

GATHERING UTOPIAS

WEEK 2: FRIDAY OCT 4 7PM

JOSÉ ESTEBAN MUÑOZ'S "THE FUTURE IS IN THE PRESENT"
FROM *CRUISING UTOPIAS* / SAMUEL R. DELANY'S
"17.36 - 17.5" FROM *THE MOTION OF LIGHT IN WATER*



The Word Is Change

368 Tompkins Ave

The Future Is in the Present

Sexual Avant-Gardes and the Performance of Utopia

FUTURITY CAN BE a problem. Heterosexual culture depends on a notion of the future: as the song goes, “the children are our future.” But that is not the case for different cultures of sexual dissidence. Rather than invest in a deferred future, the queer citizen-subject labors to live in a present that is calibrated, through the protocols of state power, to sacrifice our liveness for what Lauren Berlant has called the “dead citizenship” of heterosexuality.¹ This dead citizenship is formatted, in part, through the sacrifice of the present for a fantasmatic future. On oil dance floors, sites of public sex, various theatrical stages, music festivals, and arenas both subterranean and aboveground, queers live, labor, and enact queer worlds in the present. But must the future and the present exist in this rigid binary? Can the future stop being a fantasy of heterosexual reproduction? In this chapter I argue for the disruption of this binarized logic and the enactment of what I call, following C. L. R. James, a future in the present.² To call for this notion of the future in the present is to summon a refunctioned notion of utopia in the service of subaltern politics. Certain performances of queer citizenship contain what I call an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present. I gesture to sites of embodied and performed queer politics and describe them as outposts of actually existing queer worlds. The sites I consider are sites of mass gatherings, performances that can be understood as defiantly public and glimpses into an ensemble of social actors performing a queer world.

The Past for the Future: Queer Happenings

I begin this study of the future in the present by turning to the past. Samuel R. Delany’s memoir *The Motion of Light in Water* periodizes the

advent of postmodernity through the evidence provided by two modes of avant-garde performance. These performances do more than represent an epistemic shift; they enable the memoirist to procure a new vista on the world. The writer describes images from his then present (now squarely the past), and these pictures purchase a vision of the future. I want to suggest that these performances that are described by Delany announced and enacted a new formation within the social.

The first of these performances was held in a Second Avenue studio apartment in New York's East Village during the summer of 1960. Delany and a cousin had stumbled on a performance of Allan Kaprow's entitled "Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts." It was the first time the word *happening* had been used in a performance context. Delany explained that "many times now Kaprow's piece (today we would call it performance art) has been cited by historians as the equally arbitrary transition between the modern and the postmodern in cultural developments. But I don't believe I've read a firsthand account of it by any of its original audience."³ However, the memoirist has missed some of the most interesting accounts of this performance genre, for there is in fact a fascinating literature chronicling and documenting this artistic movement.⁴ Delany's account is nonetheless valuable. He remembers entering an apartment that was taken up by polyethylene walls on painted wood frames. These walls divided the performance space into six sections of about eight feet by eight feet. The sections were accessible from a door-wide space on the outside but were separated from one another by semitranslucent walls through which one could make out "the ghost" of what was happening in the adjoining section. There were half a dozen or so wooden folding chairs in each room. The remembered performance that Delany narrates consisted of a child's windup toy being set on the ground and let run and then wound up again and again over the twenty-minute running time of the performance. Through the plastic walls the sounds and sights of other happenings partially filtered into the writer's cubicle. He could make out the buttery glow of a candle in one room, while in another he heard the sounds of a drum.

The writer's expectations were severely challenged by this performance. He had assumed that the work would be "rich, Dionysian and colorful." He expected the happenings themselves to be "far more complex, denser and probably verbally boundable." He expected happenings that would crowd in on one another and form an interconnected tapestry of occurrences and associations rich in meanings and meaning fragments, full of resonance and overlapping associations, "playful, sentimental and reassuring." Yet the

work he encountered was “spare, difficult, minimal, constituted largely by absence, isolation, even distraction.”⁵ Delany expected the six parts to be chronologically ordered, like acts in a play, but they were instead spatially organized. Delany writes that “it was precisely in this subversion of expectations about the proper aesthetic employment of time, space, presence, absence, wholeness and fragmentation, as well as the general locality of ‘what happens,’ that made Kaprow’s work signify: his happenings—clicking toys, burning candles, pounded drums, or whatever—were organized in that initial work very much like historical events.”⁶ Delany admits that his expectations were formed by a modernist desire to see “meaningful plenitude,” yet his disappointment waned once he had found the time to contemplate Kaprow’s project, work that he found to be “more interesting, strenuous and aesthetically energetic.” Delany concludes his recollection by claiming that “‘Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts’ was about as characteristic a work as one might choose in which to experience the clash that begins our reading of the hugely arbitrary postmodern.”⁷

That avant-garde performance is intimately linked to another mode of “happening” that occurs later in the memoir. Delany was alerted to this particular performance venue by a painter friend in the East Village. His friend Simon had told him about the trucks parked by the river at the end of Christopher Street as a place to go at night for instant sex. Once the author passed the truck’s threshold, he discovered that, on a regular basis, between 35 and 150 men slipped through the trailers, some to watch but most to participate in “numberless silent sexual acts.” Delany describes these acts as rituals that reconstructed intimacy: “At those times, within those van-walled alleys, now between the trucks, now in the back of the open loaders, cock passed from mouth to mouth to hand to ass to mouth without ever breaking contact with other flesh for more than seconds; mouth, hand, ass passed over whatever you held out to them, sans interstice; when one cock left, finding a replacement—mouth, rectum, another cock—required moving the head, the hip, the hand no more than an inch, three inches.”⁸ This scene is described as “engrossing,” “exhausting,” “reassuring,” and “very human.” The writer explains how the men in this space took care of one another not only by offering flesh but by performing a care for the self that encompassed a vast care for others—a delicate and loving “being for others.”⁹

Delany follows this description pages later with another retelling of public sex performances. On his first visit to the St. Mark’s Baths, Delany encountered a well-lit mass of perverts. Lighting made a difference insofar

blue light points toward utopian

as the piers operated under the cover of a protective darkness that also kept the massiveness of the crowd available. In this respect he compares the piers to Kaprow's "Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts." In the more formally theatrical happening, "no one ever got to see the whole" because institutions such as subway johns, the trucks parked on the Christopher Street pier, pornographic theaters, and other institutions of public sex accommodated these performances by cutting them up, by making sure that the whole was distorted. In the **blue light of the St. Mark's Baths something was confirmed deeply for the then twenty-year-old** budding science-fiction writer: "What this experience said was that there was a population—not of individual homosexuals, some of whom now and then encountered, or that those encounters could be human and fulfilling in their way—not of hundreds, not of thousands, but rather of millions of gay men, and that history had, actively and already, created for us whole galleries of institutions, good and bad, to accommodate our sex."¹⁰

This section of *Motion of Light in Water* is critiqued by historian Joan Wallach Scott, who oddly employs this memoir as an example of gay history's reliance on unreconstructed narratives of experience, fixed identity, and "the visual."¹¹ (Lisa Duggan has already pointed out the inappropriateness of making such an argument on gay and lesbian history based on a writer's nonfiction memoir.)¹² Scott attempts in her article to partially recant her reading of Delany, yet she ultimately fails to comprehend the author's project. The Kaprow piece taught Delany a valuable lesson about the way in which **public culture is cut up through the institutions of the majoritarian public sphere**. The happening thematized vision to show the ways in which vision is constantly compromised. Most of Delany's memoir narrates through **a Kaprowian understanding of the alienation and segmentation that characterize the real**. His moment of seeing the whole of public sex is a **utopian break in the narrative**—it is a deviation from the text's dominant mode of narration. **Public sex culture revealed the existence of a queer world, and Kaprow's happening explained the ways in which such utopian visions were continuously distorted**. Delany explains that "the first apprehension of massed bodies" signals a direct sense of political power. **This apprehension debunks dominant ideology's characterization of anti-normative subject-citizens as "isolated perverts."**¹³ Kaprow's performance and the piers were adjacent happenings that presented only shades of the whole; the blue light of the bathhouse offered a glimpse of utopia.

