

## A Something Else Reader

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[Various Artists]

*A Something Else Reader*

New York City, USA: Primary Information, 2022

368 pp., 6 x 9.25", softcover

Edition of 4500

It's difficult to quantify the impact of the Something Else Press, a publishing venture started by Fluxus artists Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles, in 1964.<sup>1</sup> The press published about fifty titles in the decade that it was operational, including books by some of the most important artists in a variety of disciplines, including music (John Cage, Henry Cowell), dance (Merce Cunningham), Pop Art (Claes Oldenburg), Concrete Poetry (Emmett Williams), found poetry (Bern Porter), literature (Gertrude Stein), Mail Art (Ray Johnson), Happenings (Al Hansen), philosophy (Marshall McLuhan) and Artists' Books (Dieter Roth).

The publisher's most radical contribution to the history of Artists' Books is somewhat invisible now: the use of traditional book binding rather than the experimental formats favoured by many "book artists" working in the late sixties and early seventies. Other than two boxed works<sup>2</sup>, the press eschewed the alternative bindings of Fluxus (bolts, hinges, plastic boxes) and the more delicate hand-stitched, handmade paper offerings common at the time. This approach allowed them to effectively infiltrate libraries and bookstores, and for them to survive being passed down from owner to owner.

Maybe the best measure of their ongoing influence is not an individual title, but the press as a whole. Contemporary publishers of Artists' Books invariably take cues from the SEP, and perhaps none more so than Primary Information.

The publisher of *A Something Else Reader* first came to prominence with their reprints of the Something Else Press Great Bear pamphlets series. Long out of print and often much more difficult to acquire than the books published the SEP, the series included text scores, essays, manifestos, performance documentation and other artists' writings. The Primary Information reprints were lovingly recreated in facsimile, and beautifully housed in printed wooden box.

Even more difficult to track down now are the Something Else Press newsletters - broadsides that coupled catalogue entries and forthcoming titles with essays and writings by Dick Higgins and others. The newsletter was where Higgins outlined his mandate for the press and where his influential essay "Intermedia" was first published.

Primary Information made the complete set available as downloadable PDFs, a year after the Great Bear reprints. They can be found on their site, [here](#).

Facsimile reprints of two other Something Else Press titles followed, in 2013 and 2015: Emmett Williams' *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, and *Fantastic Architecture*, compiled by Dick Higgins and Wolf Vostell.

I suspect these undertakings extend beyond a shared interest in the material, to a shared mandate.

In addition to publishing Artists' Books, the Something Else Press *also* produced facsimile reprints of out-of-print material.

The Press reprinted *The Dada Almanac* for the book's fiftieth anniversary in 1966, the first trade edition reprint of any of the early 20th century avant garde movements either side of the Atlantic.<sup>3</sup> The Great Bear pamphlet series included a reprint of Luigi Russolo's 1913 Futurist manifesto *The Art of Noise*.

*Dick's 100 Amusements* is a reprint of an 1873 compendia of parlour entertainment that Higgins recognized as proto-Fluxus<sup>4</sup> (and probably also liked the shared name of the title).

Six volumes by Gertrude Stein were reprinted, amounting to over ten percent of the Something Else Press' output. These may have been partly due to the fact that they were in the public domain and that their sales might help support recent work<sup>5</sup>, or to stave off criticism of a lack of originality.<sup>6</sup>

But many of Gertrude Stein's works were either only available in abridged forms<sup>7</sup>, or not at all. And they were too costly on the secondary market to get into the hands of the general reader.

"Something Else Press was selling books in supermarkets and had door-to-door salesmen," Primary Information co-founder Miriam Katzeff told Bomb Magazine, in 2014. "For us, our target audience isn't collectors who are dominating so many other parts of the art world. It's our peers: artists, students, historians."<sup>8</sup>

The desire to make important texts available again and at affordable prices is at the core of Primary Information's agenda. Like the Something Else Press, they produce titles in large editions (there were 4500 copies of *A Something Else Reader* produced, for example). And Primary Information takes it a step further, even, by reportedly selling their books at cost.

