

## Book Review: A Something Else Reader, Edited by Dick Higgins

By MARK BLOCH, February 2023

The Something Else Press operated from 1963 to 1973, a brief but important ten year span, during which it published 64 innovative titles. This book was conceived by its founder, Dick Higgins, who outlined it in early '73 in a letter to Random House. He wrote a beautiful intro for it on January 11, 1973, mailed it off with a detailed Table of Contents and, a month later, his concept for *A Something Else Reader* had been rejected by the large press that had recently been acquired by RCA. Those were the early days of the corporatization of the book industry to which a lone wolf like Higgins, writing from his Vermont farmhouse, stood in stark contrast.

Fifty years later Primary Information has released *A Something Else Reader*, 350 pages of unusual, unorthodox, whimsical curiosities, not the type of thing you see in books much these days, if you see books at all. If this book were to appear on the interwebs, all but a few people would hurriedly click onto the next thing. But with content so unusual, so atypical, set in strange typefaces with frequent and inconsistent paragraph breaks, with unusual illustrations, it might, despite eyes contemplating an escape, give even the most normal of readers a momentary jolt, an intellectually curious victory pause, a celebratory lapse, gifted to otherwise routine thought patterns. These pages are attractive in a much-needed and long-forgotten quirkiness that Dick Higgins now seems destined to have birthed into publishing. His various missions are discussed in his introduction. One thing it does not say is that the Something Else Press was unabashedly experimental for its own sake, an assessment I am not sure Higgins would agree with or embrace.

Nevertheless, the world at large today could certainly use a dose of what Higgins was doing in the late sixties and early seventies because it broke molds. The influence of the (pun intended) “beats” he covered still permeate this culture (though at one point he refers to Allen Ginsberg and Charles Olson as “scarcely Something Else”) but the trail has been paved over so many times that barely a trace remains of the trailblazers. This skews the perceptions of young people who think it may always have been this way. So it is helpful to see a compilation of newly minted trails here—particularly for those unfamiliar with this fat collection of forgotten genres. This book is ideal for readers who may have heard about Fluxus but don't know why—Higgins' own piece, *Postface*, will explain. I'm also picturing thousands of young attendees of Printed Matter's annual art book fair each year who may not know how this community started. Well, it started with Dick Higgins and these authors that he quixotically offered up and his knack for explaining why one might care.

Alice Centamore happened upon Dick's 1973 notes for this project in his archival papers at Northwestern University and thanks to this exciting discovery, she, Primary Information and the Dick Higgins Estate have created an illuminating sampler. Higgins prepared the choices himself, building a Table of Contents and doing most of the selecting and editing. The book ends with one and a half pages by Centamore called an Editor's Note, though the book is “assembled” by Centamore, with Higgins listed as editor. Confessing her

job was to extract the exact shape of a lesser portion of the selections herself, Higgins selected completely, then prepared the details of 70% of the rest. While it would be illuminating to know which choices were *not* by Higgins, I'm doubtful the *Reader* would be much different had Higgins selected every last word of it. After all, the Press was his baby until its final year when he finally backed away a bit. What would be important to know are the reasons certain SEP books were completely left out of his *Reader* by Higgins in his selections in the first place.

Ray Johnson's *The Paper Snake*, for instance, the second SEP book, is not excerpted. Fair enough, but then why bother including, with minimum context, a page with a murky, typed-upon photograph by Johnson next to a throwaway Ken Friedman poem from John Cage's *Notations* book?

This is not a horrible sin but it did make me wonder what Higgins consciously left out and why. Meanwhile Hugh Fox, in his *An Analytical Checklist of Books by Something Else Press* that closes out this volume, doesn't appreciate Ray's *Paper Snake*, calling it one of the few duds in Higgins' output due to its "repetitive" and "tedious" nature. He thinks less of it than other SEP books, perhaps not seeing Johnson, via Black Mountain College, as any extension of the Bauhaus, which he wishes he could see more of in an informative nine point introduction. Fox calls *The Paper Snake* overly "worked at," the exact opposite of a sensibility to which Ray Johnson, the Bauhaus and BMC were early to subscribe: the Chinese *wu wei*, "Do nothing but leave nothing left undone."

Accordingly, not knowing if Higgins was planning to re-typeset the *Reader*, Centamore asks would he have recreated the various chapters just as they had appeared? To her credit, she left the original look of every chapter in tact, providing the odd charm of this volume.

