

# the something else NEWSLETTER

---

Volume 1, Number 6

May, 1967

40¢

---

## Against Movements

by DICK HIGGINS

Oh, this technique business! So often technical innovations are confused with ideational ones. Only the kind of person who would buy a painting he didn't like simply because it was a *painting* would admire an early Picasso simply because Picasso was a cubist. If he were consistent, he would have to take Gleizes also, who is similar technically in certain works. Why admire Schwitters because he is a collagist? Or Rauschenberg merely as a combinist? Albers as a Geometrist? Kaprow as a Happenings artist? Williams as a Concrete Poet? Actually, these descriptions of people do have an important function, in that they establish frames of reference to describe techniques. But they do not describe the work itself. From the idea of Intermedia, which is a means of describing and classifying the techniques used to achieve a given result, we can easily conceive of a Geometric Collage which was neither Geometric (if one might apply the term to Albers' brand of painting) nor Collage per se, nor even a mixture of both, but whose technical essence arose from in between and represented a fusion of ideas.

It is only an illusion that there is a Happenings movement or ever was. The same can be said, I think, of Concrete Poetry. Both merely represent Intermedia, which in turn reflect the new technical and social possibilities within society. In my opinion, such Happenings artists as Kaprow and Oldenburg really belong to quite different worlds. Kaprow represents a lyrical, poetic tendency, and Oldenburg a more extroverted, social one. Kaprow works with rituals, mass numbers of rela-

tively anonymous participants, audiencelessness (a clumsy word, but more accurate than the usual term, "audience participation"). Oldenburg uses the separate performer and audience functions. Kaprow's work pushes the definition of art. Oldenburg uses the creation of a work of art implicitly and equally unconventionally. And similar distinctions can be made between these two artists, whom I have merely chosen as examples, and others of the best people who have found the Happening a useful technique and medium—Vostell, Brecht, Hansen, myself, and the many others from many worlds.

We could make a similar series of distinctions among the various people who use the medium of Concrete Poetry, but I would prefer to hold this off until Emmett Williams' comprehensive *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* is published,\* since many of the names of the major figures in the medium are as yet unfamiliar to the American public at large, and in order to discuss these figures in detail, it is necessary that the work be available to substantiate what I say. Suffice it to say, for now, that Concrete Poetry with its various cognates, represents very generally a fusion of Poetry and Visual Graphic Art ideas, and is fully as broad an Intermedium as the Happenings.

However the very existence of the Happenings and of Concrete Poetry as Intermedia reflects a tendency to reflect the social and technological changes of the past few decades. This is not true of other so-called move-

\* available by September, 1967 (ed.)

ments, which simply reflect changes in fashion, taste and stylistic decor (hence their characteristic short lives as "movements"), but do not imply any functional change of the medium in which each work finds itself.

Such stylistic "movements" are merely sets of stock motifs, and the appearance of each new set is without any far-reaching implications at all so far as the media and intermedia are concerned. Typical of such sets are Op, Pop, Pure-form Sculpture and Minimal Art.

Op gives the appearance of objectively trying to maximize optical vitality for aesthetic effect. What usually results, however, is an offshoot of geometrical art, in that there are only shapes. The after-images are seldom as dazzling as they should be. In order to maximize brilliance, in the colored canvases, complimentary colors should be used. However, they seldom are. In the mixing of paint with opaque pigments, the three major pairs of complimentary colors are red-green, orange-blue, yellow-violet. But only in the mixing of paint. Normally when we place a brilliant red by a brilliant green, we see a sort of vibration along the line of meeting. The same does not happen with orange and blue. This already suggests the inadequacy of the pigment complementaries. And in fact, they are inadequate.

But in fact there are several sets of balanced subtractive primary colors. The most brilliant results can be achieved, though, only by using transparent colors based around yellow cyan (a distinctly greenish blue) and magenta (a bluish red). This gives us the color complementaries: red-cyan, yellow-blue and green-magenta. Blue is a mixture of cyan and magenta, red is a mixture of magenta and yellow, and green is a mixture of yellow and cyan. Try placing a yellow and a blue side by side: the vibration is far more sizzling than a yellow by a violet or a blue by an orange. Try a violet (which lies between magenta and blue) beside a yellow-green: the vibration is very wild. If the artists involved in this kind of work were actually interested in exploring the aesthetic potential of optical effects, they would have discovered these things by experimentation. But the optical effect instead becomes only a motif, since the experiment is not real. Which is not to say at all that a work using inaccurate primaries would even be improved by using balanced primaries: only its optical aspect would be strengthened, and that only in terms of vigor, which might not help the painting at all. But my point is that to try to explain an Op painting as an extraordinary phenomenon or part of a movement is like trying to explain Renoir as part of the nude movement.