I turn to this memoir of the sixties at this particular moment because it echoes the ongoing attack on cultures of sexual dissidence that New

York City is currently weathering. The draconian rule of mayor Rudolph Giuliani saw the institution of a policy that rezoned the vast majority of public sex out of the city. New laws closed down most adult bookstores, bars, movie theaters, peep shows, and performance spaces that featured sexually oriented performance—not only female strippers at straight bars but go-go boys at queer clubs. The crackdown on public sex was part of Giuliani’s notorious “quality of life campaign,” now carried on under the mayorship of Michael Bloomberg. The venues Delany employed to see “the massed bodies” that signaled political power have become harder and harder to glimpse. In many ways the fragmentation that will characterize this New York City’s culture of public sex will be far more alienating than that described in Delany’s chronicle of pre-Stonewall New York. While normative middle-class subjects enjoy a porn-free Manhattan, citizen-subjects who participate in the service economy of the sex industry now experience a level of harassment that surpasses even that experienced by other wage workers such as street vendors and taxi drivers. Giuliani instituted a range of policies that clamped down on those professions as well, industries that, like that of sex workers, are heavily populated by people of color.

In the late 1990s Times Square entered its last phase of what I half jokingly call “late Disneyfication.” Many local adult businesses were, and continue to be, replaced with more corporate representation, such as Disney stores and Starbucks franchises. Queers and other minoritarian subjects continue to be pushed further into the private sphere. Delany, in his now classic text *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, theorized what he calls “contact relations,” as opposed to networking. Delany’s thesis is a lucid and powerful one: “Given the mode of capitalism under which we live, life is at its most rewarding, productive, and pleasant when the greatest number of people understand, appreciate, and seek out interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will.”¹⁴ Delany’s work here uses his experience as a participant in Times Square’s alternative erotic economy of public sex as the primary example of contact relations. Through anonymous and nonanonymous encounters, the writer experienced interactions that constituted powerful cross-race and interclass contact. The zoning of commercial sex culture will effectively replace these relations with basic networking. A salient example of networking and the new Times Square is the suburban tourists who are shuttled into the city in large tour buses. On the bus they interact exclusively with other tourists who have decided to venture into the big city. These tourists might then

take in a show—let us just say it is Disney’s *The Lion King* at a corporate-sponsored venue such as the American Airlines Theatre—and perhaps go out for dinner at chain restaurants such as Applebee’s or Red Lobster. These tourists then hop on the bus and are safely deposited in their suburban homes. **The only contact they have outside of their class strata is with representatives of the service industry who take their tickets or serve their meals.** This is the new Times Square in post-Giuliani New York.

It is especially disturbing yet politically sobering to realize that the mayor’s initiatives are supported by many gay voters. Lisa Duggan has recently described this phenomenon as *homonormativity*.¹⁵ Duggan’s term is meant to outline the **retreat into the private sphere that conservative homosexuals have participated** in, in an effort to assimilate and perhaps purchase a seat at the table that right-wing gay pundits such as Bruce Bawer and Andrew Sullivan long for.¹⁶ Such writers are the major architects of the gay pragmatism I discuss in chapter 1. The larger point resonates with an earlier theorization of sexual assimilation. Theodor Adorno, in an essay recently translated as “Sexual Taboos and Law Today,” debunks the mythology of what he called “sexual liberation.” Adorno explains that sexual liberation is “mere illusion”:

This illusion arose together with the phenomenon sociology elsewhere describes with its favorite expression “integration”: **the same way in which bourgeois society overcame the proletarian threat by incorporating the proletariat.** Rational society, which is founded upon the domination of inner and outer nature and disciplines the diffuse pleasure principle that is harmful to the work ethic and even the principle of domination itself, no longer needs the patriarchal commandment of abstinence, virginity, and chastity. On the contrary, **sexuality, turned on and off, channeled and exploited in countless forms** by the material and culture industry, cooperates with the process of manipulation insofar as it is absorbed, institutionalized and administered by society. As long as sexuality is bridled, it is tolerated.¹⁷

Both Giuliani’s and Bloomberg’s gay support has everything to do with the way in which assimilationist homosexuals are willing to “turn off and on” their sexuality. The contract that they have signed on to demands that sexuality be turned on only within the shelter of the private sphere, in a darkness that is far murkier than the shadows that enveloped the trucks on Christopher Street in a pre-Stonewall 1960. The assimilationist

homosexuals who backed Giuliani and back Bloomberg are a sexual proletariat that has been swept into the conservative populism so powerfully characterizing this moment, dominated as it is by neoliberalism and, more specifically, gay pragmatism. The contract they have signed is one of fake futurity. Rather than investing in children, they invest in an assimilation that is forever over the rainbow.

During sex panics such as the current one, it seems especially important to enact a criticism that accomplishes a few tasks. As Kaprow's happenings and Delany's memoir did, we crucially **need to map our repression, our fragmentation, and our alienation**—the ways in which the state does not permit us to say “**the whole**” of our masses. It is also important to practice a criticism that enables us to cut through the institutional and legislative barriers that outlaw contact relations and obscure glimpses of the whole. These glimpses and moments of contact have a decidedly utopian function that permits us to imagine and potentially make a queer world. Such a criticism would work by allowing us to see “the future in the present.”

