

Dick Higgins, 1938 - 1998

Dick Higgins was a great human being. He was great in talent and achievements; great in the rigor and depth of his experimental art; great in the influence he exerted on the world. Born in 1938 in Jesus Pieces, England, Dick Higgins died in 1998 at the age of 60. In the last four decades of those sixty years, he became a major figure in twentieth century culture.

History will eventually shape a clear critical, conceptual and artistic picture of Dick Higgins. A human history will accompany it, but Dick's human qualities will inevitably be abstracted from the ambiguous and intricate weave of human nature. The man whom history will honor cannot incarnate the feeling and tone of the man whose death affects so many, the human qualities of character and mind that gave substance to the public figure.

The public person is the Dick Higgins whose biography is better known with every passing year. This is an historical Dick Higgins, one of the inventors of happenings, a co-founder of Fluxus, the founder of Something Else Press, the critical theorist who named and clarified the concept of intermedia. Behind these was a deeper and even more complex figure than even these facts suggest. He was cut of the same cloth as the great humanists who gave voice to the intellectual and spiritual upheaval bridging medieval times and the early modern era.

More than once in recent years, I have heard thoughtful scholars rank Dick Higgins's role as an influential presence in the arts of the century with that of Marcel Duchamp and John Cage. The comparisons are appropriate and informative, in similarity as well as difference. As Duchamp did, Higgins abstracted and then concretized the profound artistic and intellectual ferment of an era. He was a bold experimental artist. He was also a quiet, tireless contributor to the world of ideas. Through the exhibitions, projects and publications he helped to shape, he became a pivotal figure in the network of idea-based artists whom he attracted and with whom he interacted. For many, Higgins personified and exemplified these issues from the 1960s through the last days of the century.

Higgins's art explored and - in European terms - problematized the issues that attracted his attention. His works functioned as the specific demonstration of larger theories, and his theories shaped the crucial framework within which much of the artistic thinking of our era emerged. While the art world is driven by intellectual fashion, it is historically and intellectually illiterate. Many of the artists and composers whom Dick Higgins influenced have little or no knowledge of Higgins as a source of their ideas and work. This gap

in the knowledge of a media-driven art world will be remedied when Higgins's work is given proper historical study.

Higgins's program was astonishing in scope and scale, encyclopedic in perspective. His work ranged across painting, performance, and poetry; happenings, intermedia, and film; typography, book art, and publishing. Beyond this, he shaped a theory of the arts for our times, and he explained his theory in an extraordinary series of books and essays. His explanations opened a world of artistic territory for those around him. At different times, Higgins described these worlds under the various rubrics of experimental art and the arts of the new mentality. The most expressive term, and the one that Higgins most durably gave to the English language, was the word "intermedia."

Higgins coined the term "intermedia" in the mid-sixties to describe the tendency of the most interesting and best in the new art to cross the boundaries of recognized media or even to fuse the boundaries of art with media that had not previously been considered art forms. With characteristic modesty, he often noted that Samuel Taylor Coleridge had first used the term.

Higgins was too modest. Coleridge used the term "intermedium" once (and apparently once only) in referring to a specific issue in the work of Edmund Spenser. Those who have read Coleridge's Lecture Three: 'On Spenser' see a distant kinship to Higgins's construction of the term, but note that Coleridge's use was different and distinct in meaning and form. Coleridge referred to a specific point lodged between two kinds of meaning in the use of an art medium. Coleridge's "intermedium" was a singular term, used almost as an adjectival noun. Higgins's "intermedia" referred to a tendency in the arts that became both a range of art forms and a way of approaching the arts. Higgins said on more than one occasion that he may have read the Coleridge essay at some point in his years as a student at Yale or Columbia, and thus subconsciously taken it in. This may be so, but Dick Higgins coined a new word in the current form and contemporary meaning of the term "intermedia." He went on to elaborate the issues and ideas involved in this term in a program of artistic research and writing that spanned over three decades.

