Allan Kaprow

ASSEMBLAGES, ENVIRONMENTS AND HAPPENINGS

(A) *The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible.* The reciprocity between the man-made and the ready-made will be at its maximum potential this way. Something will always happen at this juncture, which, if it is not revelatory, will not be merely bad art – for no one can easily compare it with this or that accepted masterpiece. I would judge this a foundation upon which may be built the specific criteria of the Happenings, as well as the other styles treated in this book.

(B) *Therefore, the source of themes, materials, actions, and the relationships between them are to be derived from any place or period* except *from the arts, their derivatives, and their milieu.* When innovations are taking place it often becomes necessary for those involved to treat their tasks with considerable severity. In order to keep their eyes fixed solely upon the essential problem, they will decide that there are certain 'don'ts' which, as self-imposed rules, they will obey unswervingly. Arnold Schoenberg felt he had to abolish tonality in music composition and, for him at least, this was made possible by his evolving the twelve-tone series technique. Later on his more academic followers showed that it was very easy to write traditional harmonies with that technique. But still later, John Cage could permit a C major triad to exist next to the sound of a buzz saw, because by then the triad was thought of differently – not as a musical necessity but as a sound as interesting as any other sound. This sort of freedom to accept all kinds of subject matter will probably be possible in the Happenings of the future, but I think not for now. Artistic attachments are still so many window dressings, unconsciously held onto to legitimize an art that otherwise might go unrecognized.

Thus it is not that the known arts are 'bad' that causes me to say 'Don't get near them'; it is that they contain highly sophisticated habits. By avoiding the artistic modes there is the good chance that a new language will develop that has its own standards. The Happening is conceived as an art, certainly, but this is for lack of a better word, or one that would not cause endless discussion. I, personally, would not care if it were called a sport. But if it is going to be thought of in the context of art and artists, then let it be a distinct art which finds its way into the art category by realizing its species outside of 'culture.' A United States Marine Corps manual on jungle-fighting tactics, a tour of a laboratory where polyethylene kidneys are made, the daily traffic jams on the Long Island Expressway, are more useful than Beethoven, Racine, or Michelangelo.

(C) *The performance of a Happening should take place over several widely spaced, sometimes moving and changing, locales.* A single performance space tends toward the static and, more significantly, resembles conventional theatre practice. It is also like painting, for safety's sake, only in the center of a canvas. Later on, when we are used to a fluid space as painting has been for almost a century, we can return to concentrated areas, because then they will not be considered exclusive. It is presently advantageous to experiment by gradually widening the distances between the events within a Happening. First along several points on a heavily trafficked avenue; then in several rooms and floors of an apartment house where some of the activities are out of touch with each other; then on more than one street; then in different but proximate cities; finally all around the globe. On the one hand, this will increase the tension between the parts, as a poet might by stretching the rhyme from two lines to ten. On the other, it permits the parts to exist more on their own, without the necessity of intensive coordination. Relationships cannot help being made and perceived in any human action, and here they may be of a new kind if tried-and-true methods are given up.

Even greater flexibility can be gotten by moving the locale itself. A Happening could be composed for a jetliner going from New York to Luxembourg with stopovers at Gander, Newfoundland, and Reykjavik, Iceland. Another Happening would take place up and down the elevators of five tall buildings in midtown Chicago.

The images in each situation can be quite disparate: a kitchen in Hoboken, a *pissoir* in Paris, a taxi garage in Leopoldville, and a

bed in some small town in Turkey. Isolated points of contact may be maintained by telephone and letters, by a meeting on a highway, or by watching a certain television program at an appointed hour. Other parts of the work need only be related by theme, as when all locales perform an identical action which is disjoined in timing and space. But none of these planned ties are absolutely required, for preknowledge of the Happening's cluster of events by all participants will allow each one to make his own connections. This, however, is more the topic of form, and I shall speak further of this shortly.

(D) *Time, which follows closely on space considerations, should be variable and discontinuous.* It is only natural that if there are multiple spaces in which occurrences are scheduled, in sequence or even at random, time or 'pacing' will acquire an order that is determined more by the character of movements within environments than by a fixed concept of regular development and conclusion. There need be no rhythmic coordination between the several parts of a Happening unless it is suggested by the event itself: such as when two persons must meet at a train departing at 5:47 PM.

Above all, this is 'real' or 'experienced' time, as distinct from conceptual time. If it conforms to the clock used in the Happening, as above, that is legitimate, but if it does not because a clock is not needed, that is equally legitimate. All of us know how, when we are busy, time accelerates, and how, conversely, when we are bored it can drag almost to a standstill. Real time is always connected with doing something, with an event of some kind, and so is bound up, with things and spaces.

