

Return and Tactics. The Idea of Play in the Estonian Culture of the 1960s and the Happening 'The Burial of a Mannequin'

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Summary

Abstract: This article analyses the idea of play as a method of creation and a mitigator of social oppression in the Estonian culture of the 1960s, focussing on the happenings organised by young artists and comparing them with the aims and methods of the Tartu 'theatre innovation'. The specification of the essence and main characteristics of play is based on Roger Caillois' cultural historical theory of play. A somewhat exceptional happening, 'The Burial of a Mannequin' (1969), is discussed in more detail.

There are several ways to discuss the happenings that were born in the context of the Soviet period. They can be examined as acts of social resistance, or expressions of the Western-style 'spirit of the 1960s'; they can be analysed primarily in relation to the environment and city space, or more attention can be paid to the structure and/or requisites of the action; finally, the analysis can concentrate on the forms of dialogues with the Western art of the 1960s, or happenings can be seen as parallels to the theatre innovation of the late 1960s. The present article proceeds from the latter option, building upon the key word *play*, which has become topical both in art and theatre, and different ways of using and interpreting it.

In general, the definitions of play used in the Estonian art and theatre of the 1960s were

distinguished from each other by art's interest in the environment and theatre's interest in human beings. Art strove to perceive surroundings in a new way (by creating disturbances and shifts in the regular rhythm of life), while theatre wished to liberate a person's 'real self'. We have to pay attention to the background of each of these conceptions and the factors that had their effect on them – rumours spread among artists about happenings performed in Western countries, and the ideas of Jerzy Grotowski, which had a vast effect on theatre. The idea of play was undoubtedly much more elaborated in theatre than in art, but despite different tendencies and different significance, in both genres play was a striving for greater 'authenticity' and spontaneity, and it was necessary to redefine the essence of creative work and the role of the artist. Happenings can be seen as a process of such a redefinition and as an extensive and sometimes half-conscious attempt to try out different tendencies that were shaped (and partly even caused) by the mood of the late 1960s throughout the world, as well as by the very clearly restricted local social and political context.

On the one hand, the idea of play inspired and gave direction to artists and theatre people and, on the other hand, it helped to draw together and give names to different movements and impulses found in culture. The art historical meaning of happenings has, undoubtedly, been mixed with a cultural historical meaning. When analysing 'play' as a method in different spheres of art, it should, on a wider scale, be compared with the 'games' of Soviet society (maskings and adaptation mechanisms). The 1960s have been described (e.g. by Viivi Luik) as the decade when the Soviet regime adapted to life in Estonia. A certain grid of routine rituals was created within the repressive political system that

helped to ground the tensions emerging from the system, or to ignore them. In such a society, the issue of play in its wider sense became extremely ambiguous – there were games that had to be played in order to keep the system satisfied; there were games that were played in order to adapt to the system; there were games that were played to bait the system or to escape it, even if only in imagination. Happenings obviously belonged to the latter two categories, and often balanced on the edge between the two.

Both the broad wave of Estonian happenings and the main productions of the local theatre innovation were born in the second half of the 1960s and the early 1970s. During this relatively short time, important changes in trends and moods occurred in art and theatre, partly in relation to social and political events. In art, people moved from spontaneous actions towards more self-conscious and structured activities. In theatre, to the contrary, people became more and more absorbed in 'free play' and improvisation. In 1968 and 1969, the peak of moods characterising the decade and changes in attitudes and hopes caused by a political backlash became especially closely intertwined. A certain role in different developments in art and theatre was undoubtedly played by different specifications and reaction speeds of different genres, as well as by the new information that arrived at the same time as the first experiments were held. In theatre, this favoured the discussion of the idea of play; in art – the adoption of entirely new subjects.

Two polarities can be distinguished in the performance art of the 1960s, in Estonia as well as in Western countries: play focussed on returning to the initial spontaneity and innocence, and structured, rational and tactical play. In Roger Caillois' theory of play, *ludus* and *paidia* could conditionally corre-

spond to these polarities. In Richard Schechner's approach, they can be called, respectively, the tradition-seeking avant-garde and forward-looking avant-garde. If we compare the Estonian theatre innovation and the play of happenings using the return/tactics axis, at first glance, the former seems to be strongly inclined to return and the latter seems to remain somewhere in between the two, still being quite largely oriented towards tactical play. Elements of spontaneous and structured play can very often be found side by side in performances and happenings.