Higgins was an artist as well as a theorist. He approached experimental art in a genuinely experimental spirit. In essence, he constructed an extensive research program of ideas and issues ripe for exploration. He then posited the cases and examples that would explore them. These cases and examples

formed the body of his work. One must compare Higgins's studio program to a scientific research program to comprehend his radical and experimental nature. Even though he was interested in the operation of chance, he did not rely on chance effects. Quite the contrary, one of his famous one-sentence manifestos read, "If you haven't done it twice, you haven't done it." Higgins placed great emphasis on learning and mastering the specific artistic skills needed to undertake his experiments. In some cases, he only put these skills to use once or twice, but he felt the mastery of skills essential if art works were to fulfill the experimental goals for which he shaped them.

He was equally rigorous in documenting his results. He accepted and critically analyzed the problematic results of his experiments as well as the successes. Rather than bury his failures, as most artists do, he published or exhibited them when he felt it appropriate to a larger program of ideas. More important, he challenged the scope of an art world that insisted on artists who confined themselves to the limits of a single discipline or medium. While intellectuals and critics with no stake in the art market admired Higgins's extraordinary experimental spirit and his rigorous integrity, these virtues hardly suited him to an art world interested in the repetitious production of recognizable and salable physical artifacts. Like soap or automobiles, art works are most marketed under brand names and salable works are expected to embody brand values. It is an irony of the art world that many of the critics and curators who view themselves as opponents of market mechanisms and corporate branding expect art to be packaged in readily identifiable formats and brand-value packages. This is understandable given the management of art work by a complex of forces as powerful in the art world as the military-industrial complex is in the larger world. Even so, it is sad that those who represent scholarship and critical distance accede to and reinforce this aspect of the system. Critics and curators should -- more than most -- have been excited by Higgins's work and the range of meanings he helped to shape. (Endnote 55 on page 227 of Higgins's last book, *Modernism Since Postmodernism*, offers one of the reasons why Fluxus artists are systematically excluded from the art market at the very moment they have become increasingly famous. One imagines that independent thinking by critics and curators who understand the intellectual foundations of experimental art might have made a difference. But then, it poses the corollary question: do many of today's critics and curators understand the intellectual foundations of experimental art?)

Higgins was concerned with far more than his own work, however. He was engaged in the work and ideas of the colleagues he respected, an important reason for his work as a publisher and public thinker. This role, in fact, was a key reason for Higgins's great influence, and he helped to shape an international community of

learning through two major forums for intellectual dialogue and artistic interaction. These were Fluxus and Something Else Press. Higgins played an important personal role in shaping the laboratory of ideas that swirled around Fluxus and Something Else Press. These became a meeting-point and breeding ground for some of the best and most innovative experimental art of our era, in music and performance, in visual art and intermedia.

Thus it is that comparing Higgins with Cage and Duchamp has become common for a knowledgeable few, and so it is that Higgins holds his own in this comparison. But if he holds his own, it is because there are important differences between his career and theirs. As an artist, far fewer of Higgins's works are known than Duchamp's. His work as an artist was incomplete, and it will remain incomplete. He will never complete the program of works he planned to undertake. As a result, his final stature as an artist will never be known. There are as yet no works in Higgins's body of work that rank with Duchamp's acknowledged masterpieces. This is partly so because Higgins was not given to the memorable single gesture. This is also the case because times have changed, and times have changed in great part because of Duchamp's influence and Cage's, not to mention the influence that Higgins himself exerted. Of course, Higgins's standing as an artist is subject to reconsideration. I still recall the time a friend of mine was offered a Duchamp for \$300. Duchamp's reputation wasn't always what it is now. But then, Joseph Beuys was just an eccentric art teacher in those days and you could still buy a copy of George Brecht's *Water Yam* for \$5.00.

If it is not yet possible to evaluate Higgins's work as a visual artist, few dispute the power of his ideas. In intellectual rigor and depth, he was one of the few artists since Duchamp who had the capacity to plan and complete a comprehensive program of idea-based art. And unlike Duchamp, whose program is expressed in enigmatic notes and elliptical comments, Higgins was a skilled theorist who presented his ideas and concerns in an expansive, thorough body of sophisticated, articulate publications.

