

## I Committed a Happening

By Oscar Masotta

When, in the December 16th edition of the newspaper *La Razón*, I read Professor Klimovsky's condemnation of intellectuals who "concoct" Happenings, I felt directly and personally implicated. If I am not mistaken, the number of persons in Buenos Aires who fulfill such conditions can be counted on half the fingers of one hand. And since Klimovsky recommended "abstaining" from Happenings and "investing" the powers of the "imagination in lessening this tremendous plague" (of "hunger"), I have to admit, seriously, that I felt ill at ease, even a bit miserable. So I said, "I committed a Happening," in order to quell this feeling.

But I was quickly able to regain my tranquility. The choice, "either Happenings or Left politics," was false. At the same time, is Professor Klimovsky a man of the Left?<sup>1</sup> It was enough to recall another either/or—of the same kind—that Klimovsky proposed in his prologue to a book by Thomas Moro Simpson,<sup>2</sup> where one reads: "We are much given to existentialism, phenomenology, Thomism, Hegelianism, and dialectical materialism; by contrast, analytic philosophy is almost absent from the curricula of our philosophy schools. . . . The causes of this state of affairs are diverse, reflecting the unusual preponderance in these latitudes of . . . certain religious or political traditions." Finally, one must reply in the negative: No, Professor Klimovsky is not on the Left. First, because of the explicit tendency to assimilate the political to the religious, as we read in the preceding paragraph. Second, because in the context, when Klimovsky says "political" he directly denotes "dialectical materialism," i.e., this philosophy of marxism. Third, because these two lines of assimilation seek only to persuade one of the truth of the false, right-wing choice: "either marxism or analytic philosophy." And fourth, because it was anecdotally, i.e., historically, false that there existed at the moment when Klimovsky wrote this prologue, any preponderance in the teaching of the "marxist tendency" in Argentine lecture halls.

I said that the two choices are of the same kind: in both, one of the opposing terms does not belong to the same level of facts as the other. Analytical philosophy (the philosophy of science + modern logic + the analytic study of the problem of meaning) does not include any assertion about the development of history, about the origin of value in labor, about the social determination of labor, or finally about the social process of production or about the necessity of revolution that can be read in this process. It could then additionally be said that insofar as marxism includes proposals concerning the origin, value, and scope of ideas, for example, it includes analytic philosophy, while the reverse is impossible. Marxism can certainly integrate the results of the analytic study of propositions and strengthen its methodology with the contributions of the logic and philosophy of science; while, on the contrary, if analytic philosophy claimed to include marxism, it would simply dissolve eighty percent of the assertions of marxism, which, being proposals about society as a whole and about the totality of the historical process, are effectively *synthetic*, if not dogmatic.<sup>3</sup> We then see that there exist two perspectives from which to look upon the relation between marxism and the philosophy of science. If one does so from the viewpoint of marxism, there is no exclusive choice, but a relation of inclusion and complementarity. If, on the other hand, we look from the viewpoint of the philosophy of science, the terms become contradictory and the choice is exclusive.



The same holds for the choice between the Happening and the concern with hunger (excuse me for this combination of words). Given that the Happening is nothing other than a manifestation of the artistic genre, the surest and easiest way of answering, using words in their proper meaning, is to say that by extension this choice would also include musicians, painters, and poets. Must one then look in Klimovsky's words for indications of his totalitarian vocation? I do not think so. Professor Klimovsky is surely a liberal spirit, of whom, I am sure, one could say the same as Sartre once said of Bertrand Russell some years ago: that in truth, for him, intellectuals and science are *all that exist*. But what must have certainly occurred is much simpler: Professor Klimovsky was caught off guard by the phenomenon of the increasing use of the word "Happening" that Madela Ezcurra has discussed. This mistake—whether intentional or not—is in itself revealing.

