



PROJECT MUSE®

English Composition As A Happening

Geoffrey Sirc

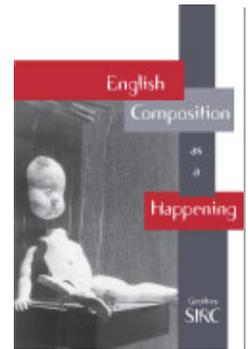
Published by Utah State University Press

Sirc, Geoffrey.

English Composition As A Happening.

Utah State University Press, 2002.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/9262.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9262>

6

ENGLISH COMPOSITION AS A HAPPENING II

PASSAGES

This book has shown my interest in work that explores practice: work that can be used to think about pedagogy, texts, materials, issues of production and reception, and particularly issues of form and content (what's used in Composition, what's not, and what other fields with the idea of composition at the center are using). I've especially been interested in recuperating ideas from the past—most obviously those figures like Duchamp, Pollock, the Happenings artists, the situationists, and the Sex Pistols, all of whom I consider compositionists-at-large; but also, in terms of the field of Composition Studies, from compositionists I've loosely grouped under the rubric Happenings Composition, referring to a time when our field seemed more open to broader material concerns. And I can't help but compare Composition of that vibrant era to that which supplanted it, as a kind of chronicle of loss. Take, for example, two very different textbooks, Ken Macrorie's *Searching Writing* and Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Ways of Reading*, which seem like such key transition texts to me: one the last gasp of the spirit of Late Sixties Composition, the other central in establishing the curriculum of the academic, analytical essay that currently holds sway. As scholar-teacher, I like to wander through such pedagogical scenes, hoping to inspire my practice (or reconfirm it), searching for ways I can best present forms and occasions for writing that might allow my students' spirit of inquiry and poetry to flourish in interesting ways.

In *Searching Writing*, the problem with college composition for Macrorie is almost wholly material: "In classes, the experiences in textbooks and lectures belong to others. Students are expected to see the relevance of this material to their new lives, but their old lives are seldom allowed into the discussion, and half-people learn poorly" ("Preface"). *Searching Writing* was designed to reinvent the research paper (that academic arch-genre) as "I-Search" paper, an expressive, experiential inquiry-quest a student undertakes out of some nagging

personal need, “searches in which persons scratch an itch they feel” (14). In fact, the topics for such inquiry needed to be so idiosyncratic, so deeply felt, that Macrorie urged a kind of receptivity that would allow them to bubble up out of semi-conscious, quasi-dream states: “Walk around for a couple of days letting yourself think of what you feel you need to know. 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” (62). (Macrorie’s student, then, as surrealist-in-training; Benjamin speaks of “Saint-Pol Roux, retiring to bed about day-break, fix[ing] a notice on his door: ‘Poet at work’” [*One-Way Street* 226–227].) The textbook’s basic methodology: after a series of freewrites to hone a personal, expressive style, the student identifies a topic, figures out the key information sources to check (usually people and current pamphlets, not books), and then writes up the story of the search. The overriding ambiance hovers around those *outré* terms “honesty” and “authenticity,” with Macrorie psyching the student: “Say to yourself, ‘What goes down here is going to be truth of some kind, nothing phony’” (6). It’s a stubborn search for truth, for the conditions that might lead to it. The book’s subtitle could have been “Only Connect,” offering us the writing course as this basic human encounter between teacher and student: “The two must meet, bringing with them their own experiences and searches, their own effort and commitment” (“Preface”). The writing class, for me too, is, yes, all about that meeting, two experienced souls on their individual quests, their searches, stopping for a brief encounter, passing the time, then moving on, reinvigorated for the journey by their time spent chatting together.

An absurd idea, I know; that’s the writing class as coffee bar, acquaintances meeting for an hour or so, looping through the verbal traces of their respective passages. Mere chit-chat is utterly forbidden, no casual conversation when there’s all that required work to do. Shooting the breeze is not a currently sanctioned curricular practice: “There is nothing worse than a class where discussion is an end in itself—where a lively fifty minutes is its own justification” (Bartholomae and Petrosky *Resources for Teaching* 4). Such self-justified rap sessions, though, formed the highly unprofessional pedagogy of Happenings Composition:

Halfway through the semester now in all my classes, I begin the two-hour session by saying, “What’s on your mind today?” . . . One day when I [asked it] . . . Miss Edick, who had frequently launched the class into a good discussion,

started to speak, looked sad and confused, and then said in a low voice, “*I don’t know—this may sound awfully strange. Maybe I shouldn’t ask, but I’ve had to think about death lately, and I just wonder what you think of it.*” (Uptaught 177)

Mine, then, is nostalgia for the pre-professional, the pre-disciplinary. My sense now of Composition is of a field that all reads the same books, shares the same notion of what counts as professional knowledge; this auto-replicating homogeneity of the professional becomes the material discriminator for *Ways of Reading*: reading selections based on “the sorts of readings we talk about when we talk with our colleagues” (iv). Trimbur dutifully acknowledges this *de facto* canonicity—“all the work in cultural studies, feminist studies, postcolonial studies, literacy studies, African American studies, gay and lesbian studies, and so on that it seems irresponsible not to follow”—as the price we pay “for better and for worse, [to feel] part of a profession that has arrived” (“Close Reading” 137). We may have arrived, but what we’ve left was the joyous potential of our idiosyncratic status as anti-discipline, concerned only with students’ inner lives, helping them craft some meaning on their own anxieties. When the overall imperative, then, was just to love them; the goal simply that “deeply felt truth” (Macrorie *Searching* 31).

Ways of Reading is designed to be a program “where students are given the opportunity to work on what they read,” a “place to work on reading” (iii). Itchy topics are not scratched in the course, neither do ideas for investigation percolate through from half-sleeping states. They are controlled according to the set list of readings a student works through in the course: it is, then, a classic composition-reader-based course. The particular spin *Ways of Reading* applies is that students work through texts that will supposedly help them read the university, see how the discourse and inquiry of scholarly writing works. Texts chosen are bedrock critical theory classics—Barthes, Berger, Fish, Kuhn—as well as other similar literary monuments. Think about that scene for a minute: some of the most prized works by true icons in contemporary literary and critical thought, and these things somehow need to be *worked on* (“and [the students] work on it by writing” [iii])? Now, these works are pretty famous, have a pretty firmly established critical rep; do they really need *more* work done on them? And just what sort of work would that be, that our students could do it? What they’re doing, of course, is materially extending those masterpieces further into the discourse. It’s a kind of conservancy work, extending the scope of the works’ power, preserving

their reputation in the scholarly tradition by weaving them tighter and more firmly into the fabric of critical thought: making it more and more unmistakable, more obvious, that when one writes about the tradition of Western thought, the names that will repeatedly recur are Barthes, Berger, Fish, Freire, Kuhn, Anzaldúa, etc. This is burnishing the works, glossing them, tending to their critical apparatus, making sure the investment in them remains sound. The standard space for such a scene? It's the museum curator's office.

Bartholomae, then, is the Sherman Lee of Composition. In the history of American museums, Lee, as curator of the heavily endowed Cleveland Museum of Art, was someone who could afford to withstand the pressure Thomas Hoving, the Metropolitan's director, put on the museum world to stage huge blockbuster shows in order to increase attendance. Lee wanted the museum to "remain immune to community pressure, [so] he defended the critical and preservationist role of the museum against what he regarded as a misguided interpretation of the institution's civic responsibility" (Conforti 22). Lee fought to strengthen the museum's cultural ramparts against the popular, the spectacular. All those blockbusters were taking the curator's time and resources away: "Traditional activities surrounding the care and interpretation of the museum's permanent collection had been disrupted. The priority once granted to conservation and scholarly publications had been undermined; galleries were no longer places for the quiet contemplation of works of art" (Conforti 22).

For most of my career as a composition instructor, I was uncomfortable with my status as academic gatekeeper. I bristled at that role of mine in an institution whose goals I saw as somberly conservative. But I've since learned to approach my role strategically. Take Hans Haacke, who creates highly prized installations, exhibited in museums and galleries, which are deeply critical of the museum and its corporate-sponsored ability to fix form and content, not to mention helping to shape the larger cultural ambiance. When asked why he showed his work in museums, since he hated them so much, he answered: "You have to be part of the system in order to participate in a public discourse. . . . As soon as you exhibit your work in galleries and museums, you are part of the system. I have always been part of the system. I am of the opinion that you cannot act outside the system, or be on your own, and participate in a discourse" ("School" 23).

