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Living and Rebellious Bodies: Publications as Seen by Artists in the 1960s and 1970s

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REFERENCES

Better Books/Better Bookz: Art, Anarchy, Apostasy, Counter-culture & the New Avant-garde, Londres : Koenig Books ; Karlsruhe : ZKM Centre for Art and Media ; Trondheim : Kunstmuseum , 2018. Sous la dir. de Rozemin Keshvani, Axel Heil, Peter Weibel
Intermedia, Fluxus and the Something Else Press: Selected Writings by Dick Higgins, New York : Siglio, 2018. Sous la dir. de Steve Clay, Ken Friedman
Josephine Berry, *Art and (Bare) Life: A Biopolitical Inquiry*, Berlin : Sternberg Press, 2018
Lucy Mulroney, *Andy Warhol, Publisher*, Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2018

- 1 When you study the work of one and the same artist, it is not always easy to differentiate and organize publications resulting from an involvement in an experimental and revolutionary art with a wider trajectory, where the figure of the artist helps to sell (books), or else becomes secondary, making room for the career of an intellectual figure. This issue gradually appears when one reads two books, one devoted to Andy Warhol's publications, and the other to those of Dick Higgins. Without being exhaustive, these works respond to the aim of revealing several complementary facets of the artists, who are at the same time writers and publishers, among other activities. Their approaches to publishing developed throughout their lives, from the late 1950s and early 1960s to the 1980s, for Warhol, and up until the 1990s for Higgins. Concerning *Andy Warhol, Publisher*, Lucy Mulroney analyzes several publications in the form of case studies. Steve Clay and Ken Friedman, for their part, have put together a broad selection of Dick Higgins's writings, published in disparate printed contexts,

including unpublished texts and memos which further contextualize his activity as a publisher.

- 2 Both artists took full advantage of the practices associated with publishing to involve many artistic partners, by associating them, in Andy Warhol's case, with the writing of books permeated by a polyphonic voice, or by publishing their writings and some of their sources, the way Dick Higgins endeavoured to do—although this latter did not enjoy the same recognition as Warhol. The introduction to the compilation of Higgins's writings offers Ken Friedman a chance to try and promote artists with elusive and esoteric profiles, like Higgins's, to the rank of figures like John Cage and Marcel Duchamp. As Ken Friedman points out, this status is explained more by the dissemination of his ideas than by specific visual works, something which that artist seems to have been aware of, as we can read, in particular, in his postscript to *Postface*: "An artist must not only create his work but also, if that work presents any difficulties, create a conceptual environment or paradigm in which its difficulties can be surmounted. Maciunas, the organizer of Fluxus, seemed to take a very emblematic view of our history: naturally my work, which belongs to many worlds at once, confused him. I felt it might, similarly, confuse other people."¹ George Maciunas incidentally appeared in his eyes more as the organizer of the Fluxus collective; and Dick Higgins had the self-appointed task of tirelessly expanding the often ancient sources of intermediality. His work as a researcher, and especially his research undertaken into visual poetry, as part of a higher degree in the English department at Columbia University between 1975 and 1979, further enriched the wealth of his contribution. It is at least necessary to overlap the fields of concrete poetry, Fluxus and his publishing house, Something Else Press, to understand Dick Higgins's position in several networks that are connected but cannot be overlaid on each other, which clearly shows the perimeter of the anthology. We can also wonder, more broadly, about the absence, hitherto, of any real analysis of Dick Higgins's oeuvre, something which such an anthology of his texts invites.
- 3 The place where we discover and purchase artists' productions (including their magazines and books) is also an essential issue, broached in the introduction to *Andy Warhol, Publisher*. In it, the artist's publications are compared with the positions of Lucy R. Lippard, founder of the Printed Matter bookshop with Sol LeWitt in 1976. Lippard put forward the idea that the distribution of artist's books in "supermarkets, drugstores and airports"² was an indicator of the success of artist's books, although she subsequently changed her position, fearing, in fact, that such books might be reduced to the rank of a commercial art, with which Warhol, for his part, juggled so well. Based on a complementary viewpoint, Higgins defined the books he published with Something Else Press as having to be "something else" in relation to the most classical forms of publishing, while at the same being available to the public in a grocery shop alongside the vegetable stand.³ But while this obvious fact may seem to have been forgotten, to what degree is the bookshop not one of the most appropriate hybrid spaces for this, without having to spatially distance the art book from the more commercial book, and thus provocatively offer alternative experiences in a cultural space and sales outlet, encompassing diverse values? Or even to question its nature and use? This hybridness can first of all be enacted at the level of the place's spatial configuration, its "sub-spaces", with each one supporting a field, and even a symbolism. Making the bookshop a fully-fledged object of art history, like the highly