Unlike Cage, Higgins was not old enough to have been forgotten and rediscovered. (Cage, like Higgins, lived in genteel poverty until he was quite old.) Despite the differences that might eventually have been rectified by time and a longer life, however, those who had a deep knowledge of the two legendary figures with whom he forms a triumvirate hold Higgins in high esteem. The reason rests on qualities that make Dick Higgins unique among the artists of the twentieth century.

To understand these qualities, one must look back in history, neither to the composers of the Romantic era nor to the artists of the Renaissance, but to the humanists who transformed the Middle Ages into the

modern world. To find Dick Higgins's proper comparison, one must look to Erasmus of Rotterdam.

Like Erasmus, Higgins's work attracted many of the best minds of his era. His thinking and his work ranged wide and deep over several fields. He exchanged letters and correspondence with a wide circle of colleagues. And, in notable similarity to Erasmus, Higgins harnessed the power of the printing press in the service of his theories. Time and context gave Higgins's works different meaning. He certainly never achieved the popular success of Erasmus, whose works alone comprised nearly one third of all books sold by one Oxford bookseller in 1520 and whose *Encomium Moriae* was still in wide use a century later when Milton was at Cambridge. But like the great Erasmus, he viewed life and learning in the broadest perspective. Higgins read widely, aided by a near-photographic memory, and he could have said, as Erasmus did, "My home is where I have my library." Even more significant, principles held prime place in Higgins's life, and principles informed his art, his intellectual activities, and the way he conducted his life. Simply put, he was the kind of human being whose greatness rests on the natural dignity of moral grandeur, a dignity that combined with talent to make him admirable in the deepest sense of the word.

Like Erasmus, Higgins was committed to a knowledge that bridged past and present moments, classical and modern concerns, prehistoric and postmodern phenomena. His books outline the broad range of his interests. Among them, we find the first major historical study of pattern poetry. So, too, there are essays and monographs on a sixteenth-century Italian philosopher, a seventeenth-century English theologian-poet, a pair of eighteenth-century German historian-critics, and several major modern composers and poets. And, more recently, there is a massive study on an influential twentieth-century book designer. As publisher of Something Else Press, Higgins was also responsible for a major revival of interest in the work of Gertrude Stein with the publication of a wide range of her books, including the first complete edition of her enormous masterpiece, *The Making of Americans*. There is more, and the next few years will certainly see a decent collection of his writings, eventually to be followed by a complete collection of annotated works, a major retrospective exhibition with a full and proper catalogue and finally the intellectual and artistic biography he deserves.

As important and useful as these will be, no catalogue of facts will contain Dick Higgins. The rhythm of a text, a word, a silent note, a sign can be reflectively imagined, though, and each imagining of the man will be a new horizon. As the horizon of ideas and expectations meet the man, his work, and his words will take on new meaning.

It is November now. Here in the Swedish countryside, the gray weather and turning leaves are interrupted by an occasional moment of piercing sunshine. The last time I saw Dick, we went walking here, down the same road where I went walking today. It was spring then, going on summer. As on so many days before, we talked about a hundred things. It was one of those rambling conversations that cross years of multiple connections. The topics were in some ways the same as the last time we met and talked. There was a little change, though, and the changes in each conversation charted the change people make through life and time. We strolled around the village church, an austere and beautiful structure that is now eight centuries old. Then we went to the forest, the Priest's Woods, a tract of land that belongs to the Diocese of Lund. The forest was given to Lund Cathedral over a thousand years ago, when King Knut the Holy of Denmark established the cathedral here under the guidance of Absalon, the founding bishop of Copenhagen. Dick liked walking in these history-rich woods, and he loved the flow of history.

That afternoon, we spoke of many things. As always, we fished in the river of history. But personal issues were more important. Foremost was his health. Dick had been in a bad automobile accident only a year before, together with Alison Knowles and Jessica Higgins. He was recovering, but he wasn't yet feeling great. This was the first long walk he'd taken in a long time. He was worried about finances.

But we also spoke about happy matters and interesting things: Fluxus, old times at Something Else Press, Dick's next show, my latest project, Hannah Higgins's book, Dick's new book, my new book, getting married (me), being married again (Dick), Dick's day with Bengt af Klintberg the week before. For me, it was a day like many days since I first met Dick in 1966. We'd see each other after a separation of a few months or a few years. In between, we'd correspond or talk on the phone. The distance in time and space always seemed about the same. We'd catch up and go on.