Actually Op painting has so many predecessors in the last forty years that it really is like a motif or genre which many from many different points of views have used. For example, there is the work of the extraordinary Polish artist Henryk Berlewi who, forty years ago, already, was doing black and white Op graphics and paintings that are absolutely indistinguishable from certain works of Victor Vasarely and Brigitte Riley.

Recently a great deal of verbiage has been devoted to conceptualizing minimal art. But art is as art does.

If I sit on a chair, it is a chair. If I include the chair in a sculpture, it is sculpture. If I sit on a sculpture, it is a chair. The concept of exploring how little one can do and still have a work of art does not in any way explore the Intermedium between art and life unless the particular work becomes capable of a multiplicity of functions, and simply the fact of its location within that medium is no guarantee that the work will be of any particular interest, any more than the fact that a work is a sculpture guarantees that it will be interesting. The Flavin minimal art pieces, in which, for example, two fluorescent lights are fixed at right angles, if they are interesting, are not interesting just because one can read by sculpture-light, or because the communication is framed in an ultra-simplified language. Alison Knowles has a large set of shelves on which she keeps the many marvelous small art works that friends have given her over the years; among them she keeps her old sewing machine. It is beautiful as a work of art not because it is or is not art, but because thinking about it as art makes it a very effective object visually.

George Brecht has been doing what is now known as minimal art for the last seven or eight years. If one were to accept the idea that minimal art constituted an actual movement, Brecht would probably have to be called its father. He produces both objects and events (by which I mean miniature Happenings), and the language of both is somehow the same, since each reflects his taste for the very simple and the very small. If his work has extraordinary implications to the possible functions of the arts, it is not because they are simple or small: that is his eye and his taste. Somewhere I have a copy of the *Rubayyat of Omar Khyam* printed in microscopic type, and about  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch by  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch in size: it has no implications that I can think of. So if George Brecht is the father of minimal art, then surely Yves Klein is the father of Bluism.

By Pop Art what is usually meant is art which deliberately uses familiar images, styles and frames of reference from mass culture. Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes, Claes Oldenburg's giant ice cream cone and Roy Lichtenstein's comic strips are generally accepted examples from what is considered the Pop Art movement. But Oldenburg is a fantasist, a magician. He takes the idea and transforms it, by altering its scale so massively, in the case of the ice cream cone, or by converting it into an art image that contrasts with its original function, as in the case of the soft baseball bat or the incredible, drooping soft toilet. It is typical of him to have done a series of proposed monuments, very few of which could be expected to be built, such as a gigantic teddy bear to tower over the New York skyline at Central Park, or the colossal pack of cigarettes for Piccadilly Circus in London. Whatever the debt that others who are generally considered Pop Artists owe to Oldenburg (and it is a large one, since he is the most profound of the artists on the present scene), in my opinion Oldenburg belongs more properly to whatever movement Goya was a member of.

On the other hand, there is no question that the post-World War II period is finally over, and that the isolation of the artists is fast being reduced, thanks to the various social and technological changes, from the development of television to the enormous explosion of the art and literary publics. The postwar period was a difficult one, and was typified by the personal and subjective approach of Abstract Expressionism. Now we are in a period where art is far less of a specialty item. The quality of our popular music is at a higher point than it has ever been—at least since the early 1920's, and the college age public has grown so huge that for almost any work of value, no matter how extraordinary, there is an audience. As a result conditions have become easier. What I would therefore like to suggest is that not merely some but actually almost all the younger artists today are, in one sense or another, Pop Artists, and that to confine the term to a very small number of specialists is not to reflect the true situation very accurately at all. Ten years ago it was obvious that the majority of the most exciting paintings being done were abstract, but the term Abstract Expressionism was normally applied only to a rather small circle of painters in New York. Today, however, we use the phrase Abstract Expressionism to describe virtually all the non-Geometric abstract painting being done in the United States, Europe, Japan, etc. It is a term that no longer refers to a movement but to a format.

I suspect that in twenty years the term Pop Art will become the standard format name for virtually all the works being produced today that include objective, recognizable materials from daily or popular living and all these paintings, sculptures, Happenings, Concrete Poetry, collage musics, sound poems, object poems and so on will be covered by the Pop Art umbrella. The illusion of little movements will have disappeared into the reality of an overall format of the period, within which the differences of the various artists can be seen uniquely rather than just as types.

If we do not speak of movements then, we will need another way to describe similarities between work, and what used to be names of movements may, in some cases, be applicable as names of formats for work. We can then refer to Berlewi's very old work, not as "pre-Op" but as "Op format." It is a much more sophisticated and accurate approach than trying to conceive of movements, because it reflects more accurately the uniqueness of the contribution of major figures.

For example, one can learn a great deal more about Vostell from thinking of him as working in a Happenings format using the Dé-coll/age principle,\* than by either conceiving of him as the founder of the Dé-coll/age movement (I have actually heard him introduced publicly as that!), on the assumption that any

\* Dé-coll/age is the name Vostell gives to a common emphasis throughout his work, which he uses as a principle, on exposure, erasure, transformation, removal, stripping off, etc. The name comes from the French word for an airplane take-off.

major artist must have his movement, even if nobody besides its founder belongs to it, or to describe him as one of the leading members of the Happenings movement, which neither indicates Vostell's uniqueness nor his importance.

