

After briefly outlining the process by which the Fluxus community coalesced, the author proceeds to recount the birthing of Something Else Press, Inc., and the transformation of aspects of the Press' objectives into Printed Editions. In the process, the essay discusses many of the parallel concerns shared by both Something Else Press and Fluxus publication activities as well as their divergent agendas and strategies.

Two Sides of a Coin

Fluxus and the Something Else Press

Dick Higgins

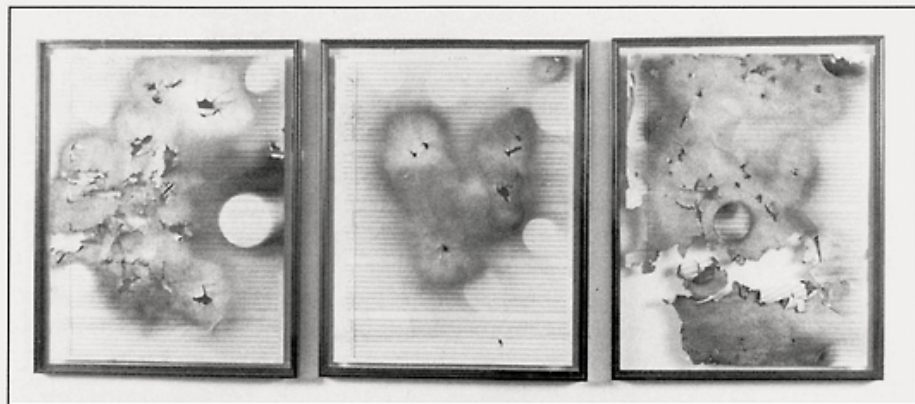
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When happenings and events began to be performed in New York and elsewhere in the late 1950s, there was some consensus that the works which visual artists performed in spaces of their own devising (usually constructed in or sponsored by art galleries) constituted "Happenings." There was, however, no name for works which were made by people who were not primarily visual artists. These were spoken of simply as "events," a convenient term used by myself and my fellow students in John Cage's class in "Experimental Composition," at the New School for Social Research.¹ At first the individuals who were doing them had no agreed-upon name for what they were doing, but performances of this kind of work at Yoko Ono's loft on Chambers Street in New York (1960–61) and at George Maciunas' AG Gallery on Madison Avenue (1961), made it obvious that a name was needed. Maciunas gave up his art gallery in 1961 and undertook the design and production of La Monte Young and Jackson Mac Low's *An Anthology*.² When his work was done, Maciunas found that he still had a large amount of intriguing material which he wanted to publish, so he proposed a magazine and publication series, to be called "Fluxus." Maciunas went to Europe at the beginning of 1962 and organized a series of performances to promote Fluxus, called "Festum Fluxorum" ("Feast of Fluxuses"), the first of which was to take place at an art museum in Wiesbaden, Germany. Alison Knowles, Emmett Williams and I were among the participants in those "Fluxus Concerts," which would later be described as "Fluxconcerts." These concerts caused a great scandal and the press began to call the work "Fluxus" and the participants *die Fluxus Leute*, (the Fluxus people). After performances we stayed at Maciunas' house outside Wiesbaden in Ehlhalten am Taunus, staying up most of the night trying to figure out the implications of what we were doing, discussing Turkish music and Heideggerian hermeneutics,³ which I saw as an appropriate theoretical underpinning to our work. Along the way we planned the tactics of our next steps, mapped out new pieces and dined on such delicacies as pink or green mashed potatoes and imbibed Unterberg, a bitter liqueur. If we were "the Fluxus people," what was this Fluxus we had unleashed, and what was it for? It was already several years too late to write a proper manifesto setting out our program, as most movements have done. Maciunas later drafted one, but only a few people signed; we were too far along in our work and too diverse for that.⁴

At Ehlhalten we had lots of time to talk about the history of what we were doing. Maciunas was well aware of Hellenistic Greek visual poetry that paralleled our colleagues' concrete poetry, though he mistakenly ascribed it to the Byzantines.⁵ I told Maciunas about Quirinus Kühlmann (1644–1688), a German visionary poet who made visual poems called "Kühlpsalms" which were printed in his *Kühlpsalter* and recited on "Kühl days." Eventually Kühlmann was burnt as a heretic by the Tsar of Russia in Moscow, where he had gone to see if the Tsar would like to found a new church with him. Maciunas was delighted by the story. From Kühlmann we picked up the habit of using terms like "Fluxconcerts,

Fluxartists, Fluxreasons," and "Fluxanythings." These terms were useful to us since we were not happy with the connotations of "art," its liminality and overtly elitist associations. We preferred to think that the art-life dichotomy lay at the basis of Fluxus, that "Fluxart" was somehow closer to life than other art forms.

