

## Something Else Press: Exploring the Ways and Means of Communication

By Steve Clay

Designed, edited and produced by Dick Higgins, Something Else Press books contain offbeat and avant-garde writing in a neat and tidy yet quirky and distinctive form. The Press began in 1964 following Higgins's break with Fluxus founder George Maciunas, and embodied the many of the concerns which identified the then nascent art movement.

Early titles include Jefferson's *Birthday/Postface* (1964), Higgins's collection of performance scores about which the jacket copy reads: '*Jefferson's Birthday* consists of all the things Dick Higgins wrote, composed or invented between April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1962 and April 13<sup>th</sup> 1963 inclusive, on the assumption that the bad work one does is just as valid as the interesting work. So some is lousy. So? Some is terrific. Hurrah for the Irish! And hurrah for Thomas Jefferson! And Daniel Webster too!'

*Jefferson's Birthday* was produced back-to-back with *Postface*, Higgins's account of the background and beginning of Fluxus. He thus connects theory to practice a theme that would be pursued and enacted throughout his career.

Other early publications include New York Correspondance School of Art pioneer Ray Johnson's *The Paper Snake* (1965). Here is a bit of Higgins's somewhat polemical jacket copy description:

'The meaning in Ray Johnson's work is not logical, like an Aristotelian syllogism, but counter logical, like a psalm. All art... 'Al Hansen's *A Primer of Happenings & Time/Space Art* (1965) was another early title, as was Rumanian born *nouveau realiste* artist Daniel Spoerri's 1966 classic, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance (re-Anecdoted Version)* 'Done with the help of his very dear friend Robert Filliou and translated from the French, and further re-anecdoted at random by their very dear friend Emmett Williams, with one hundred reflective illustrations by Topor'.

Dick Higgins's 1969 collection *foewaomwhnw* (disguised as a prayer book) contains his defining essay 'Intermedia' in which he first describes and elaborates artworks which 'fall between media' arguing that the social conditions of the time (early to mid 1960's) no longer allowed for a 'compartmentalised approach' to either art or life. Indeed the range of works published by Something Else exemplify a very diverse approach: first American editions of several of Gertrude Stein's works including *The Making of Americans* (1966); a reprint of Henry Cowell's *New Musical Resources* (1969); Merce Cunningham's *Changes: Notes on Choreography* (1968); John Cage's anthology of radial musical scores *Notations* (compiled and produced with Alison Knowles and published in 1969); *A Sailors Calendar* by Ian Hamilton Finlay and Gordon Huntly (1971); Jackson MacLow's aleatoric and systematic composition *Stanzas for Iris Lezak*; Richard Meltzer's *The Aesthetics of Rock* (1970); *One Thousand American Fungi* by Charles McIlvaine and Robert K MacAdam (1973); and Emmett Williams's *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967) which still stands, along with Mary Anne Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Indiana University Press, 1970) as one of the defining gatherings of the subject. Artist's books, critical theory, early Modernism, concrete poetry, amusement, Fluxus, back to the land hippie culture

– through the use of conventional production and marketing strategies, Dick Higgins was able to place unconventional works into the hands of new and often unsuspecting readers.

In *Two Sides of a Coin: Fluxus and Something Else Press*, Higgins notes his style of publishing (large edition books in a ‘trade’ format) in contrast to that of Maciunas, who stressed the original, the hand-made or hand-assembled book/object that was necessarily produced in relatively small editions. Both Maciunas and Higgins rejected the ‘Helvetica look’ which dominated commercial design at the time (early to mid sixties); Maciunas, in Higgins’s words ‘...favoured a tight energetic look, which he achieved by using sans serif types, especially News Gothic, which he then juxtaposed with old-fashioned and florid display faces...’ Higgins describes some of his own ways around the ‘Helvetica look’ thus: ‘...I set poems and short chapters flush bottom on the type pages (usually they are set in the middle). I used larger and bolder running heads at the tops of pages than is customary in order to tie the page together and because I liked the legibility it gave to a sometimes rather scattered or unorthodox page. Since I did not wish to develop favouritism among type faces, I used whatever faces a particular supplier had, often making my selections by means of chance operations, using dice ... [this] gave the Something Else Press books their look of old but new.

In addition to pamphlets, cards, newsletters, posters and other ephemera, Something Else Press had published over sixty book titles when it ended due to personal health and departmental problems in 1974. Peter Frank’s *Something Else Press an annotated Biography* (MacPherson and Co, 1983, now out of print) is a generally excellent source of information about the publications and the aesthetic and intellectual curiosity which drove them. Other useful sources include *The Something Else Press – Notes for a History to be Written Someday* published in *The New Lazarus Review* (Vol.2, n.1, 1979; ¾, 1980) as well as the essay *Two Sides of a Coin: Fluxus and Something Else Press* (published in Higgins’s *Modernism Since Postmodernism: Essays on Intermedia* (SDSU Press, 1997) *Modernism Since Postmodernism* is the final volume in Higgins’s critical trilogy which also includes *A Dialectic of Centuries: Notes Towards a Theory of the New Arts* (Printed Editions, 1979) and *Horizons: The Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1984). Higgins’s scholarly projects include *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature* (State University of New York Press, 1978) and *On the Composition of Images Signs and Ideas (De Imaginum Signorum et Idearum Compositione)* by Giordano Bruno, edited and annotated by Dick Higgins, translated by Charles Doria and with a foreword by Manfredi Piccolomini (Willis, Locker & Owens publishing, 1991).

Toward the end of his career, Dick Higgins voraciously collected the works of American commercial trade book designer Merle Armitage (1893-1975) and authored the yet-to-be published *Merle Armitage and the Modern Book*. One of the projects sadly left unfinished at the time of Higgins early death was *A Theory of the Book*, which was to be published by Granary Books. The concept for this book had been developing in Higgins’s mind for years; he’d even compiled an extensive bibliography, which was later found in his computer files. A lovely obituary for Dick Higgins (1938-1998), written by Ken Friedman, appears in Judith Hoffberg’s

*Umbrella* (Vol. 21, n. ¾, 1998) and is reprinted in *Umbrella: The Anthology* (Umbrella Editions, 1999).

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