

Dick Higgins's A Something Else Reader

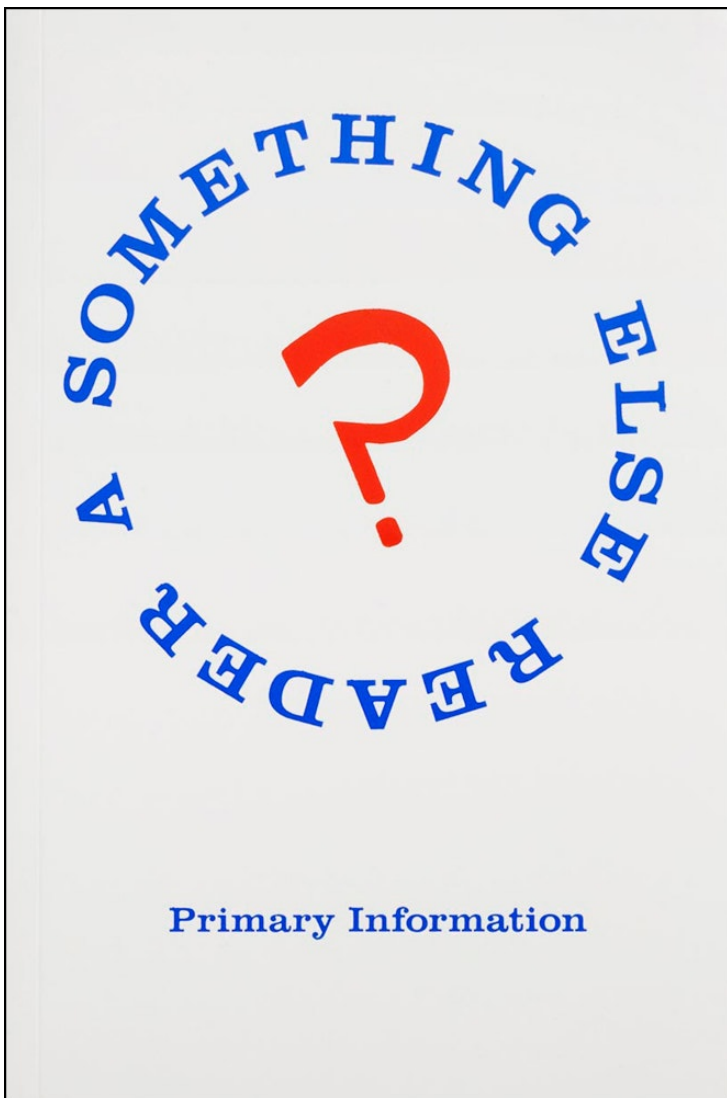
Jennie Waldow :: 2/1/2023



Primary Information

Art Books

This collection models how contemporary artists and publishers can build on and subvert the communicative forms of the recent past.



Dick Higgins and Alice Centamore, Eds.

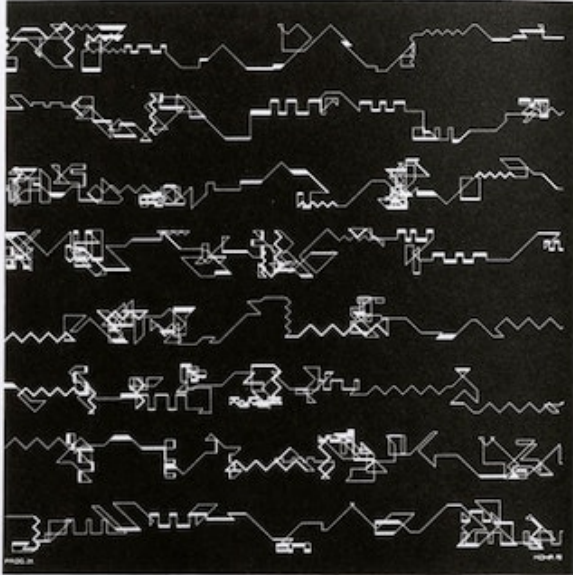
A Something Else Reader

(Primary Information, 2022)

In 1972, the artist, poet, writer, Fluxus affiliate, and Something Else Press founder Dick Higgins sent a proposal to Random House. The proposed title, *A Something Else Reader*, would collect excerpts from the multifarious output of its namesake press: event scores, concrete poetry, conceptual collages, philosophical essays, and reprints of classic modernist publications. While Random House rejected Higgins's pitch, the art historian and curator Alice Centamore more recently came across the proposal in Higgins's archive at Northwestern University. With Primary Information, which has published several notable reprints of Something Else Press works, she set about making the *Reader* a reality.

Higgins, who coined the term "intermedia" to describe works with hybrid forms, was a canny and discerning promoter of his own artistic moment, as described in Siglio Press's 2018 book *Intermedia, Fluxus, and the Something Else Press*. While Siglio's book focuses on Higgins's longstanding creative production, the *Reader* is more concerned with the Press's larger output. Established in 1963, the Press confidently embraced the esoteric. In the introduction to the *Reader*, Higgins writes with characteristic brio: "My intention hasn't changed at all [since the founding of the press]: to publish what nobody else knows how to handle, the new forms that aren't labeled [...] mostly I would concentrate on things that could not find another publisher. Things that weren't neat, but which seemed to me to need their audience, that seemed natural in our world." Though the Press folded in 1974 for financial reasons, it ultimately did find its audience, gaining influential status in the world of artists' books.