The growing connotation of the word "Happening" in the mass media originates in certain presuppositions conveyed by these messages which, when not analyzed, tend to determine their contents. In truth, these presuppositions are nothing other than "ideas of communication," as Jacoby writes; that is, ideas concerning society as a whole, which include, fundamentally, decisions with respect to the "place" in society to which each sphere of activity should belong. Now, it is certain that no journalist, whatever his level of information, can ignore the fact that, at its very basis, the word is associated with artistic activity: thus a certain apparently positive ambivalence in the degree to which what the word means is taken seriously or jokingly. This is because the idea of Art with a capital "A" carries a lot of weight for these journalists. What comes to pass—and the whole matter is not much more complicated than this—is that through its conservative groups, society establishes the connection between this "place" (a receptacle of hierarchical ideas, of judgments concerning the relative value of the results of every kind of activity) and each sphere of social activity by fixing on the particular activity's "materials." Thus, the prestige of the artist's activity should be systematically linked with certain properties of the material he uses. In this way the idea historically arises that bronze or marble are "noble materials." During the time of Informal art, and also before then, we have seen the painters react against this idea: but the results were not particularly negative.

And yet the quarrel with respect to the nobility of the material is completely outdated today, and for that very reason it is possible that it has attained a certain degree of vulgarization. Works made with "ignoble" materials are accepted on the condition, I would say, of leaving the very idea of material in place; that is, the idea that the work of art is recognized by *its* material support. To say it in another way: there is still a humanism of the human, since the idea of material is felt to be the "other" of the human (and it is granted transcendence for this reason). There is a fundamental opposition: human subjectivity on one side, sensible material on the other. If one carried the analysis further one might see that as in Levi-Strauss's description of the myth, this binary is correlated with another: outside-inside. Now, in traditional art (and particularly in painting, sculpture, and theater), what is outside of what is outside, man can only have contact with sensible material because he *is* a body. And on the contrary, sensible material can only convey an aesthetic image on the condition of *not* encompassing the condition of its existence, i.e., the human body. This could be the reason why, as Levi-Strauss says, there is a problem of dimensions in the very constitution of the work of art: in some way it is always a *miniature* of what it represents.<sup>4</sup>



But what then shall we think of the Happening? As it tends to neutralize these oppositions and homogenize people and things, the Happening begins by making the very notion of "material" more improbable, more difficult, as art it is then an activity whose social "place" is difficult to establish, and perhaps Kaprow is right to proclaim that the Happening is the only truly "experimental" art.

From January to March of 1966, and while in quite close contact with Happening-makers such as Allan Kaprow, Dick Higgins, Al Hansen, Carolee Schneeman, and the German [Wolf] Vostell, I was able to be present in New York at some ten Happenings. Two impressed me particularly. Both had this in common: they included the physical presence of the artist and the "public" did not exceed, in either of them, more than two hundred persons. But they were totally different. It could be said (I do not like this choice) that one was made for the senses, while the other spoke to the understanding. The work of Michael Kirby was, effectively, "intelligent."<sup>5</sup> Kirby had called the audience together on March 4th, in Remsen Street, in a middle-class neighborhood of Brooklyn. When we arrived at the place we discovered that it was a religious school, St. Francis College. In New York it is quite common for Happenings to take place in schools, or even in churches. The most superficial reason, perhaps, is to be found in the fact that American Happenings are relatively nonsexual, unlike the French ones.<sup>6</sup> Those that I have seen, in general, induced the idea of ceremony: they were serious, if it can be said that way. But this is an insufficient explanation because Carolee Schneeman held the presentation of her *Meat Joy*, which was rather audacious from the sexual viewpoint, in the church on Washington Square surrounded by the buildings of New York University.

