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A *Something Else Reader* looks back at the history of *Something Else Press*, a publishing company founded in 1963 by the Fluxus-related writer, artist, and composer Dick Higgins. It's an anthology of material from the various books that small press produced and issued through 1974. This new book has been published by *Primary Information*. All photos for this article by brutjournal

DICK HIGGINS' SOMETHING ELSE PRESS WAS SOMETHING ELSE

A *Something Else Reader* IS PUBLISHED FOR THE FIRST TIME — 50 YEARS AFTER IT WAS ORIGINALLY COMPILED

A Something Else Reader

Edited by Dick Higgins

Assembled by Alice Centamore

Published by Primary Information, Brooklyn, New York, 2022

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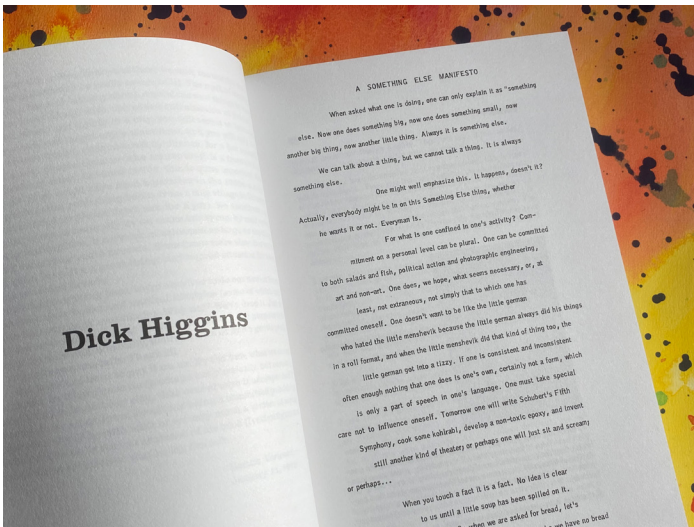
by Sarah Fensom, brutjournal's U.S.A. West Coast bureau chief, in Los Angeles

In its time, the New York-based *Something Else Press* was truly something else — a small press founded in 1963 by the artist, composer, poet, and art theorist Dick Higgins (1938-1998) with the aim of publishing the original, unusual work of artists and writers of the post-World War II era's avant-garde.

Higgins ran the company almost right up until it folded in 1974. A co-founder of the international



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A *Something Else Reader* contains a text written by *Something Else Press* founder Dick Higgins explaining the interests, aims, and guiding aesthetic principles of the artists-oriented publishing company that was founded in 1963.



A *Something Else Reader* features a section of writings by the American avant-garde artist Allan Kaprow, who became known in the 1960s for his development of "happenings."

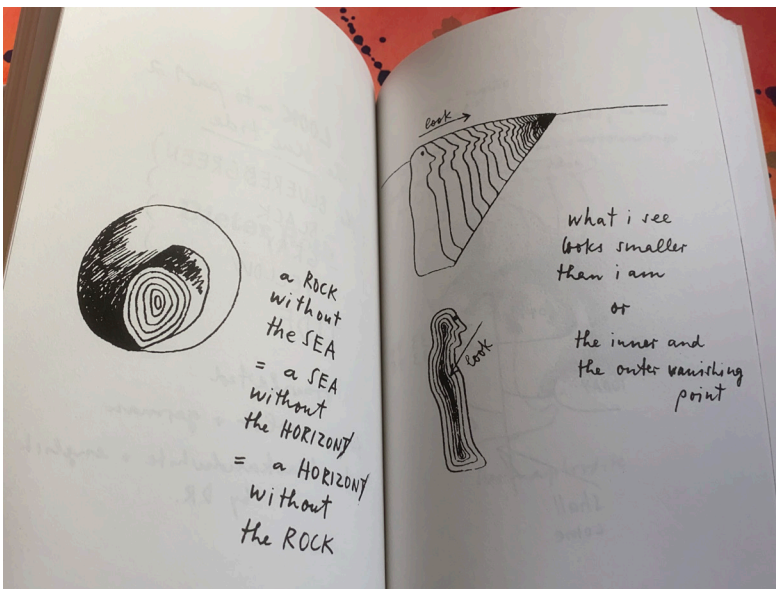
Fluxus community of avant-garde artists who experimented with chance-based, audience-participatory, performance-oriented art forms, Higgins coined the term "intermedia." It referred to the Fluxus artists' often undefinable, interdisciplinary practices.

