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## A Happening

**By R. H. Gardner  
(To Whom It Happened)**

I'm pleased to report that I have attended my first happening.

A new "art" now threatening to replace Pop painting, Prepared Piano and the theater of the absurd in the forefront of the American avant garde, happenings are not easy to describe.

In that they depend upon staged programs planned and rehearsed for presentation to an audience, they fall I suppose in the general area of theater with one outstanding difference. Rather than merely watching, the audience gets into the act. At some happenings, I'm told, spectators are put through a drill that may embrace anything from group singing to gymnastics. At mine, they sat on rows of chairs while being shouted at, sprayed, imprisoned and otherwise harassed by a swarm of creatures in outlandish attire.

The affair was something like a miniature party organized by the Margins in side and presided over by the "Mars" brother.

The setting was a bar on the Baltimore waterfront of Mrs. Alan Warringer. Two performances took place the first at 1:30 P.M. and another two hours later before some 200 people, including some prominent citizens, several out-of-town visitors and staff members from the *Baltimore Sun*, the Johns Hopkins University and the Baltimore Museum of Art. Programs distributed at the door stated that the "happening" was "The Artist" - the work of Dan Brown, a student at the Maryland Institute and whose art the subject served at this year's Maryland Festival Show.

**Material Is Plastic**

by a large white screen, stood a sculptured leg of human proportions. On it had been printed the word "Leg" in red paint. At approximately 9:30, as the remainder of the 120 seats were filling up and the overflow crowd was drifting toward the rear, rock 'n' roll music began to blare from a speaker.

Almost simultaneously, five characters in knee-length plastic bags, silver helmets, red gloves, without the pellets and black elastic masks, emerged from the wings and arranged themselves along the right wall.

A sixth, wearing something that looked like a black space suit (hood and all), took a position in front of the white screen. Simultaneously I later discovered the subject resembled a water-skied the hapless character in a frenzied racing to the heavy beat.

"THUNDER, they call me a water-ski that," glared the crowd, while the engineer and mechanical crewmen figured raked rates like from side to side.

"It's weird, of it, I'm weird of it," said a woman across the aisle.

**Assaultment Of Waves**

Suddenly several men, sporting the white masks of crude hooligans, appeared in the aisles and began to bark a strange assortment of waves.

One who carried a roll of silver foil wrapped about a high trailing "top" a silver-colored tin can. Another and dressed gladiolus cylinders and little postulated boxes which he called "Bones, Fables" and "Bones, Eternity" respectively. Still another passed out cans of liquid described as "Artist's Club" but which had the legend "Entertainment" striking West. Property of U.S. Gov't.

the speaker, "I wonder how many of you boys and girls have played the clock game? The object is to see how high you can count to twenty without. What do you say we do it?"

firm, disturbing the projected picture with her body.

As she moved up the aisle, the unnamed girl and her partner embraced the dancer in the corner, allowed her to embrace the program during the show.

body across the room. "The artist is dead." The statement became a refrain, repeated over and over again as the people chattered.

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A new art now threatening to replace Pop painting, Prepared Piano and the theater of the absurd in the forefront of the American avant garde, happenings are not easy to describe.

In that they depend upon staged programs planned and rehearsed for presentation to an audience, they fall I suppose in the general area of theater with one outstanding difference. Rather than merely watching, the audience gets into the act. At some happenings, I'm told, spectators are put through a drill that may embrace anything from group singing to gymnastics. At mine, they sat on rows of chairs while being shouted at, sprayed, imprisoned and otherwise harassed by a swarm of creatures in outlandish attire.

The effect was something like a masquerade party organized by the Marquis de Sade and presided over by the Marx Brothers.

The setting was a barn on the Baltimore-county estate of Mrs. Alan Wurtzburger. Two performances took place: (the first at 7:30 p.m. and another two hours later) before some 250 people, including many prominent citizens, several out-of-town visitors and staff members from the Maryland Institute, the Johns Hopkins University and the Baltimore Museum of Art.

Programs distributed at the door stated that the happening--titled "The Artist"--was the work of Dan Basen, a student at the Maryland Institute and winner of the sculpture award at this year's Maryland regional show.

## **Material is Plastic**

A dark, stockily built, tousled-haired young man in a black shirt and faded blue jeans, he was directing preparations for the second performance when I arrived and, therefore, was too busy to talk. But I gathered from the program notes that he habitually built his Happenings around a particular object or material.