Before Maciunas returned to America in 1963 to present Fluxus formally in the USA, he had asked me to prepare the manuscript of what became *Jefferson's Birthday* (a cross section of my work from 1962 to 1963) for publication. Since I had been trained as a printer, was working at Zaccar Offset,⁶ and was used to copy-editing, design and all the tech-



Dick Higgins, *1,000 Symphonies*. Three segments of a seven part musical score made by machine gun, each 52.1 x 44.4 cm., 1963. Courtesy Emily Harvey Gallery.

nical sides of printing and publishing, it was natural for me to be involved in the production of my book. However, when the book did not materialize in what seemed to be a reasonable amount of time, and when Maciunas could not promise when he could get to it, I founded Something Else Press,⁷ incorporated on February 2, 1964 as "Something Else Press, Inc." *Jefferson's Birthday/Postface* was completed in August 1964. *Postface* was an account of the background and beginning of Fluxus, and the two books were bound together so that theory would not be divorced from practice. I called myself the "President" (and, for a time, sported a necktie in "presidential blue"). Barbara Moore was the first editor, and when she left in 1966, Emmett Williams moved from Europe to New York and became the next editor. The Board of Directors varied slightly, but it usually consisted of myself, Alison Knowles and Emmett Williams. While the Press never had more than five employees at one time (as many people as one could stuff into a taxi cab) we did have some interesting people aboard over the years. At the shipping and order desk alone we had dancers Meredith Monk and Judy Padow, composer-violinist Malcolm Goldstein, artist Susan Hartung, poets Denis

Dunn and Lawrence Freifeld, writer Mary Flanagan and others, not to mention the artists and writers who worked for the press in other capacities, for example Ann Noël Stevenson and Fluxartists Al Hansen and Ken Friedman.

Between 1966 and 1973, when I finally left "the Press," we produced ninety-five books. The problems we faced were typical of those of any small, independent publisher. Even though prices of books were high for the times, we lost so much money through distribution that our best selling titles were a threat to our very existence.⁹ After my departure, two others were produced: Manfred Eaton's *Biofeedback Music* and a facsimile edition of Gertrude Stein's *As a wife has a cow, a love story*, which was printed but not distributed. My successor at the press was Jan Herman, a good editor who wanted to run the operation, but it turned out he had no gift for fund raising or diplomacy. While he would wrap packages and do chores, he would not do what the president of an organization should do: write grant proposals, visit with possible patrons, handle major sales, etc. By the Autumn of 1974, the debts of Something Else Press had accumulated to about \$240,000, and, though its assets were much more than that, I was in no position to return to the Press and work this out. As co-owner of the Press (with Emmett Williams), I filed for bankruptcy.¹⁰

In 1972, I had started publishing very small, model editions of my works under the name "Unpublished Editions." Alison Knowles joined me in the project in 1976, and in 1978 so did John Cage, Philip Corner, Geoffrey Hendricks, Jackson Mac Low and, soon thereafter, Pauline Oliveros and Jerome Rothenberg.¹¹ That same year we changed the name of the press to "Printed Editions," as "witness to our new identity" (as our catalogue put it). Structurally, the new press was an unincorporated syndicate. The books were produced by each artist/member and sold through the network that had been built up for Something Else Press. All promotions were done on a cooperative basis and monies received were credited to the artist/author and paid out. There was only a minimal overhead to deal with. The system worked well until the end of 1986, at which time so many other publishers wanted to produce our main titles, that we had no major books for Printed Editions. So we agreed to disband – mission accomplished. That was the end of my formal involvement in book publishing.

As for Maciunas, his own first publications appeared in 1962 and 1963. *Fluxus*, intended as a magazine, never appeared except as an annual. The repro proofs which we had carefully corrected at Ehlfalten were never printed – they were eventually destroyed in a flood in Maciunas' car. But *Fluxus* did serve as the imprint on the yearbooks, books and "Fluxboxes" which began to appear in 1963. Maciunas set up shop in Canal Street among the surplus shops, and there he bought plastic boxes, collected the makings of kits, and pasted Fluxlabels onto covers. At the time of his death, in 1978, Maciunas was still producing *Fluxus* publications of one sort or another, mostly Fluxboxes. A few

were even produced to his specifications posthumously by Barbara Moore's *Reflux Editions*.

