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THE SOBER JOY OF THIEVING

Jennifer Stob

Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings by Judith F. Rodenbeck. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011. Pp. 312, 47 illustrations. \$34.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

“The Museum gives us a thieves’ conscience,” begins Judith F. Rodenbeck’s excellent *Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings* (ii). The aphorism is from “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” one of the central texts that mark phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s engagement with aesthetic theory.¹ Originally published in 1952 in *Les Temps Modernes*, the literary journal synonymous with left-leaning, post-war Continental intellectualism, Merleau-Ponty’s essay takes issue with the way our perception of art is institutionalized.² He critiques not only our conventional historical understanding of artistic style but also the conventional reception framework that museums offer us; both, he proclaims, deaden our experience of artworks and restrict their ability to truly extend our visible world. The museum in particular disappoints because it too often serves as a “meditative necropolis” for artworks rather than a contextual “historicity of life” for them.³ In their standard form, they compel us to appraise and consume art retrospectively as a collection of objects, sculptures, and canvases in artificial communion. We as a society have invented these museum environments, and therefore our art viewing is tainted by this act of stealing artworks from artists and from their naturally evolving context. Merleau-Ponty suggests that,

paradoxically, the very museums we visit with “a somewhat spurious reverence” inevitably produce in us a “thieves’ conscience.”⁴

Radical Prototypes turns Merleau-Ponty’s dictum on its head. Rodenbeck evokes it conventionally in her first chapter, describing the guilty conscience that accompanies her own art history of an artistic practice as ephemeral, marginal, and resistant to institutional display as happenings. Conceived by artist Allan Kaprow in 1958, happenings were a kind of performance art that resisted theatrical performativity and sought instead to blur the definitional boundaries between creator, performer, spectator, and participant. Carefully organized and scored, happenings were nevertheless nonnarrative events; throughout the 1960s, Kaprow and others depended increasingly on improvisation and the unexpected as key factors of this process-oriented, open art form. Perhaps to spite this guilty conscience, Rodenbeck refashions the meaning of Merleau-Ponty’s dictum in the six chapters that follow, using this appropriation to frame her discussion of an entirely different relationship between art and theft in the 1960s. The book positions artist Allan Kaprow and those who took up the artistic practice of happenings he pioneered as exemplars of an artistic thieves’ conscience in action. Happenings arose out of a keen interest in reconstituting some

of the formal, artifactual evidence left by the 1920s avant-gardes. In its failure or its success, this figurative reconstitution was a base from which artists like Kaprow, Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Whitman, and Red Grooms could depart in the elaboration of their own artistic projects. Stripped of Merleau-Ponty’s moralizing overtone, the guiding thieves’ conscience that Rodenbeck locates in happenings inflected this collage-inspired performance paradigm with multiplicity instead of duplicity, subversion instead of guilt, and transparency instead of secrecy. Happenings are positioned as a kind of transitional aesthetic thievery. They occupy the definitional boundary between modernist *détournement* (a politicized practice of appropriation) and neutral post-modernist pastiche.

With her narrative, Rodenbeck deliberately sidesteps the dualism of formalism and the avant-garde that has dominated many of the art historical narratives of the 1960s. If happenings are best characterized as intermediary, open-ended, relational, and interdisciplinary, then their historicization would do well to reflect this, she reasons. Her book calls for and models a scholarly “matrix through which to approach a generation of postwar artistic efforts” (27). Her contribution lies in a series of individual “material, rhetorical, and discursive” histories (18) that enhance our

understanding of what happenings were and what they aspired to be. The wealth of material on the sociological climates, the architectural practices, the technological metaphors, the theatrical methodologies, and the photographic conditions that surrounded happenings acts like connective tissue, shaping and securing them within art history. In this sense, then, the art historical matrix to which Rodenbeck contributes should be thought of as a sort of expanded field for happenings where the artworks of Kaprow and company are no longer contrasted with painting alone but with all other experimental intermedia and the areas of inquiry intermedia shares: the everyday, the aleatory, and the participatory.