The *Reader* conveys how the artistic achievements of the 1960s and 1970s departed from modernist innovations, modeling how contemporary artists and publishers can, in turn, build on and subvert the communicative forms of the recent past. In the introduction, Higgins describes how many of the Press's lauded reprints were motivated by what he saw as sloppy comparisons between avant-garde movements of the recent past and then-contemporary Fluxus and Happenings: "Because Dada materials were hard to get, very few people knew them. So whatever you did which was new, establishment types from the *Village Voice* and the like would say, 'It's been done before,' or, in exasperation, 'It's Dada.'" To clarify this distinction (and to reveal the true, innovative nature of the artistic provocations of the 1960s), the Press released a facsimile of the Richard Huelsenbeck-edited *Dada Almanach* (1920) and five Gertrude Stein works in the public domain, making these titles more widely available in the United States. Similarly, *A Something Else Reader* confronts readers afresh with the specificity and scope of past artistic experiments.



from Computer Graphics
by Manfred Mohr

Drunk Boat

by Ruth Krauss

act one everyone is born
act two South Pole
act three West 86th Street
act four everyone contracts
act five everyone recovers
act six everyone dies

Act seven
because seven is a magic number
the torch carriers are waiting on the side

TORCH SONG

Life, the girls are wearing their skirts higher
and higher
for you
Life, at the South Pole the icebergs
are dancing for you
For you the film-makers are making films
And me I am writing a poem
for you
look! no hands—
I be carry for you torch great torch set on fire whole world
waterfalls green lightnings maelstrom
unlatched land and the tree that will become a violin
or perhaps a fence
Life, I am eyes full of accolades for you
my ocean
my moon
my horse

There are event scores that range from sweet (Bengt af Klintberg's "Seven Forest Events," "Number 2": "Walk out into a forest and wrap some drab trees, or yourself, in tinsel") to prankish (Al Hansen's "Car Bibbe," which instructs enactors to crash and set fire to cars; one score ends, "give yourself up to the proper authorities") to queasily sensory (Alison Knowles's "Nivea Cream Piece," in which performers apply hand cream in front of a microphone). Essays and poetic treatises by Higgins, Bern Porter, Nam June Paik, and Claes Oldenburg define the new movements and forms with urgency. The most illuminating sections are the anthology excerpts, which feature clever and moving works in rapid-fire sequence. The extract from *Breakthrough Fictioneers* sequences Eleanor Antin's *100 Boots*, Charles Platt's hilarious choose-your-own adventure comic, and Manfred Mohr's hieroglyphic-like computer graphics, among other works, providing a window into the variety of formats and tones contained in the original publication, which intriguingly defined its subject as "the art of narrative, of time applied to language." While the wildness of some pieces in the *Reader* has been dimmed by the acceptance of intermedia into established art history, the staunchly uncommercial nature of the Press still comes across clearly. While many entries are funny, poetic, or visually intriguing, others focus on obscure topics or take up longwindedness as a purposeful style, demonstrating Higgins's faith that even the most challenging or idiosyncratic works would find their audience.

According to Centamore's brief editor's note, "Higgins's draft of the original table of contents listed, in many cases, the exact titles of the works or chapters he intended to include, but in some instances, he listed only a publication's title followed by a page count, and no other specifications." In the latter cases, Centamore "selected the works to be included, trying to match the selections to the specific page count that Higgins had noted in the table of contents." This editor's note is curiously located in the back of the volume; while this placement preserves Higgins's status as the original voice of Something Else, it does so at the expense of foregrounding some useful contextual information as well as Centamore's status as a key collaborator. The anthology excerpts, in particular, seem to have been chosen for a simultaneous diversity of subject matter, visual styles, and artist identities, contributing to the number of significant works by women and people of color featured in the volume. Was this Centamore's contemporary intervention, or were these pieces all selected by Higgins? Other publication choices are explained more clearly. Without precise instructions from Higgins, Centamore chose to reproduce all the works in their original format, resulting in a pleasing hodgepodge of typefaces and graphics that mirrors the Press's wide-ranging ethos. Even the book's dimensions gesture to the Press's history: they are drawn from one of its most famous publications, Emmett Williams's *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*.

Like the older works that Higgins once reprinted, many Something Else titles are now rare. The selections in the *Reader* provide insight into the range and ambition of the Press, allowing both well-known and underseen titles to recirculate in accessible form and, notably, in proximity. Whether the reader agrees with Hugh Fox, writing in a 1974 bibliography that comprises the volume's only non-Press inclusion, that Something Else has "the single most impressive and significant list of any twentieth century publisher, small press, large press, over- or under-ground, or avant-garde," its prescience is undeniable. *A Something Else Reader* provides a tantalizing introduction to the Press's catalogue, highlighting its historical reach and uncompromising approach to artistic expression.

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