Higgins created *Something Else Press* in part to promote Fluxus, whose participants became known for innovative performance pieces that often called attention to the art-making process and to the nature of art itself. With such publications as the widely influential *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1966) by Daniel Spoerri, Robert Filliou, Emmett Williams, Dieter Roth, and Roland Topor, and *Notations* (1969), which was edited and compiled by the composer John Cage, along with the artist Alison Knowles, Higgins' small publishing company came to define the radical possibilities of the modern artist's book. When it comes to small presses and the artist's book genre, *Something Else Press*'s influence and legacy still reverberate today.

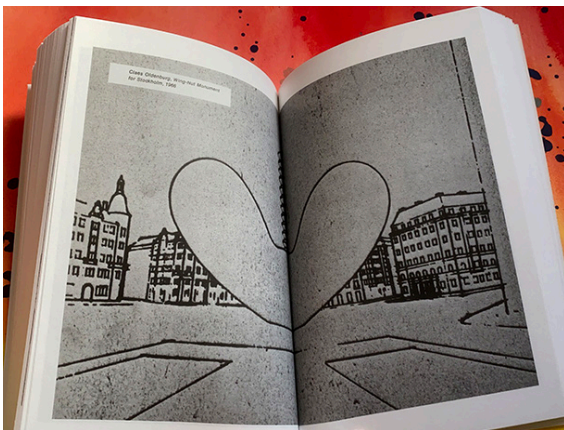
Higgins edited *A Something Else Reader* in 1972 and pitched the version of the book he had prepared to Random House, one of the largest mainstream trade publishers in the United States. His proposal was declined. Later, after *Something Else Press* went out of business in 1974, Higgins' anthology of material his small press had published over the years became the collateral damage of the company's demise. The book remained unpublished for five decades until Alice Centamore, a researcher who has delved deeply into Higgins' work, found the proposal the artist-writer had prepared for *A Something Else Reader* in his archive. Using that detailed plan for the book as a guide, Centamore assembled the newly published anthology.

This fully realized version of Higgins' long-observed anthology was released late last year by Primary Information, a small press based in Brooklyn. The new volume brings together Higgins' own writings as well as the work of such avant-gardists and visionaries as the Fluxus stalwart George Brecht; the architect, designer, and systems theorist Buckminster Fuller; Brion Gysin, the painter, writer, sound poet, and experimenter (along with his pal William S. Burroughs) of the cut-up compositional technique; Allan Kaprow, the developer of "happenings"; the video-art pioneer Nam June Paik; the sculptor Claes Oldenburg; the artists Dieter Roth and Carolee Schneemann; and many others.

Primary Information's edition of *A Something Else Reader* is an attractive, hefty paperback of more than 350 pages; measuring a good, handbag-size 6 by 9.25 inches, it's a treasure trove of curious discoveries and an enticing object packed with illustrations, photographs, visually arresting concrete poetry, and imaginative page layouts.



Drawings and notes by the Swiss artist Dieter Roth in *Primary Information's* edition of *A Something Else Reader*.



A Something Else Reader reproduces the sculptor Claes Oldenburg's 1966 drawing for his proposed "Wing-nut Monument for Stockholm."

The book opens with a 1973 essay by Higgins in which he traces the history of Something Else Press. Here, he shares a number of important insights about Fluxus, "intermedia," his collaborators, and the anthology's assorted contents. Higgins also explains how George Maciunas (1931-1978), the eccentric, Lithuanian-American architect and graphic designer who served as the de facto leader-coordinator of Fluxus, initially had offered to publish the whole of his written output from April 1962 to April 1963.

However, as it turned out, Maciunas's failure to issue in a timely manner what Higgins had dubbed "*Jefferson's Birthday*" and himself had described as a compilation of "all the things Dick Higgins wrote, composed, or invented between April 13th, 1962 and April 13th, 1963," along with "Postface," a "history of Fluxus in traditional essay format" that Maciunas had commissioned, prompted an impatient Higgins to start Something Else Press and ultimately release all of those writings himself.

In his opening essay in *A Something Else Reader*, Higgins also notes that Something Else Press's mission was "to publish what nobody else knows how to handle, the new forms that aren't labeled, the useful science books that aren't dull enough for the professionals or hip enough for the establishment." He recalls, "Whatever the establishment would do, I would do something else," and notes that his new company published material that could or would not otherwise find a publisher — or, as he put it, "things that just weren't neat, but which seemed to me to need their audience, that seemed natural to our world."

