Roger Reynolds, who is now in Japan on a fellowship from the Institute of Current World Affairs, surveys the aesthetic, social, and psychological dimensions of Happenings from the particular perspective of his Japanese experience.

HAPPENINGS IN JAPAN AND ELSEWHERE

by Roger Reynolds

The experience of dislocation is becoming rarer now. Voracious mass media and modern technology have sated us. It by no means follows that startling events (Sputnik, the Kennedy assassination) or combinations of them cannot occur, but, nonetheless the unlikely has become a somewhat flaccid notion. The proliferation of intensifying adjectives, intended to refurbish common events, attests to this.

Recent developments in technical manipulation of media and environments — the Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper" record; electronically automated teen-age night clubs like the "Cheetah" chain; computerized light sculpture, which has also been used by advertising agencies in enormous programmed signboards; and massive entertainment facilities like Disneyland and the Gyrotron at Expo '67 make the frequently amateur-theatrical nature of Happenings seem mild.

The needs which gave rise to Happenings are real and current, though, and the reaction against "professionalism" and civic-centeredness in the traditional arts justified.

Happenings seem to me to rely on one or more of three fundamental schemes, though they are certainly not thought of as such: special focus, associative
development, and juxtaposition. The first involves the illumination of one element through enlarged scale, proliferation, repetition, and so on. Associative development implies a semi-improvisatory, open-ended series, from a simple beginning through more or less closely related stages. In juxtaposition, normally remote objects or processes, especially archetypes or myths, are brought together for combined though not necessarily integrated presentation.

Only after fragmentation and dissociation have become commonplace can the idea of juxtaposition become natural. The same is true, to a lesser degree for unusual focus and remote associations. We are now accustomed to rapid response to our changing needs, and, as well, to rapid adaptation to pressures impressed by the needs of others. In the art world, the Futurists and Dadaists systematically punctured inflated traditions and habits. In The Art of Assemblage, William Seitz notes that Dada substituted, for the first time in Western thought, a non-rational frame for a rationalized hierarchy of values. More broadly, it became clear during this century that our capacity for producing change and affecting substitution was fast exceeding our ability to adapt. After Nuremberg and Hiroshima, we can have few illusions about man's power of bureaucratically and mechanically disrupting the most basic of human continuities: the individual life.

Emerging into the industrial age by an even more precipitous ascent than the Western nations, Japan must contend, as well, with radical linguistic and social disparities. War and the following occupation further intensified the magnitude and rate of change. Zen Buddhism has been fundamental in shaping Japan and it has always permitted, even honored, non-rational ways. The superimposition of scientific values and highly "logical" thought patterns on Japanese society resulted in still another disruptive schism. It is not surprising that the Japanese artist should have been enmeshed in the perception of discontinuity. Nor is it surprising that, faced with remote alternatives, he frequently chooses an imitative way—unwilling to turn back to traditions which seem displaced or irrelevant and unable to achieve the demanding act of genius: reconciliation between fundamentally disparate elements. What is remarkable and encouraging is that there is so much significant effort by the younger Japanese artists.

The Japanese propensity for group associations can be inferred from the statistics below. In 1955, at least four years before Allan Kaprow's Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts christened the genre in October 1959, a group of artists centered around Jiro Yoshihara in Osaka were presenting programs of events which can certainly be seen as anticipating Kaprow in vigor and imagination, though not entirely in intent. Beginning in 1955, the "Gutai Group" ("concrete group") gave presentations in and around theaters in Toyko and Osaka. In 1959, the "Neo-Dada Organizers" first displayed their constructions and paintings at the Yomiuri Independent Show, and from the "organizers" several years later came the "High-Red-Center Group" (title derives from the literal meanings of the principal members' names: painters Takamatsu, Akasegawa, and Nakanishi). "The Experimental Workshop" (1951), under the spiritual leadership of Shuzo Takiguchi included composers Ichiyanagi, Mayuzumi, Takemitsu, and Yuasa, as well as poet-critic Akiyama, and artists Yamaguchi and Fukushima; while the "Group Ongaku" ("music group") made up of composers Ichiyanagi, Shiomi, and Tone, and artist Kosugi began its "dada music" in 1961. More recently there has been occasional activity by individuals such as Kuniharu Akiyama, Katsuro Yamaguchi, and painter Ay-O, as well as
spectacles by Kato’s "Zero Dimension Group" from Nagoya.
A few outlines will suggest the normal run of Japanese-style Happenings:

On every intersection of any size in Tokyo, a small building with a conspicuous red light is situated. Last Spring, members of Tokyo’s "Dating Group" rushed to positions in front of one of these police boxes and proceeded to eat several chickens, still bloodily alive. There are apparently no statutes covering this situation. (juxtaposition)