C. L. R. James entitled his first volume of collected writing *The Future in the Present*. This title riffs on an aspect of Hegelian dialectics suggesting that the affirmation known as the future is contained within its negation, the present. In James's coauthored *Facing Reality*, a document that **has been described as a classic of the American left**, he argues that a **socialist future could be glimpsed by observing worker interaction and sociality within the space of the industrialized factory**. Furthermore, he explains that the shop floor was an actually existing socialist reality in the present. His most striking proof for this thesis considers the case of an anonymous worker at an unnamed factory: “In one department of a certain plant in the U.S. there is a worker who is physically incapable of carrying out his duties. But he is a man with wife and children and his condition is due to the strain of previous work in the plant. The workers **have organized their work so that for ten years he has had practically nothing to do.**”¹⁸ James looks to this situation and others like it throughout the world as examples of an already existing socialist present outside of the bureaucracy that was the Eastern Bloc. James argues that “**the fundamental task is to recognize the socialist society and record the facts of its existence**”; thus, the scenes he describes are to be read as “outposts of a new society.”¹⁹

This idea in James, this notion of the future in the present, is manifested through his post-Trotskyist workerism, which has been critiqued widely. Today it is easy to dismiss an intellectual romanticization of labor. Two of James's most famous collaborators denounced this notion as

delusional and naive. Cornelius Castoriadis (who contributed to the same book under one of his pen names, Pierre Chaulieu) has countered James's claims by explaining that "it is not difficult to understand that if socialist society already existed people would have noticed it." Raya Dunayevskaya, who founded the Johnson-Forest Tendency in American Marxism with James, stated that "the man who can write 'It is agreed that the socialist society exists' need never face reality."²⁰ These are harsh words from allies and friends. Yet, despite these damning critiques, I am still drawn to this idea in James and its emphasis on the factory worker, particularly its framing of the **social performer as something more than a cog. I contend that James's dialectic utopianism** is not useless insofar as it helps us imagine the future without abandoning the present. James's formulation works as a refunctioned utopianism that is predicated on a critique of the present. I suggest that the reading practice that James describes helps us read the world-making potentialities contained in the performances of minoritarian citizen-subjects who contest the majoritarian public sphere.²¹

I use the term *minoritarian* to index citizen-subjects who, due to antagonisms within the social such as **race, class, and sex**, are debased within the majoritarian public sphere. The remainder of this chapter considers performances that I describe as **sexual avant-gardist acts** whose ideological projects are both **antinormative and critical of** the state. Minoritarian performance—performances both theatrical and quotidian—transports us across symbolic space, inserting us in a coterminous time when we witness new formations within the present and the future. The coterminous temporality of such performance exists within the future and the present, surpassing relegation to one temporality (the present) and insisting on the minoritarian subject's status as world-historical entity. The stage and the street, like the shop floor, are venues for performances that allow the spectator access to minoritarian lifeworlds that exist, importantly and dialectically, within the future and the present. James's workerist theory allows us to think of the minoritarian performer as a worker and the performance of queer world-making as a mode of labor. **These performances are thus outposts of an actually existing queer future existing in the present.**

Utopia - antinormative and stateless

Magic Touches: Queers of Color and Alternative Economies

Research has taken me to Jackson Heights, Queens. There I visited and patronized the now-closed **Magic Touch**, a bar whose name signaled a mode

of contact between sex workers and consumers that can potentially be described as interclass and interracial contact. As the clock ticks and the world of New York's **culture of public sex faces extinction**, I have made a point of soaking up as much of it as possible. This bar certainly did not compare to the illicit orgy on the piers that Delany chronicled. Yet it was very different from similar venues in the city, such as the Gaiety in Manhattan.

The Gaiety was one of the last surviving gay burlesque shows in New York City. A decade ago it was a hub of hustling and public sex activity. Patrons would not only interact with the performers, who were always available for private shows, but were equally interested in those sitting next to them. All sorts of sex would happen in this venue and others like it, including the similarly defunct Eros Theater and the Showpalace. The Gaiety managed to stay in business longer than its cohort by adopting many of the state's policies before the state actually instituted them. Patrons were not allowed anywhere near performers, performers were strictly forbidden from negotiating private shows, and security guards patrolled the aisles and made sure that patrons did not touch one another. The performers were almost exclusively white. All the dancers were conventionally attractive and extremely well muscled. Most were based in Canada, traveling to the Gaiety once a month to hustle on the side and strip on stage. These body types hold a powerful spot in the erotic imagination of mainstream homosexuality. I have described this phenomenon elsewhere as the "dominant imprint" that organizes mainstream desire in U.S. gay culture.²² Later in this book I mention the way in which transgender performer **Kevin Aviance figuratively and literally rises above this pervasive bodily mode**. The dominant imprint is a blueprint of gay male desire and desirability that is unmarked and thus universally white. Patrons, like desiring subjects in mainstream gay culture, can never touch these boys unless they negotiate a private show in the adjacent lounge area. A private show averages about two hundred dollars. (Internet sites that discuss hustling from a consumer's perspective complain of the dancers' limited sexual repertoire. Two hundred dollars can generally buy a patron a "posing show," in which a flexing hustler offers mostly visual pleasure to the often frustrated sex consumer.)²³ The dancers' inaccessibility and desirability are a combination of contradictory attributes recognizable in the dominant imprint. Tall, blond white boys with pulsating muscles who barely dance are instead objects to be desired from afar and engaged only in private, thus conforming to a culture of sex work that can be **characterized as primarily being about privatized networking relations**.

There was no such policing at the Magic Touch. The show was run like a contest there: a raffle selected judges for a competition, and contestants were judged on a range of attributes, which included both dancing and physical appearance. Whereas the Gaiety's performers were mostly white, the Magic Touch's were mostly Latino and African American. Since the Magic Touch was one of only a few neighborhood gay bars in Queens, some lesbians and straight women would also show up. The bar's clientele stood in sharp contrast to the Gaiety's: the Gaiety was predominantly populated by white men and tourists from Europe and East Asia, whereas the racial diversity I encountered at the Magic Touch continues to surpass any I have seen at other gay clubs.

Filipino queens sat next to older white daddy types who were across the bar from beeper-wielding Latino hustlers who seemed to know the group of black men clustered around the jukebox. Some folks were Manhattanites braving the outer boroughs; others hailed from even deeper in Queens. The performers came out in uniforms—military garb, loose-fitting hip-hop fashions, snug-fitting gay club wear, blue-collar flannel drag—and stripped to a G-string. They were instantly disqualified if they showed anything that might be tucked inside the G-string. Their dancing styles varied: some let their bodies do all the work; other boys were quite acrobatic. Hip-hop dance moves dominated the performers' routines. The movements were often described as a highly sexualized break dancing. As soon as the contest was over and the winner was crowned, the boys would mingle with the audience for an hour or so. Tips were stuffed in bikinis and boots, deals were brokered, conversations ensued.

The dancers at the Gaiety did not seem to take as much pleasure in the dancing. Instead, most would strut around the stage. During any one show a dancer at the Gaiety would dance to two consecutive songs. The music was almost exclusively contemporary pop. During the first song the dancer would perform a striptease to his jock or underwear. He would then walk backstage, and there would be a minute or two when the audience anxiously awaited the dancer's next appearance. During this pause, the dancer was getting erect or, as it is known in the professional lexicon, "fluffed." The erect dancer was greeted by a round of applause when he reemerged from backstage. Sometimes the dancer would have tied a rubber band or a cock ring around the base of his penis to allow him to maintain his erection a little longer. But more often than not the erection had faded by the middle of this second number. A display of nudity would have closed down the Magic Touch. In fact, its dancers had to wear more

than a G-string since the zoning laws prohibited female go-go dancers and male dancers from wearing anything as revealing as bikinis. A few topless dance bars throughout Manhattan survived by scrawling an *S* in front of the word *topless* on their signs, which now read “Stopless Dancing.” The “stopless” dancers would pole dance while wearing T-shirts. Most of the male go-go dancers wore athletic shorts as they rehearsed their moves on stage. Although the strippers at the Magic Touch were unable to take it all off, the customer was able to achieve physical contact when tipping his dancer of choice. The Gaiety’s antiseptic lounge had a rough equivalent in the Magic Touch’s ironically titled VIP lounge. The VIP area was actually the bar’s basement. It included a pool table and several pieces of run-down wicker furniture and white plastic picnic chairs. The contact enacted between dancer/stripper and spectator/john here was much more tactile and intense than what happened upstairs.