Maciunas' style of publishing stressed original design, unusual materials, and the hand-made; objects in boxes and printed sheets held together by nuts and bolts. The advantage of object books is that there are minimal editorial costs: no binders' dies and sample cases to worry about, etc. However, the unit cost (the cost of making each copy) is relatively high, the results cannot be sold universally, and the production of large numbers takes too much time. For example, Maciunas set us up with piles of papers to crumple and then unfold for Mieko (formerly "Chieko") Shiomi's page in the *Fluxus Yearbox* (1963). It took three people an evening to produce the papers for her one page. There were to be forty or so pages. This is why so few copies of the *Fluxus Yearbox* were produced. In fact, Maciunas sometimes produced each copy of the publication to order, waiting a few weeks until the orders had built up and then assembling whatever was needed.

Maciunas' politics were crypto-communist; while never a party member, he loved to affect a conspiratorial manner, and his adoration of the USSR was not precisely rational. However, he had very little of the popular touch. Most of our circle, Fluxartists and Fluxfriends, had a strong populist streak which made us concerned about whether the Fluxboxes and publications were too elitist. (Our productions were "collectibles," and perhaps we were simply producing as much "for the collector" as traditional artists.) With this on my mind, around 1964 I began to have a vision of our publications being sold in supermarkets and other improbable mass outlets.

Nobody seems to know how Maciunas first learned graphic design, but throughout the 1960s he made his living doing design, paste-ups and mechanicals – what was known in the trade as "finished art," often for the Jack Marchard Studios.¹² But Marchard's main business was brochures, labels, logotypes, posters and pamphlets. The normative style of the time was the "Helvetica look" – set everything in Helvetica typeface, give it lots of room and let it go. Maciunas favored a tight, energetic look, which he achieved by using sans serif types, especially News Gothic, which he then juxtaposed with old-fashioned and florid display faces, such as the old wood type faces in the romatique family. The layouts themselves were those appropriate to Marchard's business. Usually they were based on grids into which, or over which, the types were laid out so as to suggest a cellular form. For the *Fluxus* publications, for which Maciunas was not limited by the needs of Marchard's clients, he frequently placed his types upside down or at least on their sides; this too had the effect of emphasizing the grid, as well as having a humorous effect.

I, too, rejected the "Helvetica look." My design style became whatever was appropriate to book formats. Grids were, for the most part, useless for such large scale work. So I laid out my pages recto-linearly but



John Lennon, *a date for George from John*. Altered polaroid of an anonymous Beatle fan, 10.8 x 8.9 cm., n.d. Jonas Mekas and Hollis Melton Collection.

lined up the elements along the diagonals of the pages, setting my type to form triangles and trapezoids wherever possible and, when feasible, set poems and short chapters flush bottom on the type pages (usually they are set in the middle). I used larger and bolder running heads at the tops of pages than is usual in order to tie the page together and because I liked the legibility it gave to a sometimes scattered unorthodox page. Since I did not wish to develop favoritism among type faces, I used whatever faces a particular supplier had, often making my selections by means of chance operations, using dice.¹³ In this way I became familiar with many seldom-used or old fashioned fonts which gave the Something Else Press books their look of old – but new. I liked Maciunas' designs, but he never commented on mine so I assume he didn't reciprocate. But what Maciunas really did not like was the withdrawal of my energy from the production of Fluxus publications.

Yet all along the move had been all but inevitable. I wanted to offer Fluxus to everybody, to have Fluxus and Fluxus-type work (similar works by other artists who were outside our circle) available in airport book shops and in grocery stores. Maciunas focused on the work being cheap but gave little attention to making them accessible to ordinary people; to promotion and distribution beyond the order forms that were printed in his CC V TRE newspapers, which, of course, had to circulate among the right people to function at all, people who already had some idea what they were looking at. Concern about this made my withdrawal from the production of the publications more or less just a matter of time.

