

## Adrian Henri – Total Artist

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## ADRIAN HENRI – TOTAL ARTIST

Catherine Marcangeli

A 1968 poster for an exhibition at London's Institute of Contemporary Art insists on Adrian Henri's dual work of art, as a painter and a poet (Fig.1). Henri (1932-2000) came to prominence as a writer in the 1967 groundbreaking Penguin anthology *The Mersey Sound*, alongside Roger McGough and Brian Patten. In his poems, he juxtaposed everyday or pop images with highbrow cultural references, creating a web of references that made his work both complex and accessible. Henri had trained as a painter at King's College, Newcastle, under Richard Hamilton, and his early Pop Art sensibility translated into urban imagery, collages and hyperrealist paintings of meat against a clinical white background. Henri was also a pioneer of Happenings in Britain, setting up the first "events" as early as 1962, collaborating and corresponding with European and American artists involved in performance, including Jean-Jacques Lebel, Mark Boyle, Allan Kaprow and Yoko Ono. He also published a landmark book on Environments and Happenings (*Total Art*, Thames and Hudson: 1974). Performance was central to Henri's practice, both as a visual artist and as a poet. He gave numerous live readings and, in the 1960s and 1970s, fronted the poetry-and-rock group Liverpool Scene, signed by RCA. In 1969, the band performed at the Isle of Wight Festival, supported Led Zeppelin and toured America.

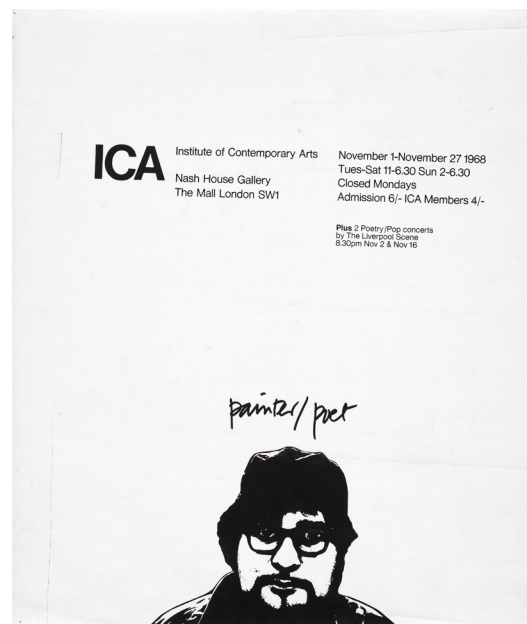


Fig. 1. Adrian Henri, poster for the exhibition Painter/Poet, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 1968.

The exhibition *Total Art* was part of the 2014 Liverpool Art Biennial<sup>1</sup>. It focused on “the long Sixties,” when Henri’s work was at its most radical, irreverent, innovative and collaborative. The show included paintings, collages, prints, annotated scripts, artefacts and ephemera, silkscreened rock posters, stage wear and other rare and recently discovered audio recordings and film footage. Through the presentation of both artistic and archive material, it aimed to show how Henri’s eclectic interests and multifaceted œuvre placed him at the centre of a distinctively local yet internationally connected counter-culture, while his embrace of total art acted as a template for later interdisciplinary art practices. The exhibition concentrated on Henri’s work in different media, but also attempted to capture some of the excitement and dynamics of the 1960s and 1970s art scene in Liverpool and internationally.

In 2015, the exhibition held at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts and titled *First Happenings—Adrian Henri in the 1960s* focused on Henri’s early happenings.<sup>2</sup> Building on the techniques of collage and assemblage, and collaborating with other writers, artists and musicians, he used different media to create environments in which audiences were not passive viewers but active participants in an unfamiliar collective experience. The emerging art form was part of a strategy for drawing on the everyday as a means of narrowing “the gap between art and life.”<sup>3</sup> This paper focuses on the first of those happenings, titled *City* (1962), which attempted to translate contemporary urban reality into an ephemeral art event, thus breaking the barriers between artists, and between artists and audience.