Imagine some evening when one has sat talking with friends, how as the conversation became reflective the pace slowed, pauses became longer, and the speakers 'felt' not only heavier but their distances from one another increased proportionately, as though each were surrounded by great areas commensurate with the voyaging of his mind. Time retarded as space extended. Suddenly, from out on the street, through the open window a police car, siren whining, was heard speeding by, *its* space moving as the source of sound moved from somewhere to the right of the window to somewhere farther to the left. Yet it also came spilling into the slowly spreading vastness of the talkers' space, invading the transformed room, partly shattering it, sliding shockingly in and about its envelope, nearly displacing it. And as in those cases where sirens are only sounded at crowded street corners to warn pedestrians, the police car and its noise at once ceased and the capsule of time and space it had become vanished as abruptly as it made itself felt. Once more the protracted picking of one's way through the extended reaches of mind resumed as the group of friends continued speaking.

Feeling this, why shouldn't an artist program a Happening over the course of several days, months, or years, slipping it in and out of the performers' daily lives. There is nothing esoteric in such a proposition, and it may have the distinct advantage of bringing into focus those things one ordinarily does every day without paying attention – like brushing one's teeth.

On the other hand, leaving taste and preference aside and relying solely on chance operations, a completely unforeseen schedule of events could result, not merely in the preparation but in the actual performance; or a simultaneously performed single moment; or none at all. (As for the last, the act of finding this out would become, by default, the 'Happening.')

But an endless activity could also be decided upon, which would apparently transcend palpable time – such as the slow decomposition of a mountain of sandstone . . . In this spirit some artists are earnestly proposing a lifetime Happening equivalent to Clarence Schmidt's lifetime Environment.

The common function of these alternatives is to release an artist from conventional notions of a detached, closed arrangement of time-space. A picture, a piece of music, a poem, a drama, each confined within its respective frame, fixed number of measures, stanzas, and stages, however great they may be in their own right, simply will not allow for breaking the barrier between art and life. And this is what the objective is.

(E) *Happenings should be performed once only.* At least for the time being, this restriction hardly needs emphasis, since it is in most cases the only course possible. Whether due to chance, or to the lifespan of the materials (especially the perishable ones), or to the changeableness of the events, it is highly unlikely that a Happening of the type I am outlining could ever be repeated. Yet many of the Happenings have, in fact, been given four or five times, ostensibly to accommodate larger attendances, but this, I believe, was only a rationalization of the wish to hold onto theatrical customs. In my experience, I found the practice inadequate because I was always forced to do that which *could be repeated*, and had to discard countless situations which I felt were marvelous but performable only once. Aside from the fact that repetition is boring to a generation brought up on ideas of spontaneity and originality, to repeat a Happening at this time is to accede to a far more serious matter: compromise of the whole concept of Change. When the practical requirements of a situation serve only to kill what an artist has set out to do, then this is not a practical problem at all; one would be very practical to leave it for something else more liberating.

Nevertheless, there is a special instance of where more than one performance is entirely justified. This is the score or scenario which is designed to make every performance significantly different from the previous one. Superficially this has been true for the Happenings all along. Parts have been so roughly scored that there was bound to be some margin of imprecision from performance to performance. And, occasionally, sections of a work were left open for accidentals or improvisations. But since people are creatures of habit, performers always tended to fall into set patterns and stick to these no matter what leeway was given them in the original plan.

In the near future, plans may be developed which take their cue from games and athletics, where the regulations provide for a variety of moves that make the outcome always uncertain. A score might be written, so general in its instructions

that it could be adapted to basic types of terrain such as oceans, woods, cities, farms; and to basic kinds of performers such as teenagers, old people, children, matrons, and so on, including insects, animals, and the weather. This could be printed and mail-ordered for use by anyone who wanted it. George Brecht has been interested in such possibilities for some time now. His sparse scores read like this:

DIRECTION

Arrange to observe a sign
indicating direction of travel.

- travel in the indicated direction
- travel in another direction

But so far they have been distributed to friends, who perform them at their discretion and without ceremony. Certainly they are aware of the philosophic allusions to Zen Buddhism, of the subtle wit and childlike simplicity of the activities indicated. Most of all, they are aware of the responsibility it places on the performer to make something of the situation or not. As we mentioned before in connection with another of Brecht's pieces, this implication is the most radical potential in all of the work discussed in this book. Beyond a small group of initiates, there are few who could appreciate the moral dignity of such scores and fewer still who could derive pleasure from going ahead and doing them without self-consciousness. In the case of those Happenings with more detailed instructions or more expanded action, the artist must be present at every moment, directing and participating, for the tradition is too young for the complete stranger to know what to do with such plans if he got them.