Measured and formal in tone, preeminently readable at the same time, Rodenbeck's book is often like an unexpected treasure hunt amidst the presumed familiar. "Let's look for traces of civilization!" the trio in François Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962) exclaim delightedly to one another as they wander through a wooded area to the beach. Readers of Rodenbeck's histories are led to wander, too, finding known documents, theories, and artworks linked freshly and illuminatingly to one another. The chapters "Creative Acts of Consumption, or Death in Venice" and "The Black Box" are in this sense exemplary. The former features an impressive synopsis of the activities and aims

of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM). This, along with a discussion of the work of sociologist David Riesman, helps articulate the space—"purposive though almost aimless" (63), as Kaprow wrote in 1967—that a cluster of happenings activated in the early 1960s: Oldenburg's *The Store* (1961), Gerhard Richter and Konrad Lueg's *Leben mit Pop* (Living with pop, 1963), and Kaprow's *Bon Marché* (1963). In the latter chapter, the infamous black box of both contemporary theater and complex electronics is brilliantly posited as a metaphoric "overdetermined bachelor machine" (80) for artists involved with happenings, minimalism, and Fluxus (an international network of artists united by their interest in chance, live performance, and collaborative projects in the early 1960s through the 1970s). It provided a site of phenomenological exploration where blank surface, technological construction, and existential interior could be triangulated.

Perhaps because of the very lack to which it points, "Generation Gaps," the first chapter of *Radical Prototypes*, is the book's most modest offering: it extends the preface, giving an overview of the lacunae in art history after 1945 that contribute to our presently limited understanding of happenings. Art historians don't know the particulars of the passage from neo-Dada

to pop to minimalism to intermedia, and although privileged cultural moments are attributed to conceptual art, performance art, and photography, practically no scholarship speaks knowledgeably to their prehistories (5–6). Theorists like Guy Debord and Herbert Marcuse must have been impactful on American intermedia artists, but we can't specifically trace how, and the secondary theoretical discourses thus far developed to examine art of the 1960s (psychoanalytic theory among them) don't seem sufficient to contextualize happenings (7, 22). These observations speak to the necessity of the contingent project of constructing an art historical matrix rather than a genealogical tree or flowchart. While the gaps Rodenbeck identifies won't ever be hermetically sealed—nor could they be—contemporary art historians continue to introduce critical missing knowledge to the field (subjective testimonies, painstakingly researched exhibition histories, archive-supported time lines, and even rigorous formal analyses) as affixed nodes upon which a matrix like Rodenbeck's can be further extended.

Radical Prototypes assumes a solid knowledge of the American art world in the 1960s; it takes as its point of departure the basic descriptive material on happenings provided in texts by Kaprow, like *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings* (1966) and *Essays on*

the Blurring of Art and Life (1993), as well as secondary literature like *Childsplay: The Art of Allan Kaprow* (2004) and *Allan Kaprow—Art as Life* (2008).⁵ Rodenbeck often provides exceptionally helpful background information omitted in these former works. For example, she carefully discusses John Dewey's pragmatism and reads the paradigm of happenings against Fluxus pieces. In some chapters, however, readers would benefit from even more recap of constitutive artistic elements, especially in cases where images are reproduced but not directly referenced or contextualized. Nevertheless, the advantages of this approach are clear, affording Rodenbeck ample space in which to thoroughly explore the contrast between Judith Malina and Julian Beck's Living Theatre and happenings ("Madness and Method") and the antinomies of happenings that took indexical mediation as a key performance motif ("*Car Crash*, 1960" and "Foil").

As the book's title suggests, Allan Kaprow conceived of happenings as *radical prototypes*: radical in the critique that their frequently destabilizing, negative, or ambivalent model of subjectivity and society contained, and prototypical in the enormous influence they have exercised on more contemporary artistic paradigms such as installation art, performance art, and relational art (xi). The radical

and prototypical nature of happenings has crossed over into contemporary popular culture as slang and has been mediatised through film, television, and pop fiction. The forms of resistance built into happenings (resistance “to documentation, to memory, to the market, and even to their own codification” [ix]) have too long been neglected or misinterpreted by art historians and curators. Rodenbeck’s book redresses this. While never accusatory, the final chapter of *Radical Prototypes*, entitled “Participation,” gestures meaningfully in the direction of curator, art critic, and art administrator Nicolas Bourriaud.