### **Polythescapes : collage and assemblage**

One of the most formative influences on Henri’s work was Richard Hamilton and the Independent Group. In *Man, Machine, Motion*, the 1955 exhibition Hamilton curated at the ICA, means of transport—aquatic, terrestrial, aerial and interplanetary—were shown to have transformed our perception of the spaces we inhabit. Hamilton later defined Pop Art as “popular, transient,

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<sup>1</sup> *Adrian Henri – Total Art*, Exhibition Research Centre, School of Art and Design, Liverpool, John Moores University, Liverpool, UK. Exhibition curated by Catherine Marcangeli, July 5-November 25, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> *First Happenings – Adrian Henri in the 1960s*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK. Exhibition curated by Catherine Marcangeli, January 27-March 15, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> The expression is attributed to Robert Rauschenberg, an artist much admired by Adrian Henri and quoted in his poem titled ‘Me’ in *The Mersey Sound*, Penguin Modern Poets 10 : London, 1967.

expendable, low-cost, mass-produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, and Big Business.”<sup>4</sup> As a student in Newcastle, Henri was interested both in Hamilton’s notion of a continuum between high and low culture, and in the idea that artists must examine their surroundings, the new types of images and the means of communication produced by their contemporary society. In the 1950s and 1960s, urban landscapes were turning into what Henri termed “Polythensescapes.”<sup>5</sup> Collage and assemblage were a fitting medium to respond to the disjointed experience of the modern city. Advertising leaflets, slogans, commercial designs and flashing neon signs thus found their way into his poems, paintings, collages and happenings; they were used to depict and to comment on the very world from which they were taken.

In the early Sixties, while teaching at Manchester Art College, Henri produced a series of drawings and paintings of nearby Piccadilly Gardens. At the time, the Gardens were slightly sunken, and looking up, one would see Piccadilly-Circus-style neon signs and flashing adverts: “Below eye level was grass. On eye level was the shops. Above eye level was the advertising. So that it had a layered feeling to it.”<sup>6</sup> Advertising was now structuring the way city dwellers perceived their space. Henri celebrated the energy of the contemporary city, all the while savouring the ironic tension between nature and artifice: “even the little bit of nature in Piccadilly was artificial. The flower beds were maintained by the council. One day there would be a dense mass all of one colour, the next of another colour.”<sup>7</sup> That almost arbitrary use of colours to create an image of nature rather than nature itself, the idea that colours are mere cyphers for nature, is exemplified in *Piccadilly Painting* (Fig. 2, 1964). The bottom half of the picture consists in flat patches of colour: green (for a notional grass), yellow and pink (for notional flowers). Consumer goods include eggs and chips in the top of the picture, a Mother’s Pride slogan, and adverts for Guinness and Bass. A bird—a recurring image in Henri’s work from the late 1950s onwards—is painted against a “kind of blue,” a phrase that refers both to the murkiness of the city sky and to the 1959 Miles Davis album which Henri owned and to which he paid homage the following year in a series of collages and poems.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Hamilton, letter to Alison and Peter Smithson, January 26, 1957.

<sup>5</sup> Adrian Henri and Roger McGough, introduction text to *City*, manuscript, Adrian Henri Archive, “Happenings” section. Estate of Adrian Henri, Liverpool.

<sup>6</sup> Adrian Henri, *Paintings 1953-1998*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, 2000, p.56.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid



**Fig. 2.** Adrian Henri, *Piccadilly Painting*, 1964, oil on canvas. Estate of Adrian Henri.

The exclamation: “Daffodils are not real!” further highlights the artificiality of “urban nature.” Thanks to Wordsworth’s poem, the daffodil had long been emblematic of romantic poetry, and of its epiphanic relationship to nature. Therefore Henri found it pleasingly ironic that plastic daffodils should come as free gifts in packets of Omo washing powder. The plastic flowers featured in several of his paintings as well as in early happenings such as *Paintings, Daffodils, Milkbottles, Hats* and *Daffodil Story* (Fig. 3, both 1963). For the latter, Henri and Patten wrote a series of “daffodil poems”, recited and played back on tape. During the event, Henri painted a huge daffodil; live music was played by the local band The Undertakers; Wordsworth’s poem was read out loud; and a caped Death figure distributed flowers to the audience.