As composition teachers, we mount exhibits, prize certain works, neglect others, and in so doing, lead our local patrons through a tour of

form, content, and larger questions of cultural ambiance. We are, indeed, curators, but as such, we need to do our job well. SFMOMA's Bruce Weil feels his job as curator is to work against the museum's role as repository of the culture's finest, positioning the institution instead as a more neutral information provider for people: art as ideas, data, rather than (overly determined) objects. As curators of academia, then, we can exploit the possibilities of our status, exposing students to a range of culturally valid forms as well as non-mainstream content; in so doing, we provide our audience with a host of possibilities for worlds and forms to inhabit. What I see in many *Ways of Reading*-derived curricula, though, are a lot of weak, safe shows; shows with less-than-risky themes, all showing the same kind of middle-brow art. Most all of the composition readers I see carry on some version of the Sherman Lee project, trying to continually gloss the canon of our permanent collection, inviting students in to study the great works and contemplate "the way the text positions them in relationship to a history of writing" (Bartholomae "What Is . . . ?" 21). The titles of the shows we mount all sound like the titles of those bland, corporate-sponsored traveling exhibits: *How We Live Now*, *Re-Reading America*, *Gender Images*, *Our Times*. I eagerly await textbooks with titles like *Environments*, *Situations*, *Spaces*; *In the Spirit of Fluxus*; *Formless: A User's Guide*, or *Sounds in the Grass*. What *Ways of Reading* teaches is traditional Art Appreciation, recharging the masterpieces for a student, re-enchanting them. It's pedagogy as docency. The questions the text asks about a work are designed to make it come alive for students, to make them learn to savor it the way we in academia (supposedly) do, to make the work's discursive field viral, recombinant: "We have learned that we can talk about [these works] with our students as well" (Bartholomae and Petrosky iv). *Ways of Reading*, then, places students in the huge white cube of the contemporary museum gallery, walls dotted with some of the greatest works ever thought and felt. This is a vastly different space from *Searching Writing*—Macrorie locates his student on the street (in a camera shop, a fire station, a zoo): "Go to people. They're alive this year, up to date" (89).

Macrorie's idea of the *deeply felt truth* has resonated so strongly in my practice because it is the aspect of my students' writing I like best, the aspect I think represents their strongest work. Take Greg White, a student for whom writing an essay is a tenuous process; he shows his true voice, his heart and insight, in short works, in in-class writings and in the email messages he sends me. Here, for example, in an email with the

subject heading “been there, done that!” he reflects on the discussion we had earlier that day of some Tupac Shakur songs:

dear mr. sirc

i'm in class today were talking about 2pac and not so much disappointed, however the people in class don't understand 2pac the way i do. see my life is very different from what people think. it pissed me off to hear people in our class talk but not from experience. but from what they learne by the media. 2pac song “keep ya head up” is so true. how do i know? because everything he said i've been through remember when you said you can't listen to this song wihtout having a tear come to your eye. well it did because it hurt for 2pac to be so much on point. the things this man said was so true for instance he said he blame his mother for turning brother into a crack baby. my mother had a child who is my brother who has down syndrome from my mother drinking. and then he goes on telling how he tries to find his friend but their blowing in the wind. when i went home i trie to find my friends the one's who i was hanging with when i was young they were around just always out of reach i understand when pac said he people use the ghetto as a scapegoat i love my ghetto i'm not just talking about the people i'm talking about the place. the people most of the people are good to me. the rest want to see my fell i have so many mixed feelings right now i can't stay focused on what i'm saying i guess that's another down fall us people from the “ghetto” have sometimes the feelings as pac fuck the world attitude and other times i say i'm going to show all these mother fuckers what i can do so many obstacles so little time makes me frustrated. so i can't focused i what i supposed to do.

I have many students like Greg, and my challenge, I feel, is to have these young writers burnish not Jane Tompkins's essays, but their own form of powerful *pensée*, while, certainly, at the same time learning some kind of basic prose styling to help them avoid verbal pitfalls at the university. It is a tough struggle, doubtless because it is the key tension in all fields throughout modernity with the idea of composition at their center: the tension between the academic and the avant-garde. This is the focus of *Composition as a Happening*, on the institutional space that enframes the human scene of written expression. As such, it fits with what art theorist Hal Foster sees as the crucial difference between the historical and neo-avant-gardes: “the historical avant-garde focuses on the conventional, the neo-avant-garde concentrates on the institutional” (17). So Deemer, Lutz and the rest of *Composition's* historical avant-garde took as their focus the conventions of the texts students produced,

opening them up to the passional possibilities of new forms like those generated by the Happenings; as Lutz declared, “We must as teachers of writing concentrate first on the creative aspect of writing” (“Making Freshman English” 35). Our concern in the second wave of Composition’s avant-garde is on the over-determined classroom scene, the university’s imperative and how it is allowed to invent itself, replicate itself, in the work done in that space. We are not so fortunate, perhaps, to live in the heady times of the historical avant-garde. As Foster shows, those were times when the rhetoric was anarchistic. He cites the language of Daniel Buren’s 1971 essay on “The Function of the Studio,” calling for “total revolution” and “the extinction” of the studio (25); and in our field, again from Lutz, we have a call for “the complete restructuring of the university” (35). “Our present is bereft of this sense of imminent revolution,” as Foster acknowledges; hence, contemporary artists engaged in the institutional critique of the neo-avant-garde “have moved from grand *oppositions* to subtle *displacements*” (25). So the goal becomes ways to pressure the academic context in firm but subtle ways. We might start, as I do, with figuring out new strategies for allowing the voice and concerns of Greg White to become a part of the academic verbalscape. This means I reflect on the central question of to what extent essayist academic prose must remain the focus of my practice? Despite my affinities, I can’t look to Macrorie’s I-Search genre for a resolution to this tension. There’s often a thin-ness about the quest in Macrorie’s students’ papers, a chipperness; his student Elizabeth King’s paper, for example, “A Camera Right For Me,” begins “‘What do you want for a graduation present?’ my mom asked. I hadn’t even thought about graduation, let alone a present, but that’s my mom—always ten months ahead of time. ‘How about a good camera?’” (67). He prizes a melodramatic belle-lettrism far more than I do, and so occasionally his own prose cloys: “That’s why so many lectures and textbooks are dry—they lack the blood, muscle, rain, and dust of stories” (99). He can’t shake that Hirschian obsession for cutting excess verbiage—even though he does sell editing with a gimlet eye: “Wasted motion irritates or infuriates us because at bottom we know we’re going to die at seventy or ninety and we want to make good use of the time we have left” (39). And his formalism leads him, not just to offer a four-part template for the I-Search paper, but even, of all things, to a gratuitous put-down of Peter Handke’s “The Left-Handed Woman,” calling it “sloppy and confusing to a reader” (130). I love Ken’s spirit, then, but not always his letter.

So, where do I go? Where I wanted to go, what made the most sense to me personally, was here:

[1. MARGINAL NOTES]

The bride stripped bare by her bachelors even.

to separate the *mass-produced readymade* from the *readyfound*—the separation is an operation.

Kind of Subtitle

Delay in Glass

Use “delay” instead of picture or painting; picture on glass becomes delay in glass—but delay in glass does not mean picture on glass—

It’s merely a way of succeeding in no longer thinking that the thing in question is a picture—to make a delay of it in the most general way possible. (Duchamp 26)

To Marcel Duchamp’s *Green Box* (1934), and the idea of the prose catalogue. Text as a collection of interesting, powerful statements. A kind of daybook or artist’s notebook. The way I myself work—jotting notes on the fly, sound-bite *aperçus* that sound good by themselves but can become workable bits in a larger structure. A basic compositional tool; a medium I feel students like Greg White could work well within. Jean Suquet has some relevant, deeply engaging commentary on this amazing work:

In Paris, in 1934, an edition of a hundred or a hundred and fifty copies of the *Green Box* was published—so named because of its green flocked cardboard cover and the assonance between “vert” [green], “verre” [glass], and “ouvert” [open]. Ninety-four scraps of paper bearing plans, drawings, hastily jotted notes, and freely drawn rough drafts were delivered in bulk. It was up to the reader to shuffle these cards as he or she pleased. There was no author’s name on the cover; the work appeared anonymous and as if offered to the blowing winds. In light of this, I had not the least scruple, when opening it for the first time in 1949 at the request of André Breton, in making it speak (with Marcel Duchamp’s consent) in my own voice; and out of its sparkling randomness, I began fishing words that resonated with something I felt deep inside me, something obscure yet promising illumination. One should refrain from saying “I.” One should say “we.” It is indecent and pretentious to appropriate body and soul, blood and sweat, the work of another. If an interior journey goes deep enough, at some point it arrives where all roads meet.