In the center of the room, where the action was to unfold, was a space where film projectors had been set up, along with three or four different types of slide projectors and recorders. The audience was supposed to sit in chairs arranged into three groups surrounding the middle space. Kirby soon arrived, followed by a group of five or six technicians. There were other people in the center of the space. When the lights went out the projection of a 16mm film began: seated around a table were two people conversing (one of them a priest). The audience quickly understood that the conversation concerned the physical characteristics of the very place where they were. The priest and the other person were planning the Happening that was unfolding: they were talking about the capacity of the space, the lights, the quantity of "performers" they would need, the price of the tickets, and whether there would be any remaining profit once the expenses had been paid. The lights were then turned on again. And when they went off the next time, a projector showed, once again on a wall, a map of the area of Brooklyn where the school was located; the shadow of a pencil flitted across the map, tracing the path from a nearby square to the school itself. The lights went on and off again: then the same itinerary that had been traced by the pencil was traversed by an automobile, presumably Kirby's. The camera filmed the streets from behind the windows of the vehicle, until arriving at the building of the school. The lights then came on again, and on one side of the space, seated at the same table, and clothed in the same way, the priest and his friend repeated the conversation of the film. The lights went on and off again, and in the moments of darkness, a slide projector alternately showed one of them and then the other. Then Kirby entered the scene live and joined the conversation, and afterward the lights went off again and in the film one could see the same scene repeated, the entry of Kirby who sat



down to converse along with the other two. Afterward the priest appeared in the film in full face, speaking to and looking at the live public. When the lights went on Kirby answered him from below, from the table. These operations grew more complex as they followed in succession: they combined, for example, with photographs of places in the space itself, which were projected onto those same places. The photo of a corner of a large wooden door projected onto the door. What happened was that the account of the programming of the Happening came increasingly closer to the time of the Happening that was unfolding until, finally, the audience, which had been photographed a few minutes before this with Polaroid cameras, could see itself, photographed, on the walls between the three groups of seated persons surrounding the action. When the lights went on, Kirby's presence in the middle of the room made it seem as though the actions had reached an end. And yet something was happening. The technicians seemed to be having some kind of difficulty with the equipment, maybe it was a matter of cables. Finally Kirby explained that what was happening was that the noise and voices of the persons in the audience had been recorded, that the idea was that the audience should listen to its own words inside the space in the same way as it had seen itself photographed, but problems had arisen and the Happening could be considered over. The audience answered the final words with sustained applause. We then left our seats, and slowly we began to go out. Hardly had we begun to do so when we heard the treacherous clamor of our own applause—which Kirby had carefully recorded—accompanying our steps.<sup>7</sup>

The author of the other Happening was La Monte Young. At the time I was not very familiar with the American "scene," and so I paid attention to the opinions of everyone else. Young: a disciple of Cage, Zen, close to the "cool" painters, into the drug scene. The Happening (or musical work?) was held at the house of Larry Poons, an excellent painter promoted by Castelli. I don't remember the exact address; it was downtown, on the West Side, in a "loft," one of those enormous shed-flats that you can find in New York for two hundred dollars a month, and which after painting them totally white are lived in by some painters and simply used as a studio by others. It was on the third floor, and one had to go up by broad stairways that came out in shed-apartments like the final one, but totally empty. Only in certain corners, set discreetly on certain walls, one could distinguish canvases: these must have been pictures by Larry Poons. After climbing the last staircase, one was assaulted by and enveloped in a continuous, deafening noise, composed of a colorful mix of electronic sounds, to which were added indecipherable but equally constant noises. Something, I don't know what, something Oriental, was burning somewhere, and a ceremonious, ritual perfume filled the atmosphere of the space. The lights were turned out; only the front wall was illuminated by a blue or reddish light, and I don't remember if the lights changed (perhaps they did, switching from red to green to violet). Beneath the light, and almost against the wall, facing the room and facing the audience, which was seated and arranged throughout the space, there were five people also sitting on the ground, one of them a woman, in yoga position, dressed in what was certainly Oriental clothing, and each of them holding a microphone. One of them played a violin, while, seen from my position, not much more than five yards distant, the four others remained as though paralyzed, with the microphones almost glued to their open mouths. The very high-pitched and totally homogeneous sound had at first kept me from seeing the cause of these open mouths, which was that the four, stopping only to breathe, were adding



a continuous guttural sound to the sum of the electronic sounds. The violinist slowly moved the bow up and down, to draw a single sound from the strings, also continuous. Before them, between these five and the public, could be seen the naked spectacle of a tape recorder playing a tape loop and the cables of an amplifier device. There was in this timeless spectacle a deliberate mix—a bit banal for my taste—of Orientalism and electronics. Someone, pointing to the first of the five, told me that it was La Monte Young himself, and that he was “high.”<sup>8</sup> Surely they were right; and the others as well. The event had begun at nine at night and was programmed to last until two in the morning. Among the audience were one or two people who exhibited something like a possessed state, in a rigid meditation position.