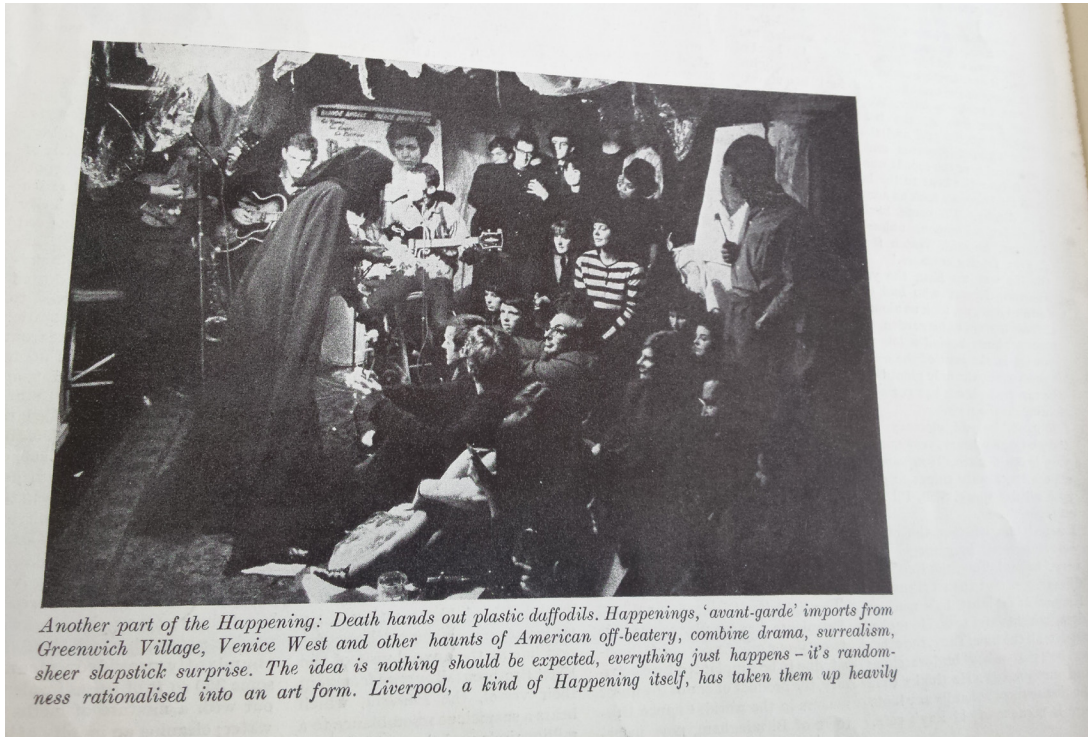


Fig. 3. Adrian Henri et al, *Daffodil Event*, Liverpool 1963.

Daffodils reappeared in one of Henri's most famous collaged poems: walking by chance past a motorcar showroom, he noticed an advertisement for a Dutch car, the DAF, marketed as "The New: Fast Daffodil"; he picked up the leaflet, cut it up, cut up Wordsworth's poem and made a collage with the two texts. Unlike Tristan Tzara's recipe for a Dada poem, which left the result mostly up to chance, in Henri's poem, the quotes from Wordsworth appear in the same order as in the original, so that the reader often familiar with "The Daffodils" is tempted to complete the sentences, but is then wrong-footed by the DAF sales pitch.