(F) *It follows that audiences should be eliminated entirely.* All the elements – people, space, the particular materials and character of the environment, time – can in this way be integrated. And the last shred of theatrical convention disappears. For anyone once involved in the painter's problem of unifying a field of divergent phenomena, a group of inactive people in the space of a Happening is just dead space. It is no different from a dead area of red paint on a canvas. Movements call up movements in response, whether on a canvas or in a Happening. A Happening with only an empathic response on the part of a seated audience is not a Happening but stage theatre.

Then, on a human plane, to assemble people unprepared for an event and say that they are 'participating' if apples are thrown at them or they are herded about is to ask very little of the whole notion of participation. Most of the time the response of such an audience is halfhearted or even reluctant, and sometimes the reaction is vicious and therefore destructive to the work (though I suspect that in numerous instances of violent reaction to such treatment it was caused by

the latent sadism in the action, which they quite rightly resented). After a few years, in any case, 'audience response' proves to be so predictably pure cliché that anyone serious about the problem should not tolerate it, any more than the painter should continue the use of dripped paint as a stamp of modernity when it has been adopted by every lampshade and Formica manufacturer in the country.

I think that it is a mark of mutual respect that all persons involved in a Happening be willing and committed participants who have a clear idea what they are to do. This is simply accomplished by writing out the scenario or score for all and discussing it thoroughly with them beforehand. In this respect it is not different from the preparations for a parade, a football match, a wedding, or religious service. It is not even different from a play. The one big difference is that while knowledge of the scheme is necessary, professional talent is not; the situations in a Happening are lifelike or, if they are unusual, are so rudimentary that professionalism is actually uncalled for. Actors are stage-trained and bring over habits from their art that are hard to shake off; the same is true of any other kind of showman or trained athlete. The best participants have been persons not normally engaged in art or performance, but who are moved to take part in an activity that is at once meaningful to them in its ideas yet natural in its methods.

There is an exception, however, to restricting the Happening to participants only. When a work is performed on a busy avenue, passersby will ordinarily stop and watch, just as they might watch the demolition of a building. These are not theatre-goers and their attention is only temporarily caught in the course of their normal affairs. They might stay, perhaps become involved in some unexpected way, or they will more likely move on after a few minutes. Such persons are authentic parts of the environment.

A variant of this is the person who is engaged unwittingly with a performer in some planned action: a butcher will sell certain meats to a customer-performer without realizing that he is a part of a piece having to do with purchasing, cooking, and eating meat.

Finally, there is this additional exception to the rule. A Happening may be scored for *just watching*. Persons will do nothing else. They will watch things, each other, possibly actions not performed by themselves, such as a bus stopping to pick up commuters. This would not take place in a theatre or arena, but anywhere else. It could be an extremely meditative occupation when done devotedly; just 'cute' when done indifferently. In a more physical mood, the idea of called-for watching could be contrasted with periods of action. Both normal tendencies to observe and act would now be engaged in a responsible way. At those moments of relative quiet the observer would hardly be a passive member of an audience; he would be closer to the role of a Greek chorus, without its specific meaning necessarily, but with its required place in the overall scheme. At other moments the active and observing roles would be exchanged, so that by reciprocation the whole meaning of watching would be altered, away from something like spoon-feeding, toward something purposive, possibly intense.

(G) *The composition of a Happening proceeds exactly as in Assemblages and Environments, that is, it is evolved as a collage of events in certain spans of time and in certain spaces.* When we think of 'composition,' it is important not to think of it as self-sufficient 'form,' as an arrangement as such, as an organizing activity in which the materials are taken for granted as a means toward an end that is greater than they are. This is much too Christian in the sense of the body being inferior to the soul. Rather, composition is understood as an operation dependent upon the materials (including people and nature) and phenomenally indistinct from them. Such materials and their associations and meanings, as I have pointed out, generate the relationships and the movements of the Happening, instead of the reverse. The adage that 'form follows function' is still useful advice.

Otherwise, a sort of artistic schizophrenia can result if *any* subject matter and material is subjected to *any* interesting formal technique. It may be that some subjects, because of our familiarity with and wide use of them, allow for more alternatives of transformation and grouping than other subjects. An apple can be painted in the Neo-Classic, Realist, Impressionist, Expressionist, and Cubist styles and still be recognized as an apple, but an electron microscope cannot. The Impressionist mode, for instance, would blur it beyond recognition – and at that point the real subjects become light, optical sensation, and paint, and *not* the microscope.