avant-garde and counter-cultural London-based Better Books, which opened in 1946, and was then renamed Better Bookz in 1964, until it finally closed for good in 1967, helps us to make progress with regard to these matters. This also reveals numerous and still little known “middlemen” who created the link between artistic domains and cultural venues on both sides of the Atlantic. In particular, these “middlemen” brought in the Fluxus artists from the American scene, and the Beat Generation. In this respect, we should mention the part played by the owner of better Books, Tony Godwin, who was also in charge of the paperback section at Penguin Books, as well as the role of the artists and poets he employed, among them Jeff Nuttall, Dick McBride, Bill Butler, Bob Cobbing and Barry Miles. The catalogue for the exhibition held at the ZKM/Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, *Better Books/Better Bookz: Art, Anarchy, Apostasy, Counter-culture & the New Avant-garde*, offers plenty of space for hitherto unpublished archives and documents, while unfurling the thread of a tale told by Rozemin Keshvani. This tale is dizzy-making because of the number of goings-on, collaborations, publications and personalities listed, in a very compact layout. The angle is first of all a narrative one, and not very critical, except for a vague Bachelard-like analysis of space, and the emphasis applied to the work of the artist and poet Jeff Nuttall. The tensions within that multi-generational community only come to the fore in one or two of the reports to which the catalogue gives pride of place.

- 4 A number of collectives found a mooring in that bookshop (Groupe H, Sigma, The Writers Forum, London Film-Makers, etc.). Poetry played a central role in it: “It is through the transmigration of poetry into art that we begin to comprehend the community that flourished at Better Books.”⁴ It is worth noting that the editorial line of Something Else Press also showcased concrete poetry as a field marked by intermediality. Highlighted by the recent publications about Dick Higgins and the London bookshop—which, incidentally, distributed the books published by Something Else Press—, this field offers an extremely interesting area of research.
- 5 More broadly, for Better Books and Something Else Press, but also for Andy Warhol and his interest in books, this was the symptom of an approach to language as a living body, starting from a criticism of its debasement by a normative knowledge, conveyed best of all by books. Whence the need to make it once again an agitator. Shifting from one state to another can’t happen in a state of calm, and calls for an almost initiatory and physical experience, with one not going without the other. Starting out from a place dedicated to the dissemination of books and knowledge, the terrain of their collective de-manufacture is duly constructed.
- 6 One of the most striking experiences underscored in *Better Books/Better Bookz: Art, Anarchy, Apostasy, Counter-culture & the New Avant-garde* was the The sTigma environment, opened in 1965, which filled a large part of the bookshop’s basement, regularly used for happenings and environments, being, as it was, the most radical space in terms of how it was used. Orchestrated by Jeff Nuttall, with the help of many artists, what this involved was rousing the public from its lengthy slumber, anaesthetized in its very senses by a society of the spectacle. Through its silence, the public became an accomplice to the atrocities committed in the age of the atomic bomb and the Vietnam war. As a claustrophobic and multi-sensorial space, often deliberately abject in its artefacts, in The sTigma there is no turning back. It was notably the British artist John Latham’s⁵ *Non-Return Valve* (1965) which played a key role in that arrangement: copies of the magazine *Economics* formed the two leaves of a narrow and