In 1960, painter Shusaku Arakawa invited a large number of persons to be seated in a balcony which could only be reached by means of a ladder. The "audience," visitors to an art festival at Nippon University, suddenly found itself in complete darkness. Arakawa removed the stepladder and quietly laid down on the floor below. When nothing whatever happened for more than an hour, the audience became restless and finally, in boredom and irritation, jumped down to the floor. Finding Arakawa, they began to interrogate him. He was unresponsive. Further irritated, the crowd began to prod and finally kick him. Through it all, he remained mute, without visible reaction. (associative development)

On a stage before a Tokyo audience in 1957 lay a flat plastic mass measuring approximately 10 feet by 20. Slowly it began to expand as gas was pumped in unobtrusively. Swaying and shifting, it revealed a Pollock-like pattern as its dimensions grew. When it had reached the size of a small bus, it was cut into and slowly withered. (special focus)

In December of 1966, the Painter Ay-O returned from New York and organized with Akiyama and Yamaguchi, a bus excursion along a sightseeing route well-populated with temples and shrines. At one point by the windy docks lining the Pacific, balloons were released and rolls of toilet paper thrown into the air, unwinding across the paths of the running participants. Elsewhere a television set was abused by missiles and axes after which it was to be buried.
The winter ground proved too hard, and the set was thrown into Tokyo Bay instead. Questions from Robert Filliou’s "Ample Food for Stupid Thought" were read and answered. At sunset, the group split in two and walked in opposite directions about the outer path of a large temple. When two persons met, they shook hands (shaking hands has a peculiar flavor for the Japanese whose customary greeting is the bow).

A large portion of the Japanese activity which might come under the heading of Happenings (I will use this term to cover the variety of efforts described above) has a flavor of personal, and sometimes social, protest. As Art critic Yoshiaki Tono has pointed out, some of the early groups such as the "Neo-Dada Organizers" were more social than artistic in nature. They participated in demonstrations against ratification of the Japanese-American Security Treaty with as much or more relish than they sponsored "esthetic" events. "The art activity of the group," writes Tono, "was thus somewhat compromised by the social heat of its members . . . it was like a bomb, bursting with great force, but lacking the force to sustain itself." Experiments with Happening-like events on the part of the "Gutai Group" and later with the "High-Red-Center Group" grew naturally out of changes in their materials and techniques as artists. This is one explanation for the relatively short span of interest on the part of most individuals. Once passing personal needs were satisfied, there was apparently not sufficient pressure from social or political factors to support a continuation. Of the groups mentioned earlier, only the "Zero Dimension" and "Dating" groups are still in operation. There is, as a result, no roster of Japanese Happeners, but a large number of painters,
sculptors, and musicians who have a history of sporadic involvement.

It is interesting, and perhaps not so incidental, that those Japanese who live abroad have achieved the reputation of being particularly unrestrained. This may be due to the individuals themselves (though the most notorious Oriental, Nam June Paik, is Korean) or it may simply reflect the power of the inhibitory forces, social and habitual, which operate in Japan. Spirited the people certainly are, whether at a sporting event, a sake party, or a protest demonstration, but they are rarely wild or vulgar. There is considerably less opportunity for individual action as an outlet, and more for group demonstration.

Japanese society is well equipped with the tools of repression. Not only the traditionally inviolable family, school, and business loyalties — factors which result in the still high rate of arranged marriages and the absence of job-mobility — but the language itself acts constantly against individual dignity and unsanctioned enterprise. Such a seemingly straightforward comment as “I am pleased with my new work,” is unthinkably brash in the Japanese language. There are, in addition to normal verbs, two other sets, one of which serves to humble one beneath the person to whom he is speaking, and another which honors the person to whom one is speaking so that he is placed effectively on a higher level. Social pressure is such that during the fifties the highest ranking cause of death in the fifteen to thirty age group was suicide. If one can change his circumstances, replace old loyalties or surroundings with new, he can find release from otherwise intolerable personal situations, if not, “alternatives” become more drastic.

These factors may illuminate an important way in which Japanese Happenings are distinct from the American variety. Anonymous participation in group art efforts is not such a compelling ideal here, where, after all, group involvements and endeavors from the inescapable school uniforms to mass vacations (in which all members of a corporation join) are an inevitable aspect of daily life. Here I am, of course, separating individual products from formal group alliances which abound. A satisfactory sense of outlet or release comes naturally in the form of individual action, even exhibitionism. Strictly impressed standards of personal decorum may be more easily violated under the banner of “art.” The audience has not, as a result, been eliminated in Japan. It is essential. Although very little is generally asked of the spectator, he is, conversely, never abused.