In all this there was something that escaped me, or that wasn't to my taste. I don't like Zen, or rather, even while it gives rise in me to a certain intellectual curiosity, since in it there are certainly valuable intuitions about language, it disgusts me as a social phenomenon in the West, and even more as a manifestation within a society so dramatically capitalist as the American one. But I knew neither the practice of Zen, nor the complete theory; and additionally, in this sum of deafening sounds, in this exasperating electronic endlessness, in this mix of high-pitched noise and sound that penetrated one's bones and pummeled one's temples, there was something that probably had very little to do with Zen. Since I had entered the room the physiological condition of my body had changed. The homogenization of the auditory time, through the presence of this sound at such a high volume, had practically split one of my senses away from all the others. I felt isolated, as though nailed to the floor, the auditory reality now went “inside” my body, and didn't simply pass through my ears. It was as though I were obliged to compensate with my eyes for the loss in the capacity to discriminate sounds. My eyes opened wider and wider. And all they found in front of them, enveloped in the quietude of their bodies and in the light, seated, were the five performers. How long would this last? I was not resolved to pursue the experience to the end; I didn't believe in it. After no more than twenty minutes I left.

Two or three days afterwards I began changing my opinion. When you took away the connotations of Zen, Orientalism, etc., there were at least two profound intentions in the Happening by La Monte Young. One of them, that of splitting a single sense away from the others, the near destruction, through the homogenization of a perceptual level, of the capacity to discriminate on that level, brought us to the experience of a difficult restructuring of the total perceptual field. Simultaneously, the exhibition of the performers in their quietude, beneath the bath of colored light, transformed the entire situation into something very similar to the effects of LSD. The situation was therefore something like an “analogue” of the perceptual changes produced by hallucinogens. But the interesting thing, in my opinion, was that this “analogue,” this “similitude” of the hallucinatory condition, did not end up turning into one. The rarefaction of the perception of time was not sufficient to transform it into an actual hallucination because it had too much real weight to become unreal: the hallucination could not go beyond the state of induction. This is the idea that I took to “commit” my Happening five months later in Buenos Aires. But there was another idea in the work of La Monte Young: through the exasperation caused by a *continuum*, the incessant sound at high volume, the work transformed itself into an open commentary, naked and express, of the continuous as continuous, and thereby induced a certain rise in consciousness with respect to its opposite. Or, it could also be said that La



Monte Young pushed us to undertake a rather pure experience by allowing us to glimpse the degree to which certain continuities and discontinuities lie at the basis of our experience of our relationship with things.