I had protested strongly to Maciunas in response to his threat to withdraw his legal sponsorship of Ay-O and other foreign Fluxartists (whose status required letters of support) if they participated in Allan Kaprow's production of Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Originale*, which was being produced as part of Charlotte Moorman's Festival of the Avant Garde for 1966. Both Moorman and Stockhausen were anathema to Maciunas, the former as an exponent of European cultural chauvinism (was American cultural chauvinism any better, I asked) and the latter as an unprincipled opportunist.¹⁴

Maciunas chose to view my protest and involvement in the production of *Originale* as a withdrawal from Fluxus. He denounced me in the chart histories which he constantly revised. In two versions of the chart, he stated that I had withdrawn from the group to found a rival organization.

However, I kept describing myself as a Fluxperson and my Fluxfriends kept including me in their projects. So I was not really excluded from Fluxus. Then, one July day in 1966, Maciunas and I sat down outside the Something Else Press office in the city park which served as my private conference room, and we talked over our objectives. Maciunas and I might not have agreed about the relation of our activities to society as a whole, but we did agree on the objectives of our publishing activities. While the Fluxus publications should serve as paradigmatic models or prototypes of various sorts, the best role for Something Else Press was an outreach series, useful for getting our ideas beyond the charmed circle of cognoscenti to which, reluctantly, we belonged; one which could present all kinds of alternative and intermedial work to the larger public. The press tried to be "something else," to provide an alternative to what commercially oriented trade publications were doing and, since there was The Something Else Gallery in the front room of Alison's and my home, to what commercial galleries were showing. This was a position of which Maciunas heartily approved, and thus the schism ended. I was again included by Maciunas in Fluxus and so it continued until his death.

Fluxus was to be thought of as having four aspects: a series of publications, a group of artists, the forms associated with these publications and the artists' performances and the theoretical positions inherent in these. It was not so much a movement, with a clearly defined group of artists setting out to achieve a particular program, as a "tendency," organized on a collective basis: something more pluralistic and less exclusive than the other iconoclastic movements of our century which in one way or another resembled – Dada, Futurism, Surrealism, Russian Constructivism.

Something Else Press was to be a parallel expression, covering much the same ground; committed to the development of a context for Fluxus and intermedial art forms by bringing the work to the largest possible public in an undiluted form. Whatever we did, however, it would have to coincide with our name and be "something else."¹⁵ But if it was to fulfill its roles, the Press would have to include kinds of intermedia other than Fluxus. Otherwise we would not be creating an appropriate context for our reception. The editorial Board – Emmett Williams (and, earlier, Barbara Moore), Alison Knowles, myself and, at the end, Jan Herman – focused on other possibilities: printing such intermedial areas as concrete poetry (which Emmett Williams had pioneered),¹⁶ new forms of fiction or proto-novel,¹⁷ and works of past avant-gardes which we felt were important yet either misunderstood or under-appreciated.¹⁸ This was in keeping with Maciunas' and my view that cultural innovation is cumulative, that each innovation adds to the store of possibilities and does not simply replace some earlier mode forever as, by contrast, is often true in science.

The assumption that replacement applies to culture and art as much as science, that the introduction of a new form does not simply add to the available possibilities but makes the older ones obsolete, is what I

call the "neoteric fallacy" ("neoteric" is a rare word but it is not my coinage; it denotes a taste for or interest in the new). Opposed to this fallacy would be Maciunas' and my views that brothers and sisters in artistic innovation have always been active, that the avant-garde is eternal, but that many of the most worthwhile innovations have been lost over the centuries or have been repressed. This would be true of secular drama in the Middle Ages, of unusual styles of music in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries or in some non-Western classical music tradition (notably Central Asian Turkish and Mongol styles), as well as of such forms of intermedia such as visual poetry and graphic musical notation.

Maciunas announced several issues of his *Fluxus* magazine which would be devoted to this kind of material. However, they never appeared and, in fact, he barely had a chance to scratch the surface. I was more fortunate, because when I left Something Else Press I had the leisure to gather materials of this sort together, resulting in my book *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature* (1987).¹⁹ I also worked out the first stages of a hermeneutic theory for intermedia art in general and Fluxus in particular,²⁰ thus completing some of the objectives which had been set out during our late night discussions at Ehlhalten in 1962, namely clarifying the historical context and roots of Fluxus and beginning the task of establishing its theoretical matrix, without which it is hard to evaluate individual works or to develop a critical vocabulary for Fluxus or, indeed, for many other art currents of recent years – conceptual art, art performance or, arguably, language poetry.²¹