The short-term commitment of most Japanese Happeners seems to indicate that this activity serves a primarily personal function (psychological rather than artistic). The relationship between Happenings and political protest mentioned above is no more than a coincidental result of strong individual feelings. Politically, events in Japan would seem to demand protest now more than before, yet it has abated. The society is reflected by the materials used, as one would expect: the slashing of large paper screens (modeled after the invitingly fragile paper shoji or sliding doors), and the inflation of or encasing by enormous sacks and balloons (everything one buys in Tokyo is enclosed in plastic bags, from a table with chairs to already plastic wrapped ears of corn). The preoccupation with junk and debris which followed the Second World War, however, has passed completely now, and there is not a trace of the self-consciously homely lower East-side décor which is the favored atmosphere for many American works. While individualism and antiseptically neat suburbia in America lead to the need for “participation” and chaotic settings, Japan’s crowded, tightly group-structured society naturally leads elsewhere.
Contemplation and esthetic awareness are deeply ingrained features of Japan’s ancient, deflected, but uninterrupted history. Zen Buddhism attempted to make a virtue, a joy, out of deprivation. Things are rapidly changing, but not so radically as to have displaced these elements. A gardener, for example, is expected to work little more than half the time he is on duty in order, I was told, to leave ample time for consideration of the correct moves. In short, it is scarcely a new idea to the Japanese that one could or should attempt to find beauty and meaning in ordinary objects or life.

It should be noted, in passing, that violence and vulgarity do not dominate Japanese Happenings (no matter what Life Magazine may write nor how many times the explainers invoke the name of Artaud). It is true that the culture’s admittedly un-Western attitudes about sensuality and nudity might make it easier for a Japanese Happener to do things which seem “emancipated” to the American or European bystander. Such things cause no excitement here. If Dada’s method was shock its lasting force has depended on the imaginative artistic force of adherents like Arp and Duchamp. From our vantage point it is clear that outrage resided less in their acts than in the attitudes of their public. Similarly, Happenings do not need to rely on shock, which is, in any event, more difficult to achieve now. They have more effective means.

There are still small-scale events each season in the larger Japanese cities, usually put on by college students for private gatherings, but most of the appropriate energy is now directed either at individual work by artists who are increasingly successful internationally, or towards feeding the burgeoning interest in “off-Ginza” theater. Farce and theater-of-the-absurd — native and imported plays — have become increasingly popular with the younger people in Tokyo, not, apparently, because the approach is newer than that of Happenings (It isn’t.), but because controlled, skillful activity is more appealing, more satisfying to them. Their matter-of-fact attitude toward Happenings was echoed nicely by Jiro Yoshihara, mentor of the Gutai Group, which inaugurated Japanese efforts. When I asked him why the group was no longer doing Happenings, he replied simply, “We’ve already done them.”

Amidst the protest and exhibitionistic events have been spaced some of a significantly different order, not Happenings in the classical New York sense but certainly important. They are the products of Kuniharu Akiyama, Toshi Ichiyanagi, and Toru Takemitsu. Relying less on focus and unexpected juxtapositions, they are more concerned with what I have called associative development. Special focus can be deliberately banal, settling on something like one of the Gutai Group’s balloons which gradually grew to thirty feet in length extending out over the audience and emitted jets of smoke from orifices along its length; or it can, in combination with associative development, produce a more subtle and haunting result. Symbolism, after all, can do no more than remind us of something we already know.

Ichiyanagi’s “Experimental Music” was included on a program of Happenings in the Fall of 1966 at the Sogetsu Art Center in Toyko. Four persons were seated in straight chairs. Contact microphones were fixed to the surrounding floor. “As slowly as possible” the performers leaned sideways in their chairs. At the end of a time period which they privately judged to be four minutes, they were to have reached a point of imbalance such that they crashed to the floor. At this instant began a second four-minute period during which each performer was directed to struggle violently but silently with his chair. When the second estimated four minutes was
up, each individual froze in whatever position he found himself. Then, when all four were ready, they resumed sitting on their chairs, as before, leaning gradually to one side. The curtain slowly descended, falling completely before balance was lost again. Throughout, the sounds of this mute, stoic, four-way struggle were electronically amplified and broadcast in the hall. (*special focus and associative development*)

