

Happenings, and why we can't call them that anymore by Tom Osborn

From 'Ambience', a local arts magazine in Haringey, in summer of 1969.

We started doing happenings about 18 months ago. Not long after that, around the time when department stores began calling their window displays happenings, it became impossible to use the word.

There are a lot of words that can't be used - at any rate not without a self-conscious set of inverted commas. Drama, art, improvisation... Or Truth and Honour. And what do we call sexual intercourse?

In the same sort of way, many people can't use the existing artistic forms any longer. We are a group of painters and sculptors and actors. It's now possible to see that we came together because for each of us, what happens on an ordinary stage and what is fixed in the picture frame are embodiments of the old system of lies.

When we first started, many people didn't understand what we were up to. Now, more and more people do. This isn't our doing except to a very small degree. It's just that as time goes on, more and more people are coming to feel the same about the existing structures. Giving up an existing structure can be very frightening. The fact that it has lost its force and become a lie doesn't make it any easier. An artist's use to society is that he feels dissatisfied first, and has the need to do something about it.

Sociologically speaking, this is what improvisation is about. It's a way of developing skill in dealing with unknown situations, and it is done by people who can no longer use known situations. In performance it becomes a ritual of discovery.

Improvisation in performance is controlled in two ways. First, by the sort of criteria that you work to in practice work. And second, by the structure that you put in.

There's no such thing as a completely unstructured situation. Even in real life, nothing ever happens totally by chance. And in an event that is in any sense a performance, that's to say a meeting between people who have developed some common ground and are interested in putting it into some sort of statement which is watched by others: in any such event there is at the very least a time and a place - which is a structure.

We believe very much in the importance of 'performance'. Doing something properly needs commitment. The painter (i.e. the conventional painter) makes an object, and commitment comes with the permanence that this object has. But if there's an important time element, if you are concerned with a process more than an object as many painters are now, then your commitment depends on this process being seen by an audience.

Feeding narrative or image structure into an improvised event is difficult. I regard it as the central problem of performed improvisation. The trouble is, improvisation works best when the improviser is not deliberately planning what to do next, at least not in the way one usually does plan ahead and the way on which an ordinary text usually depends.

We started by simply responding to the bits of our improvised events that excited us. We would try to work out what conditions made that happen, and try to eliminate the bits that were boring and irritating. A successful event seems to have three stages. It is only successful in the middle stage. During this time, it is riveting to watch and rich images are thrown up. The beginning and the end stages are often embarrassing and annoying.

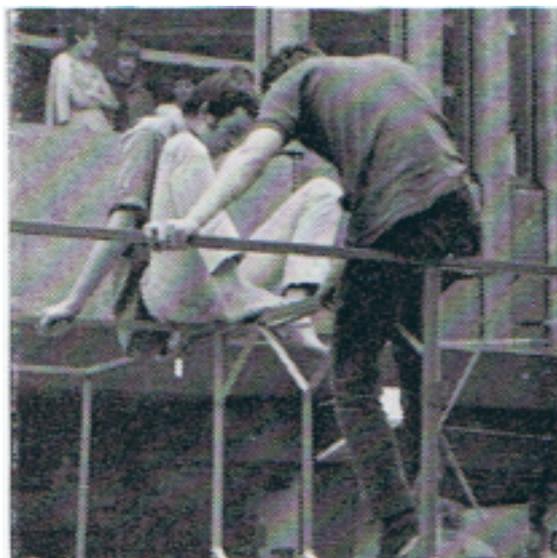
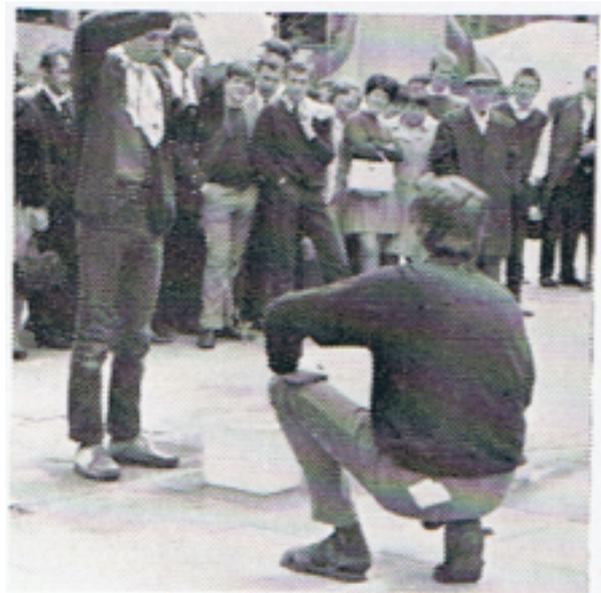
The bad end isn't too hard to get rid of. What happens is that the good middle (if the event has worked) is so absorbing and often such fun that one wants to make it go on after it has come to its natural end. So instead of letting things happen one is making things happen. It is a general rule of events, as it is of life, that letting things happen works, while making things happen often leads to contrivance and phoniness. This doesn't mean sitting back and doing nothing. It does mean being in the right state of mind.