not very moveable door, into which you literally had to plunge headfirst, and which it was possible to pass through in the direction of the circuit drawn out, but not in the other direction to exit. There is a very thin line between a conditioning which it is hard to escape from, and the obligation to face the result of this kind of drowsiness, through a book-like physicality, at once disquieting and liberating. This can explode in forms that are sexual this time around, on the borderline of pornography, in this underground space of the bookshop, where release acts as a base for a space distributing knowledge. This was attested to by several performances by the People Show collective based on Jeff Nuttall's intentionally obscene and sadistic scenarios, with, for example, a female performer cruelly manhandled by two other members of the collective (an untitled performance⁶). This desire to retake possession of the control of bodies confiscated by an omnipotent bio-power is clearly at work here, as analyzed by Josephine Berry in *Art and (Bare) Life: A Biopolitical Inquiry*, about other performances. By extension, knowledge is a vehicle of this confinement, in particular a confinement of gender, body and sexuality. Josephine Berry clearly emphasizes the awareness of such a relation by the Fluxus movement and by Jeff Nuttall. In the chapter about the 1960s in her diachronic book, the issue of language does not have a central place, for she is interested first and foremost in practices in which the body is visible, while a game of identitarian hide-and-seek is the actual object of many Andy Warhol publications. Nevertheless, the theoretical apparatus, propping up the field of aesthetics, developed in *Art and (Bare) Life* can here be applied to the field of writing by the light shed on research involving "non-identity" and "being as otherness".⁷ Lucy Mulroney has understood this well, and with great subtlety, by linking Warhol's films, which Josephine Berry also examines, to his books like *25 Cats Name Sam and One Blue Pussy* (1954) and *A, A Novel* (1968), in which Warhol makes the most of things to "denaturalize categories such as *author*, *writer* and *edition*".⁸ It is extremely interesting to realize, in Andy Warhol's publishing work, how this denaturalization proceeds as much by way of a collective practice of writing as by way of the confusion of identities of figures associated with his writing, who, at the same time, represent the subject of the books. The very stuff of writing, as much as the consistency of its constituent authorities, is worked by the figure of disguise. The opaqueness of the artist-cum-writer and publisher is thus revealed.

NOTES

1. Higgins, Dick. "Postscript to *Postface*. Fifteen years Later" (1982), *Intermedia, Fluxus and the Something Else Press: Selected Writings by Dick Higgins*, New York : Siglio, 2018, p. 85
2. Mulroney, Lucy. "Introduction", *Andy Warhol, Publisher*, Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2018, p. 3-4
3. Higgins, Dick. "Two Sides of a Coin. Fluxus and the Something Else Press" (1992), *Op. cit.*, p. 147
4. Keshvani, Rozemin. "From Beat to Concrete - Better Books, Art, Counter-culture London and the New Avant-garde », *Better Books/Better Bookz: Art, Anarchy, Apostasy, Counter-culture & the New*

Avant-garde, London : Koenig Books ; Karlsruhe : ZKM Centre for Art and Media ; Trondheim : Kunstmuseum , 2018, p. 96

5. *Ibid.*, p. 74

6. *Ibid.*, p. 66

7. Berry, Josephine. "Sex, no Eros", *Art and (Bare) Life: A Biopolitical Inquiry*, Berlin : Sternberg Press, 2018, p. 224

8. Mulroney, Lucy. "One Blue Pussy", in *Op. cit.*, p. 25

AUTHORS

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Constance Moréteau is an art historian specializing in reading experiences in contemporary art, and currently in charge of research projects at the Fondation universitaire A*Midex - Initiative d'Excellence d'Aix-Marseille. With Neil McWilliam and Johanne Lamoureux, she has published *Histoires sociales de l'art : une anthologie critique* (Les Presses du réel, 2016) and recently contributed to the catalogue for the exhibition *America's Cool Modernism: O'Keeffe to Hopper* (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 2018). Her latest article which appeared in 2018 in *Itinéraires* is titled "Mots, textes et images: tours de passe-passe dans les artist web projects d'Allen Ruppersberg et Iñaki Bonillas" (*Itinéraires. Littérature, Textes, Cultures: "Littératures expérimentales"*, 2017-3).