"Blue Aurora for Toshi Ichiyanagi" was prepared by Takemitsu for presentation at the University of Hawai'i's East-West Festival in 1964. Consisting of three simply but artfully made collages and a fourth card containing directions, it is a suggestive, multi-layered play on water, the color blue, directions, directionlessness, and space. When John Cage did it in Tokyo, he wore blue socks, blue gloves, and a blue net mask. Having asked some people to shine flashlights equipped with blue filters around the auditorium during his performance, he proceeded to move slowly about in accord with the instructions, periodically whispering the word "space." Water poured from one glass into another, apparently empty, became instantly blue. A large piece of blue silk material was allowed to run hissing between his hands or across the surface of a table. In the end, all lights were extinguished while the word "and" in enormous block letters was revealed, illuminated by black light. When normal lights returned, Cage sat quietly in a chair, without mask, smoking a cigarette. (*associative development*)

In "Blue Aurora," the performer is invited to display a high degree of virtuosity. Starting with a tangible and yet indefinite stimulus, he must put specific fragments (words, colors, directions) into a context of his own making. The "score" decrees nothing, but provides a climate. Seeing that the author has done his work thoroughly, without relying on in-group associations though perhaps including them, one may be moved to exert his own capacities.

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Though Happenings rarely require or admit anything in the way of a plot, they do generally have a theme or point. But frequently, a verbal, written, or photographic report makes a stronger and more evocative point than the Happening itself is able to. Descriptions, of course, instinctively avoid all that distracts. Even the interfering or disagreeable elements take on an amusing tone so long as one has not actually had to endure them.

Most people are embarrassed or annoyed by unskilled activity, unless they have some personal stake in it (like a father and son talent show). The same is true of cluttered environments and time dimensions which prove too large for the available events. Consciousness of time (and hence boredom) arises from effort at achieving continuity. If there is not sufficient motivation for the observer, he loses interest and passes into a state of daydream or bald discomfort. Unless attentive, he is unlikely to receive detailed or meaningful impressions from new experience.

For the most part, activity results in satisfaction to the degree that it involves the successful use of skills. These do not need to be "professional" skills. Even the most rudimentary instances of human gregariousness include rhythmic handclapping, swaying, and chanting. These too are tasks, but geared to the common denominator. Personal satisfaction comes from doing something in a way that ranks well on one's own scale of values. It is a serious miscalculation to expect that people will be moved, altered, or enlightened by observing inept

Katsuhiko Yamaguchi with rotating distress signal.
performance or from taking part in activity which does not challenge their personal capabilities effectively (taxing enough to require real effort, not so taxing as to assure defeat). It is unfortunate that the dull, cluttered, or rambling reality of many Happenings inhibits rather than releases, obscures the aims rather than enunciates them.

More contemporary than the traditional techniques of extension and embellishment, the juxtaposition of normally disjunct elements has become increasingly important as a key to new awareness in science and in art. Grey Walter in The Living Brain has given the following picture from the perspective of a neurophysiologist:

... a man may learn by experience to associate two series of events between which any connection seemed at first wildly improbable. For such associations to be possible, provision must be made for every signal entering the nervous system to be relayed to every part, not merely to the specialized receiving zone. Thus from the knot of an event is generated a web of speculation; when two series of events are perceived together they form the warp and woof of a shimmering fabric into which is woven the pattern of probability that the two events are significantly related. The repetition in time of this pattern permits the construction of a hypothesis of correlation; the idea that one series of events implies the other.

In a compact passage this evidently sensitive scientist points up the importance of the continuity of events (series) and the exercise of attentiveness on the part of both maker and observer-participant (provision must be made. ... repetition in time...) if one is to achieve a meld of two extraordinary associates. Traditional concepts of continuity are far too restrictive now, but the improbable, by definition, can only be anticipated when
carefully prepared. This does not mean that it is necessary to resort to established formulas — of period comedies and sonatas or theater-of-the-absurd and psychedelic rock. A limitless variety of events might qualify, but pattern and effort would seem to be basic.

Psychologist Sarnoff Mednick of the University of Michigan developed a test for creativity several years ago based on the ability to make associations between things which might not appear related at first thought. To achieve generality, he used common word-pairs in the following way. Rat, blue, and cottage might appear on the first line of a test, wheel, electric, and high on the next, and so forth. The test subject is asked to locate a word which combines naturally, as a pair, with each one of the series of three. In the first instance above, that word is cheese, and the second either chair or wire. Something further, and of considerable significance, came out of the RAT (remote associates test). The possible existence of a need for novelty (a need in the sense of a “drive state” analogous to more obvious ones such as hunger, sex, etc.) was investigated. Results showed that subjects who scored high appeared to have a drive towards novelty (or away from redundancy), while low scores appeared to have a positive aversion for novelty.

