PREFACE TO THE EXPANDED EDITION

On the Way to Un-Art

Art sometimes begins and ends with questions. A big question for me in the mid-50s and 60s was What is Art? I tried answering it with what were then vanguard art moves. I filled makeshift gallery spaces with trash picked up on the streets. Sounds and lights were everywhere. Visitors were urged to enter the spaces and move the parts like so much furniture. I called these accumulations *Environments* and half-accepted a sophistry floating around the studios, that art was anything!

But “anything” was too easy. If anything was art, nothing was art. And the few experimental examples of such pretensions at the time—including mine—were patently idiosyncratic, hardly as open-ended as a theory of anything promised. Nobody that I can recall bathed in Lemon Jello or became a school teacher *as art* (until much later).

Vanguard art in those days was clearly something. But what was it? Again, I thought I had the answer: the *Happening*. The Happening initially was a collage of rather abstract events for moveable audiences such as:

Three steps forward and two to the right
Purple banners dropped from above
Circular saw roaring
Matches slowly lit and blown out
Face in a mirror
Now go to room five . . .

The Happening seemed to me a new art form that couldn't be confused with paintings, poetry, architecture, music, dance, or plays. As residues of a European past, these old forms of art had lost their artness

for me by overexposure and empty worship. Happenings were fresh.

But soon, even the experimental Happenings appeared saddled with the art history they would replace. I'm not referring to the traditional topics of genre, style, and subject matter which occupy historians and critics. I'm talking about unquestioned beliefs associated with all the arts. For example, belief in objects that can be possessed; belief in eternity; belief in control and skill; belief in creativity; belief in publicity and fame; belief in marketability. These beliefs guided the Happenings no less than the conventional arts and popular culture. Happenings, therefore, were just another version of vanguard theater.

But I gradually eliminated most of these beliefs by doing events only once, by not sending out announcements, by shifting event sites from artists' lofts and underground galleries to remote landscapes or to multiple sites that were out of touch with one another; as well as by encouraging people to select their own sites and times. The weather and insects were occasionally involved. Flexibility of time allowed passengers on transatlantic trips to calculate their doings based on changes in time zones.

The biggest problem, however, was the presence of audiences at Happenings. Audiences have been standard requirements of theater and music, popular and highbrow, since the remote past. Commercial galleries and most museums also count their attendees to determine upcoming budgets, programs, and sales. Getting rid of one's audiences could threaten not only an artist's self-esteem but his or her survival.

I had a job, fortunately, and so I could experiment. My audience (never large) was reduced further to a handful of participants plus the accidental passerby who was invited to join in the activity. Participants would volunteer to take part in a task explained in advance:

Building a tower of used Coca-Cola cans
Making a lot of noise
Tearing it down

But that strategy wasn't enough. Leaving galleries, museums, and professional arts circles for woods, alleys, public bathrooms, and supermarket aisles could hardly erase my role as a former painter in the New York art scene of the 40s and 50s. It was like rejecting a labor union membership. I was known for my past and was reminded of it constantly. Just as serious, I was a full-time teacher of art history and studio

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practice in a university, and this was common knowledge too. Some saw this as a conflict: one foot in the present and one in the past.

But I took a cue from stories of monastic practices in which dissatisfied persons, seeking the proverbial meaning of life, give up the real world and its temptations for a presumed spiritual, and better, one. Could this be done in art without physically going into a monk's cell for life? I thought it could and called it "un-arding." Essentially, this was accomplished by taking the art out of art, which in practical terms meant discarding art's characteristics.

This allowed me to retain my membership in the art community while leaving it. Leaving art *is* the art. But you must have it to leave it. I define it as that act or thought whose identity as art must forever remain unknown. That is, to answer the initial question What is Art?, art could (but might not) be simply doing art, whatever that is, as long as it can't be identified.

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