I wandered lonely as  
 THE NEW, FAST DAFFODIL  
 FULLY AUTOMATIC  
 that floats on high o'er vales and hills  
 The Daffodil is generously dimensioned to accommodate four adult  
 passengers  
 10,000 saw I at a glance  
 Nodding their new anatomically shaped heads in sprightly dance  
 Beside the lake beneath the trees  
     in three bright modern colours  
 red, blue and pigskin  
 The Daffodil de luxe is equipped with a host of useful accessories  
 including windscreen wiper and washer with joint control  
 A Daffodil doubles the enjoyment of touring at home or abroad  
 in vacant or in pensive mood.<sup>8</sup> (...)

This variation on a canonical work is not a straight debunking parody—although the poem had been drilled into Henri as a schoolboy, he was an admirer of Wordsworth—but rather an ironic reflection on the contrasted registers that could now coexist in the modern environment, a rethinking of ideas about the disjunct syntax of high and low.

Henri's Pop sensibility and his aspiration to include reality into his works, led him to incorporate 3-D items into some of his pictures. In *Four Seasons* (Fig. 4, 1964), Henri plays with tensions—between hand-painted marks (the graffiti in *Spring*) and collage (the poster in *Summer*), between figuration (the depiction of a road in *Spring*) and abstraction (the same grey surface divided by a horizontal yellow

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<sup>8</sup> Adrian Henri, "The New Fast Daffodils," in *The Mersey Sound*, Penguin Modern Poets: London, 1967.



Fig. 4. Adrian Henri, *Four Seasons*, 1964, mixed media on board. Estate of Adrian Henri.



line, can be seen as an abstract composition), between fake nature (the plastic daffodil and grass in *Spring*) and sophisticated artifice (the female model under a luxurious silk sheet in *Summer*), between sentimental evocations (the teddy bear and broken pram-wheel in *Winter*) and hard-edge neutrality (the stripes of fairground colours in *Summer*).

Likewise, his *Death of a Bird in the City* series draw part of their effect from the presence of real objects. Henri started painting very gestural, almost calligraphic pictures of birds in the 1950s and he returned to the subject throughout his career, referring to it in his poetry too—“Without you white birds would wrench themselves free from my paintings and fly off dripping blood into the night.”<sup>9</sup> The image was derived from several sources: Henri remembers looking at a photo of a work by Marcel Duchamp, “a work on glass photographed at night with lights below and odd shapes”;<sup>10</sup> he mistakenly interpreted one of those shapes as a bird fluttering, about to die. Besides, he had just read Garcia Lorca’s *Poet in New York*, which included “a whole section on birds dying in cities”<sup>11</sup> and it made a lasting impression on him. He associated those birds with people dying alone and isolated in big cities. The great number of birds killed by traffic also gave Henri the idea for his 1962 *Death of a Bird in the City* happening. After the release of Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963), the image took on additional resonances and associations.

In *Bird Dying for its Country* (Fig. 5, 1963-64), Henri made a more specific political point: he explicitly connected this painting to the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of World War I by inscribing a quote from Wilfried Owen under the British flag: “*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*” (“it is sweet and right to die for one’s country”). Owen rejected Horace’s patriotic sentiment:

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
 Pro patria mori.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Adrian Henri, “Without You,” *The Mersey Sound*, London: Penguin, 1967, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Adrian Henri, interviewed in *Paintings 1953-1998*, op. cit., 42.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.44.

<sup>12</sup> Wilfried Owen, last eight lines from the poem “Dulce et decorum” (written in 1917-18), published posthumously in 1920.