In the middle stage of an event, if this creative flow, or whatever it is, is working then whatever you do is 'right'. You are in a state of awareness and relatedness, to things and to people. Problems of space and timing simply disappear because whatever is done achieves a sort of perfection that couldn't be improved on by repetition and rehearsal. So the rule is: when the good middle finishes, stop.

The bad beginning is less easy because it's a time of winding up, of trying to start. The improviser and the long-distance runner are both working for their moment of release. With the explosive events, the moment of release has to come with the moment of effort, which explains the extraordinary winding up procedures of the high-jump athlete Dick Fosbury and others.

The difference between the released phase and the other two is quite striking. It's not a matter of degree, it is all or nothing. When an event works, one is in no doubt. A commonplace example of this difference seems to be evident on television. Turn off the sound when someone is speaking or being interviewed: either the speaker looks fascinating and is just as interesting to watch as to listen to, or (more often perhaps!) simply looks ridiculous and phoney.

The usefulness of recognising the dynamic pattern of a free event is in the criteria that it gives one. How to achieve the released functioning of the middle section: that is a major problem. And the other major problem, even more important, is the central one I've already referred to: how to use this way of functioning at the same time as achieving the image content that one wants, instead of the arbitrary image content that is thrown up out of the subconscious.



Referring to sociology again: the situation of a true or a phoney social structure or ritual seems to be exactly comparable with the script that can be done and the script that can't. We have found it necessary to build up from the most basic steps, like learning to speak all over again. We haven't got very far yet. Actual speaking is the most difficult thing of all. Because the moment you start trying to do a script which is tied to the old structures, you stop functioning in the middle-phase way and start functioning in the beginning- or end-phase way.

This is the sort of area we have been working in. What we do is to work to a script which is a set of instructions. The most open ended script one could write would be simply instructions to a number of people (the 'performers' - but it's at this point that the distinction between performers and audience becomes blurred) as to where they should be at a certain time.

This is like the piece by the composer La Monte Young which consists of the instruction 'Listen'. A slightly more complex instruction, and one that we sometimes use, is 'Cross the stage ten times'. A much more complex script, which we have used, would be to bring materials to build tents, build them, and then interrelate.

The view that a script is a set of instructions is, I believe, useful even for a play written in precise dialogue. One can see Hamlet not as a piece of literature but as a set of instructions for an event.

Here are two stories.

A few months ago, snow fell in a remote part of Zambia for the first time ever on record. There was widespread panic. The inhabitants had never seen snow before. The existing rules no longer worked and they were faced with an unknown situation.

The second story is probably just as historical. It is about a Buddhist monk who happened to pass a woman by the roadside who was crying.

'Why are you crying?' he asked.

'I've lost my son. He is dead', she said.

The monk thought for a time and then he hit the woman, really hard so that she fell over. As he went on his way, he said to her:

'That will give you something to cry about'.

Both the above stories are relevant to the state of our society.

In the past few years, artists have stopped working in isolation. They have suddenly become interested in technology, architecture, social structuring and so on. Artists are professional specialists at going into unknown situations. Industrialists, workers, please note.

I have to say there are bits of this article I don't like much now - slogan-like phrases such as 'the system of lies', and the two little 'stories' at the end - I think I was rather under the spell of Keith Johnstone at the time! - though in general I value his work greatly and gained greatly from it. And much of the article I stand by. I've included it in because it puts together much of what is referred to in part in various other places on this site (some of the Articles and 'FGA' in Gallery). - 2013.