The penultimate piece in the book, just before her brief explanatory note, is Fox's piece that appeared in the *Small Press Review* in March '74, summing up the various SEP books available at that time. I do agree with Fox's assessment that "it gives a kind of historical overview of the whole metaphysical revolutionary movement, from dada and surrealism, through modern cultural historical developments, right into a full-scale discussion of the methods and techniques of chance art" and that "Higgins' own theoretical work... is filled with historical perspective and he makes the whole historical context of contemporary avant-garde techniques clear in relation to origins and directions."

However, Fox finds the Press lacking in a few things which I do not. He cites Rimbaud, French Symbolism, and painting theory (with his expectations including desired info on Van Gogh and Gauguin, clearly not part of Higgins' bailiwick) and the aforementioned Bauhaus as omissions.

Higgins was certainly an artist but not one as schooled in painting and drawing as others of that era, even if that was all about to change, like say, his wife, Alison Knowles, who studied with Richard Lindner at Pratt. Like Knowles, Higgins held a teaching position at the then-recently opened Cal Arts in Valencia, California when the *Reader* was conceived. Higgins did not like it there much and moved the Press from Newhall, CA to Barton, VT, near the Canadian border, from '71-74. In 1972 the earliest mention of the *Reader* appeared in one of his newsletters by Camille Gordon, an editor who just happened to be his alter ego. A year later he

compiled the list of which of his books should go into this *Reader* and sent it off with the 12 page *Introduction*.

And so this *Reader* opens with one quick *Something Else Manifesto* and two longish Dick Higgins pieces: that intro to the *Reader* as idea and an excerpt from *Postface*, one half of his first book. The latter describes the cultural landscape in 1962, the year before he founded his Press. *Postface* was also, indirectly, the reason for it. Fluxus founder George Maciunas, his downstairs neighbor on Canal Street at the time, had promised to publish a year of Dick's output and also *Postface*, a recap of Fluxus thus far, but when George characteristically dawdled, an impatient Higgins put up his own money and his Something Else Press was born. First he informed his wife, Knowles, who helped him with the title, then the rest of the world, despite his neighbor's protestations. I discuss the fallout and lack thereof and their various conflicts [here](#), in yet another too-long book review—Siglio's 2018 overview of not only the SEP but also Higgins' entire oeuvre, the impossible function that Maciunas' book was looking to serve.

These events begin an *Introduction* to this *Reader*, arguably the best part of this book. He tells anew how he started the Press, why, and reconstructs a history. Higgins conceived of his letter to Random House as a handbook for a ten year project that was still unfolding, not anticipating it would soon end.

It is worth reminding young readers that back then news in the underground travelled, literally, by word of mouth. The Something Else Press was a well-kept secret but not to hepcats (my preferred term) in the know internationally. Higgins referred to the squares (again, my term) who didn't keep up with those rapidly changing times as "myopic, calcified, and professional," with the latter a '60s put down. He referred to even the venerable Jill Johnston as "a journalist for the hip establishment." According to Higgins, his focus was only "new tendencies and republishing titles from the historical avant gardes."

Higgins also signals in his intro a change of direction he had planned for the 1970s: expanding into nature and science titles. He even hinted at possibly including sociology, if it would evolve out of an interest in "natural lifestyles," referring to life in the Zeitgeist. "Why not, we've lived it."

When George Maciunas' requested Higgins write a history of Fluxus that became *Postface* then delayed it until Spring '65, Dick countered with, "No good," and vowed to start the new press and use it to publish what others could not: "new forms that aren't labeled," "useful science books that aren't dull enough for professionals," yet "hip enough for the establishment" and finally, as a kind of North Star, whatever establishment presses did, he vowed he would do "something else," including especially "what nobody else knows how to handle."

In October 1963 his *Jefferson's Birthday/Postface* was bound with his *Manifesto* published on the book jacket. By January '64 he had acquired an office on 5th Avenue and the Something Else Press was incorporated early the following month.

A SEP newsletter started out in 1966, containing his famous text, *Intermedia*, which he first composed to accompany Al Hansen's *Primer of Happenings and Time/Space Art*. Wanting to defuse some confusion about the arts of that time, he gave a few lectures on the intermedia concept that has come to characterize

Fluxus and his own way of working, then published it in that first newsletter which would become his mouthpiece.