They also publish works from a third category (alongside contemporary Artists' Books and classic reprints), titles which Katzeff calls "historical material that has never been printed in book form before"<sup>9</sup>. Fittingly, *A Something Else Reader* is a bit of a hybrid. The contents have all been previously published - in book form - but not as here, and not with Dick Higgins' introduction.

The book was originally intended by Higgins as a primer which he pitched to Random House, hoping a larger publisher could introduce the material to a wider audience. They passed, but suggested that he publish it himself. However, the Something Else Press was already hemorrhaging money and re-categorization from the IRS made continuing the enterprise untenable. After ten years, the press folded in 1974<sup>10</sup>.

The proposal and assembled table of contents for *A Something Else Reader* went into Higgins's archive, where it was found by scholar and curator Alice Centamore, who compiled the works and assembled the book for Primary Information.

The title includes selections from both The Something Else Press titles and the Great Bear pamphlets from a wide variety of artists including Eleanor Antin, George Brecht, Pol Bury, Augusto de Campos, Clark Coolidge, Philip Corner, William Brisbane Dick, Robert Filliou, Albert M. Fine, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Hugh Fox,

Buckminster Fuller, Eugen Gomringer, Brion Gysin, Richard Hamilton, Al Hansen, Jan J. Herman, Dick Higgins, Åke Hodell, Ray Johnson, Allan Kaprow, Kitasono Katue, Bengt af Klintberg, Alison Knowles, Richard Kostelanetz, Ruth Krauss, Jackson Mac Low, Robert K. Macadam, Toby MacLennan, Hansjörg Mayer, Charles McIlvaine, Richard Meltzer, Manfred Mohr, Claes Oldenburg, Pauline Oliveros, Nam June Paik, Benjamin Patterson, Charles Platt, Bern Porter, Dieter Roth, Aram Saroyan, Tomas Schmit, Carolee Schneemann, Mary Ellen Solt, Daniel Spoerri, Gertrude Stein, André Thomkins, Wolf Vostell, and Emmett Williams.

At \$25, I can't recommend the title strongly enough. You can purchase it [here](#).

Better still, for only \$45, you can buy a 'bundle', which includes the excellent *Fantastic Architecture*, *A Something Else Reader* and *nine* Great Bear pamphlets, [here](#). Unless you need it for food, I can't think of a better way to spend your money.

1. Fluxus artists Emmett Williams and Ken Friedman served as Editor-in-Chief and General Manager, respectively.
2. Robert Filliou's *Ample Food For Stupid Thought* and *de-coll/age happenings* by Wolf Vostell. Notably, the Filliou title was also issued as a hardcover book.
3. Peter Frank. *The Something Else Press: An Annotated Bibliography*. McPherson & Company, 1983. Page 14.
4. Frank also notes that the Almanac's author, Richard Huelsenbeck, was a friend of Higgins' family, making securing permissions a lot easier.
5. Higgins also authored a book called *Pattern Poetry*, which traced the roots of Concrete and Visual Poetry back centuries. It's still available from Amazon, [here](#).
6. "New masters" as Higgins called them in a newsletter essay entitled "Why Do We Publish So Much Gertrude Stein?"
7. In her 2020 thesis *Something Else Press as Publisher*, Rachel High unearths a note from Dick Higgins to Peter Frank, indicating that the purpose of the reprints was also to "head off the kind of criticism that led off, 'you can't do that—the dadaists did it all before,' [or 'Stein']."
8. A quarter the length, in the case of *The Making of Americans*, which the Something Else Press reprinted in full, all 925 pages.
9. "The audience that we are trying to serve aren't the people who can afford the one of the five remaining copies of a legendary artist's book," she told Brooklyn Rail.
10. An excellent example being Lee Lozano's *Notebooks*. See earlier post [here](#).
11. Primary Information - which was co-founded by James Hoff and Miriam Katzeff in 2006 - has already outlasted the Something Else Press by six years.