Because the Happenings are occupied with relatively new (at least new for art) subject matter and materials, the stylistic conventions used by the other arts, or by such philosophical disciplines as logic, are best left alone. To illustrate why, several years ago I used serial methods related to Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique. A root-molecule of events was written down: 'a jam sandwich being eaten in a dining room, a person laughing outside a window, and an alarm clock going off periodically in the bedroom.' This was the basic cluster of situations that was to grow into the Happening. [. . .] I had in mind the very thorough way that the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen developed serialism, whereby all the elements of sound could be made mathematically consistent. But while this was possible in music, particularly electronic music, whose rudiments are relatively nonassociative, this was not possible with the materials of a Happening, with their high degree of everyday usage. And I did not want to lose all the advantages these provided by deliberately choosing more neutral events (about which I shall say more shortly). The worst difficulty to arise out of these procedures, however, was that as they became more exacting, performance became nearly impossible.

The results on paper were interesting enough, but in action (as far as any action was capable of being derived from the complicated scores) the effect was static and mechanical. The events were simply not eventful. A regimen unrelated to their natural qualities seemed to have been superimposed upon them. The scheme was self-evidently 'formal' but the subject matter was not; or it had some as yet unrevealed form that was hidden because it was not respected. I concluded that to do this at all, limits had to be observed in choosing the initial stuff of the Happening. And these limits were contrary to the principal direction the art was taking.

We generally mean by 'formal' art (the fugues of Bach, the sonnets of Shakespeare, Cubist paintings) an art that is primarily manipulative. As in a chess game, the manipulation is intellectual, whereby elements of the work are moved according to strict, sometimes self-imposed, regulations. The weaving of these elements into groupings, regroupings; the losing and finding of themes, subthemes, and counterthemes, seemingly disparate yet always dominated by the relentless inevitability that they shall resolve at the end, is the peculiar fascination of such an art.

Formal art must be made of a substance that is at once stable and general in meanings. A formalist cannot easily use the horrifying records of Nazi torture chambers, but he can use a simple statement like 'the sky is blue,' abstract shapes such as circles and squares, the raising and lowering of an arm that does nothing else. The impact of the imagery, the 'what,' is not as important as the intricacy and subtlety of the moves the imagery is put through.

A formalist who wishes to make a Happening must choose with discretion situations that can be freely manipulated without jarring the overtones of the imagery within them. A group of men all in white doing calisthenics, a ticking metronome, a sheet of paper being moved variously across the floor are obviously easily formalized. But for this to become truly great, I think that some time must elapse. The media are still too undigested for us to feel at home with them. This is essential: to be profitably involved in an activity of arrangements, the materials arranged must not command attention. At present, the media are all rather unstable because their meanings in their new context tend to arise more quickly than anything else. Kleenex may be a commonplace, but collected in quantity in a Happening they would immediately push into relief all that we have only half-consciously thought about Kleenex and its intimate uses.

Therefore, in making a Happening, it is better to approach composition without borrowed form theories, and instead to let the form emerge from what the materials can do. If a horse is part of a work, whatever a horse does gives the 'form' to what he does in the Happening: trotting, standing, pulling a cart, eating, defecating, and so forth. If a factory of heavy machinery is chosen, then the clanging of motorized repetition might easily cause the form to be steadily repetitive. In this way a whole body of nonintellectualized, nonculturized experience is opened to the artist and he is free to use his mind anew in connecting things he did not consider before.

Think of the following items: tires, doughnuts, Cheerios cereal, Life Savers candy, life preservers, wedding rings, men's and women's belts, band saws, plastic pools, barrel hoops, curtain rings, Mason jar gaskets, hangman's nooses – one could go on almost indefinitely. They are all obviously united by a common circular shape (an observation that could be made by a botanist or a standard auto parts salesman as well as by any painter; for the recognition and use of physical resemblances is not the special talent of artists alone, even if the tradition of form analysis would seem to tell us so). By juxtaposing any half dozen of these items, an idea for a Happening could emerge. And from this combination, meanings not

normally associated with such things could be derived by minds sensitive to symbols. [. . .]

Shifting things around can be an excellent mode of *performance* as much as of composition. Just as an Environment or an Assemblage can be maintained in prolonged transformation by allowing its parts to be rearranged in numbers of ways, the same can apply to a Happening. This would simply continue the compositional process into the performance process and the two usually distinct phases would begin to merge as the caesura between them is pulled out. Suppose, for example, that three environments and five actions are selected, partly by taste and partly by chance methods. [. . .] Each action may be performed once or twice, and at one or two prescribed environments and at their respective times, as desired.