I was twenty. I dreamt—with due reverence—of taking up the journey where the previous traveler had left off. (“Possible” 86)

Suquet, then, had an encounter with Duchamp, a meeting, to which each of them brought their own experiences and searches, their own effort and commitment. He saw Marcel as a fellow-traveler, and their encounter changed Suquet’s life, evoked in him a grand dream, a life-long itch. His whole scholarly career became an endless We-Search paper on the *Large Glass*. Duchamp was able to effect this vocation in Suquet, perhaps, because the technology of composition he used was different, interesting, human-scaled. Formal requirements were left open, *ouvert*; the focus was on the idea behind the composition, the statement it made: “I considered painting as a means of expression,” Marcel said in an interview, “not an end in itself. . . . [P]ainting should not be exclusively retinal or visual; it should have to do with the gray matter, with our urge for understanding” (135–136). Duchamp, then, as Action Painter, concerned with the revelation contained in the act, that tension. It’s the same tension, between the formal and the transformal, that Macrorie felt: “In part, writing is designing or planning; in part, it’s watching things happen and discovering meaning” (38).

But not every student is caught up in working on a *Large Glass* that they need to make a mess of notes and drawings about. That is probably not an itch of theirs. But rap music most definitely is. That email from Greg White was written in the basic writing class that I center around hip hop. It’s a course students have begged to get into for the past 6 years I’ve been running it. Some students have waited an entire year to get into it. No surprise, hip hop is a rubric for some of the most exciting cultural media available to young people today, transcending perceived distinctions of age, gender, race, and ethnicity. My goal as academic curator is to mount a hip hop exhibit that will satisfy the masses’ itch, as well as leave them with an intense formal, verbal, and conceptual experience, one that will give them cultural and discursive capital to do with as they see fit. Like Bartholomae, I am a preservationist; one of the curator’s duties, according to Weil, is to preserve the fragile works that threaten to disappear (said regarding both Daniel Spoerri’s resin-covered foods from the 60s, which are rotting today; as well as much of the recent net-art tied to links—the perils of archiving, offline, art that was conceived to evolve online). I’m tired of seeing so many Greg Whites come and go in my courses and not have their heartfelt work archived

in some culturally meaningful way. A course on writing about rap is one obvious way the classroom can be remade as a Happenings space—witness the email another student, Angela Bates, sent me at the end of our course one semester, an evaluative comment that seems to hearken back to Lutz’s class in that incense-filled room in the student union:

The best of your class is that we can listen to rap and talk about how we feel about particular aspects of the song and all and we can use the lyrics in the papers. The most enjoyable project was the paper on Tupac I love tupac and I was able to show my love on a different level where people can respect him as a person and as an artist the same way that I do so I tried to incorporate some [of] my emotions and convictions into the paper.

But as Happenings performance space, then, we need to, as Oldenburg reminds us, attend to those “residual objects” left behind. So the performance-document, the trace, is important; leaving behind the score or theatre-notes for your project, so others can appreciate and learn from your group’s efforts. (Coles and Macrorie, with their book-length collections of the scores, notes, and residual objects from their own performance spaces, seem to have intuitively understood this.)

To attempt such a trace-capturing in my class, as a way to allow student desire to subtly pressure academic writing, I’ve been drawn to another catalogue of passionate inquiry, Benjamin’s record of his thirteen years of research into the cultural preoccupations of nineteenth-century Paris, *Das Passagen-Werk* (*The Arcades Project*). It is a work similar to Duchamp’s, a definitively unfinished project that one is intended to extend, “at best a ‘torso,’ a monumental fragment or ruin, and at worst a mere notebook, which the author supposedly intended to mine for more extended discursive applications” (Eiland and McLaughlin x). The English translators of the work offer a nice capsule overview of Benjamin’s project, sort of a Bartholomaen text-driven I-Search of not simply scholarly classics but an entire culture, centered around the Macrorian street. The subject of the *Arcades* quest was the *slow study and respect* of the residual objects left behind from the ongoing performance piece called “Paris of the Nineteenth Century”:

diverse material [from the literary and philosophical to the political, economic, and technological] under the general category of *Urgeschichte*, signifying the “primal history” of the nineteenth century. This was something that could be realized only indirectly, through “cunning”: it was not the great men and celebrated events of traditional historiography but rather the

“refuse” and “detritus” of history, the half-concealed, variegated traces of the daily life of “the collective,” that was to be the object of study, and with the aid of methods more akin—above all, in their dependence on chance—to the methods of the nineteenth-century collector of antiquities and curiosities, or indeed to the methods of the nineteenth-century ragpicker, than to those of the modern historian. Not conceptual analysis but something like dream interpretation was the model. The nineteenth century was the collective dream which we, its heirs, were obliged to reenter, as patiently and minutely as possible, in order to follow out its ramifications and finally, awaken from it. (Eiland and McLaughlin ix)

So we find entries such as the following from the convolute (or grouped sheaf of notes) on “[Boredom, Eternal Return]”:

Child with its mother in the panorama. The panorama is presenting the Battle of Sedan. The child finds it all very lovely: “Only it’s too bad the sky is so dreary.”—“That’s what the weather is like in war,” answers the mother. Dioramas.

Thus, the panoramas too are in fundamental complicity with this world of mist, this cloud-world: the light of their images breaks as through curtains of rain. [D1,1]

“This Paris [of Baudelaire’s] is very different from the Paris of Verlaine, which itself has already faded. The one is somber and rainy, like a Paris on which the image of Lyons has been superimposed; the other is whitish and dusty, like a pastel by Raphael. One is suffocating, whereas the other is airy, with new buildings scattered in a wasteland, and, not far away, a gate leading to withered arbors.” François Porché, *La vie douloureuse de Charles Baudelaire* (Paris, 1926), p. 119 [D1,2]

The mere narcotizing effect which cosmic forces have on a shallow and brittle personality is attested in the relation of such a person to one of the highest and most genial manifestations of these forces: the weather. Nothing is more characteristic than that precisely this most intimate and mysterious affair, the working of the weather on humans, should have become the theme of their emptiest chatter. Nothing bores the ordinary man more than the cosmos. Hence, for him, the deepest connection between the weather and boredom. How fine the ironic overcoming of this attitude in the story of the splenetic Englishman who wakes up one morning and shoots himself because it is raining. Or Goethe: how he managed to illuminate the weather in his meteorological studies, so that one is tempted to say he undertook this work solely in order to be able to integrate even the weather into his waking, creative life. [D1.3] (101)

A vector analysis of almost any page from the *Passagen* gives an idea of the various genres he's working in: quotation (of passages of varying lengths), summary, short critical reflection, more extended quotation and/or analysis, sound-bites, notes to himself. In terms of the material content, it's far more open, more lived—among the myriad topics covered are history, urbanism, desire, horror, shopping, pleasure, conspiracy, art, architecture, prostitution, gambling, engineering, even transcriptions of names and signs (I like how the translators use the word *torso* because truly there is a body moving in this space, a desiring body). He achieves, then, the true daybook, one whose method implies “how everything one is thinking at a specific moment in time must at all costs be incorporated into the project at hand” (*Arcades* 456). Finally we can note the preconception of writing as hypertext: that entry above, with the “Dioramas” tag, for example, in the “[Boredom, Eternal Return]” convolute, anticipates readers who can click the selection, taking them to the “[Panorama]” convolute.

Why am I drawn to this method, and how do I use it? First, it's the idea of sustained inquiry, of the search as project. It's basic Macrorie: “Anyone can learn to search and write in a way that furthers thought and reflection, that builds and sees” (*Searching* “Preface” np). The *Passagen*, though, is *form ouvert*, far more open than Macrorie's; it's a minimalist building structure, that “slender but sturdy scaffolding” the historian erects “in order to draw the most vital aspects of the past into his net” (Benjamin 459). Currently, as one attempt at Composition-as-a-Happening, my students are involved in an arcades project trying to permeate the phantasmagoria of rap's drama because, as a curator, I want my gallery-space to be thought of as an important information-source for the student-audience. Each class member selects a convolute, based on desire (old school, cultural roots, the socio-political, gender, race, gangsta, 2Pac, the industry); some general theory and background is read and annotated; then more specialized reading; then contemplative field work. Audio and video as necessary. Brief works constellated together into the larger interactive project. Writing that works minutely, from the inside out, to develop a statement. So Scot Rewerts, for example, begins his own Arcades Project on rap and politics by recording and reflecting on a text snippet on Malcolm X he found on a hip hop website and some Rage Against the Machine lyrics:

-El Hajj Malik El Shabazz aka Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21 1965 but his connection to Hip Hop has been a long and strangely eerie one. The man who once ran the streets of

Harlem, lived the fast life and spent time in prison was a bona fide Hip Hopper of sorts back in the days of his youth. Malcolm went to all the latest shows, hung out with all the coolest music cats. He was up on the latest happenings as they were emerging from the streets. Back when he was a youth, Hip Hop of his day was known as Be-bop and Malcolm who was always known for keeping it real was down with the whole scene. (Davey D's Newsletter)

A direct correlation with one of the most powerful black men that ever lived to hip hop, shows how truly political hip hop is. In a Rage Against the Machine song Zach rap/rocks "Ya know they murdered X and tried to blame it on Islam!" (<http://www.musicfanclubs.org/rage/lyrics/wakeup.html>)

-Background: 'Black nationalism'

'He may be a real contender for this position should he abandon his supposed obedience to white liberal doctrine of non-violence . . . and embrace black nationalism' 'Through counter-intelligence it should be possible to pinpoint potential troublemakers . . . and neutralize them' (<http://www.musicfanclubs.org/rage/lyrics/wakeup.html>)

This is in the background to Rage's song "Wake up." This, even though not really thought to be a hip hop genre of music, is extremely political in reference to the Civil Rights movement.