Dick wrote me just a few days before he died. He was at work on a new book titled **The Theory of the Book**. I was looking forward to the manuscript. When we first knew each other, we sent manuscripts back and forth as typewritten or xeroxed documents. When times changed, we often sent beautifully printed desktop documents or computer diskettes. These days, it was e-mail and attached files. But through all the years, our discourse was the same.

Dick was a model for me, a model of everything one may aspire to be as an intellectual, as a man of dignity. This is not to say I agreed with Dick on everything or needed to. That's not the role of a model. When two minds meet in difference, they learn and grow as much or more than when they meet in similarity. That's one of the things I loved best about Dick. He cherished the

life of the mind. We could debate freely. And we could trade ideas, sources, and suggestions for reading and thoughts for our next debate. Dick played this role in other lives, too, because he cherished the life of the mind and the life of ideas. That is why he seems to me well so compared with Erasmus.

As an intellectual presence, Dick Higgins is still alive for me, towering, and grand, an embodiment of ideas and issues, a mind engaged in the virtue and value of ideas without consideration of personal advantage. Some days, I find myself thinking he is still here, and in the life of the mind, he is.

But there is another Dick Higgins, and I will not see him again, at last not in this place. That is the Dick Higgins who headed his letters and e-mail messages with a little reminder of what happened on the day in history. That is the Dick Higgins who knew the years of effort and negotiation to realize an exhibition or a book, the Dick Higgins who would send a cordial note of congratulations when someone else was stirring up a maelstrom of discontent over a trifling error that would have been correct if the aggrieved artist had answered a query two years earlier. That was the Dick Higgins whose sensitive and subtle analysis of George Maciunas's typography was grounded as much in his friendship for George as in his sense of type.

That was the Dick Higgins who was known and loved around the world. But if he had friends around the world, so too, he was a public figure in many countries. Thus it was that his death occasioned obituaries and notices in many places. One appeared in the New York Times. A far more perceptive essay appeared in *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, the newspaper of the Skåne region around the cities of Malmö and Lund, where Dick had recently been visiting professor.

"For me," wrote curator and art critic Jean Sellem, "Dick Higgins was a direct contact with modernism, a brilliant, many-sided and productive poly-artist with a subtle and poetic imagination. He was a visionary, a humble man with high thoughts on the deepest issues in life."

So he was to many of us. He was a friend, a colleague, and an exemplar. He was an explorer of new worlds, a pilgrim.

One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirlleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.

- Ecclesiastes 1:4-7

Thank you, Dick, for everything.

Ken Friedman
Sweden

When death comes unexpectedly, it naturally leaves survivors stunned. More so when it comes to a figure so much a part of what we call the avant-garde as Dick Higgins. It seemed he'd be around forever -- whether in one way or another organizing events of all sorts, or giving sage council to his friends, or periodically starting a new publishing venture, or affably supporting younger artists, or as a reference that keeps recurring in source after source, or, among friends, talking of his depressions and financial problems, or, as the Grand Duke of Fluxus, holding a regal court and demonstrating what courtesy can really mean.

From the day after his death, people began expressing disbelief, asking me questions, and telling me stories. Some of the stories seemed to emanate from a secret hanger on Roswell airfield. No, he didn't die while haranguing an audience in Mexico City (that one conflated the performance in Quebec City with the *Poste Arte Biennial*, which didn't begin until 3 weeks later, and changes a *Danger Music* piece performed in Quebec into a brawl). No, the autopsy doesn't mean anyone suspects assassination, it's just required by Canadian law. Perhaps if the rumors had come out a bit more elegantly they might have functioned as something like a Fluxus event in itself. The *Danger Music* piece (a problematic work to start with) has taken on curious and unexpected dimensions under these circumstances.

In this tense atmosphere, I began telling comic Higgins stories. In one instance, Dick made supper for my girlfriend and me, including baked beans with ginger root. Dick could, remarkably, cook these beans as a gourmet dish, and I like to think that Alison played a role in the evolution of the recipe. After dinner, we went into the living room, where Susan and I sat on the sofa and Dick sat on an open chair between us and a very large fan. Now this was definitely not a good seating arrangement after Dick had eaten perhaps a pound of beans. Telling this story seemed to break the tension for some people in the weeks immediately after his death.