At no time is it known if actions will be performed at all of the three environments, since the choice is left to the performers, nor what the number and kind of actions will be at the environments chosen. [. . .] The ninety-six possible combinations are numerous and dramatic enough to make this small list of events both unexpected and sufficiently different in every case.

There are related ways of setting off rearrangements of fixed numbers of actions such as by *cueing*, in which performers are given a set of actions that are signaled, knowingly or unknowingly, by one another or by natural occurrences such as the sound of a car horn or a cloud formation. These cues also may be responded to in any one of a number of alternative ways in each instance, so here again the combinations are quite varied.

Finally, chance may determine nearly everything, and personal preference and the rumblings of the imagination will be put aside. I say chance operations may 'nearly' determine everything, for any sensitive mind will tend to make connections between the actions which he finds occurring and those in which he is taking part, even if he had no way of knowing them beforehand. [. . .] The advantage of chance methods, in my view, is that they free one from *customary* relationships rather than from any relationships. New ones will be noticed by the observant artist, whether he professes to like this or not. Most of the time he seems to like it.

The preceding discussion of composition has been a summary of all the rules-of-thumb raised respecting Happenings, rather than being merely technical. Problems of materials and content enter into the question at every stage and so I should like to re-emphasize the importance of a pervasive process which is manifestly organic and not divided into categories. Analytic writing, because of the very nature and history of the words we use, tends towards the broken-apart and divided and is necessary for the sake of convenience. But the only art that is so fractured is academic art, and thus I made it clear throughout the listing of the conditions I believe to be crucial to the Happening as an art, that they are not iron-clad rules but fruitful limits within which to work. As soon as they are found to be useless they will be broken, and other limits will take their place.

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Source

Kaprow, A. (1956) *Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings,* New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Allan Kaprow (1927–)

American artist, founder of the so-called 'Happening' movement in the early sixties. Kaprow studied at New York University, at Columbia University, and at the New School of Social Research, New York, where he took John Cage's class in experimental music. He has been producing performance art as a practitioner and theorist from the late 1950s to the present. Around 1956 Kaprow began making what he called Assemblages, which used found material from the surrounding environment, also creating Environments and Happenings, the latter of which were described by Michael Kirby as 'non-matrixed performances', a similar concept to that employed by the Dadaists, though without their anti-art overtones. The element of chance, which was often present in these early works, clearly came from working with Cage. Kaprow saw art in the streets and in the everyday actions of life as Cage had defined music, and the happenings were devised to sensitise audiences and participants to this, prefiguring current explorations of the 'performative' in everyday life on the one hand, and the work of Richard Foreman and Marina Abramovic on the other. Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959) involved three rooms with chairs arranged in circles and rectangles forcing the audience to face in different directions. Each visitor was presented with a programme and cards with instructions as to actions they were to follow. The series of fragmented events were to be understood by the audience in any way, thus prefiguring the multiple meanings of post-modern performance. 'It is important' wrote Kaprow, 'to declare as art the total event comprising noise/object/movement/colour and psychology'. In *Sweet Wall* (1970) participants built and then destroyed a wall made with bricks and held together by a mortar of bread and jam, just a few steps from the Berlin Wall, calling attention to the uselessness of the task in what was a materialist environment. Many of Kaprow's contemporaries undertook similar experiments, notably Claes Oldenberg, Dick Higgins, and Yoko Ono, though none of them agreed the term 'Happening' and none produced manifestos or magazines. The idea of the audience was eliminated completely, integrating all elements into one experiential whole, prefiguring the breakdown in audience/performer relationship attempted by Grotowski or Boal. Thus Kaprow can be seen to be at the root of many contemporary attitudes to art and performance, his influence spreading throughout the performing arts. In this extract from his book Kaprow explains the origin of the field of the Happening, as well as giving some examples for his readers to follow.

Compare this article with writings by the following authors in this reader

Abramovic – the heightening of the everyday
Boal – for the theatricality of the everyday
Brecht – for making the everyday strange
Cage – Kaprow's teacher
Grotowski – for audience/performer interaction
Kantor – a European interest in the 'happening'
Richter – for the Dada experiments

Further reading

Kirby, M. (ed.) (1965) *Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology*, New York: Dutton.
Sandford, M.S. (ed.) (1995) *Happenings and Other Acts*, London: Routledge.

Elizabeth LeCompte

INTERVIEW

In developing Brace Up! *(1990) did you work with the Japanese material before addressing* Three Sisters?

Yes.

Was this material linked to the notion of a Japanese theatre troupe?

I always use a framing device outside the material, so it's like an onion skin or a frame within a frame. In all the pieces there's some outside storyteller and there's a text within that story.