The bird is emblematic of innocence lost in vain, of “the old Lie,” and the treatment of the picture surface echoes the violence of that sacrifice—Henri used a hot poker to scorch it, marking it as soldiers were marked by mustard gas burns. The link between war, birds and urban violence recurs in “Death of a Bird in the City II,” a poem dedicated to the war photographer Philip Jones Griffiths:

Guns are bombarding Piccadilly  
Firing at ten million splattered white  
dying birds

Doors thrown open  
Girls mouths screaming  
The last unbearable white bird  
Spotlit, slowly struggling threshing  
against blackness  
Crucified on the easel<sup>13</sup>

In Henri’s work, certain images migrated across different media, and Collage was a constant formal principle in his poetry and in his art. As a student, he had become fascinated by the evocative powers of Schwitters’s elegant collages and by the methodical and organic creation of the environment that was to become the *Merzbau*. Schwitters’s adoption of the prefix Merz—to subsume all his activities, be it poetry, music or art, seemed to Henri the most apposite way of dismissing traditional categories: not only could the artist work in different media, but he could offer the viewer a more complete, multi-sensory experience—a total art. When the Independent Group held the exhibition *This is Tomorrow* at the Whitechapel in 1956, artists, architects,



Fig. 5. Adrian Henri, *Bird Dying for its Country*, 1963-4, mixed media on board. Estate of Adrian Henri.

<sup>13</sup> Adrian Henri, “Death of a Bird in the City (for Philip Jones Griffiths and his photographs),” in Catherine Marcangeli ed., *Selected and Unpublished Poems*, Liverpool University Press, 2007, 106.

critics, graphic designers and musicians collaborated on composite environments. Group 2, comprising Hamilton, John Voelcker and John McHale, juxtaposed images from high art (a reproduction of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*) and popular culture (posters of Marilyn and of Robbie the Robot); a juke-box played music, while the sense of smell was stimulated by a carpet which released a strawberry scent when visitors walked on it. An Op Art corridor and some roto-reliefs disrupted the visitor's spatial perceptions. *This is Tomorrow* was a collective endeavour that, more systematically than Schwitters's *Merzbau*, addressed all the senses and invited the visitor to interact with the installation. Yet it was different in tone from the effect Henri aspired to—it was very curatorially designed and sociologically analytical of contemporary culture, whereas in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Henri was increasingly attached to commonplace activities and ordinary spaces. For example, his *Summer Poems Without Words* (1964) were originally distributed to the audience in leaflet form. The list of instructions to be carried out “over a period of seven days” included:

2. Travel on the Woodside Ferry with your eyes closed. Travel back with them open.
4. Find a plastic flower. Hold it up to the light.
8. Look at every poster you pass next time you're on a bus.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that these instructions should be addressed to a “you,” emphasizes the importance of the reader, viewer or audience—this is a direct consequence of Henri's activities on the live poetry scene in Liverpool since 1961, with Roger McGough, Brian Patten and others. Setting up readings and performing weekly in front of an audience made them acutely aware of the need to be accessible, and entertaining, so poetry readings often had musical interludes or musical accompaniment—the Art College and a variety of pubs and music venues, as well as *ad hoc* performance spaces were only a short walk from each other, making such collaborations all the easier and spontaneous. This collaborative element was carried across into the Happenings which Henri staged from 1962.

### **From assemblage to happening: *City* (1962)**

Henri's collage-assemblage aesthetics soon extended into three dimensional interactive environments and happenings, considered as 3-D collages that unfolded in time as well as space. If that transition from collage and assemblage to happenings was able to occur over such a short period,

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<sup>14</sup> Adrian Henri, “Summer Poems Without Words,” in *Tonight At Noon*, Rapp and Whiting, London, 1968, 31.

in 1962, it is undoubtedly due to the fact that collaborations among poets, musicians and artists were already commonplace in the city.