One of my friends, an anthropologist who works with gay Filipino men in New York City, would refer to the Magic Touch as the “Tragic Touch.” This was a nickname given to the bar by some Jackson Heights locals. The tragic in this rewriting of the establishment’s name was meant to poke fun at the pathos of the **hustler-john relationship—the manner in which older men pay younger hustlers**. From the vantage point of youth, we can clearly see the pathos of this relationship. Yet I want to suggest that it is a pathos that undergirds the ageism and, for lack of a better word, lookism of all gay male erotic economies. From yet another perspective, we can see this relationship as something else, another formation: this economy of hustler-john is an alternative economy in which flesh, pleasure, and money meet under outlaw circumstances. This economy eschews the standardized routes in which heteronormative late capitalism mandates networking relations of sex for money. This economy represents a selling of sex for money that does not conform to the corporate American sex trade always on display for us via media advertising culture and older institutions such as heterosexual marriage. The hustler-john relationship represents a threat to these other naturalized performances of sex for money, in part because it promotes contact between people of different class and racial backgrounds. At the **Magic Touch I found men of all colors relating to one another, forming bonds, and I saw this in** mass. I glimpsed a whole that is diverse and invigorating in its eclectic nature. Some men came for voyeuristic pleasure, some came to meet other men who were spectators, and others came to participate in the age-old economy of hustler and john—all were performing outlaw sexuality. The zoning legislation allows

such establishments to function only in industrialized spaces far away from public transportation and other businesses, where men who brave these industrialized zones encounter far greater risks of gay bashing and robbery.

Stickering the Future

The phrase “Whose quality of life?” caught my eye. Someone had printed this line on a sticker attached to a street sign near my home. The rest of the text read, “It’s a beautiful day. . . . ‘Crime is down.’ Police brutality is up. . . . What are you doing outside?” The sticker was signed by a Mickey Mouse head with the letters “f.t.m.” superimposed over it. Text below the mouse insignia explained that the acronym stood for “fear the mayor.” The main text is a takeoff of ABC network’s ad campaign encouraging viewers to sit at home and watch TV despite a sunny day outside. I later encountered another sticker, this one showing an image of two white men in baseball caps with their arms around each other. The men represented the contemporary white gay male clone, the type that populates certain neighborhoods in major U.S. cities, such as New York’s Chelsea or Los Angeles’s West Hollywood. These images did not represent the dominant imprint but did resemble a look organized and formatted by the desire that is the dominant imprint. The text read, “Can we afford to be normal?” Below the photo I found what at first glance appeared to be the logo of corporate megachain store The Gap. But instead it spelled out G-A-Y. A slogan flanked the faux corporate insignia, reading, “Heteronormativity. Fall into the trap.” I understood this sticker to be associated with the previous one when I located the same familiar mouse head in the corner. This time the acronym was different—it read “r.h.q.,” which stood for “resist the heterosexualization of queerness.” I began to inquire as to the authorship of these inspired little stickers and soon traced them to a group of young activists in New York City who had launched an impressive stickering/wheatpasting campaign against then-mayor Giuliani’s directives. The group worked with the activist collective Sex Panic for a time but became disillusioned with that group’s inability to incorporate questions of gender, race, and age into its critique of state censorship and homophobia. The group has refused to name itself, in an attempt to remain a working collective and sidestep the essentializing effects that occur when a group identity is adopted. At times the group employ the acronym “f.a.g.,” which

stands for “feminist action group.” At other times it appropriates the name of the suburban high school group that all white, middle-class officials support, SADD (students against drunk driving), resignifying that acronym to mean “sex activists against demonization.” The only constant graphic the group retains in its guerrilla posturing and stickering is the outline of a Mickey Mouse head, which is meant to represent New York’s ominous Big Brother. In the group’s activist statement—a zine titled *Swallow Your Pride*—members explain, “we choose to do a stickering/wheatpasting campaign because there are a lot of special perks to this kind of media. First, it’s really cheap. Second, it reaches a different audience than the other options that are vaguely accessible: Internet, gay weeklies, and sometimes bigger newspapers, it’s really local. People see the stuff on the street and in the city. It is not limited to people who have computers or read the newspaper regularly—which means younger people and poorer people.”²⁴ This group has attempted not to replicate the mistakes of other important activists groups such as Sex Panic, Act-Up, and Queer Nation. Its guerrilla campaign has attempted to imagine and enact a mode of queer publicity that is calibrated to be responsive to modalities of difference that include race, class, gender, and sexuality. The young activists’ insistence on an integrated and intersectional queer critique can be discerned if we consider a sticker that reads, “I Nushawn Williams.” Williams is a young HIV-positive African American man who has been arrested for engaging in unprotected sex. He became a contemporary Typhoid Mary as sensationalized media reporting constructed him as the ultimate AIDS predator. The group’s intervention in this case was a difficult and risky move. It is indeed a complex move to identify with someone who, though not behaving in a conventionally sexually responsible fashion, was, nonetheless, not the racialized monster constructed by the media’s reporting.

The stickers function as performing objects inasmuch as they solicit a response from spectators. Sometimes people attempt to rip the stickers down; at other times people write directly on the stickers. The stickers themselves then become forums for public debate, where people work through pressing social issues in a space away from the corrupt mediatized majoritarian public sphere. The performances that the stickers demand from viewers open the possibility of critical thinking and intervention; they encourage lucidity and political action. They are calls that demand, in the tradition of African American vernacular culture, a response. The response is sometimes an outpouring of state ideology, yet at other times the responses are glimpses of an actually existing queer future in the present.²⁵

One sticker in particular offers an important critique of the present that signals the coming of a new moment of queer activism and publicity. During Giuliani's mayoral reign, Washington Square was one of his pet projects. He first increased **police presence at the park to truly militaristic proportions**. The entire space of the park was and still is blanketed by at least a dozen or so police officers at any given moment. A large police trailer was parked next to the park, and it has become command central. I cannot count the times over the past six years that I have stood witness to three or four police officers jumping on one homeless drug dealer. (When I write "drug dealer" here, I mean homeless men who hustle tiny "dime bags" of marijuana.) This policing has a new technological dimension because the park is now completely covered by video cameras that record everything happening inside or near Washington Square. The park is currently the most surveilled public space in the city. A week or so after these cameras first appeared, I noticed the mouse head again. This time the acronym read "w.b.w.," which stood for "we are being watched." Another sticker soon followed. It had a great deal more text: **"Smile!: You are on closed Circuit Television**. The NYPD also installed surveillance cameras in Washington Square Park. In our public urban spaces we are watched and harassed by an increasingly brutal police force. The use of state-sanctioned violence against queers, youth, people of color and the homeless in an effort to 'clean-up' this city must stop. Giuliani's 'quality of life' campaign is driving us out of the places where we have always hung out." The sticker functions as a mode of political pedagogy that intends to publicize the state's machinations of power. While technologies of surveillance colonize symbolic space, the anonymous performance of stickering contests that reterritorialization and imagines another moment: a time and place outside the state's electronic eye. This working collective is watching the watcher and providing a much-needed counterpublicity to the state's power. In this work we also glimpse an avant-gardist sexual performance, which is to say a performance that enacts a critique of sexual normativities allowing us to bear witness to a new formation, a future in the present.