One had only to glance at the barn's decor to realize that in this, his fourth, the material was plastic. Huge, tissue thin sheets of the stuff hung from the ceiling, along with plastic clothes bags and plastic strips terminating in dummy feet (of the sort used for display in department stores) and old shoes.

Many of the sheets were decorated with streaks and whorls of red, yellow and green paint. Many of the bags contained shreds of newspaper, cloth and aluminum foil. Flanking the stage, which was backed by a large white screen, stood a sculptured leg of heroic proportions. On it had been printed the word "leg" in red paint.

At approximately 9:30, as the remainder of the 120 seats were filling up and the overflow crowd was drifting toward the rear, rock-n-roll music began to blare from the speaker.

Almost simultaneously, five characters in knee-length plastic bags, silver helmets, red gloves, inflated life jackets and black cloth masks, emerged from the wings and arranged themselves along the right wall.

A sixth wearing something that looked like a black spacesuit (hood and all), took a position in front of the white screen. She--for I later discovered the outfit concealed a woman--led the bag encased chorus in a ritualistic rocking to the heavy beat.

"Ohhhh, they call me a teenage idol," groaned the record, while the enigmatic and somewhat ominous figures rocked robotlike from side to side.

"I'm scared of it I'm scared of it," said a woman across the aisle.

## **Assortment of Wares**

Suddenly several men, sporting the white coats of candy butchers, appeared in the aisles and began to hawk a strange assortment of wares.

One, who carried a roll of silver foil waived all loft a sign reading "Buy a Silvernear 25 Cents." Another sold greasy plastic cylinders and little pasteboard boxes which he called "Basen Feelies" and "Baen Environments" respectively. Still another passed out cans of liquid described as "Artists Club" but which bore the legend: "Emergency Drinking Water. Property of U.S. Gov't."

At the conclusion of the sale, Mr. Basen walked to the center of the house and inscribed a large green "B" on a hanging strip of plastic with a pressurized spray can. One by one, members of the cloth-faced chorus burst from their bags and sprayed each other in similar fashion.

"This is the real thing. This is the real thing," said a man behind me.

Having momentarily withdrawn, the life-jacketed figures returned carrying the four sides of an unassembled plastic box, with which they proceeded to enclose the first two rows of the audience. It took them 10 minutes to nail the box together. During the interval the imprisoned spectators sat there quietly, if somewhat apprehensively, looking out through the transparent sides.

After his assistants had finished the job, Mr. Basen strode up and, with an offhand flourish, wrote "Audience" on the box with a spray can of orange paint.

Meanwhile, the seller of the silver foil roamed the room modeling hunks of the stuff against unsuspecting spectators profiles and shoulders. A life jacket came slowly up the aisle asking individuals in each row, "You want to help? You want to help?" A man near me said he would and was told to "go to the door and wait."

Handfull of confetti were tossed over the side of the box onto the heads of those within. Somebody raised an umbrella.

Several men, including the fellow who had offered to help, appeared at the front of the barn puffing under the weight of a full-size coffin, which they managed finally to deposit on a wooden frame in the center of the aisle.

A moment, and then -- to the strains of majestic, inspirational music, the coffin lid started to rise. Up, up, up it came, revealing--Mr. Basen. He rose slowly, portentiously, like Adam on the day of creation, and surveyed the littered barn as though he were seeing it for the first time. He wore a tail coat on top of his blue jeans.

As he reached the zenith of his ascent, an arm extended itself from the coffin's interior and a girl, dressed in frilly pink, emerged. They stood there, in the coffin, looking tenderly into each others' eyes. As they kissed, the candy butchers rushed around spraying the audience with something that smell like mouthwash.

More confetti was tossed about as, still kissing, the couple sank back into the coffin. Shrieking, the life jackets ran up the aisle, banged down the lid and, like a gang of drunken pallbearers, lugged the coffin away.

## **Girl in a Garden Hat**

The people in the plastic box, apparently realizing that it had served its purpose, began punching airholes in the sides. It had, I realized suddenly, become hot and stuffy in the barn.

A pretty girl in a garden hat waltzed wistfully down the aisle to the tinkling tune of a music box, which she placed in the center of the stage. Immediately Mr. Basen, now out of his tail coat and back in his black shirt, climbed down the aisle and smashed the box with his heel.