A happening called 'The Burial of a Mannequin' (participated in by Ando Keskküla, Leonhard Lapin and Andres Tolts) was performed in the summer camp of the youth magazine *Noorus* at the Kabli seashore in 1969. Next to a bonfire area, a female mannequin (which had secretly been buried at the site the previous night), was unearthed, broken into pieces and thrown into a bonfire, accompanied by the cheering of the audience. Differing from the majority of happenings performed by Estonian artists at that time, this was a planned and prepared event that had a prologue, development, peak and climax. In addition, this action followed a certain general notion of an ancient ritual, which is rare with artists' happenings, but much more characteristic of theatre innovators. The principal difference from other happenings was caused by a different sensing of time: while in the majority of happenings, time flows without a specified start or end, time in 'The Burial of the Mannequin' was linear, at least in the first phase of the event, and moved, step by step, towards a climax. The Dionysian end of the event allows us to talk about a meeting of the two different senses of time, about the flow of structured events into free, unlimited activities. 'The Burial of the Mannequin' contained an in-

interesting discrepancy – on the one hand, in the play, the participants wished to find their own private liberation that broke all restrictions but, on the other hand, they wished to structure the liberation.

In talking about the undermining and fixing functions of play, we should bear in mind both the fact that play is enacted, and also the essence of play. Depending on the viewpoint, the play of artists, as well as that of the theatre, contains the potential to support the ruling social order, as well as the potential to rock it. If we discuss happenings as the letting off of steam, as the channelling of oppression and protest into relatively innocent and safe activities, we can conclude that they supported the ruling regime. But if we discuss the peculiarity of such activities, where nobody would exactly know what they mean, how they would proceed and end, we could find the potential in them to generally undermine social stability. In the context of art, the fact that happenings were enacted in Estonia at the same time as in the West and in other Eastern European countries indicates that the local art history belonged to the greater general narrative of art history. But the accelerated development of Estonian art in the 1960s, the rapid influx of new information, and the testing and interpreting of new strategies and tactics caused a certain confusion, which could be one of the reasons why artists often did not take happenings too seriously. For an art that already was under great stress, the border-busting element of happenings was attractive, but would have brought along too much uncertainty and instability if developed further.

Giving people back the knowledge of both Estonian and Western art history (withheld by Stalinist authorities) was one of the most important factors shaping the 1960s generation of young artists, actors and producers.

The artists of Western countries, at least some of them, attempted to get rid of the burden of institutionalised culture. But Estonian young artists, trying at the same time to relate to modern art and to follow the new ideas that were spreading via journals and books, found themselves in a situation where they were attempting to both adopt and reject the new culture.

The birth of the first Estonian happenings was quite closely connected with the spreading of the ideas of existentialism and the first translations of absurd dramas. We know that the first happening event in Estonian art history was also the first known production of absurd drama in Estonia (Samuel Beckett's 'Act without Words' was performed at the Tallinn 21st Secondary School in 1966). In the late 1960s, all the phenomena that had emerged in the West during a much longer period – existentialism and the absurd, pop art and hippie ideology – appeared simultaneously here. The information they brought along accumulated and mixed and, as a result, many ideas, including the idea of 'free play', had no single source, or even a single meaning.

We should note that, as most of the new art phenomena arrived here via written sources, and they were not always fully understood, play and the idea of play often lived their separate lives, and now and then met in methodical or experimental models created to connect the idea and the activities. But, despite numerous differences in the art of the Western countries and the art of the countries of the Eastern block in the 1960s, the ideas of play and the happening were initiated by a mainly similar uneasiness about the essence and role of art. It was necessary to revise them, or at least to create temporary instability in order to specify the role and activities of play. Many theories discuss play

as a non-structured intermediary or experimental area that contains possible alternatives for the emergence of a new culture. In the context of art as a unity, happenings can be treated as the means of testing these imaginary limits, and as one phase on the road to defining and specifying oneself as an artist.

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