So Fluxus and the Something Else Press had related objectives, but they were different too. The Press largely grew out of Fluxus, and Unpublished/Printed Editions out of the Press. The Press could not have performed its outreach if it had used the kind of experimental formats which were appropriate to Maciunas' Fluxus publications, nor could he have provided the experimental prototypes, if he had confined himself to books. Of course there are exceptions to this as well as overlaps. Maciunas did, in fact, do several traditional-format books early on in Fluxus, and Something Else Press issued several books in boxes or on cards or portfolio books. For example, Robert Filliou's *Ample Food for Stupid Thought* (1965) came in two editions, a traditional book one and a postcard set in a box. Wolf Vostell's *Dé-coll/age Happenings* (1966) came in a box which included a set of black and white reproductions of his happenings notations, a book with their texts, and Alka Seltzer® packet glued to a piece of aluminum foil and a trimmed matzoh cracker. Allan Kaprow's *Calling* (1968) was arranged as a visual poem on vinyl sheets with plywood covers. My own *foew@ombwhnw* (1969) was bound as a prayer book.²² But these are just that, exceptions. Most of the Something Else books were only experimental as regards the printed page, not in format, trim size or binding. We also published twenty pamphlets on handsome colored papers, the Great Bear Pamphlets. These cost up to \$2.00 and were thus rather inexpensive, even for the

time. They were available in at least one grocery store – the Berkeley Coop in Berkeley, California where they were available for some time in a display case beside the vegetable counter.²³ We also became the object of a satirical wisecrack in an article in *Harper's Magazine*, which mocked the "poetry readings at the Something Else Gallery." The only reading we ever had there was a non-stop marathon reading of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Maybe Joyce was too modern for them. Anyway, the appearance of such mention in an establishment magazine, or the reviews of the Williams' *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* in *Vogue* and *Newsweek* indicate that we were getting to places which the new arts seldom penetrate, and this too was appropriate to our program.

Not only did Fluxus and Something Else Press include many of the same participants, but our objectives were closely parallel. They were twin sides of the same coin. Although it included fewer people, Printed Editions had similar objectives to those of Something Else Press, objectives more suited to Printed Editions' role as a smaller "small press" (a term which covers too many independent publishers), but our needs and purposes were appropriate to a cooperative and our entire program was devoted to aspects of our members' work. The relationship between Fluxus and Something Else Press was, therefore, a symbiotic one, while Printed Editions zeroed in on a portion of Something Else Press. All three form an overall story.

NOTES

¹ The term "event," used in this way, is of uncertain origin; the composer Henry Cowell, with whom both Cage and myself studied, used it, but Cowell may have picked it up from Cage as well as vice versa.

² La Monte Young (and Jackson Mac Low), eds., *An Anthology* (New York, 1962). The book was reprinted by the Heiner Friedrich Gallery in New York in 1970.

³ While Maciunas viewed Heidegger as a lifelong fascist whose work was a justification for fascism, I didn't.

⁴ He never had the authority within our group that, say, André Breton did among the surrealists. Maciunas might try to read people in or out of Fluxus, but as a group we operated more by consensus, regarding Maciunas as a member of the group who had great gifts for publicity and energy for correspondence, but ultimately as just one among equals. Though tempted to be dictatorial at times (who isn't?), Maciunas was glad to accept that Fluxus was a collective and, usually, to function within that context.

⁵ Actually the seven principal Greek visual poems are much older, and the few Byzantine pieces are mesostics. All this I subsequently described in my book *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature* (Albany, NY, 1987).

⁶ Zaccar Offset became the main printer for Maciunas and Fluxus. The 1977 feast in honor of Maciunas took place on the premises of Zaccar Offset, though by then they had moved to a different space from the one described in my *Postface* (1964).

⁷ The general story of the Something Else Press has been described elsewhere, most fully by Peter Frank in his monograph *Something Else Press* (New Paltz, 1983).

⁸ Since those days Ms. Moore has written memorably about Fluxus, and she is currently preparing the catalogue for a major exhibition of Something Else Press, to take place at the Granary Gallery in New York.

⁹ We produced a total of 18,000 copies of Emmett Williams' *An Anthology* and 17,000 copies of Claes Oldenburg's *Store Days* (1969), respectable numbers by any accounting.