In those early days, Barbara Moore was the Press' first and important "editorial worker." A fire forced a move to W. 22nd St. behind the Chelsea Hotel. By February '66, expatriate American Fluxman Emmett Williams moved back to the U.S. and took over editing duties, connecting Higgins to Daniel Spoerri and Robert Filliou, two important avant gardists from the south of France. In 1967 *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, put together by Williams, sold well—at 18,000 copies, "forcing" Higgins further into concrete poetry and then "cumulative prose" fiction, one example of which is *Games at the Cedilla*, a book by Filliou and yet another important Fluxus pioneer, George Brecht, which explored an alternative, pedagogic, artist-run economy with new distribution and exchange strategies and that appears later in the *Reader*.

So do parts of the first three books Higgins did—by Hansen, Claes Oldenberg and Wolf Vostell— about Happenings. Other performance material that was too small for a book eventually became the Press' series of twenty *Great Bear* Pamphlets—one-shot magazines devoted to specific artists, each associated with the Fluxus circle, which was not yet a movement or even a fixed group that agreed on... anything.

Next, a history series is described, called by Hugh Fox, Dick's "Homage to Antecedents"—which included *The Dada Almanach* by Richard Huelsenbeck; several out of print Gertrude Stein works; and Henry Cowell's 1920 little-known book containing groundbreaking sound theories. Another great audio artist, the Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo's works came out as one of the *Great Bear* pamphlets. (Why is Stein the only one of these even touched here?) Finally in the antecedent category, Hugh Fox, himself, was due to publish a book by A.L. (Abraham Lincoln) Gillespie that never materialized despite Higgins' mention in his intro.

Finally, he conveys how Emmett Williams eventually left and things got complicated. John Kimm and Jan Hermann later took over as editors. After a tirade about Cal Arts and Newhall where he moved SEP for a while, experiencing sales and distributor problems with the Press emerging self-distributed, Higgins explains relocation back east and even the start of a Something Else Farm. By the way, anyone interested in hearing a beleaguered Higgins on the way out of town trash Cal Arts, should listen to his very entertaining grumblings [here](#).

So after the *Introduction*'s background information on the Press, the *Reader* continues with yet more Higgins recapping, this time of the other forms that led to what we now call performance and conceptual.

Maciunas' (publisher) and Higgins' (artist) original plan for this book was that *Postface* would be attached to a year of the latter's output starting April 13, 1962—Thomas Jefferson's birthday, randomly chosen. A nuanced listing of then recent activities begin the truncated excerpt. The Yam Fest, the Pocket Theater, Judson and other distinctions of interest because they were not strictly Fluxus conclude with Higgins calling the Flux-word a *moniker*, not a *movement*. He calls Fluxus style "sort of a rectilinear Dada with fat and ornamental typefaces and many kitsch engravings," an excuse to "quote whatever was new and exciting... especially if it was by one of us."

He concludes the 13 page wrap-up discussing Dada, Duchamp and then Happenings artists Kaprow, Oldenburg, Robert Whitman and others, distinguishing between Happenings "the form" and the "pop term."

He similarly parses “music” and “verbal things” versus “composers” or “verbalizers,” respectively. By this point in the *Reader* one has a strong sense of Higgins’ not only as a writer but also as an editor and categorizer. The rest of the book fleshes out this talent with the work of his contemporaries.

The collection proceeds with a dozen examples from a dozen top notch samples of Fluxus scores —written plans for real or imagined activities to be performed or to conceive of doing so. Some of the most well-known examples from that era appear as do others more obscure, starting with absurd actions and potential entertainment by the Swede Bengt af Klintberg (a list of twelve, labeled “Seven Forest Events”) then more of the same by the Americans Kaprow and Hansen, who offer enormous mega-scenarios. Hansen’s “Car Bibbe,” for example, is a classic which, surprisingly, is not done more often, a performance piece for nine cars, named for his daughter.

Conversely, Filliou’s score work is micro-cosmic, internally-focused and personal with lots of bodily functions described. The work was apparently executed in New York on February 8, 1965 containing “improvised, silent musical accompaniment” that is described with the description of one section addressing Knowles, “you sat cross legged upstage” in “your corner.” Wolf Vostell’s excerpt in the *Reader*, one of the longest at 12 pages with possibly the best imagery, concludes with decoll/age as well as happenings defined, both separately and in combination. Nam June Paik’s two excerpts contains his characteristic humor with, of course, elements of electronic media brought into the mix.

Rounding out these early pages are five of Knowles’ (from the *Great Bear* publication *By Alison Knowles*) classic “Propositions,” that is then followed by a Dick Higgins fragment from *Jefferson’s Birthday* in which we get to read “The Tart or Miss America,” an elaborate “play” with stage directions, typical of his earliest unique work in the performance genre that contains within it numbered lists of performable “Situations” and “Speeches.”