Do you see specific connections between the Japanese material and the Chekhov?

Well, I do after the fact, but it isn't something that informs the way we go about making the pieces. After the fact certain things become obvious, but they're never obvious to begin with. I didn't see any reason for them to be put together other than that I happen to be interested in the formal aspects of Japanese theatre and some of the Japanese pop culture stuff and that I happen to like Chekhov's writing. When I started working on *Route 1 & 9* (1981) I didn't have any idea that these routines from Pigmeat Markham would have anything to do with *Our Town*. I had no idea whatsoever that these two would go together. I was working on Pigmeat Markham material because I was interested in it formally, the way I'm interested in the Japanese material formally. Again, in a similar

way, I was attracted to the writing, to Wilder's writing – specifically Wilder's writing as a sort of poetic text next to this popular material – 'poetic' in quotes – filled with sentimental meaning, but absolutely vacant of any *real* meaning taken apart from the characters. I then take these things as givens when we work. Of course, eventually – because I and the company are the catalysts for the two things coming together – I will see things.

You seem to be describing a process that allows very different kinds of material to inhabit the same space while, in some respects, remaining very much apart.

Yeah. Yeah, definitely. I think probably in *Brace Up!* they ended up coming too much together. I would really want something more disparate.

The emphasis you place on the formal qualities of the material seems to be in opposition to the kind of psychological basis of Wilder and Chekhov's texts.

I don't have a rejection of psychological motivation. I just have a rejection of psychological motivation existing in one form. I like to use the psychological motivation as a whole theatrical space. I can't imagine, in this day and age, not feeling the psychology in one way or another.

Were you interested in any way in the association between Chekhov's work and naturalism? Perhaps in opposition to the Japanese material?

You see, I don't know the history of the Chekhov. I hadn't, before I'd done this, seen a Chekhov play except in Dutch. I couldn't really tell what the psychology was. And the naturalism was – well, I don't speak the language. I don't have the history of that, I don't know what that is. I think I'm doing a naturalistic version of Chekhov.

One of the conventional things about naturalism is that it creates one unified world.

Yeah. That's what I think I'm doing. Perhaps Stanislavski was not – he was fragmenting it all into different characters – to me it's all one thing.

Did you see any Noh theatre live?

No. I did see some tapes in Japanese. I never saw it translated. I couldn't follow the content, but I could watch them come on and go off. That's very important. So, you know, I didn't read too much about what Noh was or what it's supposed to be. I just watched tapes in Japanese. So I think I was probably drawn to that structure, that physical architectonic structure. How they moved, how they dealt with entrances and exits.

Is it something you pursued in the piece particularly?

Entrances and exits are extremely important. That's the defining thing, isn't it? In theatre. That's essential. It's the deepest, deepest place for me. But, I've said this before.

One of the things that interests me about the use of Noh is its emphasis upon continuity – and so its reflection upon its own history. This seems to be reflected in the Wooster Group's work. Performances seem to comment on previous productions, images are re-used, rehearsal procedures are remembered or re-presented. Were you interested in Noh's concern with its own history?

I don't know. I mean, I'm not a Japanese theatre artist. I don't study Japanese theatre. I don't have any academic interest in Japanese theatre.

I'm just interested in what these appropriations might have to offer. Or what the juxtaposition of the Japanese material against the Chekhov might be doing.

I think we were getting to that when I said 'entrances and exits'.

MW [Marianne Weems, a Wooster Group associate, who was also present]**:** The way that I look at it is that it's more like a contrapuntal reading. The two things go, and sometimes connect in the audience member's mind and sometimes don't. But there's no didactic, polemical –

Attempt.

MW: connection being made. There's no attempt to connect them, really. I think there's a rhythmic attempt to make them relate, or perhaps to let them relate in the space.

Yes. To allow them to be in the space together, without this *demand* for meaning. 'Meaning' in quotes – that you're dealing with, very strongly.

Do you mean that I'm demanding meaning of you?

Yes, absolutely. That's not what I'm about. My meaning is in the piece itself. I'm not going to now make meaning separately from that piece for you. Again, it's not a thing where I'm withholding that – I don't have it. It only happens for me in the space. In the moment of the theatrical act. Here I can just tell you the way I came up with those images, the way they are brought to the stage. Then, I could, if I wanted to, spin off and say, Oh, yes, isn't it funny how this image looks good, or it's good with that sound. I could even, after the fact, probably – if I were a writer – write a whole thing on the meaning of Japanese culture and

Western language. About meaning and lack of meaning, about Western poetry and Eastern poetry. But I don't have much interest in it.

It may be that we don't have a language to talk with.