Every field of endeavor must have its research and development phase or become bankrupt. In the science of communications, I think of the development aspect as the more technological one—developing the electronic means of speaking and seeing over a television tube, or developing an organization to perform operas, and of the arts as the research branch of the communications science. The artist is whoever researches aesthetic functions in practice. Each work is an experiment, whose results are often duplicated elsewhere, either simultaneously and unconsciously or subsequently and deliberately.

Owing to the nature of the experiments, in which the impact communicated in one way or another, emo-

by Europe's greatest Happenings Artist —

### Dé-coll/age Happenings by Wolf Vostell

All his Happenings texts to date, 15 large prints of the scores, and a signed and numbered original mini-score, in a box: \$15.00. Something Else Press, Inc., 160 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010.

tionally or intellectually or through some other means, is usually in direct proportion to its freshness and avoidance of worn channels, most exciting experiments will, of course, originate from the more advanced areas of research. Experiments from the past should be occasionally duplicated, however, in order to acquire laboratory technique and to demonstrate what no longer needs to be researched.

When the results of the experiments are made known to the practitioners of the science of communication—which means virtually everybody—they are accepted or rejected or both, together or at different times, on the basis of their success as experiments. To say that a researcher belongs to one or another movement is not really, then, very enlightening, any more than to say that Pasteur was a silkwormist. Furthermore, it seems to cramp our understanding of the artist, and, if (horrors!) he comes to regard himself as a member of a movement, it is potentially quite damaging. If Edison had regarded himself as a member of the light bulb movement, would he have given us the phonograph as well?

**News card #13**

The ideas and materials from a seminal Pop Art masterpiece, presented for the first time in the artist's own words —

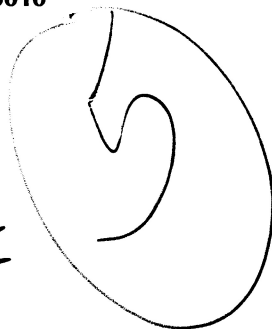
## Claes Oldenburg's Store Days

152 pages, large format, profusely illustrated in black and white and color, hardcover, only \$10.00 from Something Else Press, Inc., 160 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

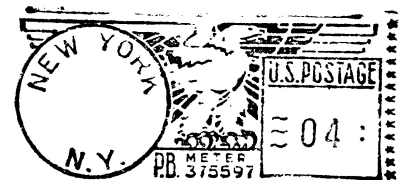
¶ It's ready ! ! ! Claes Oldenburg's **Store Days!** After nearly two and a half years of planning and making. Claes Oldenburg and Emmett Williams went over thousands and thousands of notes, scenarios, photographs, drawings, etc., and came up with a distillate of the first real masterpiece, **The Store**, in the Pop Art format. It is presented in a lyrical manner, rather than a documentary one, since we wanted to represent the ideas (and the sources of more recent ideas) rather than the network of precedents involved in the book. We wanted to make a primary source, which **The Store** was, rather than a secondary one, which it wasn't. ¶ In the Fall there will be another series of Great Bear Pamphlets, including John Cage's "Part 3" of **Diary: How to Improve the World**. Eric Andersen, some of whose concept music will be another pamphlet in the series, is distributing copies of his new film free to all who request them. His address is Skyttegade 12, St. th., Copenhagen N, Denmark. ¶ Ed Ward and Jon Zimmermann are setting up a program to distribute avant-garde radio programs to college stations. Their address is Division A, Antioch Union, Yellow Springs, Ohio 45387. ¶ Tell Jerome Agel how terrific the last few issues of **Books** have been—at 598 Madison Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10022. ¶ Dick Higgins has promised himself to write no more letters until June, 1968, and to keep his promise as faithfully as feasible, so he can get his work done. ¶ Our new Canadian distributor, to

whom our Northern friends should now write, is INFORM, 41 Walmsley Boulevard, Toronto 7, Ontario. ¶ Soon we'll have Marshall McLuhan's **Verbi-Voci-Visual Explorations** ready. We'll let you know just when. ¶ Robert Filliou is working on a new book (alas, not for us) on the implications for society and, specifically, for education of the new art forms. ¶ Milan Knizak's **Keeping Together Manifestation**, originally organized out of Prague, Czechoslovakia, has aroused participation in Africa, North and South America, Europe and Asia. Lasting throughout March, it involved more than 10,000 people, thanks to the efforts of Ken Friedman, in San Francisco alone.

Something Else Press, Inc.  
160 Fifth Avenue  
New York, NY 10010



Return Requested



MR & MRS PETER MOORE  
4 E 36TH ST  
NEW YORK N Y 10016

*Handwritten signature*