Henri's happenings should not be seen as different in nature from the rest of his œuvre, but born out of his practice of collage, and of his public poetry readings. Now, instead of juxtaposing fragments of images onto canvas, Henri turned a whole room into an environment in which to juxtapose moments, situations, fragments of the everyday, images, words, music, movements, actions and interactions with an audience: "Happenings consisted of what you couldn't stick to a canvas—people, obviously, smells, perishable objects, places."<sup>15</sup>

That approach to happenings was also influenced by the writings of Allan Kaprow.<sup>16</sup> Originally an abstract painter, the American artist became interested in the notion of environment after hearing John Cage's *4'33"* performed by David Tudor: during the "silence," Kaprow realised that all the surrounding sounds—street noises, spectators' voices, the air conditioning—were indeed part of the piece, a found soundscape that blurred the boundary between the artwork and so-called real life.<sup>17</sup> For his 1957 "Action Collages" Kaprow produced movable panels, covered in electric lightbulbs, artificial fruit and mirrors, and whose configuration could be changed by the artist or viewer. At the Hansa Gallery in 1958, visitors negotiated their way through strips of material suspended from the ceiling: people were both surrounded by and part of the environment. The same year, in an essay titled "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," Kaprow advocated in a somewhat prophetic tone the advent of a "concrete

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<sup>15</sup> Adrian Henri, "Notes on Painting and Poetry," op. cit., 72.

<sup>16</sup> In *Environments and Happenings*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1974, p.117, Henri remembers reading an article by Kaprow in early 1962—however, he had known of the American artist's work since at least 1961, as he mentioned him at a meeting of the Merseyside Arts Festival that year. The two artists started corresponding in 1966, and Kaprow went on to send Henri posters and scripts for his happenings into the 1970s ("Kaprow" folder, Adrian Henri Archive, the Estate of Adrian Henri, Liverpool).

<sup>17</sup> On his experience of hearing Cage's *4'33"* at Carnegie Hall in 1952, and of seeing Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, see Allan Kaprow, quoted in Joan Marter, "The Forgotten Legacy: Happenings, Pop Art and Fluxus at Rutgers University," in Joan Marter, ed., *Off Limits, Rutgers University and the Avant-Garde, 1957-1963*, Rutgers University and Newark Museum, Newark, N.J., 1999, p.5. Kaprow attended John Cage's classes at the New School of Social Research in 1957-1958.

art” that would reveal the world anew to artists and audiences alike. That new art would involve all the senses and make use of everyday materials, such as:

paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists. Not only will these bold creators show us, as if for the first time, the world we have always had about us but ignored, but they will disclose entirely unheard-of happenings and events, found in garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies; seen in store windows and on the streets; and sensed in dreams and horrible accidents. An odor of crushed strawberries, a letter from a friend, or a billboard selling Drano; three taps on the front door, a scratch, a sigh, or a voice lecturing endlessly, a blinding staccato flash, a bowler hat—all will become materials for this new concrete art.<sup>18</sup>

In his collages and assemblages, Henri too had been using everyday materials, often collected or found in the street. For his first happening, fittingly called *City* (plate 6), a whole room recreated an urban environment. The event was organised in 1962 as part of the Merseyside Arts Festival, which also included a parade through the streets of Liverpool, a debate on Apartheid between Bessie Braddock and Lord Lilford, chaired by George Melly, some art exhibitions, music and poetry.

The terms “event” and “happening” had both been used by Kaprow, but Henri settled on the former, largely because at the time Liverpool shops were “advertising sales as ‘Events’: ‘Furniture event!’, ‘50% Off Event!’, ‘Discount Event!’”<sup>19</sup> The idea of a “Bargain Art Event” is typical of a self-deprecatory, and maybe British, streak in Henri. Well aware that the audience may be disconcerted by this new art form, and always concerned they should not feel as if they were being talked down to, Henri and McGough produced a leaflet which acted both as a manifesto and as an explanatory introduction. The document outlines a background to the event, and outlines a lineage that runs from Dada and the Surrealists to the New York Assemblage painters, via Abstract Expressionism and jazz. Henri’s preparatory notes for *City* display all the characteristics of his 1960s events. *City* took place in a non-traditional space, the basement of Hope Hall—built as the Hope Street Chapel in 1837, it had been one of a chain of “Continental Cinemas” owned by Leslie Blond, and would later become the

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<sup>18</sup> Allan Kaprow, “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” in *Art News* 57, New York, Number 6, October 1958, pp.24-26, 55-57. Henri was also aware of Kaprow’s article “Happenings in the New York Art Scene,” in *Art News* 60, New York, Number 3, May 1961, pp.36-39, 58-62.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with John Gorman, Liverpool, March 15th, 2014,. In an email to the author, April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2014, John Gorman pointed out that, he had seen a television advert that day advertising a Dorothy Perkins “Fashion Event.”