Bourriaud introduced his curatorial concept of relational aesthetics to art criticism with his collection of essays entitled *Relational Aesthetics*, published in English translation in 1998.⁶ *Relational Aesthetics* generated well-deserved controversy in the 2000s on several counts. Several art historians (Claire Bishop chief among them) noted Bourriaud’s problematic disinterest in historicizing the contemporary art that he claims makes use of social relations as its fundamental medium. This disinterest is likely the cause of his oversight of important dynamics of agency and power within such artworks. Finally, many critics objected to Bourriaud’s suggestion that relational art offers us an “interstice” in the Marxian sense (an enclave or zone of exception from our dominant economic system

and the social relations it conditions).⁷ Rodenbeck concurs with the critiques leveled at *Relational Aesthetics*, calling Bourriaud’s assignation of what is relational in art a “self-ratifying tautology” (252). More compellingly, she raises the question of why Bourriaud’s narrative elides artworks of the 1960s, such as happenings, in favor of 1990s artworks.

According to Rodenbeck, the answer should be sought in the careful differentiation of what participation can actually mean. The participation solicited in happenings is synonymous with what Umberto Eco in his 1962 text *The Open Work* termed an “oriented insertion” (248). *Relational Aesthetics*, on the other hand, describes artworks that certainly allow spectators to participate with their bodies and minds, but not, ultimately, to potentially re-code and reconfigure the work the way an oriented insertion would. Bourriaud, as well as his critics, mostly leave the relational art *avant la lettre* of the 1960s aside when debating what art of the 1990s can or cannot contestationally do. In this sense, both sides may have missed the nuances of this earlier art’s contestational desires. These nuances are crucial: Rodenbeck claims that happenings and their participants performed the very doubt that art could continue to bring a social interstice like the one Bourriaud invokes into existence.

Happenings, she writes, “were addressed to the vanishing of precisely the possibility of this kind of experience from the horizon of perceiving subjects. Indeed, they were addressed to the obsolescence of this experience’s subject” (245). As radical prototypes, they resisted commemoration and institutionalization, but darkly: Kaprow was aware of happenings’ inability to resist the larger triad of culture industry, capitalism, and mediation in such a way that would have taken happenings out of an aesthetic framework and aligned them with the situations of the leftist postwar avant-garde, the Situationist International. In Rodenbeck’s reading, Kaprow and other practitioners of happenings could only agree with the Situationists’ appraisal of their art. Happenings, the Situationists wrote in 1963, are “an isolated attempt to construct a situation *on the basis of poverty* (material poverty, poverty of human contact, poverty inherited from the artistic spectacle, poverty of the specific philosophy driven to ‘ideologize’ the reality of these moments).”⁸

Having charted the transitions of happenings—Kaprow’s and others—Rodenbeck’s book finishes with the thought that, in them, we see experience affirmed as “an act of attention” (245). This is once again a celebration of the appropriated thieves’ conscience in art that inspired a redescription

and rearticulation of conventional society in the 1960s. Indeed, this is exactly what creates the contextual historicity of life that Merleau-Ponty longs for in his 1952 text. He laments our museumgoing with thieves’ consciences, suggesting we should instead go “in the sober joy of work,”⁹ as painters do. Rodenbeck’s book is an important contribution to the larger historical project that reminds us that artistic thieving, redescription, and rearticulating in the name of social critique are themselves sober joys.

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NOTES

1. Available in English translation in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Signs*, trans. and intro. Richard C. McCleary, *Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964); *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, trans. and ed. Michael B. Smith, trans. and intro. Galen A. Johnson, *Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993); and *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, *Studies in Phenomenology and*

- Existential Philosophy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007).
2. For a helpful introduction and overview of the essay, see Galen A. Johnson's "Structures and Painting: 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,'" ed. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 14–34.
 3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," in *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* (see note 1), 99–100.
 4. *Ibid.*, 99.
 5. Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966); Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Jeff Kelley, *Childsplay: The Art of Allan Kaprow* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); and Eva Meyer-Hermann, Andrew Perchuk, and Stephanie Rosenthal, *Allan Kaprow—Art as Life* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008).
 6. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 1998).
 7. See Karl Marx, "The Chapter on Money," in *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (1939; repr., London: Penguin Books, 1993), 115–238.
 8. Situationist International, "The Avant-Garde of Presence," trans. John Shepley, *Situationist International*, no. 8 (1963): 14–22, quotation on 20, <http://www.cdde.vt.edu/sionline/si/avant-garde.html>.
 9. Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language," 99.