When I returned to Buenos Aires in April of '66, I had already resolved to do a Happening myself: I had one in mind. And its title, *To Induce the Spirit of Image*, was an express commentary on what I had learned from La Monte Young. On disordered sheets of paper, and on the edges of my habitual ("intellectual") work, I noted both the general framework of his actions and their details. From La Monte Young I retained, unaltered, the idea of "putting on" a continuous sound, the product of a sum of electronic sounds, at an exceedingly high volume, for two hours (three hours less than he). As to the arrangement of the performers and the audience, it would be the same: the performers in front of the room, lighted, and the audience facing the performers, in the shadows occupying all the rest of the space. Thus the audience would be obliged to see and indeed to look at the performers bathed in light, for the duration and under the high volume of the electronic sound. I, however, would not have five performers, but thirty or forty; and they would not be sitting in a yoga position, but seated motionless in a motley array, on a platform. I then thought that I would recruit them among the downtrodden proletariat: shoeshine boys or beggars, handicapped people, a psychotic from the hospice, an impressive-looking beggar woman who frequently walks down Florida Street and whom one also meets in the subway of Corrientes, with shabby clothes of good cut, varicose veins but skin toasted by the sun; this woman was the perfect image of a person of a certain economic status who had suffered a rapid and disastrous fall. Finally, I thought that at the right moment I would have some money to pay these people, whom I had to find somehow by going out into the street to choose them or search for them. For the rest, the details that accompanied this central situation were not so numerous. I would start off the Happening by talking to the public, telling them the origin of the Happening, that it was inspired by La Monte Young, and that in this sense I had no qualms about confessing the origin. I would also tell them what was going to happen next: the continuous sound, the light illuminating the motley-colored downtrodden-looking group on the platform. And I would also tell them that in a sense it was as though the overall situation had been carefully designed by myself, and that in this sense there was an intellectual control over each one of its parts. That the people of the audience could proceed according to their own will, remaining seated on the floor or still. And if they wanted to leave at any moment they could, only they would have to follow a rule to do so. I would distribute little flags among them, and if anyone wanted to leave they had to raise a flag: then I would have this person accompanied to the exit (later I revised the detail of the little flags; they softened the situation, and my idea was that the Happening had to be spare, naked, hard). I would go on talking about the idea of control, about the fact that almost everything had been foreseen. I would repeat the word control to the point of associating it with the idea of a guarantee. That the public would have guarantees, even physical guarantees, that nothing could happen. Nothing, except one thing: a fire in the room. But a fire could happen in any other room, in any other theater. And in any event, precautions had been taken, and for this reason I had equipped myself with a quantity of fire extinguishers (which I would have with me at this time and would show to the audience). Finally, to give more guarantees, to reinforce the image of the fact that everything or almost every-



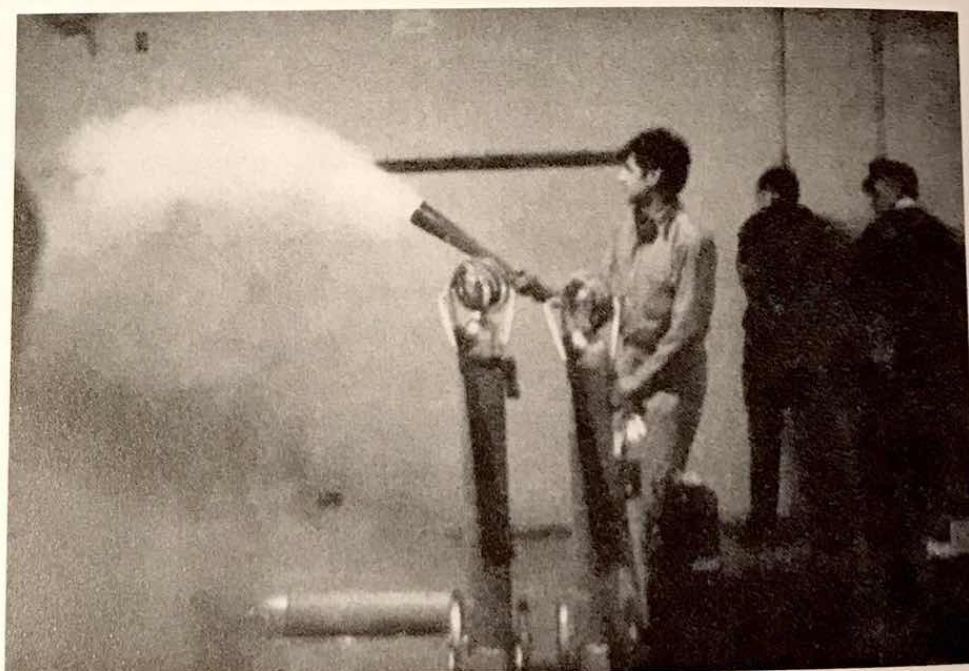
thing had been foreseen, and even designed or controlled, I myself would discharge a fire extinguisher immediately. And I would do it for two additional motives. On the one hand, because not many people have ever seen a fire extinguisher in action—except those who have been in a fire—and therefore there exists some doubt as to whether, in the case of a fire, the fire extinguishers that we see hanging from the walls will work or not. And on the other hand, for the aesthetic side of the question. Because the discharging of a fire extinguisher is a spectacle of a certain beauty. And it was important for me to exploit this beauty.

