



Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

2012

Review of Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings by Judith F. Rodenbeck

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Suggested citation:

Tomic, Milena (2012) Review of Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings by Judith F. Rodenbeck. *C Magazine* (114). p. 60. ISSN 1193-8625 Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1445/>

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Book Reviews



Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings by Judith F. Rodenbeck The MIT Press, 2011

Allan Kaprow coined the term “happening” in his 1958 essay “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” to describe the performative departure of action from the confines of the canvas. Happenings were not meant to look or feel like anything recognizable as art, but neither were they entirely dependent on the experience of the participants within a freely interactive setting. Rather, they bracketed out a whole range of everyday behaviours, routines, and responses through detailed event scores, combining playful spontaneity with authorial control. In this sense, Judith F. Rodenbeck’s timely new book, *Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings*, addresses a crucial gap in the historiography of American art.

Rodenbeck focuses primarily on the interdisciplinary American milieu of the late 50s and early 60s, correcting a number of oversights and oversimplifications. More specifically, she dismisses the historical over-emphasis on the formal structure of “action” to the exclusion of “material, rhetorical, or narrative content,” doing for happenings what Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster did for Surrealism in the 80s and 90s. Indeed, just as Krauss and Foster charted a counter-history of the movement against the grain of its principal ideology—namely, by countering André Breton’s *amour fou* with the darker automatism of the death drive and Georges Bataille’s *informe*—so Rodenbeck sets out to dispel certain misconceptions about the hybrid form of the happening.

The New York School was a locus of ambivalence for artists eager to dismantle the myth of painterly spontaneity while still being captivated by the illusory appearance of total freedom afforded by that myth. Rodenbeck’s first chapter addresses the intergenerational—and interdisciplinary—debates of that time, though each of the six chapters that follow deals with a distinct set of concerns, often through dialogue with another discipline. In the second chapter, she traces the shared political concerns of painting and urbanism, turning to the department store as a paradigmatic space of spectacle and the proliferating commodity fetish. This allows her to bring together events as geographically separate as Gerhard Richter and Konrad Lueg’s *Leben mit Pop* (1963), which took place in a Düsseldorf furniture store, Kaprow’s own *Bon Marché* of the same year, and Claes Oldenburg’s *The Store* (1961), where plaster and wire sculptures of everyday items were sold out of a space on the Lower East Side.

Theatre and photography play an expanded role in the fourth and sixth chapters, respectively. First, Rodenbeck explores different models of subjectivity in formation, comparing the happeners with The Living Theatre, an experimental theatre company founded by Judith Malina in the late 40s. Second, the author explores the notions of *near-painting* and *near-photography*, which culminate in a close reading of the tripartite Texas happening *Record II for Roger Shattuck* (1968). Seeing as *Record II*’s score calls for the breaking of large rocks and subsequent photographing of those rocks, their “silvering,” followed by more photographs, and finally a “scattering” of the photographs “with no explanation,” Rodenbeck reads the work semiotically as an allegory of the medium. In fact, some of the strongest readings in the book depend on precisely this kind of semiotic slippage. The argument in the third chapter turns on the versatile metaphor of the “black box,” bringing together such disparate attempts to probe the nature of subjectivity and interiority as B.F. Skinner’s conditioning of responses in animals and infants, John Cage’s 1951 visit to a sensory deprivation chamber at Harvard University, Stanislavski’s method acting, and the black box of experimental theatre.

Following the chapter on theatre, but preceding the one on photography, Rodenbeck’s fifth chapter focuses on a single work—Jim Dine’s *Car Crash* (1960)—through the prism of compulsive repetition and trauma. The case study is a well-chosen one. The formal structure of happenings in their own time tended to be emphasized at the expense of what Susan Sontag was virtually alone in identifying as their violent, affective and disruptive character. The well-known *Spring Happening* (1961), for example, modulated the intensity of light and sound, trapping participants in a narrow tunnel and subjecting them to the roar of a lawnmower. And yet later revisionist accounts framed the genre as a precursor to the more recent forms of participatory practice, including Nicolas Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics.

Radical Prototypes makes a convincing case not only for the complexity of happenings but also for their continuing relevance to contemporary practitioners of time-based art. The book is particularly relevant for those with more faith in antagonistic social relations than in relations that are falsely convivial, or worse, that function purely as museum entertainment.

—Milena Tomić