss-site): the Leo Castelli Gallery’s storage warehouse, where a new (but maybe not) aesthetic was being ushered in at the end of 1968. Postmodern art historian Douglas Crimp’s description of it is suffused with the sadness of roads not taken:

The site was an old warehouse on the Upper West Side in Manhattan used by the Leo Castelli Gallery for storage; the occasion, an exhibition organized by minimal sculptor Robert Morris; the moment, December 1968. There, strewn upon the cement floor, affixed to or leaning against the brick walls, were objects that defied our every expectation regarding the form of the work of art and the manner of its exhibition. It is difficult to convey the shock registered then, for it has since been absorbed, brought within the purview of normalized aesthetics, and, finally, consigned to a history of an avant-garde now understood to be finished. But, for many of us who began to think seriously about art precisely because of such assaults on our expectations, the return to convention in the art of the 1980s can only seem false, a betrayal of the processes of thought that our confrontations with art had set in motion. And so we try again and again to recover that experience and to make it available to those who now complacently spend their Saturday afternoons in SoHo galleries viewing paintings that smell of fresh linseed oil and sculptures that are once again cast in bronze.

Of the things in that warehouse, certainly none was more defiant of our sense of the aesthetic object than Richard Serra's *Splashing*. Along the juncture where wall met floor, Serra had tossed molten lead and allowed it to harden in place. The result was not really an object at all; it had no definable shape or mass; it created no legible image. (150–151)

Serra's *Splashing* literalizes Kaprow's claim that new works, after Jackson, would extend off the canvas and into the room. In the same way, for example, Schneemann thought of her 1968 Happening *Illinois Central* as "an exploded canvas, units of rapidly changing clusters" (167). *Splashing*, then, is a Jacksonian gesture, a drip composition, an action painting *en fer*. Such a process-trace, offered as legitimate work to Composition's Museum, would be treated like the work of a Basic Writer (Crimp, however, turns what would be Composition's response, *The result was not really an object at all; it had no definable shape or mass; it created no legible image*, into a point of fascination, not criticism). Happenings artists got used to the denigration: Schneemann's *Illinois Central* included a scene of bodied composition, in which the partially undressed performers, blindfolded, moved towards each other on stage and then began slow physical contact. At least one audience was not having it: Schneemann recalls, "At Nassau College, male students in the audience went berserk over the physical contact between the men (performing): they screamed obscenities, threw basketballs and cups of water at us" (170). Every Gallery, it seems, tells the same basic story: work is either judged collectible, curatable, befitting the Museum's walls, or it's rejected as worthless drippings, scorned as perversity. Ah, but things are viewed differently in the warehouse: there, simple, bold compositional gestures are made that resonate with some viewers forever after.

It speaks, as well, to the place of art in our curriculum, to how willing we are (or how strongly we feel the need) to take that next step towards stirring, deeply affective poetry, or how comfortable we are with a curriculum that seeks only to have students "appreciate the varieties and excellences of academic discourse" (Lindemann 311), actively banishing the poetic. Deemer felt "another, and I think more important, advantage to modeling English Composition after the happening. Western education has long suffered under the delusion that scientific abstraction is the unique way to knowledge. This, unfortunately, to the neglect of the poem" (125). The minor status of art in our culture is bad enough, its almost total absence in our current curriculum, in a field which used to be known as the language arts, is even worse. Jean-Jacques Lebel:

The extremely limited space assigned to art in society in no way corresponds to its mythical volume. To pass from one to the other—at the risk of breaking the law—is the primordial function of the Happening.

It is avant-garde art that liberates latent myths; it transfigures us and changes our conception of life. If this is a crime, there is no reason why we should deny it—on the contrary, we should claim it for our own. (271)

Our whole aim became to demystify the process of composition, not enchant it. We began to desire not just a clear, replicable process, but a clear way of talking about it. The focus became “develop[ing] control” (Sommers 148). But in *Happenings Composition*, student writing was seen as much more mystery-dependent; compositionists of 1968 could have been Benjamin’s Surrealists: concerned, not with “the logical realm of ideas,” but rather “the magical realm of words” (232); “the writings of this circle are not literature but something else—demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries if you will, but at any rate not literature” (227). Speaking of Robert Whitman’s rehearsals for *The American Moon* (1960), Kirby notes, “Sections were never rehearsed separately. The overall ‘flow’ was more important to him than specific details” (*Happenings* 140). That sounds like it could be advice to writers. Which flies in the face, for example, of Sommers’s insistence on the importance of non-jargony commentary (she chides “the generalities and abstract commands given to students,” by “the teacher [who] holds a license for vagueness” [153]); but, of course, words like *flow* really do mean something. Adopting such notions as Sommers’s because they seemed so much more rigorous and professional than the hokey romanticism of the Happenings marked the beginning of the end. Then, when those once-arbitrary now-unquestionable notions became the foundational lexicon, scientific research studies could be run to further extend the simulation, making it seem as if that lexicon actually named a reality (namely, the excellent varieties of academic discourse).

