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A [very short] Autobiography of Originality

by Dick Higgins

It is hard to say where I came from; certainly my parenthood is uncertain, and I've always thought of myself as something of a mongrel. I have always belonged to many worlds, and the world we live in now is always suspicious of such divided loyalties. I seem to pass in and out of fashion the way a weaver's shuttle moves across the loom, always moving from in to out, from warp to woof. In any case, it seems to me that my history does not begin with conception but with perception, whatever the reaction to me may be. I suppose I had a childhood, but it is part of my suspended consciousness, to be recalled as needed, but seldom needed. At some point I was noticed. That's that.

In the course of a long lifetime, whose documented early career begins with one or another of the "Pre-Socratics," whoever they may be, I have met up with some interesting characters,—in fact, that has been the most exciting part of my lifetime,—and I would like to tell you about a few of them and how they have perceived me.

Plato was an odd duck, I recall. He seemed to prize me in his practice—at least, so long as I was official, authorized by the councils of his faculty. His *Republic* seems more like a model for a university than a place for people to live their lives and careers. He was, however, terribly jealous of me. He banned the artists from his republic mostly for their dallying with me,—they might upset his system of government, or even seize the university president's office. A jealous lover is always hard to take, and that's what this guy Plato was to me.

Then there's Aristotle—I loved him, but he ignored me. He does not even mention me in his *Poetics*,—imagine! Well, there was nothing improper in our relationship, I assure you. I am feminine in most languages, especially in Europe. But, of course, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," and I had my revenge—on his children. Those who take the Aristotelian line—from Aquinas to T.S. Eliot—are doomed, finally, to be deadly: I don't go with them. His values repeat themselves endlessly and become mere stock in trade. They tend to be neo-this and neo- that, neo-classic or

neo-romantic: but when they claim their family in Aristotle's lineage, they become neo-ists, endlessly repeating what has already been done, usually long after it needs doing.

And, of course, the Arabs followed—they always do. They followed Aristotle like they followed the crescent. I didn't like that: I hid from them.

The Carolingian middle ages were an interesting time for me: officially they banned me from the front door, while allowing me in the back one. Hrabanus Maurus' *De Laudibus Sanctae Crucis* (9th Century) seems, on the one hand, to allow me no room; yet its poetry is the-same-but-different from earlier square-shaped poetry—its cancelled forms, its little monk staring *at* the gigantic cross in the Vienna manuscript, staring *past* it in the Vatican one—who knows which way Hrabanus wanted it? But it is a powerful statement of my way, and gives the lie to those who say that old visual poetry or intermedia are good for tricks but beside the point.

Then there were people like Giordano Bruno at the end of the renaissance. Bruno was a syncretist—he tried to know everything from

every time and every era, and to fuse it together somehow. The Roman Church (not really catholic) got jealous and burned him as a heretic. Bruno didn't think he was a heretic: in fact, when he was arrested, he had returned to Italy to become (he hoped) an advisor to the Pope. His eye was on the past; his mathematics is mediaeval, and his thought of fusion is based on ideas he had found elsewhere. But their combination? That's where I come in. His *De Imaginum, Signorum et Idearum Compositione* (1591) is a sixteenth century semiotics (among other things), though as every official Barthian can tell you, there was no semiotics before the twentieth century. Bruno saw everything as alive—not just people and plants, but rocks, the earth and ideas as well. Touch a thought or a thing: it is alive. Well, maybe that's a dangerous heresy to some, especially Aristotle's friends whom Bruno battled at Oxford. Ah, those English! They always fight me.

The historians tried to derive me—it was the only way they could describe me. They pointed at my name: "origin" plus "ali tà,"—that is, if you go there, you are at your origin. A quality of being an origin is what they said I meant, though I wonder if that is what I mean today. The fact is, that may be what I *once* meant, but I've gone beyond my name. You seldom take me apart, do you? And the linguists, forever running after the historians, they just simply abused me, confusing what I *might* mean with what I *do* mean. But, then, ah well, it's their occupational hazard. So don't confuse me with my name.

The scientists understood me differently, cumulatively. They saw that this piece from here and that from there made a useful composite of me; each vision of me, if it was real, replaced the one that came before it. The out of date was then no longer to be consulted, except in learned histories of science.

And the artists misunderstood me,—that's natural, because every art work that is fresh to us is somehow a deliberate misunderstanding and misrepresentation of something that's come before. I'd like to start an Institute for Creative Misunderstanding—and all the best of critics and artists would be members. But art moves in clumsy ways. The modernists were quite awkward: they always aimed at me and jumped, and most of the time I had to move out of their way. Jumping is no way for grown human beings to try to get around! Walking works better. But those modernists, they

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seldom saw that. Jumping here, jumping there—they also tried to use the scientists' notion, that every jump made all the older jumps obsolete. But that's silly, isn't it, that neoteric view? Each art expresses its time—monolithic like the nineteenth

century, flexible like our present crazy moment. Each time is necessary in the progress of things, and so all the expressions of these times as art, they too are necessary. Every child deserves a voice, and every moment its say. Anyway, I can't be aimed for,

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Tepary

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HORIZONS The Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia

by Dick Higgins

Written for the lay reader as well as for academic literary theorists, this book bridges the gulf between the artistic avant-garde in music, visual arts, and experimental literature and the general public. Higgins delves into multiple areas, but here is an example of one kind of poem he works with:

those pieces
that move like this
those pieces
I say
are snowflakes
i say
those pieces
that move like this
those pieces

Along with many other artists—John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jackson Mac Low come to mind—Dick Higgins has investigated and invented a variety of genres and forms, working especially in intermedia, the fusion of two or more discrete media. His poetics travel some distance from the poetry of the past. Here he uses the fusion of the "receiver's" and the artist's horizons, their knowledge, feelings experience, and imaginings to provide a vivid account of artistic experimentation over the last thirty years.

Dick Higgins is a writer, artist, and composer. He is the leading practitioner in the Intermedia.

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only found to be around. Aim for me and I'm a cheap and artificial whore—it's my pleasure to pose that way anyhow, sometimes anyway. But I'm a perfect audience—you'll always find me on the spot when something new needs to be said, danced, played, painted, performed. Why? Because new messages need new languages,—discover a new language that is natural (not one that you've made from fashionable receiveds) and I am always there. It's art where I "hang out," as the teenagers say—not artifice. In fact artifice is where I'm not.

Well, to finish off—I have no fixed residence. You'll find me all over, not just where the learned authorities point. The americans imagine I'm particularly american, but that's their myth. I was born speaking Japanese as well as English, singing Rock as well as Mozart. I wander—at one moment I'm at one concert, and then, when it is imitated enough, I get bored and leave. Life attracts me: its echoes don't.

I am a problem and proud of it. I'll never settle down.

If you like the ideas in this essay, you'll find the system they're part of in two of Dick Higgins' books: *A Dialectic of Centuries: Notes Towards a Theory of the New Arts* (2nd Edition, 1979) and in *Horizons: the Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia* (1983). *Dialectic* has Dick's notions of what art is, his attitude towards history, and some conceptual tools for putting together an overview. *Horizons* has the teleology which goes with this, a hermeneutic of the new arts, some thoughts on fluxus, Performance Art, the new musics, sound poetry, old visual poetry and the master plan of Higgins' own work. See the ads for each.

If you'd like to see most of the same ideas presented systematically, try

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