Once the fire extinguisher had been discharged, the electronic sound would begin, the lights illuminating the sector of the platform with my performers would go on, and the situation would then be created. For two hours. Later I changed the duration, reducing it to one hour. I think that was a mistake, which reveals, in a way, certain idealist prejudices that surely weighed on me: in reality I was more interested in the *signification* of the situation than in its *facticity*, its hard concreteness. (Think of the difference with La Monte Young, who brought this concreteness to the very physical and physiological limits of the body.)

In April I called together a group of people, plastic artists in the majority, to plan a festival of Happenings: Oscar Palacio, Leopoldo Maler, David Lamelas, Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, Mario Gandelsonas. I invited them to make a successive set of Happenings, in a relatively limited space of time. They accepted; we then planned that various art galleries—Bonino, Lirolay, Guernica, etc.—would each have to take the responsibility of presenting an artist. The group of Happenings would in its turn be presented and presided over by the Museo de Arte Moderno of the City of Buenos Aires. We spoke with [Hugo] Parpagnoli, the director of the Museum, and with the gallerists: everyone agreed. By acting in this way—i.e., by planning out Happenings within an official framework: the presence of the museum—I intended to work according to what may be called pedagogical ends. I was attracted by the idea of definitively introducing a new aesthetic genre among us. For this, our Happenings had to fulfill only one condition: they must not be very French, that is, not very sexual. I was thinking of accomplishing purely aesthetic ends, and I imagined myself a bit like the director of the Museum of Stockholm, who from within an official institution had opened up to all the avant-garde exhibitions and events. But Buenos Aires is not a Swedish city. At the moment during which we planned the two-week festival there came the coup d'état that brought Onganía to power; and there was an outburst of puritanism and police persecution. Scared, we abandoned the project: what is more, it was a bit embarrassing, amid the gravity of the political situation, to be creating Happenings. . . . In this respect—embroiled in a sentiment of mute rage—I now think exactly the contrary. And I am also beginning to think the contrary with respect to those “pedagogical” ends: about the idea of introducing the dissolving and negative aspects of a new artistic genre through the positive image of official institutions.

It was only recently, in November at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella (ITDT), that I would effectively succeed in carrying out my Happening. The imminence of the date had made me think about my own “image”: about the idea that others had of me and about the idea I had about this idea. Something would change: from a critic or an essayist or a university researcher, I would become a Happening-maker. It would not be bad—I thought—if the hybridization of images at least had the result of disquieting or disorienting someone.





Top: Line of hired extras in Oscar Masotta's Happening *Para inducir al espíritu de la imagen* [*To Induce the Spirit of Image*], Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, 1966. Photograph reproduced in *Happenings* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Jorge Álvarez, 1967)

Bottom: Oscar Masotta performing his *Para inducir al espíritu de la imagen* [*To Induce the Spirit of Image*], Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, 1966. Photograph reproduced in *Happenings* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Jorge Álvarez, 1967)



In the meantime, the central situation of the planned Happening had undergone a modification. Instead of people of a downtrodden condition, it would use actors. But you will see, this was not too great a compromise, nor a tribute to artificiality in detriment to reality. It came about because of a performance that Leopoldo Maler presented at the ITDT. In it he used three older women who had caught my attention: at one moment they came onto the stage to represent a radio or television show of questions and answers. The women each had to sing a song in order to get the prize. I remembered the aspect of the women, grotesque in their high heels, holding their purses in their hands, in a rather ingenuous position. These persons very clearly denoted a social origin: lower middle class. It was exactly what I needed: a group of around twenty persons indicating the same class level, men and women. Maler then gave me the telephone number of a woman who could engage this number of persons. It was somebody who had something like an agency for placing extras. I called her, she listened to me very courteously, and we agreed that there would be twenty persons. She asked me to explain what kind of persons I needed, what physical aspect. I summed it up: older persons, looking badly off, poorly dressed. She said she understood. I would have to pay each person four hundred pesos.