SCENE SIX:

KRISHNAMURTI’S *FREEDOM FROM THE KNOWN* (1969)/

“IT IS RAINING OH MY LOVE”

For some reason, expressionism has become an *outré* term in Composition Studies (though certainly not in any other field of art). The thought of students mining the refuse lot of their own lives to trace moments of becoming, of passages, has become laughable if not downright worrisome in post-Happenings Composition, a solipsistic exercise

that takes time away from the crucial interrogation of power and knowledge. But really what more revolutionary content can there be? According to Blanchot, “The everyday is platitude (what lags and falls back, the residual life with which our trash cans and cemeteries are filled: scrap and refuse); but this banality is also what is most important, if it brings us back to existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived—in the moment when, lived, it escapes every speculative formulation, perhaps all coherence, all regularity” (13). The informal, Blanchot reminds us, is “what escapes forms—becomes the amorphous” (14) It is the site of the insignificant, the unapparent, but also “the very movement of life,” and, ultimately, “the site of all possible signification” (14). Happenings Composition prizes the stuff left behind, the otherwise-discarded, because it reveals a particular life. If the class is in any way a Happening, then the ad hoc—the prewriting, quizzes, exercises, notes, journals, email, false starts—is sometimes the most permanently satisfying text of all. Think of Beuys, who used one of his student’s discarded works in his piece *Palazzo Regale*; Beuys, who focused on the spirituality of materials, knowing a thing is much more than its exterior might lead one to believe. These too-often forgotten scraps, simply used in Composition as fodder for the final draft, are similar to what Oldenburg calls “residual objects,” the costumes and stage properties that might otherwise be tossed when the final performance is over.

Residual objects are created in the course of making the performance and during the repeated performances. The performance is the main thing but when it is over there are a number of subordinate pieces which may be isolated, souvenirs, residual objects.

To pick up after a performance, to be very careful about what is to be discarded and what still survives by itself. Slow study and respect for small things. Ones own created “found objects” The floor of the stage like the street. Picking up after is creative. Also their parti[c]ular life must be respected, where they had their place, each area of activity combed separately and with respect for where it begins and ends. (110)

Composition has all its prewriting and writing-to-learn activities, but what’s prized is the essay; the process-scraps (like Neal Ohm’s Tupac riff) are rarely spoken of with the same fascination as the product. Oldenburg knew the spellbinding ethereality inherent in scraps, especially those from the banal world of the everyday: “at the center of my use of pop art is a love for the rejected, inexplicable and simple” (142).

This goes beyond just materials and content to actual language and persons. There is a basic humanity and love always at the core of Composition as Happening. Macrorie knew: “For decades white Americans have livened their language by introducing into it expressions from the streets and nightspots of Harlem, part of the dialect of supposedly ill-educated black Americans. . . . I remember now that when Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, the white, college-educated mayor of Memphis spoke hypocrisies in English and the black garbage workers spoke truths eloquently” (51). *Eloquently* is a term we might sniff at now, as belletristic, politically outmoded. But a true sense of eloquence, in whatever guise, is something to build a curriculum around.