He and the girl went through the same routine a total of three times while the assistants sprayed the audience with something that smelled like lilac water.

"This audience is not reacting properly," said a woman in front of me with obvious irritation. "In New York the people fight back." She tore a dummy foot from the plastic strip hanging above her head and flung it at the stage.

"Say," droned a voice from the speaker, "I wonder how many of you boys and girls have played the clock game. The object is to see how high you can count in 20 seconds. What you say we do it?"

"*You can do it too!*" Yelled a man on the stage who now began to conduct himself like a contestant in a hog-calling contest.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, 10, eleventwelvethirteenfourteen--" counted the voice on the soundtrack, the rhythm accelerating until the numbers ran together into an almost indistinguishable smear of sound

"You do it!" Screeched the man on the stage. "Go faster than he does!" Obediently the audience joined in.

"Fifty-twofifty-threefifty-four!" Concluded the unseen counter. "That was pretty good, wasn't it? Now let's try with the letters of the alphabet."

"*Alphabet!*" Screamed the man. His voice seemed near the breaking point.

"A - B - C - DEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ! And now," suggested the indefatigable games one, "what you say we try it with--"

"*Friends!*"

## **"Here We Go!"**

"The object is to see how many friends you can think of in 20 seconds. Ready? Here we go! Bobby, Johnny, Sarah, Susie, Becky Sandy Billy Harry Homer Henry Jackie--"

"*Have you got as many friends as he does?*"

"Whew!" Gaspd the voice, after mentioning more friends in 20 seconds than a man has any business having, "that was something, wasn't it? Well, that's all we have time for now, boys and girls. But remember before I go-you can play the game at home too."

"*You can do it at home!*" With this last, desperate crescendo of sound, the man on the stage withdrew to grateful applause.

The candy butchers began to spray the room with something that smelled like bourbon.

"Why don't they react?" Demanded the woman in front of me. As if to express her impatience with Baltimore audiences she clawed at the right sleeve of the girl in the black spacesuit, then heading down the aisle at one end of a long strip of canvas. The girl stared at her in surprise.

After that, events followed upon each other in rapid succession.

A tape recording of a series of amusing, if unprintable, telephone conversations was switched on. A motion picture of a woman disrobing was projected upon the screen. A dancer, wearing white leotards and chalk-white make-up, began to perform, distorting the projected picture with her body.

As she moved up the aisle, the space-suited girl and her partner and entwined the dancer in the canvas, allowing her to extricate herself and passed on.

Assuming a crucified pose against the screen, the dancer allowed Mr. Basen to paint her all over with black paint. At the conclusion of this bit he was surrounded by the life-jacketed chorus, who vibrated balloons while a light rotated above his head.

The candy butchers threw chicken feathers all over the spectators. This obviously had some deep, symbolic significance because, having done it once, they came back and did it again.

## **"The Artist is Dead"**

While the audience was recovering from the shock, a familiar, saccharin-flavored voice asked if anybody would like to play Humpty Dumpty Junior. The woman in front of me and her escort got up and left.

"The artist is dead," announced a man in a silver helmet. The crowd stared at him hostility.

"The artist is dead," he repeated. "You can all go home now. We've killed him. We've killed Cézanne."

"Everybody go home," shouted somebody across the room. "The artist is dead." The statement became a refrain repeated over and over again as the people filed out.

Perusing the program during the slow exodus, I noted that the "hog caller" have been plagued by Walter Murch and the dancer by Mary-Ita Greenbaum. Other participants were Andrew Feenberg (who wrote the program notes), R. Charles Wagner, Matthew Robbins, Ed Morse, Liz Quisgard, Paula Parsons, Bob Janz, Gail Waterman, Jon Sonen and Steven Spector. A footnote expressed thanks to, among others, an official of the Maryland Institute and the staff of the Baltimore Museum, "who encouraged us to experiment in our search for new art forms."

As I neared the door, I saw what was causing the bottleneck. Taking up a considerable portion of the passageway was the open coffin in which lay Mr. Basen covered with worms. He look very natural.

Happenings may or may not be art but there's one thing sure: they stick with you. For two hours after I got home I wrestled with the problem, using my fingers, a vacuum cleaner than a stiff brush, but I still couldn't get those chicken feathers off my suit.