Here are some selections from Peter Prudden's Rap Arcades Project on the topic of whiteness in rap music:

-“What had been proven in the 1960s, particularly by Motown, was that R&B-based music by black singers could easily be sold in massive quantities to white teens, creating a lucrative commercial-cultural crossover” (3).

[Nelson] George brings up a very good point in this quote. I believe this is a foreshadow for the success of the rap industry. White teens indulge in gangsta rap simply because it takes them from their middle-class suburban homes and into the heart of the inner city. More importantly, it opens their imaginations to drugs, sex, guns and violence, the very things they are sheltered from in their daily lives.

-“The heroin invasion . . . empowered a new vicious kind of black gangster. Heroin emboldened the black criminal class. Hip hop would chronicle, celebrate, and be blamed for the next level of drug culture development” (George 35)

From the words of Notorious B.I.G., “either your slinging crack rock or you gotta wicked jump shot.” Over time, the African-American male has been notoriously rocked with this assumption.

I can't leave the topic of rap and white folks without offering up this memory. It is summer 1995 and I am spending the long Labor Day weekend at a house out on the tip of Long Island. To my surprise, in a local publication I spot an ad for a Run-D.M.C. gig at the Bay Club in the Hamptons' town of East Quogue. Along with two other old-school hip hop colleagues, Ann Carli and Bill Stephney, I drive to the club, where we encounter a large drunken crowd of college-age and young adult whites. The club is jam-packed and the narrow stage swollen with equipment.

When Run, D.M.C., and Jam Master Jay arrive onstage, the building rocks. The 99.9 percent white audience knows the words to every song. "My Adidas," "Rock Box," and "King of Rock" are not exotic to this crowd. It is the music they grew up on. I flash back on Temptations-Four Tops concerts that are '60s nostalgia lovefests. Well, for these twenty-somethings, Run-D.M.C. is '80s nostalgia. They don't feel the music like a black kid from Harlem might. No, they feel it like white people have always felt black pop—it speaks to them in some deep, joyous sense as a sweet memory of childhood fun. In a frenzy of rhymed words, familiar beats, and chanted hooks the suburban crowd drinks, laughs, and tongue kisses with their heads pressed against booming speakers. It may not be what many folks want hip hop to mean, but it is a true aspect of what hip hop has become. (74–75)

This quote [from Nelson George] depicts the classic stereotype of the white suburban teen seeking a revolutionary moment derived of independence, attitude, style, and tough guy mentality. I realize this image simply because I have fallen under these circumstances countless times. As a teenager living in a middle class society with rules and regulations operating in every arena the feeling of rebellion against the norm is consistently present. Others and I view rap as an escape to a world unimaginable to our Abercrombie & Fitch lives, where the biggest thing we must decipher is whose house we will watch Dawson's Creek at. The fact is driving down the street with the windows down in the parent's expensive car with the latest track blaring and the bass bumpin presents a bad boy thuggish image. The truth is we as adolescent white kids have absolutely no indication of what it means to live the life of the lyrics we feel associate with our lives. On how many occasions have you heard of a 14-year-old white child shot to death for his Air Jordans? The reality is never, we dream and paint pictures in our minds of what life is like in the inner-city through these albums. I enjoy listening to rap music, but to say I can relate or I feel for those who lives are filled with drugs, guns, violence, poverty, and sex is completely asinine.

The Macrorian quality to my use of the *Passagen* is how the student finds an already-enchanted space and wanders through that (the museum now conceived of as populist, audience-responsive data-site). In

Ways of Reading, students inhabit those expansive, relatively empty spaces, far removed from their own world; they don't awaken from the dream of academic discourse, they learn to speak it and keep dreaming it. But an even keener difference between the *Passagen* and *Ways of Reading* is that sometimes the search *is*, indeed, about a text, and sometimes it's even about a "long, powerful mysterious piece like John Berger's 'Ways of Seeing'" (Bartholomae and Petrosky *Ways of Reading* iii), but oftentimes it's not. Oftentimes the search is about a personal project that's being worked on that has far more to do with beats and rhymes than with a John Berger article. And sometimes the search is even more basic, Greg White as Miss Edick: "*I don't know—this may sound awfully strange. Maybe I shouldn't ask, but I've had to think about death lately, and I just wonder what you think of it.*" *Given that . . . ; if I suppose I'm suffering a lot . . .* was how Duchamp phrased Miss Edick's low murmur (23). The *Passagen* is not the student's clever response to a docent-guided tour through the great works of literary culture, but simply a re-representation of the students' own self-guided tours through cultural detritus that fascinates, which maybe holds clues; as Macrorie termed these material searches, "stories of quests that counted for questers" (*Searching* "Preface" np). Texts in such a curriculum become paratactic assemblage, with an intuitive structure based on association and implication, allowing the reader to fish out of them words that resonate with something felt deep inside (*an escape to a world unimaginable to our Abercrombie & Fitch lives*). Writing *apassionato e con molto sentimento*. I really don't think it's up to me to teach students how to process that "serious writing, . . . the long and complicated texts" (*Ways of Reading* iii) of the academy; if certain disciplines feel the need to use those texts, they're free to teach students their intricacies. Composition as a Happening means the displacement of such texts from the writing class, substituting a basic awareness of how to use language and information, a cool project, and a sense of poetry. This, after all, is a highly respectable curatorial mission: "to reinvest art with a new humanism, using basic forms of symbolism, allegory, figuration, and language . . . ask[ing] us to think about how we feel about the world we live in" (Auping 11).

THE TEA CEREMONY

Compared with the way post-Happenings Composition defines the classroom enterprise of college writing instruction, as *a professional commitment to do a certain kind of work with a certain set of materials*,

Composition as a Happening is far less mediated, looser. It silences that tedious, already-wrote drone of *knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing*. It is a pedagogy designed to un-build our field's spaces, a standard-stoppage, a composition theory (like Schoenberg's) that values the eraser end of the pencil (or the delete key). If post-Happenings Composition demands a commodity to hang on its gallery walls, Happenings Composition offers, as anti-commodity, Rauschenberg's most sublime work, his erasure of a de Kooning pencil sketch. Disappearing becomes our new production strategy: "But I want to slim things down, get rid of things, reduce stocks. To escape fullness you have to create voids between spaces so that there can be collisions and short-circuits. For the traditional imagination, that is not acceptable. It's a sacrilege" (Baudrillard, qtd. in Gane 38). Erasing dull, overdetermined words would open up the gaps between them, until the words form a new syntax, representing their new relations, inexpressible by the concrete, alphabetic forms of language. Baudrillard knows that in contemporary communication systems

there is no time for silence. Silence is banished from our screens; it has no place in communication. Media images . . . never fall silent: images and messages must follow one upon the other without interruption. But silence is exactly that—a blip in the circuitry, that minor catastrophe, that slip which confirms the fact that all this communication is basically nothing but a rigid script, an uninterrupted fiction designed to free us not only from the void of the television screen but equally from the void of our own mental screen, whose images we wait on with the same fascination. (*Transparency of Evil* 12–13)

Silence, then, can be an ethical weapon, a last-ditch attempt to savor shards of the unmediated real. In a rhetoric of silence, the necessary preparation isn't planning but rather forgetting; instead of brainstorming, it's brain-emptying. Oldenburg's desire becomes heuristic:

I would love to do a happening based on another dream, where I say to myself, "On the 24th of January I'm going to do a happening," and my entire preparation consists of forgetting that I had promised to do this piece on the 24th of January. When the time comes, I get into a cab and I go to the theatre and there I am with the audience before me. Whatever I did would be the piece. I haven't had the nerve to do it but in a way all pieces are like this. (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 147–148)