It's possible.

Which is, on the one hand, a shame, on the other hand, it may be instructive.

I think it is. I think it's probably very instructive looking at the work next to other people's work, too, to be honest, just by my inability to grapple with whatever it is you're telling me. It has something to do with why the work is like it is.

It's important, from my point of view, because I don't intend to demand a meaning for the piece.

No, no. I know. Believe me, I'm not trying to be obfuscating. Maybe the language that you're using I don't use. Maybe you've talked to people who aren't as theatre-oriented as I am. That's why Joan Jonas came to work with us, because she wanted to make entrances and exits. She doesn't make them in her own work. I didn't come from theatre but from painting and film – which is, the cut, you know, entrances and exits again – when do you come into a scene and when do you leave it. It may be that.

And this is also connected with framing.

Well, of course. Again, I think what I'm saying to you is that form is extraordinarily important to me – certain kinds of theatrical form. And I'm always trying to see it in different ways. And of course I work to different theatre traditions – not only Japanese. I worked for a long time with vaudeville, American vaudeville. So –

And the focus upon form is a key to these very disparate elements coinciding in the same space.

Yes, absolutely. And anything can co-exist together – without, you know, losing its own uniqueness – without being absorbed and regurgitated. They are separate, and they can stay separate and at the same time inform each other – within the same work. At best, when the form is strong enough, that's what happens. If the form isn't strong enough, it's just chaos. That's the danger.

That kind of focus doesn't offer itself to any kind of question I might ask about meaning or theme, does it?

No. Again, you can talk to me about what's going on on the stage.

I'm interested in the emphasis you place on 'presence'. You've said that you use whatever methods you can to try and make – or allow – the actor to become as present as possible.

Yes.

Is this a formal quality in the work?

It can be. Usually that presence is something that I think is – kind of – always in conversation with the formal pattern. The formal pattern will tend to allow the performer to get lulled into feeling safe. Within this structure that I've made, there are always holes that pop up – that's part of the form. So you have to be vigilant, all the time. Vigilant. Tremendously vigilant. And be aware of everything behind you and in front of you, of the entire structure. Or you might drown. Drowning, I mean – you know, stop you from breathing – to fill you up with water so you can't breathe. I think the constant battle for me as a director is to find ways that an actor can be always present, always alive, always thinking this is the first and last moment that she's there – doing this thing – within a structure that is so strong and so sure.

Do you think about the audience in the making of work?

Yeah. I mean – it's like the audience is *there*. They're the air that you breathe. The audience is the other part of the exploration process for theatre. There is no theatre without audience, so there is no life without breath. It's that essential. But it's an involuntary thing, breathing. And my awareness of the audience is almost involuntary. Sometimes I'm conscious of it. Usually when they come in for the first time – it's like a pain in your chest. I become aware of them when things aren't working on the stage. When something's wrong, I become aware in a very conscious way. So then I work to become unaware of them in a way that I'm unaware of my breathing. It doesn't mean that I'm cutting them out. It's just that they should be part of the flow of the whole.

It strikes me that if you concentrate on these formal elements in a way that keeps the possibilities of the piece open, that keeps these things colliding or existing at the same moment, then – because there are many languages being held up at the same time – the work resists being read through a single language. I wonder if, as a consequence of this, the viewer might become more open to this 'presence'?

I know what you're saying – but I don't know. Again, I'm not always sure. It's no science. I was talking to a writer a while ago, who's a little older than me. He was saying how, you know, he now had become technically better. He could write more quickly. He knew when things weren't working. He'd acquired technique. And I had to realise when I was talking to him that I still don't know how to get that presence on the stage, that every time I go down for a new piece

it's the same battle as it was for *Sakonnet Point* in 1975. That I had not gotten any clearer about how to get that presence, how to keep it, how to make the form balance with the –

Do you think it can succumb to technique?

Well, I don't know. I don't know. I wish I had the technique, because it's harder to do it.

Joe Chaikin tried to gear technique toward producing presence, didn't he?