Higgins published the work of Fluxus-affiliated artists with great dedication. For example, Something Else Press published what Higgins describes in his introduction as the "original source material [for happenings] — dreams, projects, implications, and so on." The word "happenings," he writes in his 1973 essay, was "becoming horribly corrupt, the scenarios read like a breeze, and we brought out many, many books from the Happenings people."

Among them was Claes Oldenburg's *Store Days* (1967), a collection of texts, graphic materials, and photos from the artist's famous pop art installation "The Store," a presentation that opened in the winter of 1961 in a rented storefront in downtown Manhattan's Lower East Side district. It featured Oldenburg's painted-plaster undergarments

and slices of pie, all of which were offered for sale. Excerpts from Store Days appear in *A Something Else Reader*, including details of the installation's lighting scheme and an image of the temporary store-gallery's dressing rooms.

The new book also includes portions of the German artist Wolf Vostell's *Dé-Coll/age Happenings*, which Something Else press published in 1966. That artist's book featured translations of texts Vostell had used as what Fluxus artists referred to as the "scores" for their participatory art events – in Vostell's case, for the happenings he had staged in various cities in the late 1950s and the 1960s. Reproduced here, Vostell's texts and diagrams read as both records of past performances and as instructions for their future iterations; in format, they resemble examples of concrete poetry.

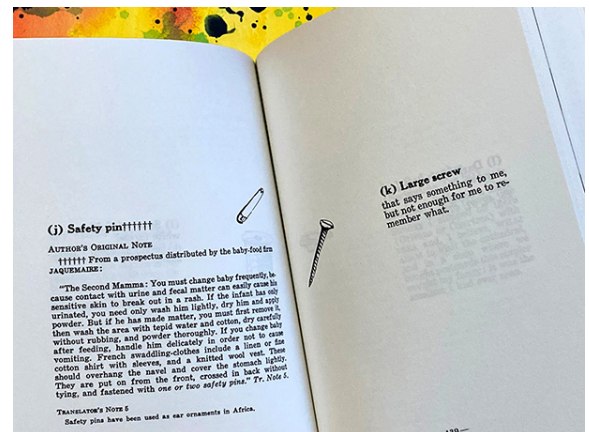
In his introductory essay, Higgins recalls how he brought Emmett Williams, a creator of concrete poetry who was close to the Fluxus community, into the fold of Something Else Press, and how his arrival among its stable of contributors led to its publication, in 1966, of *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*. Earlier, Williams had translated, from the original French, a text the Romanian-born, Swiss artist Spoerri had written for *Topographie Anécdotée du Hasard*, a pamphlet describing the various objects on a table Spoerri had assembled and presented as a work of art at the Galerie Lawrence in Paris in 1962.

Williams was friendly with Spoerri and with Robert Filliou, a French Fluxus artist. Before Something Else published its English-language version of *Topographie Anécdotée du Hasard* as *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, Williams added to Spoerri's writing, as did Filliou and Dieter Roth, a Swiss artist who would become known for his artist's books, limited-edition prints, and works made of found materials.

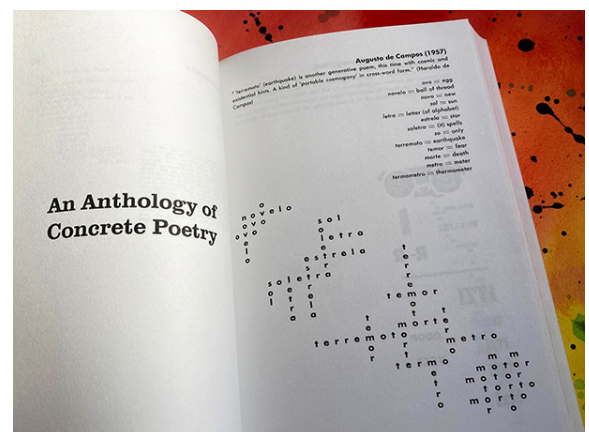
A Something Else Reader includes the topographical map Spoerri created to identify each of the items that made up the composition of his so-called snare picture, the table-top, object-filled assemblage work he had shown in Paris in 1962 that became the subject of both language versions of *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*. *A Something Else Reader* also includes some of Spoerri's charming autobiographical writings about the various objects – a knitting needle, a piece of sponge, and two candle butts, among many others – that had appeared in his table-top-capturing artwork.

Given his interests as a writer, Williams was instrumental in Something Else Press's publication of concrete poetry. In 1967, it issued his influential *Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, a book that, by the time Higgins composed the essay that has been cited here, had sold a brag-worthy 18,000 copies, an impressive achievement for any small publisher.