Mourning through Militancy: Matthew Shepard and Others

The **point of seeing the whole of our masses** did not become salient for me until I witnessed a theoretical formulation on the streets of New York, in the form of an uprising that was put down with brutal force by the

New York City Police Department. **The policing of this uprising worked so that the masses would be unable to see the whole.** Matthew Shepard was savagely beaten, bound to a fence, and left to die on a Wyoming road in the fall of 1998. The national attention this murder received was a surprise for many activists. Queer activists in New York City were very aware of the fact that, while crime was supposedly down under the Giuliani regime, violence against gays and lesbians was on the increase. In 1998 hate crime violence had increased by 8 percent.²⁶ Walking through the East or West Village, Chelsea, Brooklyn, or neighborhoods in Queens, queers have become very accustomed to seeing posters with the pictures of some queer person, often a queer person of color, who has been murdered or has “disappeared” in New York. We see similar posters warning us of other predators who prey on our community. It was Shepard’s telegenic face that secured a lot of media attention. His “traditional” good looks echoed certain aspects of a dominant imprint, and that certainly helped him become a flag that many people could rally around. Many of the activists who showed up for the Matthew Shepard political funeral the next day understood that if Shepard had not **been a pretty white boy, there would have been no such outcry.** We nonetheless seized the moment and took to the streets, not only for Shepard but for the countless women and men of all colors who have survived and not survived queer violence on the streets of New York City and elsewhere.

The official advance estimate for this vigil was five hundred people; other estimates suggest that five thousand showed up. The New York City Police Department responded to the outpouring of activism by calling in the troops. Marchers during this rebellion attempted to take to the streets, but the police insisted that this massive group walk exclusively on the sidewalk. A rupture came, and people surged onto the streets. Violence ensued, horses were brought out, billy clubs were brandished, activists were pushed and knocked down. **The protest’s marshals, its leadership, were the first people arrested.** I saw friends taken away, loaded on MTA buses commandeered by the police. Many people **on antiviral drugs missed dosages and risked building up immunity to these precious drugs.** My friend David was not planning to be arrested, but he was nonetheless randomly picked out of the crowd and taken to central booking. Another friend, Rebecca, avoided arrest but had a close call after she was shoved by a cop, her vigil candle spilling wax on another officer who turned angrily to her—in fear she apologized profusely, hoping not be taken in. Most people had not planned to be arrested; this was supposed to be a somber political vigil.

seeing these mass uprisings as manifestations of utopian desire

No one anticipated the horses, the bombardment of cops, the mass arrests, the force used against them. The peaceful vigil became something else. It became a moment when queer people, frustrated and sick of all the violence they had endured, saw our masses. The police responded by breaking up the group, factioning off segments of our groupings, obscuring our mass.

The state understands the need to keep us from knowing ourselves, knowing our masses. It is ready, at the drop of the proverbial dime, to transform public transportation into policing machines, to call out thousands of cops to match thousands of activists, to wield clubs and fists. The state, like Delany, understands the power of our masses, a power that can be realized only by surpassing the solitary pervert model and accessing group identity. Doing so entails resisting the privatization of queer culture for which the gay pragmatists such as Andrew Sullivan, Gabriel Rotello, and Bruce Bawer clamor. The next day the *New York Post* headline read, "Gay Riot." It was more nearly a queer riot, where queer energies manifested themselves and the state responded with calculated force and brutal protocols. The riot was sobering because the mechanisms of policing were partially displayed, revealed for an evening, and it became very clear to everyone present how the idea of queers making contact in a mass uprising scared the state. The utopian promise of our public performance was responded to with shattering force. Even though this impromptu rebellion was overcome easily by the state, the activist anger, a productive, generative anger, let those assembled in rage glean a queer future within a repressive heteronormative present.

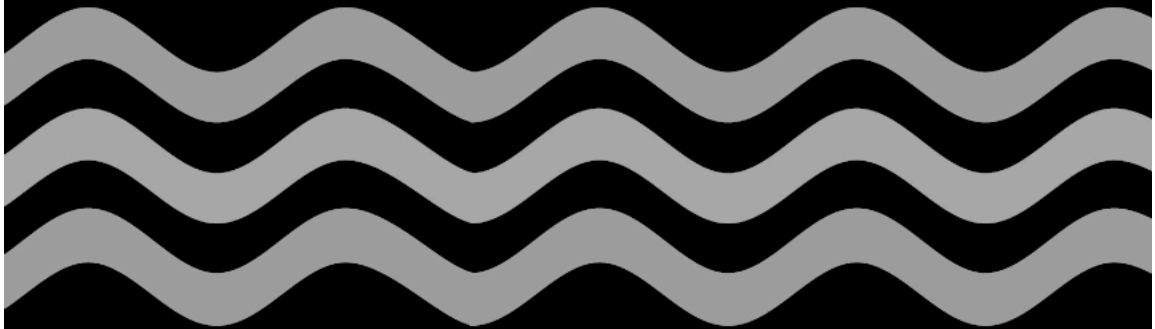
Making Utopia

Adorno provided a succinct rendering of utopia when he described it as existing in "the determined negation of that which merely is." This negation points "to what should be."²⁷ The work I have considered in this chapter looks to what is and fashions important critiques of the present by insisting on the present's dialectical relation to the future. Our criticism should, like the cases I have surveyed, be infused with a utopian function that is attuned to the "anticipatory illumination" of art and culture. Such illumination cuts through fragmenting darkness and allow us to see the politically enabling whole. Such illumination will provide us with access to a world that should be, that could be, and that will be.

WINNER OF THE HUGO AWARD

*The Motion
of Light in Water*

Sex and Science Fiction Writing
in the East Village



SAMUEL R.
DELANY

17.36. Back in my high school years, the acknowledged star of our school's creative writing program (which included the future journalists Todd Gitlin, Sheldon Novick, Stewart Byron, and Michael Goodwin; poets Lewis Warsh and, of course, Marilyn; and SF/fantasy writers Peter Beagle and Norman Spinrad) was a bright, gaunt youngster named Cary.

(Yes, you've seen him, in his black leather jacket, at the end of the Auden/Kallman dinner.)

Cary was a Marxist and had been two years ahead of me at Science. His dark hair was very thin. He usually spoke softly, intensely, and he could be very funny when he wanted to. For half a dozen years, starting in my first year at high school, his moody lyric prose, now in letters, now in short stories or personal essays, often passed around in more and more dog-eared manuscript among the awed students, was *the* exemplum of art—at least as far as I was concerned.

Cary also drew.