Post-Happenings Composition takes silence as its origin, not its terminus: "A course . . . must begin with silence, a silence students must fill"

(Bartholomae and Petrosky *Facts* 7). Silence there is simply the *nihilō* that needs to be *ex-ed*. A clean-slate prerequisite for something—say, a conventional, “authorize[d]” (*Facts* 7) Margaret Mead allegory. The post-Happenings Composition student needs something to say, has to more or less approximate a preconception; it can’t be that the student-as-John-Cage has nothing to say and he is saying it and that is poetry as he needs it, or that the student-as-Johnny-Rotten doesn’t know what she wants (to say) but knows how to say it. What we leave behind when we depart from silence, from nothing, is a sense of the sublime. As Cage reminds us, “When going from nothing towards something, we have all the European history of music and art we remember and there we can see that this is well done but the other is not. So-and-so contributed this and that and criteria. But now we are going from something towards nothing, and there is no way of saying success or failure since all things have equally their Buddha nature” (*Silence* 143). Composition today can never be common, can never use the commonplace; “the use of platitudinous ‘common wisdom’ and received opinions” stigmatizes the Basic Writer (Miller Review 93). Always rarified, reshaped, made over, Composition stubbornly rejects the readymade. Its goal is the special sight, the special vision; there is our sight and there is our students’ sight, and the goal is to have students approximate our preconception (Coles calls such presumption “consciousness-razing” [“Response” 207]). Since we do not want “a classroom situation where any reading is seen to be as good as any other reading,” we must “get the students to move beyond” (Miller “Fault Lines” 402) their own interpretations and to approximate ours. Thus, a post-Happenings Compositionist like Richard Miller is happy when his student writes a paper in which the student’s old vision is renounced and a new sense of moral rectitude is pledged (dutifully using Pratt’s institutionally-sanctioned metaphor): “I can now see [Anzaldúa’s] strategy of language and culture choice and placement to reveal the contact zone in her own life. . . . I feel I need to set aside my personal values, outlook and social position. . . . I must be able to comprehend and understand the argument of the other” (406). It reads like English Composition as Loyalty Oath. Post-Happenings Composition never wakes from the dream of *Successful Writing*, of *What Makes Writing Good*. Composition as a Happening refuses that fantasy: “Rafael Mostel tells a story of returning to the Bang on a Can festival with John Cage after a dinner break. As they made their way to their seats, some friends urged them to come sit in the back, claiming, ‘The sound is better back here.’ Cage laughed and went

to his previous seat, saying, ‘Imagine, a sound being better.’” (Gann 84). Post-Happenings Composition’s insistence on distinctions, on distinctive writing, means the museumification of the classroom space rather than institutional displacement. Bizzell, despite her sympathy to “‘texts’ of all kinds” (“Contact Zones” 168), is simply a traditional Sherman Lee style curator with a slightly trendier art of exhibition: “I am suggesting that we organize English studies not in terms of literary or chronological periods, nor essentialized racial or gender categories, but rather in terms of historically defined contact zones. . . . Time periods can be short or long, literatures of different groups, languages, or continents can be considered together, all genres are admitted, and so on” (167). The galleries have been given new names, but the museum is still there. All genres admitted, Patricia? Even La Monte Young’s “form of the wind or the form of fires. Also . . . the sound of telephone poles”? Maciunas’s anti-art forms like rainfall and crowd-babble? Bizzell’s brand of composition gets us further entrenched in *culture* and less involved with the *real*. The Happenings sought an escape from culture by seeking refuge in the real. Level:

The man/world equation is an open one, to which each Happening brings a new and evolutive solution. The Happening tries to loosen the labyrinthine knot of the Real; it is, above all, a deliverance from the tangled thicket of the knots of culture. Each participant has a different interior mandala, and thus communication takes place transconsciously. It would appear that there is a transition from inorganic to organic matter, and that, in the same way, the inorganic matter of thought—the pulsion—is transformed into an ideograph, a language, an action. Caught by and in the Happening in its rough pregrammatical state, the thought-process is freed and undistilled . . . the manifestation of the “cosmic link.” (274, 276)

Post-Happenings Composition names no other site but culture, that is where its compositionists labor, getting further and further entangled in its thickets. There is never talk of a cosmic link to another “realer” reality. Think of Yves Klein’s *Aerostatic Sculptures* (1958), in which “one thousand and one blue balloons were released into the Parisian sky to let the immaterial sensibility permeate and impregnate the world” (Berghaus 314). English Composition as a Happening is Student Text as Blue Balloon. Where is the place for spiritual intensification in mainstream Composition’s curriculum? Just as Jackson’s paintings were for their maker and viewers (Patsy Southgate, for example: “Jackson let us see his guts, and in so doing the giving up his life. The encounter with

Jackson changed my view of art and my way of seeing all things. It changed my way of relating. Jackson changed my life" [Potter 193]), so were the Happenings spiritually therapeutic for their creators and participants. For Vostell, "a happening is *direct* art in a cathartic sense: realization of raw experiences and psychic recovery through conscious use of the inner freedom in man" (Berghaus 323). Post-Happenings Composition insists that only determinate, closed-form text really means—the kind of work Kozloff claimed Jackson destroyed, "contained and computed, graded and regulated," work in which each "passage or episode is compared with another" (143)—but Jackson's art, as well as the Happenings themselves (as well as a punk riff or gangsta sample), show that open-ended, indeterminate texts mean quite well and might actually be more effective to bring about the ends Vostell was after, the striving for a sense of the infinite. The emphasis on a simple spirituality of the human heart as key Happenings criteria is not too surprising. From Tristan Tzara's "Lecture on Dada" (1922): "Dada is not at all modern. It is more in the nature of a return to an almost Buddhist religion of indifference" (Motherwell 247). Jackson Mac Low perceived how Vostell's *décoll/ages*, in similarity "with disciplines such as those of Buddhism, Vedanta and Smkhya Yoga . . . strip away the relatively illusory world of 'form' and 'name'—of phenomena—in order to see the 'really real' . . . to show us an 'in-between' reality, hidden by the ordinary surfaces of things" (Stiles 70).

Post-Happenings Composition, when it talks about writing, never seems to talk about the amount of discovery and wonder it contains. Usually content comes to mean text by Rodriguez or Douglass or Anzaldúa, never, say, blue balloons, rainfall, or getting a new camera. The irony is that in its rarification, Composition becomes bland, dull. The further irony—it is the commonplace that proves most useful in attuning perception: the rich poverty of the everyday helps cultivate a useful principle of forced selectivity. In 1961, for instance, on the Merce Cunningham tour bus, Rauschenberg announces a fact about himself: "I tend to see everything." What cultivated such panoptical power? Steve Paxton, a Cunningham dancer with whom Rauschenberg often collaborated in his own performances, felt it was poverty: "In the early days, in unrenovated downtown Manhattan, he scoured local stores and streets for materials. He had to appraise everything in his search and decide what to take home. This period of poverty lasted long enough to provide a thorough schooling in looking, seeing, and visual sorting" (262).

Instead of Rodriguez's way of reading Hoggart ("Hoggart provided a frame, a way for Rodriguez to think and talk" [*Ways of Reading* 3]), why not Tzara's way of reading a newspaper (or was it a poem)? In Dada, "[e]veryday life was brought onto the stage. Announcing the title of a poem, Tzara read an article from the newspaper. . . . Under the pressure of absolute theories that applied to life rather than to a specific art, the distinction between performing and not performing began to break down for the Dadaists" (Kirby *Happenings* 29). Late Sixties Composition's materialist egalitarianism in drawing on the common, charging it with undreamed-of evocativeness, made its Happenings pedagogy possible. It found the most sacred not in the culturally expensive and intellectually high-toned, but in the most available, the already-dumped—Ray Charles records, or the Iron Butterfly. It's the de-determinate response to the over-determined nature of things, stripping composition of all the acculturated crud of tradition to see it as uninflected, as *organization of words* or *gesturing with materials*, the basic problem of expression. John Lydon: "I'd never had any inclination to become a musician. I still don't. I'm glad I'm not. I'm a noise structuralist. If I can remember how to make the same noise twice, then that is my music. I don't think you need the rest of the fiddly nonsense unless you're in a classical orchestra. Instant pop with access to cheap emotions" (50). Masterpieces can be dull; actions, processes can keep things lively: "it is so difficult to listen to music we are familiar with; memory has acted to keep us a-aware of what will happen next, and so it is almost im-possible to remain a-live in the presence of a well-known masterpiece. . . . [This] is not the case with Feldman's music. We are in the presence not of a work of art which is a thing but of an action which is implicitly nothing" (*Silence* 136).