Integral to all my memories of Dick are the projects we engaged in, whether they be completed or not. Of those completed, *Six Fillious* seems most important and, at present, most eerie. We began the second tier of this project during one of those performance art festivals that we took for granted in the 70s, and projecting the

book was a sort of a party in itself. In 1988, one contributor, bpNichol, died. In a little over a year now, Robert Filliou, Dieter Rot, and Dick followed him, and I haven't been able to get in touch with George Brecht.

We also planned projects that didn't get realized, such as a collection of essays on Walter Savage Landor, a 19th century poet we both admired, though he had virtually nothing to do with what was going on in 1980. The thing we wanted to do was edit it as an immaculate, full-dress scholarly tome, but done by the most unlikely people we could bring together and get enough of a sense of the humor and the subversion of such a book.

The interaction between events that get performed and those that simply function by remaining possibilities lies at the heart of Fluxus. Perhaps this will continue as part of his legacy.

On a personal level, Dick's absence means there are a lot of things I won't get to show him or to finish. One of the odd things for me comes from the fact that Dick and I argued a lot. It seems strange that the argument's over, after 25 years, and shouldn't be -- not that either of us should "win" (whatever that might mean) -- just that the debates themselves usually mattered more than any possible conclusion. In some respects this seems a vestige of a much warmer and more generous time, when there was enough of a superabundance of good will, lack of dogma etc. to leave room for friendly arguments that went on for years. This didn't hold anything else up: we could continue to get each other gigs of various sorts, provide references and introductions, etc., while engaged in running debate.

That interaction between what can be performed and what remains ever potential works in all sorts of ways, and the complexity of that debate should also be seen as part of the legacy. Dick's legacy will remain important to the extent to which people actively debate Dick's work and ideas.

Karl Young, Light & Dust Books

My last sight of Dick Higgins was in August during the annual Artist's Soap Box Derby in Kingston NY. Marilyn Stablein had organized a pre Derby parade. She made the participant's costumes with men's ties. Dick appeared as the King of Ties. He had a wonderful crown with ties hanging from it and a coat made of ties. The parade passed in front of Deep Listening Space (Pauline Oliveros Foundation, Inc.) and we had wonderful eye contact and shared the good humor of the occasion. I am glad to remember Dick as the King of Ties - he certainly was just that and much much more. What a privilege to count him as a friend and wonderful colleague.

His funeral was on Sunday November 1 in Barrytown at the Episcopal Church. I was in Cologne, Germany where I dedicated the premiere of a new piece for string orchestra to the memory of Dick Higgins. The piece is called *Out of the Dark*. I pray that Dick is merged with the light.

Pauline Oliveros, California

The death of Dick Higgins is a great loss to us all -- he was truly an exceptional person. Few like him have come our way. He will truly be missed

Saul Ostrow

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words extracted from "foew&ombwhhw" by dick higgins

I still can hardly believe that I am writing these words about the artist and dear friend who just has passed away. As if he had walked away forever in the middle of a conversation; we were discussing a second edition of his Intermedia in Polish...

I met Dick Higgins through Alison Knowles, some 20 years ago when she was performing in Poland and I was her assistant during a performance festival. And since that spring '78 we have exchanged hundreds of letters, packages of books, visits, information... For me, Dick was one of the most generous people I have ever met; besides being a friend he was also a teacher, to whom I am indebted for many a thought or article I have written. His work was well known and appreciated in Poland; a number of his texts have been published in Polish, he had his retrospective show at the Warsaw Center for Contemporary Art., participated in many events...

Fluxus has had a wide and enthusiastic reception in Poland throughout the past three decades, but with Dick it was a special case, I think, because of his wide intellectual horizons and an understanding of history (without which Poles can't live). He lectured in the Lublin Catholic University on Giordano Bruno, knew a great deal about the Polish Baroque (some of Polish

verses from that period found way into his work); his specific *Dialectic of Centuries* was a delight for art people as well as for the academia here.