In his junior or senior year he'd done a set of perhaps seven drawings he'd called *The Fall of the Towers*. They were multiple portrait studies, three to five heads on a sheet: a variety of children and old people, men and women, boys and girls, some clearly middle class, some explicitly working class, reacted to a catastrophic incident, outside the frame and never shown—this one with a look of curiosity, that one with an expression of distrust, another with an excited gaze, but most with a stupefied fascination hardly distinguishable from indifference. He'd first shown them to me on a Bronx street corner one breezy November afternoon. To me they'd had all the forceful commitment of Kathe Kollwitz (an artist we all admired hugely) combined with the delicacy of Virgil Finlay (whom only those of us familiar with science fiction magazines knew of). And like everything else Cary wrote or drew or even said, to me they *were* Art!

Today I suspect that, as figurative drawings go, they were pretty good. But I was overwhelmed by them—at least by what I took to be the concept behind them.

But we are again speaking of the fifties, a decade in which our parents, reacting to the Great Depression's hardships and the war years' disorientation—first World War II, with the horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, then the Korean War—along with the McCarthy period's blow to leftist and liberal thought, made “security” our nation's watchword. People who lived in Greenwich Village or people, like Cary, who spent time there sitting in coffee shops, talking or reading, people who were members of YPSL (the Young Peoples' Socialist League) or YSA (the Young Socialists' Alliance), as almost all my teenage friends

were, people who moved away from home early to live on their own (and during one of my teenaged attempts to get away, I'd slept on the floor of Cary's roach-infested East Fourteenth Street furnished room for a week, and gone to meetings and parties with him at the St. Marks Place offices of *The Militant*, New York's Communist Party newspaper, where I'd folded circulars and stuffed envelopes for mailings and where I was bought a fair number of meals by the sympathetic older volunteer workers, and had gone to Herbert Aptheker's lectures at the Jefferson School—a building darker and more dilapidated than the old building at Science), people who played go and chess at Liz's coffee shop above the Gaslight on MacDougal Street, waiting to score a nickel bag of pot from a black dealer named Ronny Mau-Mau: such people were still “bohemians.” And even those odd folks who were actually “beatniks” did not yet have long hair.

A few weeks after our Detroit marriage in late August '61, Cary had dropped over to our East Fifth Street apartment in his black jeans and black sweater. What had happened to *The Fall of the Towers*, I'd asked. Myself, I'd been convinced that the fullness of time would bring them to some museum wall between the Modigliani portraits and the smaller nude studies of Gericault.

Cary explained that, in one of her periodic attempts to shake this “art” nonsense out of his head and make sure he did something with some “security” to it, his mother had destroyed as much of his writing as she could find, along with as many of his notebooks and letters and drawings as she could manage to cram down the incinerator. *The Fall of the Towers* had gone up in smoke in a basement furnace somewhere in the Bronx.

Had I visited the Museum of Modern Art and found that Picasso's *Guernica* or Tchelitchev's *Hide and Seek* had been destroyed, I couldn't have been more devastated.

There had to be a way to make some gesture to the fact that the drawings had existed, had delighted, had awed. And while I wondered how, wandering with Marilyn through the cable shadows slanting the plank walk, looking back at Manhattan, looking ahead at Brooklyn, I decided that must be my trilogy's overall title.

17.361. As I strolled through the start of summer with Marilyn, between two island shores, trying not to look down at the green glitter between the wooden walkway slats, a hundred thirty-three feet below (I am a hopeless acrophobe), the sky went yellow, then blue behind the Jehovah's Witnesses' *Watchtower* offices. We paused to speculate, as usual, on whether any of the windows we could see might be the one through which Hart Crane and his lover, the nameless ship's printer, had gazed out on the bridge in winter, listening to “... the long,

tired sounds—fog-insulated noises: / Gongs in white surplices, beshrouded wails, / far strum of fog horns ... signals dispersed in veils. // And then a truck will lumber past the wharves / As winch engines begin throbbing on some deck; / Or a drunken stevedore's howl and thud below / comes echoing alley upward. ...”

17.37. But not all things I felt on that bridge walk were so admirable. Among the other things I wanted that June evening—simply and baldly and with absolute envy—was to write a novel at twenty that would be more ambitious and better wrought than Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, which I'd read a few years before and knew he'd written by the same age. I wanted to write a novel better than *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, which Carson McCullers had finished at twenty-three.

The five hundred dollars I'd received after I signed the contract for my first SF novel (with the promise of another five hundred on publication, three whole hopeless and uncountable months away) along with the equally real warning from the rejection of my second, had convinced me that fiction—and, yes, science fiction—was serious business.

By the time we walked down the metal steps at the bridge's second stanchion, we'd made it from Tolstoy to Balzac: the novel, modern or classic, always seemed at its most lively when a character was learning to negotiate a social position somewhere up or down the scale from the one that he (or she) was used to. Take a lesson, then, we decided: make sure the plot pushed the various characters out of the social strata in which they began. Did that work for the science fiction novel too? It certainly seemed to provide the frame for all the energy in Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man* and, even more so, *The Stars My Destination*. If it worked for Balzac and Bester, then it could work for me.

17.4. Let's pause a moment, on an image of two young writers at the second stanchion of the bridge, ambling into Brooklyn, for another marginal tale that takes its significance from a contrast with all these moments of positivity.

Leave them, suspended, hand in hand, above the light-shot waters, and go back in time a bit.

As long as we preserve the split between what we've told and what's to come (or had been, or now runs along beside), we can return.

For a number of historians the year Marilyn and I entered high school, 1956, marks the transition from America's "Industrial Period" to its "Postindustrial Period": it was the year the country's white-collar workers finally exceeded in number its combined blue-

collar and agricultural workers. As a transition point, it's somewhat arbitrary. Whatever effects might be ascribed to this work deployment shift, they'd long since occurred in the country's major cities, where that redeployment had been the case for decades: three years before, in 1953, the city subway fare, which had remained a nickel since well before World War I, had doubled—to the outrage, consternation, and bewilderment of the whole multiethnic urban populace. And the price of milk, which for many years had been more or less stable, between 21 and 24 cents a quart, had recently moved up to a quarter, to 27 cents, and, in very little time, to 35 cents a quart, introducing us to the constant and inexorable inflation that has since become the national condition—a condition very different in feel, cause, and form from the irregular upward jerks in pricing the US had lived with since the Depression.

Four years later, in the late summer of 1960, only years after this postindustrial point (only a few weeks before or after I returned from Breadloaf to regale my mother and dying father with the summer's literary anecdotes), Allan Kaprow first presented a new work, *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts*. It was repeated on several evenings in a Second Avenue studio apartment. It was the first time the word "happening" had been used in such a performance context; and, though the particular work never achieved overwhelming popularity, over the next dozen years, through Kaprow's later "happening" works and from the word's appropriation by many other artists, the term passed into the general American vocabulary (not without a progressive banalization, which reached its peak in the seventies, when Diana Ross recorded a million-copy pop music hit, "The Happening," at which point the notion of art had been wholly replaced with the notion of desire). Many times now Kaprow's piece (today we would call it "performance art") has been cited by art historians as the (equally arbitrary) transition between the modern and the postmodern in cultural developments. But I don't believe I've yet read a firsthand account of it by any of its original audience. I jot here, for my own reasons, then, what I remember, twenty-five years after the fact of that first performance:

When walking somewhere along Eighth Street, on the side of an army-green mail collection box I'd noticed a black-and-white mimeographed poster, stuck up with masking tape, announcing: "*Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts*, by Allan Kaprow," giving the weekend dates ("Friday, Saturday and Sunday"), time ("7:30 P.M."), and price ("Contributions, \$3.00"), and location.