A return to process, to action writing, means a restorative reflection on all those process pre-writes, those simple dumpings (which, if ever re-used, had to be reshaped and made-over into acceptable college writing). Informal writings are central to a Happenings curriculum because students learn more about their personal style and statement in those open forms. Writing on glass, then, or any material . . . writing on ceramic, even. Jackson painted bowls during the Depression because they were one of the few art-works people could afford then. But also appealing to him was the genre's remove from the academic. Easel painting's technique was marked for Jackson: "Canvas and easel were circumscribed by formalities; they bore the burden of training, of classes, of

composition. . . . A bowl or plate, on the other hand, was an invitation to play—a cheap and disposable license to spontaneity in which he could safely explore his own artistic future” (Naifeh and Smith 322). Currently, electronic texts threaten to go the same way—email messages, list-posts, MOO logs, and e-conference transcripts seen as relatively worthless little drips and drools of discourse when compared to formal assignments. But those liquid words, mere spit or bile forming itself, they certainly can shimmer, can’t they? In their seeming *bassesse*, light is caught, it glistens, and for a moment, perhaps, an epiphany. And please let us agree on this: what more can a composition do? Composition as *Shimmering Substance*, then. Such was the lesson learned by Robert Childan, to finally discover the *wu* in what he previously thought were miserable, small, worthless-looking blobs, lacking any trace of discursive historicity: “To have no historicity, and also no artistic, esthetic worth, and yet to partake of some ethereal value—that is a marvel . . . that, Robert, contributes to its possessing *wu*. For it is a fact that *wu* is customarily found in least imposing places, as in the Christian aphorism, ‘stones rejected by the builder.’ One experiences awareness of *wu* in such trash as an old stick, or a rusty beer can by the side of the road.” (172)

Post-Happenings Composition, as we remember from Donald Stewart, sees nothing of value in the Budspeak of beer cans, only a commonplace register of discourse that must be eradicated from his student. So let’s resolve to dwell in the nothingness of the process-trace. Let’s remake Jean-Jacques Lebel’s *Funeral Ceremony of the Anti-Procès* (1960) for our first Happening, the one in which the “Anti-Procès manifestation [is] dead and buried” (Kaprow *Assemblages* 228). Let’s make the form of formlessness a design for sequential writing assignments. Maybe a term’s coursework is all just one long assignment, a bunch of scraps, ideas, plans—some finished pieces, maybe; but mostly definitively unfinished: a diaristic gesture, like Duchamp’s *1914 Box*, like Kaprow’s reading of Jackson’s canvases, like Peter Prudden’s Rap Arcades Project; all done, to use the terms Hebdige uses to refer to his own writing, as “the discontinuous jottings in a traveler’s diary . . . [having] the uneven consistency of writing on the run” (8). Cool journals full of seemingly worthless blobs were the stuff of Happenings Composition: From Buell comes a pedagogy of pop and the everyday: “Frequently the best results come from recording observations, feelings, random notions, family and personal things. One sixth-grade student, urged by his father to keep a summer journal, spent a number of days copying down Beatles’ lyrics. But then,

to the delight of his father and to his own surprise, he wrote the following and other entries like it . . .” (45–46). And please, let’s not try to start our institutional displacement by worrying about what our colleagues across the campus want a first-year writing course to do: if we have to answer to them for teaching students an intensified awareness of language, then they have to answer to us for the ecocide, economic immiseration, racial and gender insensitivity, and corporate ethics-lessness of their professions.

We can begin, grammatically, to make a few alterations in the physical arrangements. Rauschenberg’s paintings offer a reconceptualization of a work’s method and reception: “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” (Kirby *Happenings* 40). Cage, we remember, loved the utterly fresh, life-like heterogeneity of Rauschenberg’s combine-drawings: “The message changes . . . the work is done on a table, not on a wall . . . there is no oil paint . . . I imagine being upside down . . . it seems like many television sets working simultaneously all tuned differently” (*Silence* 105). Writing as assemblage, with a structure based on association and implication; piling stuff on to create a spellbinding, mesmerizing surface, like staring into the *Rotary Demisphere* and seeing what’s evoked. Such would make a text less loaded, less determined, less peculiarly styled, more open to possibilities, rather than closing on conventional notions. Crimp, like Steinberg, Cage, and so many others, appreciates Rauschenberg’s radical gesture in turning the surface of the painting into a dumping-ground, a “flatbed,” offering not a natural representation, but an idiosyncratic collection: “This flatbed picture plane is an altogether new kind of picture surface . . . a surface that can receive a vast and heterogeneous array of cultural images and artifacts that had not been compatible with the pictorial field of either premodernist or modernist painting” (47). Such a surface could accommodate the multivalent text-flow desired by Macrorie in ’68, that “record [of] short fabulous realities” (“To Be Read” 688). Again, we might look to something purposively other, like Eric Fischl’s exercise book for artists, to find a useful classroom text for assignments that take notions of the sublime as their goal: “[Write] something that undermines expectations” (26), “Start with a premise and then somehow invert it” (27), or, to paraphrase Vito Acconci’s assignment, “You’ve written an A paper, but you’re going to die as it’s read. What do you do? What’s the paper? How do you want to both begin and end?” (53) Or we could simply appreciate student performance

as writing-in-itself, as readymade, rather than raw material needing reshaping to mimic the masterly style, to (be)fit its frame (say, the massive Baroque gilt of Hoggart). The student's engagement with textual materials as *encounter*—with all the give-and-take dialogue and discovery that visits (especially those tinged with interest) can hold. *Shortly the stranger leaves, leaving the door open* (Cage *Silence* 103). It's a way to achieve that rhetoric of unfamiliarity desired by Irmscher, who calls the sublime of writing one of "the irreducibles" (*Ways* 10), and warns that too much analysis of writing destroys its scene; his metaphor is taking a kaleidoscope apart and trying to understand it (11). The common *flâneur* becomes the new celebrant; the Grand Ethical Poetic is Any Interesting Situation. Rather than being politically correct or professionally responsible, topics for essays are chosen simply because they thrill (e.g., given the choice, punk will *always* be chosen as topic by half our students). The populist *informe* undoes the walls and disseminates art *as it pleases*. Poor Composition. All those endless new beginnings, new paradigms, new metaphors, new directions, new inquiries. *The town may be changed, but the well cannot be changed*. Or, as Oldenburg put it, explaining his use of the Store as production/reception-site, "The studio for making art goes thru different guises, now a store, next year perhaps a factory" (141). Or perhaps a punk club, or a rap concert. Maybe even a college writing classroom. From an artistic statement by Happenings artist Robert Whitman, arises a rhetoric of writing as *s'exposer*: "The intention of these works has to do with either re-creating certain experiences that tell a story, or presenting experiences that tell a story, or showing them. You can re-create it or present it or show it. You can expose things. All these things have to do with making them available: you make them available to the observer, so called" (Kirby *Happenings* 134). His goal is very much Cage's, who felt that the whole idea was "to demonstrate what I know about, what I think people need to know about" (*Silence* 136). Form becomes the simple record of personal experience. In an interview with Richard Kostelanetz, concerning the composition of her influential Happening, *Birds of America* (1959), Ann Halprin shows how such a record can generate potentially transformative text:

I had been inspired to work on this piece as a result of a personal experience. One day as I was sitting for a long time outdoors in our wooded dance-deck, I became aware of light on a tree, a red berry that fell at my side, a fog horn in the distance, and children shouting; and I wondered if they were really in trouble or just playing. These chance relationships, each independent of the other, seemed beautiful to me. I composed *Birds of America or Gardens Without*

Walls according to that experience. Each thing was meant to take a long time, so stillness was an essential ingredient. It was intended for the audience to become so relaxed, if you will, that they could just see and hear and not have to interpret and intellectualize. They could let each thing be what it is as pure physical, sensory experience. Also, inherent in this personal experience was the possibility of discovering in chance relationships some new ways of releasing the mind from preconceived ideas and the body from conditioned or habitual responses. (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 67–68)

This is very much what I call bottom-line, parking-lot rhetoric. Very personal, very expressive, just being, becoming; very much the opposite of what passes for text in contemporary Composition: Whitman and Halprin are not doing the discourse's work, whatever that is; nor are they doing a discipline's, they're not the happy laborers off to work in a subject-field. They're just humans, out in the world, perceptive, observing things. English Composition as a Happening, then, might start simply with affording students the opportunity to render their world as Whitman and Halprin do, possibly even seeing new connections.