Selections from that Williams-assembled poetry anthology appear in *A Something Else Reader*. Among them, Ian Hamilton Finlay's "XM Poem" (1963) highlights the many evocative qualities of concrete poetry in a serpentine scrap of text in which, on the right-hand side of a single page, a cascade of x's and m's flow downward in a graceful, vertical wave. The repeating m's create a visual-musical rhythm, while



A Something Else Reader includes excerpts from the artist Daniel Spoerri's "An Anecdoted Topography of Chance," a text that describes the many different objects on a table top, from a knitting needle to burned-down candle butts, that became part of an assemblage work he first exhibited in Paris in 1962.



Emmett Williams, a creator of concrete poetry, edited Anthology of Concrete Poetry, which Something Else Press published in 1967; selections from that book now appear in A Something Else Reader.



A Something Else Reader contains material from the book Fantastic Architecture, which Something Else Press published in 1970. It was an English-language translation of Pop Architektur, which had originally appeared in Europe, in German, in 1969.

the x's break up random "mm," "mmm," and "mmMm" sounds, suggesting sonic changes and movement.

Elsewhere, super-short pieces by Eugen Gomringer – "mist mountain butterfly" (1955) and "americans and apricots" (1954) – feature austere but powerful variations of single phrases. By altering the order of the few words that appear in each one, Gomringer highlights the subtle changes in mood and meaning such playful changes can provoke.

Brion Gysin's boisterous "I am that I am" also appears in the selection of excerpts from the Willams-compiled poetry anthology. Gysin's piece is accompanied by a statement the artist wrote in 1958. It says, "Writing is fifty years behind painting. I propose to apply the painter's technique to writing; things as simple and immediate as collage or montage." Describing what would become known as the cut-up technique, which would inspire countless artists – decades later, David Bowie and Brian Eno would both employ it to write lyrics for songs – Gysin instructs readers to cut up books or newspapers, shuffle their pages and cuttings, and reconstruct new texts in a random manner. "Do it for yourself," he writes.

A Something Else Reader contains some other thematic mini-anthologies. There are, for example, selections from *Breakthrough Fictioneers*, a hulk of an anthology assembled by the artist and critic Richard Kostelanetz, which Something Else Press issued in 1973. In it, Kostelanetz brought together contributions by 101 artists and writers from various disciplines – among others, Vito Acconci, J.G. Ballard, Robert Smithson, William S. Burroughs, John Baldessari – for the purpose of exploring the form-busting, non-hierarchical, anything-goes possibilities of fiction. From the Kostelanetz-edited book, Manfred Mohr's "Computer Graphics" reappears here; so does the seminal feminist and performance artist Eleanor Antin's "An Episode from *100 BOOTS: An Epistolary Novel*."

Equally rich and diverse are the new book's selections from *Fantastic Architecture*, which Something Else Press published in 1970 (after it had first been released in Europe, in German, as *Pop Architektuur* by Droste Verlag in 1969; Primary Information reissued an edition of *Fantastic Architecture* on its own in 2015). Edited by Higgins and Wolf Vostell, *Fantastic Architecture* featured writings exploring the boundaries between pop art and architecture by such artists and thinkers as Buckminster Fuller, Joseph Beuys, and John Cage.

Cage was a influential creative figure who loomed large in Something Else Press's universe. Higgins, who was also a composer, began studying under Cage's tutelage in 1958 and took part in his music-composition course at the New School in New York. In 1969, Something Else Press published Cage's *Notations*, a book he compiled in collaboration with Higgins' wife, the artist and Fluxus regular Alison Knowles.

Featuring texts produced by 269 composers, *Notations* reproduced illustrated musical scores that challenged and expanded the way music could be written down, interpreted, and, in annotated, visual form, enjoyed. *A Something Else Reader* features such musical pieces as Albert M. Fine's "Song for George Brecht," Ray Johnson's "Upim Labo, with a quote by Ken Friedman," and Carollee Schneemann's "Snows, Sequence 4-7."

There is a lot to dig into and explore in this book that Higgins was never able to produce during his lifetime and that would and could have documented Something Else Press's accomplishments in a way he surely would have savored. Many of the ideas, literary-artistic experiments, and musings it showcases still feel as fresh and provocative today as they must have felt when the various publications in which they first appeared were originally published decades ago. As reminders of enduring, noteworthy legacies go, *A Something Else Reader* is a wide-ranging compendium that energetically lives up to its name.