Fig. 6. Adrian Henri et al, *City, happening*, Liverpool, 1962

Everyman Theatre. As the photographs of the event show, the space was intimate: John Gorman recalls it was “rectangular ... 15’x30’ ... low-ceiling ... low light ... low tech.”<sup>20</sup> The room was segmented by screens “covered with hessian, brown paper, etc.” and a “free-standing ‘junk’ object.”<sup>21</sup> The set created and recreated fragments of an urban environment, including adverts and posters, newsstands, collaged magazines, graffiti, but also tapes playing city sound effects, street noises, sirens and traffic. During the event, painting, collage and assemblage activities were performed “live.” Henri aimed to create an “atmosphere through impressionistic tactile imagery adapted from the King-size polythenscape of which we in the city are all a part.”<sup>22</sup> The piece didn’t attempt to tell a story, but to convey a city experience especially through the senses of touch, sight and hearing.

Importantly, *City* was a collective work, a collaboration between different artists: the third column of Henri’s *First Notes* (Fig. 7) is titled “cast,” as if for a play, and it mentions poets (Adrian Henri, Roger McGough, Pete Brown), a painter (Henri), a photographer (Mike McCartney), as well as musicians, actors and an electrician. Poetry and music played an important part in the Liverpool events. In his notes, Henri specified that Brown would read a section of the elegiac poem “Night” accompanied live by “any musicians available.” Live music by local bands was often supplemented with recorded music: *City* for example closes on “Folk Form N°1”, an appropriately fluid piece that unfolds around Charles Mingus’s bass rhythmic line.<sup>23</sup>

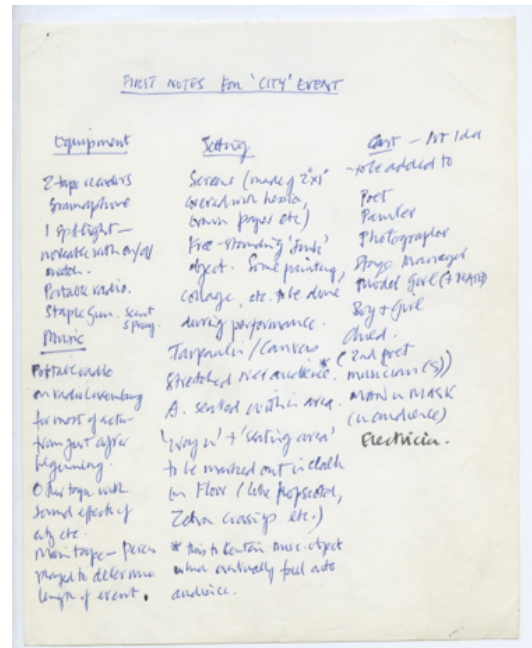


Fig. 7. Adrian Henri, notes for *City* event, 1962. Adrian Henri archive, Liverpool

<sup>20</sup> John Gorman, *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Adrian Henri, “First Notes for ‘City’ Event, “City” folder, Adrian Henri Archive, Estate of Adrian Henri. Kaprow often used the term “junk” to insist on the ordinariness of the materials to be used.

<sup>22</sup> Adrian Henri and Roger McGough, introduction to *City*, Adrian Henri Archive, Estate of Adrian Henri, Liverpool.

<sup>23</sup> From the album *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus*, Candid, New York, 1960.