So the tour is over; no more galleries, then, unless they are galleries-without-walls. Writing leaves the Museum now, or rather, the wall-panels slide away and the outside is let inside. Instead of walls . . . floors, refuse lots, the stage at Winterland, the vastness of Forty-Second Street. Post-Happenings Composition extends the notion of matrixed performance to its preferred classroom metaphors—community or contact zone (that hyper-form of community, the panic-community). But to call the classroom even a *culture* already mystifies. How about just classroom as society? Of Independent Artists, perhaps: Writing Classroom as General Exhibition. In search of that tradition-loaded historicity and authenticity, the Japanese consumers in Philip K. Dick's *Man in the High Castle* abandoned their heritage, their old ways—notions like *shibusu*, for example, “the highest expression of aesthetic attainment in Japan” (Sawada 1). A recuperative effort to recapture such concepts does not stem from a mere conservative nostalgia for old ways, however; rather the strategy is that of the neo-avant-garde, attempting “to *re*connect with a lost practice in order to *dis*connect from a present way of working felt to be outmoded, misguided, or otherwise oppressive. The first move (*re*) is a temporal one, made in order, in a second, spatial move (*dis*), to open a new site for work” (Foster 7). So Daiyo Sawada, for example, feels that a reconnection with Japanese aesthetics, with concepts like *shibusu*, “could have a profound and perhaps unexpected influence on

the way we live, the way we learn" (2). *Shibusa* finds poignancy in the rough, the quiet, the modest, the natural, the implicit, the simple. It concerns itself with anti-architecture, the un-building of walls, the blurring of inside and outside—seen, for example, in the sliding wall-panels of the Japanese house, bringing the outside in, bringing the inside to the outside. A *shibusa*-inflected theory of education would question how schools "are often constituted of exterior walls which in their massiveness act as boundaries for separating the living (learning) space from outside (everyday) space in rather emphatic ways. There is no intent that the walls be an invitation for that which is outside to come inside nor for the inside to venture outside" (3). A *shibusa* space, one where silence is heard meaningfully, is seen in "the quiet of the Japanese tea-room which attains a serenity of spirit through the stillness of gently boiling water and the hush of the swishing tea brush . . . in saying nothing, everything is invited. It is an invitation to become" (5).

So forget even the Happenings. Dick Higgins acknowledges the Happenings died from the weight of their own commodified fetishism. He much preferred the subtle displacement of Fluxus performance, in which small, banal actions became heightened through the participants' selective focus (Higgins and Higgins). So Composition as Tea Ceremony (as Fluxus Performance). Owen Smith traces the gradual transformation in the Fluxus theory of performance, speaking of such late Fluxus events as Brian Buczak's "'Falling down on the icy sidewalk' Parts one and two," which, according to Buczak, "consisted of slipping and falling down on the sidewalk when least expecting to do so." For Smith,

The lack of framing in this piece . . . demonstrates the recognition in some later Fluxus actions and events of the performative aspects of *all* activity—even when such activity is not separated and presented as "performance." While at first glance some of the later Fluxus events seem to resemble semi-private activities or parties, it was precisely in these events and gatherings that the performance activities of Fluxus came closest to one of the central aims of its agenda: the merging of art and life, or the abandonment of art. With a minimum of self-conscious performance, these later Fluxus events became a celebration of the unpretentious pleasures to be found in life. (36)

Let our tea ceremony become a funeral tea-ceremony of the anti-process, then, for a work of *shibusa* is more process, more the nothingness of an art-and-life-blurred residual object than Official Something Product: "it emerges as a *by-product* of ongoing life. . . The concept of the by-product is a most significant yet most difficult concept to appreciate when we are

continually shown that the way to produce something is to know the specifications . . . *operational specifications* of criteria which define the production of the desired products. Production of this kind . . . is best done by machines” (Sawada 6–7). (As Jackson intimated, there are modern, mechanized means of representation, if all you want is *a certain kind of work with a certain set of materials*.) Instead, *shibusu* prizes the irregularities seen in nature, textures beautifully imperfect. It implies success measured only in terms of the possible: *shibusu*, “in having no mechanical regularity of quantitative precision, invites participation by the observer because it suggests rather than commands; it opens up new possibilities because it is inherently unfinished” (9). The goal is nothing more than a feeling of intensity, the new view in your heart. Let each thing be what it is as pure physical, sensory experience. Let’s say it’s just writing. This writing is. The desperate poignancy of simple pleasures. “Taking momentary pleasures to their limit is a way of transcending history and death, and, in a doomed world, is even inevitable” (Graham 89).

That’s what’s needed, what Krishnamurti offered Jackson, the grounding for the basic stylistic he tried so hard to craft, a rhetoric of the heart. Instead of tracing the shape of cultural tradition, Composition needs to penetrate to the core of human emotion. This is what Macrorie and Coles pursued so stridently, so fervently. Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, writing in his 1966 “Statement on Intermedia,” saw how it should have all come down in Composition circa 1976: “Could it be that the central problem of the next ten years or so, for all artists in all possible forms, is going to be less the still further discovery of new media and intermedia, but of the new discovery of ways to use what we care about both appropriately and explicitly? . . . We must find the way to say what has to be said in the light of our new means of communicating” (172). But post-Happenings Composition wasn’t interested in new ways to express basic cares. It fell to extra-curricular scenes like Punk to find a way, however crudely (but how awfully excitingly), to say what had to be said. Or someone like Coles, whose incredible 1981 piece “Literacy for the Eighties” is pedagogy in the form of a rant from an old codger at the end of the bar, desperately hectoring the young breed about how it was all going wrong:

One of the first things you want to get straight about teaching writing is the vital importance of the question of what you’re going to make the whole thing mean, for your students as writers, for yourself as a teacher of writing—what you’re going to make it mean and how you’re going to keep that central. Against what sea of troubles do you see yourself taking arms as a teacher? In

the name of what do you fight? And if there is no sea of troubles for you, no fight to fight, why bother? Why not just sell shoes? (249)

That last line sounds like it came off a tee-shirt sold in a Kings Row boutique. What Coles was after was a return to the ultimate foundation of the enterprise, the central energy. How else would we define that except in terms of a basic human expressionism? Which is how the Happenings artists tried to undergird their program of the re-enchantment of the real. Theirs was a theory of textuality that tried to get in touch with energies in things, to renew people's engagement with the world; that took perception and life's intensity for its aim, not *art* or *discourse* or *discipline*. That preserved the mystery.

I know that down to the last simple detail experience is totally mysterious. The only person I know that tried to prove the simplest thing in the world, like a piece of candy, was utterly mysterious was Chirico (in his early days). But I guess its what every still-life ptr worth anything tried to show, too. With me of c. well I am living in the city, a particular city, in a different time, and my subjects are as apt to be depictions of the real thing as the real things (even real pie these days does not taste like pie). Still, what I want to do more than anything is to create things just as mysterious as nature. (Oldenburg 49)

It's retuning all compositional spaces according to a sacred economy. It's the exchange-value of the Official Museum Culture vs. the use-value of Human Life. What this means for the Happenings compositionist is the de-reification of the "craft and design" of a formalist curriculum in favor of a sense of enchantment. More from Oldenburg's notebook:

This elevation of sensibility above bourgeois values, which is also a simplicity of return to truth and first principles, will (hopefully) destroy the notion of art and give the object back its power. Then the magic inherent in the universe will be restored and people will live in sympathetic religious exchange with the materials and objects surrounding them. They will not feel so different from these objects, and the animate/inanimate schism mended. What is now called an art object is a debased understanding of a magic object. When our vision is clouded by bourgeois values and by removal from an actual functional situation (through museum-civilization) the power of the object wch was a functioning object becomes suspended and only its artificiality, that is its craft and design (which are the lowest and easiest of creations), are noted. This is "art." Think how many children a day are being perverted into art and their natural recognition of the magic in objects stamped out! (60)

A student's heart-felt email, coming out of the energy of daily life, so often has a magic, transformatory power that a dutifully-written academic essay rarely achieves. This is what overwhelmed Bill Coles about his student George Humphrey's writing. It was the way in which Humphrey captured the profound sense that one particular moment—spouse asleep on a couch as you write at your desk, while outside the window you hear the rapid transit rumbling by; the train's sound directs your gaze out that window, where you see 2 pear trees in a garden below, as well as a power plant; for some reason, the memory of conversations about D. H. Lawrence struck up with someone in your building's elevator drifts into your mind—holds clues to the mysterious workings of the world. That essay offered Coles proof that writing could be transformative. Oldenburg goes on for over three pages in his notebook for *The Store*, articulating his ethos as a series of *pro's* that try boldly to de-determine art around a baseline humanity, delineating the *What Makes Writing* of English Composition as a Happening. For example,

I am for an art that is political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum.

