

Three New Publishers' Self-Retrospectives

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The Poet's Press Anthology 1971-2021

Edited by Brett Rutherford

The Poet's Press (\$19.95)

by Richard Kostelanetz

Though I collect books about many subjects to a desultory degree, the only genre in which I try to collect every important example is one whose definition is probably of my own invention: publishers' self-retrospectives. Quite simply, from their past publications, the publisher of books or a magazine selects a purportedly choice anthology (by definition, a collection of flowers). My critical assumption is that, better than individual issues, such books portray what publishers think they have achieved and thus how they wish to be remembered. Sometimes such a book appears as the publisher continues working, though quite often the retrospective appears as the publication is shutting down.

Esopus was a remarkable magazine of aesthetic culture that Tod Lippy, a filmmaker and curator, edited and published semiannually from 2003 to 2018 in Lower Manhattan. Its most immediately striking quality was its physicality—a glorious nine by twelve inches in size, the magazine was printed full-color, on thick paper, and often with pullouts or sections smaller than the magazine itself. Because Lippy's literacy was broad, on successive pages were subjects that weren't normally found together, and as the chapters were individually designed, the mere turn of the page promised a higher reading experience.

Given the quality of individual issues, *The Esopus Reader* disappoints, reprinting only choice longer texts in uniform blocks of continuous type within a more conventional size and format. The main disappointment is not that the articles aren't good, but that this *Reader* doesn't represent what was unique and best about *Esopus*.

In its short life from 1963 to 1974, Something Else Press was the most important publisher of avant-garde texts in the world. To those of us becoming literate about avant-garde writing in the 1960s, it became a kind of graduate school, telling us not only what wasn't taught in institutions of higher education, but also which books and artists we should know and what ideas to respect. Founded and financed by Dick Higgins (1938-1998), a polymathic writer who was also a brilliant book designer, Something Else produced pamphlets, perfect-bound books in various sizes, book-art, anthologies, and ephemera that was indeed, as Higgins claimed, "something else."

The current publisher of *A Something Else Reader*, Primary Information, claims that Higgins prepared in 1972 a typescript that was only recently discovered, more than two decades after his death. While this claim surprised me, as I knew Higgins fairly well at the time, I can't now imagine anyone other than him doing this retrospective as well. Indeed, so good are his selections from his publications that Higgins demonstrates that he, unlike some other bookmakers, must have read his output carefully.

One theme of this new book is that many texts that were highly original then are still highly original now. A second is that avant-garde writing has not one strand but many. Rather than resetting the selections to produce a visually uniform appearance, this *Reader* reprints pages as they originally looked (including a text of mine, entirely numerical, consuming barely a third of an otherwise blank page). The book concludes with an "Analytical Checklist," a model of its kind, by Hugh Fox, himself an intrepid small press writer, that originally appeared in *The Little Magazine Review*.

Sooner than reprint whole examples in a short review, let me note that among the literary artists reprinted here are Jackson Mac Low, Eugen Gomringer, Robert Filliou, Wolf Vostell, Dieter Roth, Richard Melzer, Kitasono Katue, Allan Kaprow, Brion Gysin, Alison Knowles, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Claes Oldenburg, Gertrude Stein, and Higgins himself. If you know little or none of the literary art of these names, consider starting your education here. In any university course about avant-garde literature, this *Reader* could become a foundational text.

The theme of Brett Rutherford's *Opus 300: The Poet's Press Anthology 1971-2021* is persistence over neglect. Rutherford's press started small and never got much bigger as he moved away from his roots in Pittsburgh and hopped between cities, taking administration jobs and in his spare time publishing single-author collections and themed anthologies that would not have otherwise happened.

As with his 299 earlier publications, Rutherford has been generous—here with 146 writers, 363 poems, two excerpts from plays, and five prose works. Thoughtful are his headnotes for contributors both familiar and unfamiliar. He mostly published his contemporaries, but the most surprising inclusions are obscure British authors: Thomas Lovell Beddoes (1803-1849), William Allingham (1824-1899), Henry Kendall (1839-1882), and William Bell Scott (1812-1890), among others.

In the back of *Opus 300* are Rutherford's "Publishing Chronology," his annotated bibliography, and an index of the hundreds of authors he published. As a small publisher's self-retrospective, *Opus 300* should stand as an instructive model.