Dick Higgins, artist, poet, scholar, composer, publisher and a gold-mine of stories. He was defining not only new horizons of the contemporary work of art, but also historical horizons of cultural tradition—a tradition shared by all of us.

Piotr Rypson
Warsaw

Shocked and deeply saddened to hear of the sudden death of Dick Higgins, especially as I was looking forward to meeting him again (after several years) at the Rethinking the Avant Garde conference this coming weekend in Leicester, England. Dick was to be one of the respondents to a lecture by John (Hoppy) Hopkins about Entheogens and the Pursuit of Happiness, which I'm supposed to be chairing. His contribution would no doubt have been exhilarating and will be sorely missed. Dick was also one who always wanted the Avant Garde to be not only re-thought but also re-vitalised.

As FLUXlist readers will be well aware, Dick was always generous with sharing knowledge and information. He first helped me back in the early 70s when I was researching the uses of chance in the arts, and I was delighted to discover his presence on email discussions since a couple of years ago. My sincere condolences, of course, go to Alison and his twin daughters. I hope there will be many ways in which Dick will be remembered.

Michael Gibbs, Amsterdam

It was my pleasure and immense good fortune to spend three days in Dick Higgins company while attending a conference at the University of Alberta in 1997. I cherish this memory as Dick was most engaging and very generous in his encouragement of my work. It was particularly inspiring to see an artist of Dick's stature filled with enthusiasm for the work of younger artists, probing their ideas, and then offering them gentle, but thoughtful critiques. Conversely, Dick welcomed any discourse that prodded his extraordinary erudition and life experiences. Our conversations included the following topics, H. Cowell, J. Cage, M. Duchamp, M. Snow, visual poetry, Fluxus, artists books, film, performance strategies, magazines, technology, painting, Zen, form and process, chance operations... on my return to Toronto, I selfishly conspired to arrange a guest lecture spot for Dick at York University's Fine Arts Department. Unfortunately, budget restrictions at the University foiled my well laid plans for more than a year. Yes, I felt there was so much more to discuss and learn from this man... alas, it was not meant to be... sad, very sad!

W. Mark Sutherland
Toronto, Ontario

Like my colleagues throughout the world of arts and ideas, I am still in the process of digesting the news of Dick Higgins' demise, and have barely begun to assess the extent of the loss. For Dick's passing—especially in its suddenness—is felt much like the recent hurricane that destroyed two countries. Given how much Dick had left to do, and how much we do continue to depend on what he has done, his loss has a devastating impact on our discourse.

Our world has been diminished of late by the deaths of many, many important and cherished individuals. The ranks of Fluxus and fluxism alone have been deprived of some of their most significant figures—most prematurely, at least according to current measures of mortality. But no matter how much we mourn them and miss them, no matter how much we regret the stilling of their voices, their passing does not empty our immediate future the way Dick's does. To various extents, their major work had been done, their signal contributions made. Dick Higgins' primary contributions—the Something Else Press, for instance, or the development of intermedia theory—may already have entered cultural history; but his fecund mind and expansive outlook made imperative the generation of ever more varied artworks and commentaries, including more than a few that have yet to, but will, enter cultural history, and more still that now cannot.

Without constantly reinventing himself, Dick was constantly rethinking and readdressing his various realms of inquiry. And each time he reconsidered a subject—new technology, for example, or artists' books, or sexuality, or Fluxus—he approached it from a new vantage, bringing new information and new methodologies into the discourse surrounding the subject. There was a consistency to his thinking, and quite often the new angle of inquiry served ultimately to formalize and substantiate a previous one. (I think in particular of his discovery and adoption of hermeneutics, the research he conducted into pattern poetry, and other philosophical constructs and historical phenomena that he embraced enthusiastically, like long-lost relatives.) But there never was a predictability to his purview.

At the time of his death, Dick was working on any number of projects. At the time of his death, I was working on any number of projects as well. I had been hoping to share at least some of these projects with him, and to exploit his range of insight and experience to further my work. I had been hoping also to see what else he would be coming up with himself, where it would be leading him, and where it would be leading us in turn. (And, of course, if anything I knew or deduced could have been of assistance to Dick, it would have