Yes, he did. That's a good point. I hadn't thought about Chaikin in a long time. But it's also – I'll tell you what else. And this is where I'm different from the other people you've talked to, with the exception of John Cage. I think what keeps me unable to get that technique down so that I can, you know, produce more quickly, more easily and more fluidly what I need – again, I use *need* in a spiritual way – on the stage is that I'm always working with other people and other texts, not my own texts. You know, Ping Chong writes his own texts. He's controlling them all the time. Joan Jonas makes up her own actions. She doesn't go to a script. She's writing her own material. I'm not. I'm having to come up against a new person and new people downstairs every single piece. So I have to rediscover, in every piece, what makes the balance. Because people are so different. Actors are so different. I think that that's part of it. And it's that unique place – that I'm making a new thing out of old material. I'm not just redecorating an old script. I'm not just going to do Chekhov. I'm trying to – I'm trying to make it present for me. Which means, literally reinventing. I mean – 'reinventing' it – it's an over-used word. I mean reinventing it from the ground up. From the way that the language resonates in the body on the stage – every way – to the way the psychology has to be – (Claps once) – has to be crashed up against and fragmented and then reformed. So it's got a double problem. I'm reinventing something and I'm having to come up against material that I don't necessarily understand – my actors, a text – and that I don't know how to manipulate. And because I think on stage – I don't think separately, I don't sit down with the text and say, 'Ah, this means this – if I get Joan Jonas to do this on stage, then I'll get what I want from this text.' What I want from the text is what Joan Jonas and Chekhov give to me on the stage! Only on the stage. Not inside my head. So it makes it particularly difficult. I've got the worst of both worlds.

Does it not also mean that the work is difficult to talk about, in certain respects?

Well. It depends on what you mean by 'talk about'. I don't think it does. I just can't talk about it in literary terms, in the same way that most people talk about it. I've discovered more recently that theatre people – especially directors – don't talk in the same way that I do. They talk as if I'm writing. Yet I'm not a writer.

I'm using other people's writing. The process is akin to that – the process of reinventing – it's akin to writing. I just have my characters, my words, my colleagues, all materialised on the stage. Writers can do it in their head. I can't. I have to take my head – I'm very literal, as you can see – I have to take my head and put it on the stage and move the little elements of ideas around the stage to see what it means. Maybe it's a little unusual.

So I'm really a classical director in the sense that – I do plays. You know. (Laughs.) The most important thing in all of this is that – when I go downstairs I don't have any thematic ideas – I don't even have a theme. I don't have anything except the literal objects – some flowers, some images, some television sets, a chair, some costumes I like. In the last piece, something someone brought in by mistake. That's it. And then ideas come after the fact. It's a total reversal of most of the processes. And probably if I reversed it I'd do a lot more work and be a lot happier. (Laughs.) On that note –

Thanks.

(The interviewer was Nick Kaye)

■ ■ ■

Source

LeCompte, E. and Kaye, N. (1993, 1995) 'Interview with Elizabeth LeCompte', *Art into Theatre*, London: Macmillan.

Elizabeth LeCompte (1944–)

Founder and director of the Wooster Group (1976–), the New York based performance company, which broke away from Richard Schechner's Performance Group (1967–80). It grew out of a long tradition of rejection of American commercial theatre, redefining the position of the 'performer' and 'role', and the function of previously written playscripts, in particular plays by the established American and European writers, whose work often constitutes a base for the group's performance explorations. Creations such as *Sakonnet Point* (1975) and *Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act)* (1981) deliberately challenge the audience's expectations, through an essentially fragmentary and deconstructive approach. *Route 1 & 9* for example, juxtaposed extracts from Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* with the comedy routines of the black company of Pigmeat Markham, the Wooster Group performers being in blackface. *LSD . . . Just the High Points* (1984), attempted to confront Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* with a debate incorporating Timothy Leary, the drug guru of the 1960s. (Miller eventually

forbade the use of his text.) In 1991 *Brace Up!* subverted the narrative and psychological slant of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* to produce a set of technologically brilliant comments on the play and its reception, at the same time taking its visual stimulus from Japanese theatre. Later work has included material using the work of Eugene O'Neill, Racine, and Gertrude Stein (*House /Lights*, 2000).

This interview with Nick Kaye, the postmodernist historian, attempts to elucidate LeCompte's 'meaning' in her work. It is illuminating for her refusal to adopt any explanations, which avoid the fact that she creates 'theatrical', not literary or philosophical, meaning, instead maintaining that the meanings of the Wooster Group's creations lie in the pieces themselves and nowhere else.

Compare this interview with writings by the following authors in this reader

Bausch – a confrontational theatre approach
Brecht – the roots of an anti-psychological stance
Etchells – who acknowledges LeCompte as influence
Foreman and Wilson – other deconstructive approaches to narrative
Lepage – a similar eclectic approach to material
Rainer – a contemporary woman postmodernist with a similar concern for process
Schechner – North American antecedents

Further reading

Gray, S. and LeCompte, E. (1980) 'Rumstick Road', *Performing Arts Journal* 111(2).
Savran, D. (1988) *Breaking the Rules*, New York: Theatre Communications Group.
Shank, T. (1982) *American Alternative Theatre*, New York: Grove Press.