If this is finally established, it will refine our understanding of the difficulties which already seem inherent in the Happener’s expectation of and desire for participation. In short, those who need it, don’t need it. On the other hand, those who might be thought of as profiting from involvement in novel or “liberating” circumstances have a physiological drive away from them. Continuing in a vaguely psychological tone, the “responsibility” which American Happeners call for on the part of participants requires willingness to accept it.

The willingness, in turn, involves some level of motivation. A stronger drive towards novelty results in a firmer commitment to “responsibility.” This circularity leaves the Happening, as most frequently espoused, a closed activity: suited to those who recognize the desirability of it but hardly reaching out to others. New bands of devotees are formed, like madrigal groups, enjoyable, but registering no wide impact on society (as rock and roll, for example, has).

At roughly the same time Happenings began to attract attention, several other phenomena arose in the fields of advertising (Madison Avenue’s “Brainstorming”) and industrial research. In his book *Syneetics*, (1961), and later through consultation and training services, W. J. J. Gordon has shown that non-rational processes can be useful to industry. He devised techniques for stimulating problem solving and the generation of new ideas through cooperative group explorations. There are two basic operations in syneetics; “making-the-strange-familiar,” and “making-the-familiar-strange.” The second process employs three analogue mechanisms, *personal analogy* (imagining one’s feeling if one were the object under discussion — a faucet or fog); *direct analogy* ( likening disparate things by means of an associate — typewriter and pipe organ); and *symbolic analogy* (characterizing the implications of a key element by the briefest possible phrase — “dependable intermittency” for “ratchet”). At the extended group sessions which he oversees, Gordon encourages “fantasy” and the interaction of the techniques described. He discourages hasty attempts at judgment and the labeling of anything as “irrelevant.”

Allan Kaprow, the foremost apologist for Happenings, warns against the dangers of thinking of “composition” in Happenings as self-sufficient form, or as an organizing activity in which materials
are taken for granted as means toward larger ends. Composition, he writes, should be "understood as an operation dependent upon the materials (including people and nature) and phenomenally indistinct from them" (stress supplied). While there is little disagreement about the usefulness of freedom, there are differences concerning the nature of the skeletal support. Structure may, of course, be remote from that which has been considered adequate in the past. A frame may be anything from Takemitsu's collage to Gordon's analogical techniques, and beyond, but it is yet to be demonstrated that Happenings can successfully involve people without something of the sort.

In the case of synectics, motivation is powerful: money. The goal is clear as well, narrowing the field of play. In Happenings the frame is often too vaguely defined, too carelessly realized. A frequently expressed goal, the "unstructured" manner of daily life, is curious in view of the depressingly thoroughgoing structure it actually has: winter and summer; daylight and darkness; baby, travel, TV schedules; approved times for eating, sleeping, working, visiting, relaxing; the limits of the law, of decorum, of property rights, linguistic fluency, budgetary means; family, class, business, religious, national, racial allegiance, and so forth. The structure of restraints which limits us at each moment is, after all, what the "hippies" are denying.

There is a revealing confusion of terms surrounding Happenings. "Radical juxtaposition" is misleading, requiring the substitution of "outlandish" or "startling" for radical which actually means "of, or proceeding from, the root." Also unfortunate is the implication that it is what is put together — not how the combination is presented and how received — which is the crux of things. (Marshall McLuhan's "medium is the message" motto is as misleading as most other striking aphorisms. "The medium" undoubtedly influences the manner in which material is prepared for presentation, and the mood of our receptivity, probably far more than we have been able to admit; but, excepting the initial exposure to a new medium, the residue of subject matter makes the lasting impact. Information remains when the sense of the experience has faded.)

Another common word used in describing Happenings is "collage." This technique as used by artists, and more recently filmmakers, is powerful. Not only the relationships between events, as presented in the work project (fragmentary, overlapped, atypically oriented), but the normal, "real" contexts of the collaged elements are evoked, giving rise to other chains of connection and allusion. With Happenings, this process can become pretentious and self-defeating. One cannot remove a slice of life from its normal context and still have life. One can actually go about his business or he can pretend to. If one is pretending, he may well have the kind of revelations which arise from self-consciousness, but there should be no illusions about the artificiality of the process. The artist who hasn't the courage to paste a real letter or eage to his work and paints it instead looks too cautious, but the analogy cannot be transferred to Happenings. Imitation is, in any case, the palest form of learning.

There is every reason to applaud the experimental investigation (artistic or scientific) of analogical and non-rational processes. This is an exciting and doubtless a fecund terrain. It would be good to see more inventive exploration and to hear less about the "separation between art and life."

"Life" is, for the most part, not much less artificial than "art," and, in this age of credibility gaps, who can still feel duped or misled by the trivially obvious "rules" or "boundaries" of the art game?