As for the fire extinguishers, I had no difficulty obtaining them. I put myself in contact with an industry that made them, and spoke with the sales manager. Very courteously he accepted my request. He would lend me twelve fire extinguishers for one day. He also gave me instructions about different kinds of fire extinguishers to cover the possibility of various dangers. I would use one that produces a dense white smoke. When I tried it out, before the Happening, I also realized that it produced a quite deafening noise. I would use it as a bridge between my words and the electronic sound.

At five in the afternoon on October 26th, the first of the twenty hired persons began to arrive. By six all twenty had arrived. Men and women from the ages of forty-five to sixty years old (there was only one younger person, a man of thirty to thirty-five). These people came to "work" for four hundred pesos; it was temporary work, and supposing—although impossible—that they obtained something similar every day, they would not succeed at pulling in more than twelve thousand pesos a month. I had already understood that the normal job of almost all of them was to be hawkers of cheap jewelry, leather goods, and "variety articles" in those shops that are always on the verge of closing and that you find along Corrientes Street, or in some areas of Rivadavia or Cabildo. I imagined that with this work they must earn even less than I was going to pay them. I was not wrong.

I gathered them together and explained what they were to do. I told them that instead of four hundred I would pay them six hundred pesos: from that point on they gave me their full attention. I felt a bit cynical: but neither did I wish to have too many illusions. I wasn't going to demonize myself for this social act of manipulation which in real society happens every day. I then explained to them that what we were going to do was not exactly theater. That they had nothing to do other than to remain still for an hour, motionless, shoulders against the wall of the room; and that the "play" would not be carried out in the normal theater, but in a large storage room that I had expressly prepared. I also told them that there would be something uncomfortable for them: during this hour there would be a very high-pitched sound, at very high volume, and very deafening. And they had to put up with it, there was no alternative. And I asked whether they accepted and they were in agreement.



One of the older ones seemed to pull back, but they all consulted each other with their eyes, and finally, with mutual solidarity, they answered yes. As I began to feel vaguely guilty, I considered offering them cotton plugs for the ears. I did so, and they accepted, and I sent someone off to look for the cotton. A quite friendly climate had already sprung up between us. They asked me about the costumes (each of the old people held a sack or a suitcase in hand). I told them that they should dress as poor people, but they shouldn't use make-up. They didn't all obey me completely; the only way not to totally be objects, totally passive, I thought, was for them to do something related to the profession of the actor.

Soon it came time for the Happening to begin. Everything was ready, the tape loop (which I had prepared in the ITDT's experimental music lab), the fire extinguishers. I had also prepared a little armchair, on which I would remain with my back to the public, to say the opening words. I then went down with everyone to the storage room, and explained to them how they were to sit against the back wall. I had also prepared the lights. All that remained was to pay the extras: for this I began to distribute cards, signed by myself, with each one's name, which they would subsequently be able to cash with the secretary of the Audiovisual Department of the Institute. The old folks surrounded me, almost assaulting me, and I must have looked like a movie actor distributing autographs. I saw that the first persons had arrived: two of them seemed to be happy. I continued with the cards; when I turned my head again, the room was full of people. Something had begun, and I felt as though something had slipped loose without my consent, a mechanism had gone into motion. I hurried, arranged the old folks in the planned position, and ordered the lights turned off. Then I asked the people who had arrived not to come forward and just to sit down on the floor. There was quite a sense of expectation and they obeyed.