Later in the book, not grouped with these, more scores appear that I’ll mention here. Tomas Schmit is represented by a meta-questionnaire. Philip Corner’s *Piano Activities* was the piece that made Fluxus famous during the first festival in Wiesbaden, when German families saw a piano literally deconstructed in person and then sensationalized in media accounts. Dieter Rot’s eclectic cartoony musings and artistic experiments in pictures and handwritten text are what one would have seen in the pages of the most cutting edge artistbook then but seems oddly reminiscent of an edgy t-shirt or TV commercial today, while remaining thought-provoking.

Complete with a photograph and a drawing, Claus Oldenburg’s *Store Days* are 1962 “Ray Gun Theater” scores that crossed over into full museum approval very early on, thanks to the larger than life props that accompanied them. Seen here, I am struck by the vague wording and incomplete direction of them as scores.

Finally, a few more are included—excerpts from the important musical *Notations* book that was edited by John Cage. Surprisingly these fragments contain no Cage but as mentioned earlier, a Ray Johnson “send to” adjacent to a Friedman, as well as a Pauline Oliveros diagram, a Carolee Schneemann drawing and then some pure Fluxus instruction-based classics including Ben Patterson’s *Paper Piece*, another staple of the

earliest flux-performances and an A.M. Fine written-by-aliens score “for George Brecht” by the brilliant composer Albert Fine, a prime influence not only on the madcap art of Johnson but also the music of Philip Glass, his classmate at Julliard.

Besides the world of “scores” for musical and theatrical “intermedia” adventures, the reader of this *Reader* can taste the more foundational stuff of that era, including explorations of visual poetry, chance and games. Brief but substantial chunks of several hard-to-fathom, hard-to-find SEP books are included.

After twelve examples from Mary Ellen Solt to Brion Gysin from Emmett Williams’ aforementioned *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* bring alive pages in wonderful succession, 21 pages from Spoerri’s provocative and visually elegant *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* book and six absurd brain-teasers from *Games at the Cedilla* delight the mind and charm the eye. All three of these publications were bedrocks of avant garde mindsets.

Speaking of understructure, later in the book, highlights from *Fantastic Architecture*, edited by Higgins and Vostell, similarly baffle the senses and the imagination with Pol Bury’s chopped up Pan Am building, Oldenburg’s “Wingnut monument for Stockholm” drawing, Bucky Fuller’s “Tetris City,” a pyramid from 1969, JJ Herman’s giant cigarette held together with a paper clip and finally, a 1959 “architectural project” by Higgins similar to his theatrical works which recommends “taking some gigantic concrete blocks to the top of the hill, rolling them down one at a time against each other, connecting them where they fall, hollowing them out to taste and then living in the resulting structure.” Knowles’ 1968 “House of Dust,” one of the first computer program-generated poems, is also here: potential architecture that hindsight allows us to see has actually been manifested.

As a reminder that language, like everything else, was breaking down at this point in history, one of the first rock’n’roll writers, Richard Meltzer’s selection starts with three pages of appropriated “Surfin’ Bird” and “Papa ooo mow mow” text. OK, but that is followed by 13 pages of disorienting gobbledegook from a time before head banging was fashionable. At first glance I couldn’t tell if this writing was for real or a parody of itself. This is a good sign, I suppose. Broken down communication and formality, on its way out, positions this kind of academia-gone-awry-ness—both in form and content—as one of the more surprising passages in the book. Not that I liked it. But it explains both why Meltzer is largely forgotten as well as why Higgins was attracted to it. Namedropping collides with the unreadable and in a book like this, that says a lot! So at a time when no one knew that rock journalism prior to Hunter S. Thompson would have any longevity, Dick Higgins gave it a home.

Bern Porter, a master of finding art where you least expect it, who also happened to work on the Manhattan Project and help invent TV, next describes his clothes in great detail as he gets dressed in the first of seven passages followed by his “Sciarc” philosophy that unites science and architecture, dated 1947 to 1955. Then, he merges science with various other things: art, communication, literature, music, sculpture and poetry—reaching through time windows as far as 1939—formally recapping them as an arcane appendix. Then inexplicably, a photograph of a check from the Citizens Bank and Trust Company and ten more “found poems” clipped out of magazines—his forte— appear, illustrating his thought process less intellectually.