Staged in 1959 at the Reuben Gallery in New York, Kaprow's landmark *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* were precisely choreographed; members of the audience were given a set instructions on index cards, telling them where to sit, when they should stand, sweep the floor, climb a ladder, squeeze an orange, move to the next room, clap. A bell marked the beginning and end of each part. Kaprow's stage directions gave *18 Happenings* the look of a type of abstract theatre, directed by a tight score. In Henri's *City*, the audience was directed to a certain extent—the 'First Notes' stipulate that the way in and the seated area were "marked out in chalk on the floor," yet the participants were mostly spectators of the performance. In later events Henri and his collaborators devised ways of increasing audience involvement:

The chairs for the audience were arranged in three groups, each facing different ways. The four corners of the room were four stages, each with a light and a microphone. The "trick" was that the poetry and dialogue would be read in the different corners, forcing at least a third [sometimes all] of the audience to turn to see the readers. Sometimes the sound would be switched so that a reader would be in one corner and the sound would come from another corner.

This was to make the audience aware of itself, and for the audience not to be taken for granted.

Other Event "tricks" were ...

... hanging varying lengths of string from the ceiling, causing the audience either to move them aside so that they could see, or to lean to see around the string.

... covering the seats in various materials, like polythene, to make people aware

... giving the audience things to hold ... screws, sandpaper, wire.<sup>24</sup>

Like events by Cage or Kaprow, *City* was scripted—there was some room for chance, but even variations were anticipated, on a page titled "Suggestions for Incidents."<sup>25</sup> This ensured that there were no awkward lulls in the performance. Nor was it allowed to carry on indefinitely, as the music predetermined the duration of each segment—this gave a certain structure to a disparate piece that would have seemed otherwise chaotic. It would also have been reassuring for the audience to recognize some of the jazz or pop tunes. Pete Brown remembers the audience being a little bemused, "but open-minded because

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<sup>24</sup> John Gorman, email to the author, April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2014.

<sup>25</sup> "City" folder, Adrian Henri Archive, Estate of Adrian Henri.



they trusted the artists.”<sup>26</sup> They were, after all, some of the same people who, drink in hand, were as likely to attend the Monday night poetry readings as concerts by local bands at the Cavern. Contrary to the relatively austere mood and self-conscious sophistication of Kaprow’s happenings, humour was an essential ingredient of the Liverpool events, for the organisers were very conscious that the audience must be entertained even while their assumptions about art were being challenged.

The set for *City* included a tarpaulin, stretched over the audience’s head, filled with advertising matter, soap flakes and other fragments of the everyday (Fig. 8). At the end of the performance the tarpaulin was to give way, and the contents to drop onto the audience’s heads—the “tactilism” Henri referred to in his introduction. A newspaper journalist reported on their reaction: “As the 60 invited guests came out, covered in soapflakes, chewing sweets and swapping bottle tops, they appeared to have enjoyed it.” Enjoyment, accessibility and inclusiveness were political imperatives for Henri, however experimental the art form.<sup>27</sup> It may seem curious that Henri, who extolled the Surrealists and the premium they placed on the imagination, should at the same time be so attached to the ordinariness and grittiness of the street. Yet, what he found so exciting in Jim Dine’s *Car Crash*, Claes Oldenburg’s *Street*, Ed Kienholz’s *Beanery* or Rauschenberg’s *Combines* was not a new, contemporary, sort of realism; nor did he consider the power of the imagination as some kind of Surrealist escapism. What he saw in both was the possibility of a revolutionary re-enchantment of the real : in much of his painting, poetry and performances, Henri strived not only to imitate “the feel of reality,”<sup>28</sup> but to change the way reality feels.

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<sup>26</sup> Pete Brown, interviewed by the author, London, May 19th, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> See Adrian Henri, “The Poet, the Audience and Non-Communication,” *Sphinx*, autumn 1964, p.27.

<sup>28</sup> Adrian Henri, interviewed by Frank Milner in *Adrian Henri : Paintings 1953-1998*, 66.



**Fig. 8.** Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Pete Brown (with Mike McCartney in the audience, left), during *City event*, Liverpool, 1962.

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