Then I began to speak. I told them, from the chair, and with my back turned, approximately what I had planned. But before that I also told them what was happening when they entered the room, that I was paying the old folks. That they had asked me for four hundred and that I had given them six. That I had paid the old people to let themselves be seen, and that the audience, the others, those who were facing the old folks, more than two hundred people, had each paid two hundred pesos to look at them. That in all this there was a circle, not such a strange one, through which the money moved, and that I was the mediator. Then I discharged the fire extinguisher, and afterward the sound appeared, rapidly attaining the chosen volume. When the spotlight that illuminated me went out, I myself went to up to the spotlights that were to illuminate the old people and I turned them on. Against the white wall, their spirit shamed and flattened out by the white light, next to each other in a line, the old people were rigid, ready to *let themselves be looked at* for an hour. The electronic sound lent greater immobility to the scene. I looked toward the audience: they too, in stillness, *looked at* the old people.

When my friends on the Left (I speak without irony: I am referring to people with clear heads, at least on certain points) asked me, troubled, about the meaning of the Happening, I answered them using a phrase which I repeated using exactly the same order of words each time I was asked the same question. My Happening, I now repeat, was nothing other than "*an act of social sadism made explicit.*"



## Notes

1. That he is not, in truth, would not prove much. The same prejudices with respect to this word—"Happening"—can be found in a marxist intellectual or party militant. Nor is it a matter of trying to disarm the adversary's arguments by drawing attention to what he *is not*. I introduce the question of the Left here for expository reasons, to set things up more rapidly.
2. Thomas Moro Simpson, *Formas lógicas, realidad y significado* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1964).
3. Dogmatic in the positive sense of the word. This is what Sartre sees at the outset of his "critical" investigation of "dialectical reason." But in the reverse, one must certainly take care not to make marxism into a romantic philosophy of totality and synthesis. The category of totality, its indiscriminate use, has more to do with a specifically spiritualist philosophy than with the strict discipline demanded by the marxist idea of "science."
4. See the opening chapters of Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
5. Using Roland Barthes's words, I call intelligence "the aesthetic contemplation of the intelligible."
6. Lebel is not the only case in France. But whatever the value of his Happenings, one does have to recognize the positive side of his violence, his passion for getting involved. In April of 1966 I was able to attend a Happening by Lebel in Paris, where practically—and sexually—everything happened: a naked woman masturbating, an act of coitus in the middle of the space. The other day the police shut down the event.
7. Kirby's work left quite an impression on Marta Minujín, and it should be considered as the basis of her inspiration for the Happening with the sixty television sets.
8. In the language of the "junkie," it means being strongly affected by the drug.

—Originally published as "Yo cometí un Happening," in Oscar Masotta et al., *Happenings* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Jorge Álvarez, 1967). Translated by Brian Holmes.

## On Happenings, Happening: Reflections and Accounts

By Eduardo Costa and Oscar Masotta

When we gathered together in April of 1966 to plan a cycle of Happenings, some of us already questioned the validity and novelty of the genre. We were not sure that it would be possible to improve on manifestations that had taken place in the United States, their country of origin. Even though the genre was universalized and, on the other hand, the boundaries of its concept are fairly imprecise, we were not certain we would not repeat, in a watered-down fashion, something that had already been done.

Later on, toward the beginning of July, when we informed the press about a Happening that had not taken place, we were already thinking of another type of work: of working in the "interior" of the mass communications media. In any case, in a country where everybody was talking about Happenings with scarcely having seen any, it was not a bad idea to try them. We began by informing ourselves about them, and soon we had familiarized ourselves with the work and names of Allan Kaprow, Carolee Schneemann, Michael Kirby, Samaras, La Monte Young, Wolf Vostell, Robert Whitman, Al Hansen, Dick Higgins, Bazon Broch, Charlotte Moorman, Nam June Paik, Thomas Schmidt, and Joseph Beuys. The more information we gathered, the stronger grew the impression that the possibilities—the ideas—had been exhausted. The idea *not* to do an original Happening, then, and instead collect various Happenings that had already happened into one Happening suddenly seemed more important to us. What is more, the Happenings could be selected with an intentionality. Soon we decided on one: we would make a Happening that would bring together a group of Happenings of different styles, a grouping that would work as a





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