In this parade of baffling visual art enhanced by language, William Brisbane Dick, a publisher himself from the 19th Century, instructs us, with Alice in Wonderland-like illustrations and earnest accompanying texts, to follow his amusing suggestions such as “fasten a large grotesque head to the end of a stick four or five feet long.” Odd wisdom from days gone by. Ditto Gertrude Stein in 18 dense pages of tiny writing, more post-modern than antique. Higgins consciously revitalized Stein for new audiences. Here her work *G.M.P. “and two shorter stories”* (where?) ends as abruptly as it begins, illuminating nothing and everything with repetition and repetition.

*Chance Imagery* by George Brecht was a *Great Bear* pamphlet and this excerpt, 16 pages long, gives a good feel for what those pamphlets were all about and in this case, communicates still-valuable information. Complete with footnotes, it covers various topics: a passage about Dada and Surrealism, a missing link to explorations of random numbers, cards, card shuffling, coins, dice, ways of invoking chance, definitions of randomness, a long passage about the historical science of statistics, the philosophy of chance and finally, passages about John Cage, Robert Motherwell, Earle Brown, Allan Kaprow and Jackson Pollock. Bravo!

The final grouping I see in this quirky *mise en abyme* is collected short quirky tidbits, but not scores. *Breakthrough Fctioneers* was edited by a friend of Higgins, Richard Kostelanetz, who has himself written and edited many works of experimental literature. He personally contributed the final selection here, made out of numbers and called “parallel intervalic sets.” George Chambers contributed a paragraph. “Drunk boat” by Ruth Krauss is two poems. Another one follows by Clark Coolidge. Manfred Mohr contributed an early computer graphic piece, while a “programmed” comic strip by Charles Platt overflows with detailed drawings and tiny print depicting “Norman versus America” in which “your aim is to make choices which you think will be most likely to lead Norman through to the happy ending.” Apparently there are 67 different ways to pass through the paneled comic, transporting the reader into an early post-modern situation, like all these Fctioneers. The last box shows how the frames in the story are linked by readers’ choices. Enduringly, a classic and early correspondence art piece, “100 Boots,” from the well-known epistolary novel by Eleanor Antin, shows six of her photographs of footwear lined up as non-linear storytelling.

To round out the *Reader* and interrupted by some of the passages already mentioned above, are: Toby Mac Lennon’s four pages of text with large type, Andre Tompkins’ distorted image of Dick Higgins’ face famously doing a “Danger Music” piece, Charles McElwain and Robert K. McAdam’s mushroom photographs, diagrams, and descriptions in different groupings and then more Higgins: five pages of one last project by the publisher, a poem: Canto 3, Chapter 15 called “The Court of Miracles” from his *A Book of Love & War & Death*.

Like Higgins, I saved for last *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* by Jackson MacLow, a favorite of mine, which here contains chapter headings like “The Marrying Maiden” “Birth of a Student Movement,” “New Approaches to City Planning: The Return of Communitas,” A “First” and “Second” “Asymmetry for Iris” and “A Two Part Poem for Ginsberg and Burroughs.” MacLow used systems to create poetry and theatrical work. Like Higgins, Kaprow, Hansen, Brecht and others, MacLow was a student of John Cage’s *Composition* class at the New School in the late 1950s. That class could be considered an origin story for much of the work that later published by the Something Else Press, a story I am happy to recycle with this article.

In the early '80s, some twenty-five years after that Cage class, I was lucky enough to walk into an all-but-deserted small press book fair in Manhattan and sit down at the intersection of a slightly lonely trio of tables belonging to Dick Higgins, Jackson MacLow and Bern Porter, each of whom were happy to share stories about their wares with me and grateful for a temporary captive audience of one—and each other—for what they were up to. They kvetched, joked and explained, together and separately, ironically and earnestly. I will forever be grateful for their kindnesses and hopeful that despite the flashy, rapidly changing mainstream world outside the book fair on that day and others, even today, there will always be people that are drawn to something else.

Mark Bloch is a writer, performer, videographer and multi-media artist living in Manhattan. In 1978, this native Ohioan founded the Post(al) Art Network a.k.a. PAN. NYU's Downtown Collection now houses an archive of many of Bloch's papers including a vast collection of mail art and related ephemera. For three decades Bloch has done performance art in the USA and internationally. In addition to his work as a writer and fine artist, he has also worked as a graphic designer for ABCNews.com, The New York Times, Rolling Stone and elsewhere. He can be reached at [bloch.mark@gmail.com](mailto:bloch.mark@gmail.com) and PO Box 1500 NYC 10009.