Reader-based prose? Writer-based prose? The distinction is meaningless in Happenings Composition where the viewer makes the pictures. Cage’s compositional advice? As much indeterminacy as possible to let interpretation flow: “The structure we should think about is that of each person in the audience. In other words, his consciousness is structuring the experience differently from anybody else’s in the audience. So the less we structure the theatrical occasion and the more it’s like unstructured daily life the greater will be the stimulus to the structuring faculty of each person in the audience” (Kirby and Schechner 55). Composition, then, the movement of a few people through a brief moment in time and space. For Cage, the temporal, durational dynamic of process (stimulating, reactivating, possibly changing) replaces the information-space product-structure (decoding, processing); he advocated text as a kind of action painting in Jackson’s all-over style: “setting a process going which has no necessary beginning, no middle, no end, and no sections. . . . The notion of measurement and the notion of structure are not notions with which I am presently concerned” (Kirby and Schechner 55). Rauschenberg was drawn so heavily to dance and performance due to the “extreme unfixedness in image” it offered (Spector 241). Curator Nina Sundell says of Rauschenberg’s *Elgin Tie* (1964)—the piece in which Rauschenberg descends through a skylight on a rope which has a collection of objects and clothing tied to it (things Rauschenberg would employ as he climbed down), into a barrel of water perched on a flatbed truck (a cow is also led on-stage at one point), all to a soundtrack by David Tudor, played on a switch panel, which transformed the performance space’s fluorescent lights into bell-sounding audio—“The action, with its allusion to ritual pageantry and its peculiar blend of drama, risk, and absurdity, seems a metaphor for the essence of

theater" (12). To pursue Composition as a Happening, must we have students, then, descend from ropes, lead cows into class, be ice cream cones and change flavor? Not really, but in the context of an academic space, they must come as close as possible to that—to text that's a peculiar blend of drama, risk, and absurdity, which seems to me a metaphor for the essence of composition. Dick Higgins saw one reason for the Happenings' demise in the way they grew increasingly grandiose and expensive to make. Higgins counterpointed them to the still-vibrant spirit of Fluxus, whose artists never expected to sell and kept things minimal (Higgins and Higgins). So, then, Composition as Fluxus, letting us repeat the spirit but not the sins of the past. Small subversive gestures, like inviting Neal Ohm to riff on Tupac.

But having students riff on Tupac is certainly not post-Sixties Composition. When I spoke about my writing-with-rap class on an Internet listserv, one of the more famous voices of contemporary composition, posting anonymously, smirked, "you can probably make money betting that the sharks taking courses where the dominant culture trains its young are not studying rap" (S). So, topics controlled tightly now in post-Happenings Composition (according to political and academic goals) as they were prior to the Sixties (for strictly academic reasons). Doing something other, like writing heartfelt *pensées* on Tupac Shakur, for example, is suspected as pandering. But Rauschenberg felt, "There is no poor subject. (Any incentive to paint is as good as any other.)" (in *Silence* 99). Composition cannily embraced politics in the Eighties, but it abandoned aesthetics. What resulted was politically-correct formalism. Abandoning aesthetics in favor of a political simulation ironically meant turning away from the most significant issues of textual politics. In the late Sixties, compositionists were asking the same crucial questions—about what counts as composition, its material base, the relationship between composition and life, and the pressures of institutionalization—that the visual and performing arts asked but never stopped asking. Questions that menace me off and on, every day in my class, in an attempt to see the classroom as a place of human social exchange, resonating with the aesthetic dimensions of common experience. We need Jackson echoing in our ears: "The method of painting is the natural growth out of a need. I want to express my feelings rather than illustrate them." ("Narration"). Jackson leads one right to a rhetoric of human presence. I read the lines from Red Grooms's 1959 Happening *The Burning Building* and I can't see how rhetoric can go any further.

MY LOVE MY LOVE I AM WRITING MY LOVE I AM WRITING YOU TODAY I AM WRITING YOU TODAY AS IT IS RAINING OH MY LOVE MY LOVE I MUST BE LEAVING I MUST BE LEAVING YOU TODAY. (Kirby, *Happenings* 122)

Many of our theorists speak knowingly about writing with power, about the need to “make students proficient users of the varieties of texts they [will] encounter in undergraduate education,” so they don’t leave our class feeling “powerless in the face of serious writing” (Bartholomae and Petrosky *Resources* 1), but I can only shake my head, knowing the true power is the power of love, voiced in what Ashbery would call “language on a very plain level” (*Shadow Train* 3). So, in my quest for a basic passionate literacy, I listen in the copper beeches’ moaning to a dream from nowhere. Jackson would understand. Jackson, who heard the sounds in the grass, who spoke to friends of “the universal energy” and “the reality . . . in the trees” (Naifeh and Smith 688), who, one morning, on the way to his studio, tells Lee, “I saw a landscape the likes of which no human being could have seen” (Friedman “Interview”). And the painting of that landscape gives rise to the *Happenings*.