Such posters were fairly common in the Village, advertising the newly burgeoning galleries on Ninth and Tenth Streets, or telling of a poetry reading at one or another coffee

shop on the periphery of the tourist area. (Another such poster put me in touch with a group called Chamber Theater, run by an energetic and visionary woman named Risa, an undertaking which occupied me for most of a summer. Another introduced me to the New York Repertory Company, who rented the St. Marks Theater for a summer season, and where I performed for several months at the site of what is now a vintage clothing store, between the Valencia Hotel and the closed-up shell of the St. Marks Baths.) In this case, it was the word “happening” that intrigued me. An idea was abroad—and it had saturated the times so that even a bright eighteen-year-old might respond to its modernist scrip, if not the Wagnerian bullion behind it—that art must somehow get up off the printed page, must come down from the gallery wall. Lumias and theremins were the cutting edge of visual and auditory art—as yet there were not quite lightshows and synthesizers. And the word “happening”—with its lack of fanfare on the poster—spoke of just such a moment in which art might step from its current frame into a larger and more theatrical concept and context.

I wrote down the dates, time, and place in my notebook.

And I spent a lot of time mulling over what *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* might, indeed, be—quite sure, however, that I would find them exciting, whatever they were.

The weekend of the *Eighteen Happenings*, my cousin Boyd, five years older than I, was in from medical school. Why didn't he come along with me?

Boyd was a lover of Fielding's *Tom Jones* and a figurative artist of some talent, as well as a medical student. I think he was intrigued—if not by the artistic prospects, then by the notion of “the Village” with its romantic glimmer. As well, he had some curiosity as to what his younger cousin, who'd already established a family reputation for intellectual eccentricity, might be up to. And so we got on the subway (with the small, new copper tokens, brighter than clean pennies, just down from the size of dimes), and rode to the Village, to wander across town by Cooper Union, in plenty of time for the performance.

Below the bell in the apartment building's narrow, white vestibule, the same poster I'd seen on the mail holder was taped to the wall.

Upstairs, when we walked in, most of the space was taken up by temporarily erected polyethylene walls on unpainted wooden frames. These walls divided the performance area into what I assumed, at this distance, was six square chambers, each about eight feet by eight feet, each accessible from a door-wide space on the outside, but separated from one another, and through whose translucent wavering walls, you could make out only the ghost of what was going on in the chambers beside or across from yours.

Possibly because Boyd and I were early, no one seemed set up to take our contributions.

Two or three young women were walking around in black leotards, apparently part of the proceedings—one of them on the plump side. There was at least one male assistant in jeans and T-shirt, all shoulders and cheekbones and deep-set eyes, who had something to do with the small, harsh, overhead lights. A gangling man in his late twenties or early thirties, in khaki slacks and a shortsleeved shirt, with a short haircut that nevertheless peaked in front—the fifties prototype for any number of today's more conservative punk coiffures—was apparently Kaprow. The rest of the audience (somewhere between twenty and thirty-five of us) wandered in over the next half hour. Someone eventually took our money, looking rather surprised that we were actually paying.

Clearly most of the audience had been invited.

In each of the polyethylene-walled chambers, there were half a dozen or so blondwood folding chairs. It became clear that we were to be deployed between the six temporary rooms—I don't remember whether or not there was some lottery arrangement to divide us up. But at one point I suggested to Boyd: “Why don't you sit in another room so we can see as much of it as possible and compare notes afterwards?”

“That's all right,” Boyd whispered to me. “I'll stay in here with you.”

Were there six people in our particular room?

Were there six rooms?

The only truly clear memory I have of the performance proper was that I wasn't very sure when, exactly, it began. One of the assistants came in and set a small mechanical windup toy to chatter and click around the floor—which ran down faster than was expected, and so had to be wound up and set going again, several times, through the twenty minutes or so of the work's duration. I also recall a dish of water sitting on the floor, and a ball of string on a small table—but they may have been in other rooms than ours, whose entrances Boyd and I had glanced into while we'd walked around, waiting for the piece to start. During the brief performance, while we sat in our room, now and again from one of the other chambers we could hear the sound of a single drum or tambourine beat—or, at one point, laughter from one of the isolated groups when something in another room went (presumably) not quite according to plan. And just above floor level, through the grayish plastic to our right, a wobbling buttery glow came through from a candle that had been set up as, or as part of, a happening in an adjacent space.

There was general silence, general attention: there was much concentration on what was occurring in our own sequestered “part”; and there was much palpable and uneasy curiosity about what was happening in the other spaces, walled off by the translucent sheets, with only a bit of sound, a bit of light or shadow, coming through to speak of the work’s unseen totality.

At one point another assistant brought another child’s toy—this one a blue tin noisemaker with two little balls, which, when twisted back and forth, make a childish racket—silently into our room; but two steps in, she realized she had the wrong space and ducked out.

After a while, a leotarded young woman with a big smile came in and said, “That’s it.” For a moment, we were unsure if that were part of the work or the signal that it was over. But then Kaprow walked by the door and said, “Okay, it’s over now,” and Boyd and I got up and stepped out of our plastic-walled cubicle.

“Did you understand that?” Boyd asked softly as we waited our turn among the crowd at the doorway to go downstairs. “I mean, could you explain to me what that was supposed to be about?”

“I don’t think it’s about anything in the way you’re asking,” I said in my best tone of aesthetic neutrality. “You’re just supposed to experience it.”

A woman was standing next to us, wearing some voluminous caftan in a green print.

“That was kind of fun,” I said to her, to get out from under what I took to be the embarrassment—or the superiority—prompting my cousin’s question.

“Oh,” she said, “did you think so? How did you come here?”

“I saw it advertised on a poster taped up on the side of a mailbox. It sounded interesting. So we just came by.”

“You did?” she asked, a bit incredulously. I’d already noted that Boyd and I were probably the only two black people in the audience. Today I also suspect we were two of the very few there that evening unknown to the others, at least by sight. “You liked it?” And she smiled. “How unusual.”

This was, remember, 1960.

Then we were going down the stairs.

Boyd continued to question me as to the “meaning” of what we had just seen, all the way uptown. And I continued to resist explaining. But he had obviously been tickled by it all. And clearly it had meant something, though I was only willing to clarify it for myself

once Boyd’s somewhat amused attentions were diverted from me and he could tell the rest of the family about the strange artistic gathering I had taken him to in the Village.

Figuring it out for myself, I began by reviewing my expectations from the title: *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts*.

I’d assumed that the work, regardless of its content, would be rich, Dionysian, and colorful; I’d thought that the happenings themselves would be far more complex, denser, and probably verbally boundable: someone might come in and put on or take off a costume; someone might come in and destroy a baby carriage. Someone else might come in blowing bubbles under colored lights. I’d also thought the eighteen happenings, despite their partition, would crowd in on one another, would tumble into my perception one after another, that they would form a rich, interconnected tapestry of occurrences and associations. In short, while I had not assumed they would have the singular, synopsisable meaning Boyd was asking for, I’d nevertheless thought they would be rich in meanings and meaning fragments, full of resonances and overlapping associations, that they would be thick with ready-made suggestions, playful, sentimental, and reassuring—like a super e.e. cummings poem; indeed, I’d assumed from the title that they would be much like what many “happenings,” as other artists took over the term, were actually to be in the next decades (beginning the banalization that led to the Diana Ross hit).