I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero.

I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap and still comes out on top.

I am for an art that imitates the human, that is comic, if necessary, or violent, or whatever is necessary.

I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself. (39)

or

I am for the art of neck hair and caked teacups, for the art between the tines of restaurant forks, for the odor of boiling dishwater.

I am for the art of sailing on Sunday, and the art of red and white gasoline pumps.

I am for the art of bright blue factory columns and blinking biscuit signs.

I am for the art of cheap plaster and enamel. I am for the art of worn marble and smashed slate. I am for the art of rolling cobblestones and sliding sand. I am for the art of slag and black coal. I am for the art of dead birds.

I am for the art of scratchings in the asphalt, daubing at the walls. I am for the art of bending and kicking metal and breaking glass, and pulling at things to make them fall down. (40)

Composition, as I write this, seems subsumed in the politics of its practitioners. But its politics are more rote ideology than the breathtaking principles of the human heart. What could be a more basic, principled ethos than the de-determining of perception, which is the *de facto* politics of the Happenings artists? Theirs was a politics that skirted ideology to focus on the basic needs for a life lived in mental and spiritual splendor. When Kaprow piles up a courtyard full of old tires, when Rauschenberg combs the trash for his stage properties, when Cage feels that the best music is whatever you hear going on in the world around you, there's a very radical politics embedded there, an implicit critique of an over-mediated, over-commodified culture, whether explicitly stated or not; a culture the newly intensified perceptual shift of Happenings art will, hopefully, transform. Lebel: "We can no longer be satisfied with loopholes and cracks in the System; we can no longer accommodate ourselves with the pseudo-liberation of a profit-oriented economy which winds up controlling not only the distribution but the actual conception and materialization of the theatrical vision" ("On the Necessity" 283). It is not just the idea of supplement or alternative, but replacement of the current social scheme. Take Fluxus founder George Maciunas, who saw as Fluxus's "pedagogic function" the "step by step elimination of the Fine Arts . . . to redirect the use of materials and human ability into socially constructive purposes" (Stiles 69). As Owen Smith said of the Fluxus artists, "Ultimately, Fluxus does not refer to a style or even a procedure as such, but to the presence of a totality of social activities and a desire to participate in life without fixed goals or definitive characteristics" (36). Late Sixties Composition staked this social transformation on an aesthetics, based in an embodied spirituality; currently, Composition's more ideological theorists and practitioners stake it on a (often mean-spirited) thought-and-language-based textual politics. When Berghaus describes the intentions behind the Happenings and Events of Milan Knížák, founder of Eastern Europe's AKTUAL group, it sounds like the best possible political curriculum:

[His] impulses for artistic creation were simple, practical, and direct in meaning. Hedonism and the enjoyment of positive life forces were combined with a sense for the poetic and sentimental. Knížák was a man of great optimism,

sensuality, and *joie de vivre*. Spontaneity and immediacy meant more to him than aesthetic finesse. The demonstrations were designed to bring to the fore the inner forces that have been repressed or suffocated by social conditioning and material preoccupations. (359–360)

A politics without wonder and poetry, without a deep sense of sublime joy, will never be enlightening, will never be anything more than a scolding complaint. What we are (or what we should be) are poets. Lloyd-Jones describes a new, discursively hybrid writing program they created at Iowa, “a program for a broader range of writers” (5), one which sounds very Happenings, based on simply working with materials in the spirit of baseline human intensity; a curriculum based on craft, but one fully engaged in the world:

Journalists came to our courses as well as poets, graduates as well as freshmen, biologists as well as literary critics. They all came to perfect their crafts; we claimed that the craft we offered allowed them better to define themselves as crafters, to govern their own materials, and to relate to the rest of the world. Our craft, we said, is as complicated as life itself, and it engages any question a human can care to ask. (5–6)

This is very much Coles’s aim of *new awareness/new possibilities*. Lloyd-Jones realizes his identity as a compositionist: “I prefer to classify us as poets, primeval makers, enabling the culture to know itself and connect its people into a productive wholeness” (6). Deemer’s classroom was not an ideological space. It wasn’t a question for him of students learning the truth of new opinions or the folly of old ones, but simply a delay: “Rather the student should experience the difficulty of holding *any* opinion” (124). Rather than coming across as politically charged, “Should the ‘teacher’ chose to reveal (unmask) his own inadequacy (humanness), the revelation might prove efficacious and distinctly human” (124). “An art of ideas is a bore and a sentimentality,” Oldenburg wrote, “whether witty or serious or what. I may have things to say about US and many other matters, but in my art I am concerned with perception of reality and composition. Which is the only way that art can really be useful—by setting an example of how to use the senses” (48). Composition in the Empire of the Senses. Students working in whatever medium, trying to do something that sends one to heaven. Ah, the heavens . . . way up there, those swirling stars, dark and transparent as a dream. The Milky Way as fitting topic for a *Ways of Reading* course, then? Not likely, of course. We know only too well the Modernist reaction to starry-eyed sublimity in composition: too suspect,

of course, too commonplace. Greenberg loathed the non-academic freedoms Duchamp represented: if Duchamp were right, and anything could be art, why

In this context the Milky Way might be offered as a work of art too.

The trouble with the Milky Way, however, is that, as *art*, it is banal. Viewed strictly as art, the “sublime” usually does reverse itself and turn into the banal. (Greenberg “Avant-Garde Attitudes” 303)

My point: obviously, if we can’t tell the banal from something as sublime as the Milky Way, we must stop viewing composition strictly as art.

The moment, I know, seems to have passed. Late Sixties Composition gets mustier and mustier on that shelf deep within the dark interior stacks of my institution’s library. But, of course, the moment hasn’t really passed at all for some, those for whom the return to convention in the Composition of the 1980s can only seem false, a betrayal of the processes of thought that our confrontations with Composition-as-a-Happening had set in motion. I’m speaking of those who wonder about the single-minded professionalization surrounding the teaching of writing, its need to reproduce and represent in a work, to charge it with the aura of institutional tradition, of potential master status. Who wonder if our institution exists to enable writing or if the writing works in service to the institution, if “perhaps a writer’s meaning ought to be a guide to the appropriateness of a convention rather than the other way around” (Coles, “Response” 208). Who wonder about “the freedom to abandon reason and aesthetics and to just be” (Stiles 77). Who wonder if students could do pieces of writing that weren’t “writing.” Who wonder why Composition has to be *a certain kind of work*; why it can’t, instead, be more like a celebration of the unpretentious pleasure found in life. Who wonder where we might end up if we took that first step toward poetry. Who wonder about the wonder, the discovery, the wispy suggestion, that imagined sense of being upside down, of being more alive. Such wondering will never cease. The Museum is most certainly in ruins. Despite fervent attempts by post-Happenings Compositionists to keep building the permanent walls, writing-as-*informe* uncongeals walls and moves art outside into the museum-without-walls. Malraux’s museum-without-walls is “curated” in terms of its availability, its reproducibility, its status as information-site. Its system of patronage is simply the popular. Malraux’s “permanent” collection was slides, photos, no objects outside of their representations. So now, not only are the walls gone, but all the prize

works of monumental classical sculpture are gone, too, cleared from the entryway's space; only the rotunda's fountain-as-*Fountain* remains, that radical negation there at the beginning. But even the *Fountain* doesn't really remain. The "original," "signed" by R. Mutt himself, doesn't "exist" anymore, it was either broken, stolen, or lost. It exists only as a state of mind, an idea, a wispy suggestion. *Fountain* was the original unoriginal artwork; since it "originally" exists only in its reproducible form as Stieglitz photo, it's the perfect piece to commence our post-post-Happenings Museum-Without-Walls' impermanent download data-site collection. That original auratic presence—that "historicity" that we, like Dick's Japanese, are mad for—is a phantasm. "In our time," Crimp realizes, "the aura has become only a presence, which is to say, a ghost" (124). There are other ghosts, too, in our field, very agitated poltergeists, making weird sounds, knocking things over, causing cold chills to pass over the inhabitants. They will never be exorcised, never stay buried, never stop haunting us. They come with the house. We can only offer them what they want: an invitation to become. We'll keep remaking Composition-as-a-Happening, then, until we get it right. Oldenburg, realizing in 1968 that what Happenings artists had been doing for the previous ten years still hadn't been understood, could just as well have been speaking for Duchamp, Pollock, the situationists, or the Sex Pistols when he remarked, "The understanding of what we all have done is still not cleared up yet" (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 141). Charles Deemer's (un)original allegory has been a pleasure to cover. I salute the next remake of *English Composition as a Happening*, on and on through *n*-dimensions. A great era of the legend continues.