But then who gave rise to Jackson? If Jackson is the *Happenings*’ origin, who’s his? Impossible to tell, the influences on him were myriad. But I want to tease out one, another scene of Late Sixties Composition. We start in 1929, however, with Jackson in the midst of what would prove his educational disaster at Los Angeles Manual Arts High School. Socially inept, unmotivated for academic work, he wouldn’t last there long. But he was fortunate enough to have had one person knock down a few institutional walls for him, a flamboyant art teacher named Frederick Schwankovsky. Schwankovsky was a member of the Theosophy movement, whose members believed the next great advance in mankind’s spirituality was happening in California at that very time, in the person of the new Messiah, the Divine Spirit, Krishnamurti. Schwankovsky heard Krishnamurti speak from his camp in Ojai, California, read his books, and became good friends with him. He introduced the sixteen-year-old Jackson to him, who was overwhelmed with Krishnamurti’s teachings. Preaching the individual path towards awareness that must be taken, they offered solace to a disaffected youth struggling to create. “For Krishnamurti, the test of all truth—and later, for Jackson, the test of all great art—was ‘Does it flow spontaneously from an inner impulse?’” (Naifeh and Smith 131). Jackson spent six days at the camp in Ojai, listening to lectures and question-answer sessions.

QUESTION: Isn't the theory of individual freedom really anarchy?

KRISHNAMURTI: If the individual is not happy . . . he is creating chaos and anarchy around him, by his selfishness, his cruelty. (Naifeh and Smith 139)

Fast forward.

Well it's 1969, ok

All across the USA

It's another year for me and you,

Another year with nothing to do. (Stooges "1969")

So went the Late Sixties' Ballad of Disaffected Youth, searching for nothing more (or less) than a "real cool time." Or, as the Stooges put it in another song off their eponymous first album, "No fun, my babe, no fun. No fun to hang around, feeling that same old way" (a song covered eight years later, in a more desperate, implosive version, as an encore on the Sex Pistols' American tour, because youthful disaffection, it seems, is always happening).

Krishnamurti understood disaffection. "I don't know whether you have ever seriously faced this issue of why your heart is empty," he wonders at the close of his 1969 classic *Freedom From the Known*. Basically, it's the same work he's always written, a reflection on the search for meaning, energy, intensity, and vitality. He asks the only important compositional question, the question posed repeatedly by Happening artists: "is it possible for a human being living an ordinary everyday life in this brutal, violent, ruthless world—a world which is becoming more and more efficient and therefore more and more ruthless—is it possible for him to bring about a revolution . . . in the whole field of his thinking, feeling, acting and reacting?" (118).

The book could be a blueprint for Happenings Composition as it offers a simple, meditative awareness as the only way to bring about intensity. The answer, apparently, can indeed be heard in the trees' moaning: "Most of us don't know how to look at, or listen to, our own being any more than we know how to look at the beauty of a river or listen to the breeze among the trees" (24). Krishnamurti voices Deemer's desire for reengagement: "There is beauty only when your heart and mind know what love is" (86); and he speaks with the authority of a TA from Madison: "you can tremendously influence the world if in yourself . . . you lead actually every day a peaceful life . . . a life which does not create enmity. Small fires can become a blaze" (118–119). His course requires a mind "always fresh, always young, innocent, full of vigour and

passion" (19–20), one which realizes "the intellect is not the whole field of existence," and "that all ideologies are utterly idiotic" (16). In such a curriculum, students would be asked, not to be an ice cream cone and change flavors, for surely the Happenings died of their own kookiness; instead, perhaps, maybe just Macrorie's May '68, Fluxus-like goal of students using available technology "to record short fabulous realities" ("To Be Read" 688). Writing Classroom as NOW Festival.

SCENE SEVEN:

SAM SHEPARD'S *LA TURISTA* (1967)/

CODA

Let me close with a question. What if we got a text from a student one day that seemed little more than a message, brief and expressionistic? One from a young student, hardly more than a boy, "a dark skinned boy" (Shepard 258), one who came (we think) from a barren part of the Mexican desert? A message from the contact zone, then: the only contact zone I'm interested in; the contact zone where the dark and timeless desert of the primitive meets the brutal, violent, ruthless world of modernity; the one we pass through every day of our lives; the one Sam Shepard explores in every theatre-event he writes. Sam Shepard, who "has said that Jackson Pollock was important to him, but what seems more active in his sensibility," according to Richard Gilman, "are emanations from the 'happenings' phase of painting and sculpture, collage in the manner of Johns and Rauschenberg" (*xiv*). So we read this text, and as we read we realize it's a kind of brief reverie, a short riff about music and the boy's father. He muses lovingly, but in a style of speech unusual in our world, about how they'll be together soon:

And we'll sit together and smoke by the side of the road, until a truck comes by heading toward my home. And my father will kiss me good-bye and climb on the back and drive off, and I'll wait for another truck going the other way. A pale blue truck with a canvas back, carrying chickens and goats, and a small picture of the Madonna on the dashboard, and green plastic flowers hanging from the rear view mirror, and golden tassels and fringe around the window, and striped tape wrapped around the gear shift and the steering wheel, and a drunk driver with a long black beard, and the radio turned up as loud as it goes and singing Spanish as we drive out into the Gulf of Mexico and float to the other side. (Shepard 276)

If we got such a message, we wouldn't screw up our face because we couldn't "conceive of this writer as at work within a text and simultaneously, then, within a society, a history, and a culture" (Bartholomae "Inventing" 162), right? Cause we'd understand that his message originated "precisely from the breakdown or absence . . . of all such traditions in America" (Gilman *xiii*), wouldn't we? Recognizing this message, in its own small way, as what it is: a chant of paradise, written by a student who just might feel "a counter-cultural need for a new (or perhaps ancient) communal, youthful performative space" (which is how Jeff Kelley accounts for the persistent interest in the Happenings and which sounds to me foolishly like it should describe a writing class [*ix*])? I mean, we wouldn't see this writer as substandard, unproficient, as powerless in the ways of undergraduate writing, would we? Wanting to supplant his dialect with the kind of speech that made the right impression in a job interview? Fearing for him a future where he'll "[eat] nothing but rice and beans all his life . . . [selling] Coca Cola to passing cars" (Shepard 260)? We wouldn't, out of that fear—which is maybe the emptiness of our own heart—cynically fire back a reply like "You'll never make it alive!" (Shepard 276). Would we?

Marcel Duchamp  
"Box in a Valise"  
1941

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Carolee Schneemann  
“Chromelodeon”  
1963

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Chromelodeon  
Photo by Al Giese © Al Giese, Documentext, New York.

George Maciunas  
"Flux Smile Machine"  
1972

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Smile Machine  
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George Brecht  
"Direction" from *Water Yam*  
c. 1963

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Direction  
The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit.

Marcel Duchamp  
“Why Not Sneeze,  
R[ri]ose Selavy?”  
1921

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Why Not Sneeze?  
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Marcel Duchamp  
“Fountain”  
1917

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Marcel Duchamp  
“Rotorelief No. 8 (Hoops)”  
1935

Rotoreliefs  
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Marcel Duchamp  
“The Bride Stripped Bare by Her  
Bachelors, Even” (“The Large Glass”)  
1915–1923

Bride Stripped Bare  
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Marcel Duchamp  
“A Note from the Green Box”  
1934

Note from the Green Box  
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Marcel Duchamp  
“Nine Malic Molds”  
(“Large Glass, Detail #2”)  
1941

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Nine Malic Molds  
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Jackson Pollock  
Photograph by Hans Namuth

Jackson Pollock  
Photo by Hans Namuth © 1980 Hans Namuth and Barbara Rose, Agrinde Publications, Ltd. New York.

Jackson Pollock  
“Galaxy”  
1947

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Jackson Pollock  
“Seascape”  
1934

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Jackson Pollock  
"Number 29"  
1950

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Jackson Pollock in his studio  
Photograph by Hans Namuth

Jackson Pollock  
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Robert Rauschenberg  
“Linoleum”  
1966

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Linoleum  
Photo by Peter Moore © Estate of Peter Moore / VAGA, New York

Robert Rauschenberg  
"Map Room II"  
1965

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Map Room II  
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Robert Whitman  
"American Moon"  
1960

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American Moon  
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Allan Kaprow  
"A Spring Happening"  
1961

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Not Available



Dick Higgins  
"Graphis 82"  
1962

Graphis 82  
Photo © Estate of Dick Higgins

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George Maciunas  
“Concave Racket”  
1972

Concave Racket  
Photo by Nancy Ancello. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit.

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Nam June Paik  
“One for Violin Solo”  
1962

Violin Solo  
Photo by George Maciunas. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit.

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Ben Vautier  
“Regardez Moi Cela Suffit”  
in Nice c. 1962