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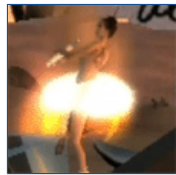


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### LIGHTNING ROD: SECOND FRONT, REEMERGENCE OF THE HAPPENING, AND THE INTEGRATION OF HISTORY

by [Patrick Lichty](#)

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In the first decade of the Third Millennium, there has been a mass revisitation of forms, from artists using "8-Bit" (Arcangel, Davis, Slocum) cooptation of 80's video game tropes and "Cute" Dirt Style (Paperrad, Olson/Nastynets) of early MS Paint and neat art styles. This has also been the case in other genres as well, as my oft-mentioned recontextualization of performance art by Abramovic through her *Seven Easy Pieces* performances at the Guggenheim in 2005, the Mattes' subsequent Second Life-based *Synthetic Performances* of 2006-7 and Kildall's *Paradise Found* images. Each of these examples either signals an appropriation of extant tropes and conceits for affective engagement through nostalgia or childhood longing. I remember an art magazine in the early 2000's with a graphic of a person lying on their side, sucking their thumb, musing about nostalgia as forever clinging to youth as infantilization, but this revisitation seems to be less about clinging to the past, as perhaps paving the way for history.



This difference, while subtle, is analogous to the next step after what has been called "orienteering". This can also be expressed in McLuhan's assertion that new media tends to first replicate extant forms, such as photography's re-presentation of the ubiquitous portrait and landscape genres through the day of Adams. Although one could sharply criticise my read of Adams as being derivative of landscape painters like Bierstadt, this is not the crux of my argument. In order to connect new forms with historical canons, there must be a throughline of exposition through extant tropes that serve as translational conduit for the establishment of continuity with historical traditions. Such is the case for Abramovic's recontextualization, Casey Reas' programmatic explorations of the systems of Sol Le Witt, and the remediation of the Mattes and Kildall. As history is more integrative than irruptive in macroscopic terms (although the micro-scale might show more quantum jumps), the avant, while breaking new ground, translates itself in the common syntax of extancy.

But what of history? For the past two paragraphs, I have been trying to describe an epistemic bifurcation between cultural forms

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of the "avant" and the "orienteer", and their inevitable appropriation/integration into history. As there is an refutation or expansion of extant forms, the tendency of history or the established artist is to welcome or integrate the new as a system of novelty or renewal. In the case of Abramovic this is obvious, and in her response to the Mattes of "Why hadn't I thought of that?", more explicit inheritances and throughlines are established. This leads to the event of the third performance of Al Hansen's *Car Bibbe II* at the Bridge Art Fair during the 2009 NYC Armory Show. *Car Bibbe II* was a Hansen text penned in 1968, as a successor to his pre-Fluxus happening, *Car Bibbe* (the "car symphony" in which participants enacted various gestures with cars from Brechtian scores). However, this piece was previously unrealizable due to *Car Bibbe II*'s actions consisting of detonation of a Cadillac, troupes of ballerinas doing barre exercises, and maintenance engineers performing collection of parts in white paper bags before repeating the cycle until total demolition was achieved. The piece was never realized due to liability issues and the inability to secure large quantities of ordonnance, but in Second Life, demolitions are easy. In fact, the proscribed dynamite was relatively hard to find in relation to the far more common nuclear weapons, so the piece could even more fully fulfill its intentions. This led to the performance of *CBII* at [www.artcontainer.ee](http://www.artcontainer.ee) in Tallinn, Estonia, and *Around the Coyote* in Tallinn, Estonia and Chicago, USA respectively, as well as a return of the Hansen Text to NYC at Bridge.

There are two points I would like to make before closing this story illustrating the integration of novelty into canonical contemporary culture in the millennial digital age. First, with virtual worlds, Web 2.0, etc., there is a much greater sense of "flow"; that is, one could argue that the indeterminacy of action focused through lens of specified intent as expounded by Cage and his adherents, Fluxus, Beuys, et al. This is seen as realization of the "life as art" as put forth by Kaprow's definition of the "happening" in that in virtual worlds, there is a much less distinct relationship between interaction-creation and art, as intent and social context has much greater emphasis in defining the nature of "art" (sic). In web 2.0, this is also seen by the decreased discreteness of actions/oeuvres, evidenced as sets of dialogic informational flows (as seen by endless streams of tweets, RSS feeds and Facebook status updates). These streams of data, especially in virtual worlds like Second Life, are aestheticized and fetishized through the creation of dynamic objects or literary interpretations of these texts. This means that art as such in web 2.0 and virtual worlds (that is, user-driven) is much less object- or event- driven and resembles the types of process art epitomized by the Happening.

In regards to the issue of intent defining the role of "artfulness", in regards to these processes/interactions, one could say that this could also be merely a function of mindfulness to the subject defining a resultant intentionality. This once again brings us back to the Fluxus tradition, as the idea of mindfulness to the intent of art-making in simple or general action stretches from Kaprow's Happening to Robert Fillou's mindfulness to everyday or public life through actions like his "Art's Birthday" concept. It seems that in an art milieu defined by the manipulation of information, intentionality in the formation of artistic action is key.

Another conversation happened at the Bridge/Armory art fair that illustrated some of the the elements of mindfulness in the creation of art : namely, a dialogue with Larry Miller and Geoffrey Hendricks, in which they explained that although the Happenings and Fluxus performances were indeterminate, they were inclusive of some rehearsal, invitation, social filtering and so on. It is not to say that the definition of the Happening was/is not an excuse for

the creation of catch-alls, but a dialectical engagement of intent that admits the mindful/invited to the procedural flows of artmaking as general mise en scene. In short, while anything could be defined as art and everyone could be an artist in the age of Web 2.0, the emergent exploration of praxis in these social media may be art, but given the information stated by Hendricks and Miller, even in a definition as general as the Happening, intentionality still seems to act as a key framing mechanism.

Lastly, I would like to try to build the argument for the building of the road of history through translation. For example, as the performance of *Car Bibbe II* was happening in Chelsea, with Bibbe stage managing while I directed in the space before the projected performance, Geoff Hendricks asked me how SF put together the happening. I replied that we took the text and cobbled together what we could find, and in response to the use of nukes and potential involvement of the audience in the space, I merely replied that one had to "go with the flow" and deal with emergent events. To this Hendricks replied that this was exactly in line with AI's practices, and that it was interesting to see how succeeding generations (Bibbe's and mine/Second Front's) reinterpreted the tradition, to which Miller concurred. This, in conjunction with Abramovic's response to the Mattes remediations are illustrations of the "lightning rod" of grounding of history with the present after the act of orienteering nears completion. That is not to say that there is merely the creation of a 21st Century Happening, but as with Rauschenberg and Hamilton from Dada & Duchamp (and their resultant flows into tech art through EAT & Ascott) the integration of the orienteer or avant with traditions occurs. Therefore, is it surprising that we see New Media artists like Arcangel, Olson, Condon, Cosic, Goldberg, Shulgin, Kanarek, Levin, Schatz, MTAA and so many others in museums, collections, and art fairs, becoming canonical? Certainly not. Although the cultural value of this integration/cooptation into the "traditional" is another matter, the issue remains that in New Media as fin de millennium, avant has served as cultural rod for the lightning bolt of history to ground itself upon. And as the bolt hits the ground, we are brought full circle, closing the circuit of history.

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