The work I’d experienced had been, however, spare, difficult, minimal, constituted largely by absence, isolation, even distraction. For all its immense framing in wood and polyethylene, the actual work was even difficult to locate as to its start, content, style, or end. (Other than the chattering toy, Boyd and I were very unsure which were “our” actual happenings and which were things that merely facilitated them.) An hour later at home, however, I was already reflecting to myself that a little arithmetic might have disabused me of some of my expectations of meaningful richness: eighteen happenings in six parts generally suggests about three happenings per part, which, in turn, suggests Apollonian concentration, sparsity, and analysis—not Dionysian plenitude.

But what exactly had been our three happenings? Or had there been only one happening in our room, while four or five took place in one of the others? Or perhaps the title had simply lied about the work: either by accident or design, there could have been a few, or many, more than (or less than) eighteen happenings deployed among the chambers. In our isolated groups there was no way to know for sure.

Had there, indeed, *been* six chambers?

I, of course, had expected the “six parts” to be chronologically successive, like acts in a play or parts in a novel—not spatially deployed, separate, and simultaneous, like rooms in a hotel or galleries in a museum. I’d expected a unified theatrical audience before some temporally bounded theatrical whole. But it was precisely in this subversion of expectations about the “proper” aesthetic employment of time, space, presence, absence, wholeness, and fragmentation, as well as the general locatability of “what happens,” that made Kaprow’s work signify: his happenings—clicking toys, burning candles, pounded drums, or whatever—were organized in that initial work very much like historical events.

No two groups had seen the same ones. No group was even sure what the other groups were seeing. No one in the audience—nor, possibly, the artist or any of his assistants—could have more than an inkling (at best a theory) of the relation of a textured and specific experiential fragment to any totalized whole. Nor could the audience be sure any authoritative statement about it, from the artist’s title to the announcement of the work’s conclusion, was the truth.

Beginning with the separate chambers, the unity of the audience had been shattered as much as any other aspect of the work.

And of course there still remained the question for me over the next few days: how, in our heightened state of attention, could we distinguish what a single happening was? What constituted the singularity that allowed the eighteen to be enumerable? Had the performance of our windup toy been one happening? Or was the winding up one happening, its walking about a second, and its running down still a third? And how were we to distinguish facilitation from content—that is, how were we to distinguish “information” from “noise”? Certainly noise could figure in the interpretation of the meaning of a particular performance. (Earlier that spring I’d played and played a record of George Antheil’s *Ballet mécanique* to a frazzle.) But that presupposes noise can be identified as such.

Still, was that mistaken assistant’s momentary ingress with her silent noisemaker one of the eighteen happenings or not?

The impressive three-dimensional frame, which not only contained the work but the audience as well, and that divided the work and the audience as well as contained them, truly shattered the space of attention and, therefore, threw as many, or more, such distinctions into question as, or than, I was ready to deal with. And in a work whose title, organization, and accidents seemed set up to question precisely such distinctions, how was one to fit their sudden problematization into an interpretation?

It would be disingenuous to say that the interested eighteen-year-old, just back from, or just about to go off to, the Breadloaf Writers’ Conference that summer went through this entire analysis in the hours and days after Kaprow’s piece. Exactly how much of it I went through then, I can’t, at this distance, say. “Subject,” “problematization,” and “interpretation” were not then part of my critical vocabulary; but “man,” “question,” and “meaning” were. And they were adequate to much of it. Certainly I had no particular difficulty accepting it as art or believing that, along the lines I’ve just sketched out, the piece was decipherable. Nor was I caught up in the search for narrative singularity—at whatever level of allegory—that, I suspect, Boyd wanted.

Still, I confess now (in a way I was unwilling to admit to Boyd at the time), I’d been disappointed in it: Boyd wanted his singular narrative meaning. And I still wanted my meaningful plentitude. But I can also say, at this distance, that mine was the disappointment of that late romantic sensibility we call modernism presented with the postmodern condition. And the work I saw was far more interesting, strenuous, and aesthetically energetic than the riot of sound, color, and light centered about actorly subjects in control of an endless profusion of fragmentary meanings that I’d been looking forward to. Also it was far more important: as a representation and analysis of the situation of the subject in history, I don’t think Kaprow’s work could have been improved on. And, in that sense, *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* was about as characteristic a work as one might choose in which to experience the clash that begins our reading of the hugely arbitrary postmodern.

The larger point is that this notion of history is almost absent from *The Fall of the Towers*—from the SF trilogy I planned on the bridge two years later—although I had been exposed to that notion in its most intense artistic representation and had even understood a bit of it. If it emerges in certain of the books’ images (the multichambered computer, the macrosocial structure, the fragmentary social portraiture), it is accidental, cursory—not psychological, not aesthetic, but ... historical.

17.5. And two writers, a poet and an SF novelist, walked down the stanchion steps to the wooden walkway, continuing their amble along the concrete ramp into Brooklyn.

Today, watching them, the only thing I can look back on with complete sympathy from that evening (and even that sympathy makes me smile) is the seriousness with which we leaped from “Gulf” to *War and Peace* to *Starship Troopers* to *The Grapes of Wrath* to

The Cosmic Rape to *Père Goriot* to *The Stars My Destination* to *Nightwood* to ... well, to whatever had struck me as effective, to whatever had seemed instructive.

Provençal poetry has its tradition of the *dompna soisebuda*, or “borrowed lady”—that ideal woman with the eyes of Judith, the complexion of Susan, the voice of Linda, the breasts of Roxanne. ... Whatever its ambition, *The Fall of the Towers* was the most “borrowed” of SF works. Perhaps all that can be said for it is that, given the age and experience of the writer, it couldn’t have been much else.

Not thinking any of this, but caught up in it like blind moths in its flicker and heat, we continued through the June warmth into Brooklyn Heights, to join Dick and Alice for dinner, where they now lived in a small brownstone.

I don’t believe I’ve said: Dick was a playwright. Sometime later Alice was to become a psychotherapist.

The talk that evening was mostly over the play Dick was writing, *The Tyrant*, an intensely concentrated and intricately worked piece about a revolution in an imaginary Central American country. Mostly we argued over the presentation of its single woman character, although from time to time the conversation drifted to Stendhal, Flaubert, Pound, Eliot, Auden, or Provençal poetry. ...

The next day, back on East Fifth Street, I sat down at my typewriter, ran a piece of paper around the narrow black platen, and typed:

THE
FALL
OF
THE
TOWERS

Then I rolled the paper down, moved it to the left and typed:

a trilogy of novels:

- 1) Out of the Dead City
- 2) The Towers of Toron
- 3) City of a Thousand Suns

I rolled the paper down farther and moved it right:

by

Samuel R. Delany
629 East Fifth Street
New York 9, New York

(Yes, this was before Zip Codes.) I took the page from the typewriter, slipped it into my notebook where I’d already begun to make notes on the organization of Book One’s first chapter and the last chapter of Book Three, and went on with what I’d begun in longhand of Chapter 1.