¹⁰ Jan opposed the bankruptcy, as did Emmett, though he had no idea where new capital might be found. In the aftermath of the bankruptcy the two of them attacked me roundly, accusing me, in an interview published in the *West Coast Poetry Review* (Winter 1976–77), of such things as, when "things got rough," taking a pleasure jaunt to Frankfurt, Germany with my secretary, Nelleke

Rosenthal and implicitly wasting the Press' resources. Well, I did have a part-time secretary, Nelleke, who was Dutch and who had a brother in Frankfurt. In September 1973, although I had left the Press in July, I decided to attend the Frankfurt Book Fair, and Nelleke came along to visit her brother and to help staff our booth at the Fair. We worked hard and sold more books in one week there than Jan Herman had sold during the entire year. While Emmett came to understand this, Jan Herman never did figure out just what had gone wrong.

¹¹ All but Oliveros had been Something Else Press authors, and an Oliveros book had been proposed.

¹² Marchards studio had the advantage of being a place where nobody smoked, important to Maciunas since he had terrible asthma.

¹³ To do this, I would make a list of up to thirty-six faces, assign a number to each, then use dice to select a number between one and thirty-six, and then start from whatever face I had selected. This resulted in some of the Something Else books being set in unusual faces or faces which are normally only used for display.

¹⁴ This was in line with the Marcyism of the *Worker's World* politics of Henry Flynt, a marginal Fluxperson who took an interesting but, I felt, unproductive anti-art position which saw art as bourgeois, a view which even Lenin had once denounced as "typically Trotskyite." In fact this is why, by way of contrast, Emmett Williams and I, the next year, invited the W.E.B. DuBoise Clubs, which was a communist youth group, to contribute a manifesto to the *Manifestos* pamphlet published by the Something Else Press in our inexpensive Great Bear Pamphlets series in 1967. All the other manifestos in that booklet were either by Fluxus artists or were somehow in the same spirit as these. I was adamantly opposed to our potential marginalization for the sake of ideological purity; we were already marginalized enough in the cultural world without adding to the problem. Most of the Fluxartists were, in any case, quite apolitical in spite of the typical political militancy of the times.

¹⁵ In the 1950s the Fluxartist Robert Filliou had already issued his *Manifesto d'Autrisme*, declaring the need always to be doing something other than the normative. This was very close to the Something Else Manifesto, which I authored in 1963 when I first decided to start Something Else Press. Both manifestos are included in the *Manifestos* pamphlet, already mentioned. I have been unable to find out where Filliou's manifesto first appeared, and was unaware of its existence when I wrote my own manifesto; mine first was printed inside the dust jacket of the first Something Else Press book,

Jefferson's Birthday/Postface (1964), also already mentioned.

¹⁶ Such works include Emmett Williams, *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1968), Eugene Gomringer, *The Book of Constellations* (1970), and the various books of Emmett's own poetry which we produced.

¹⁷ Daniel Spoerri's *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1966), my own *A Book About Love War Death* (1972) Kostelanetz, ed., *Breakthrough Fictioneers* (1972) and Toby Mac Lennan's *I Walked Out of 2 and Forgot it* (1973) are of this sort.

¹⁸ For example, such works would include Richard Huelsenbeck's *Dada Almanach* (1966) or Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* (1969) and the four other Stein works which we reissued. These last began the current popularity of Stein today, since, at the time we were doing our reissues, Stein was sometimes discussed but, since her works were so hard to obtain, she was very seldom read.

¹⁹ This book, already mentioned, documents some 1800 visual poems from before 1900 C.E. from all over the world and also presents a gathering of related phenomena, such as old graphic musical notations.

²⁰ These theories originally appeared, for the most part, in the *Something Else Newsletter*, starting in February 1966 with "Intermedia," which revived that term from S.T. Coleridge. The early texts went through various revisions, as they began to compose parts of a whole, until they reached their final versions in two books, *A Dialectic of Centuries: Notes towards a Theory of the New Arts* (1st ed., West Glover, VT, 1978 and [revised] 2nd ed., West Glover, VT, 1979) and *Horizons: the Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia* (Carbondale, IL, 1983).

²¹ Most of what passes for criticism in those areas offers potential vocabulary but little insight, since the relationship among the words is not clear and no contextualization is offered for the work in terms of its diachronic or current relationships. This point I expand on in an article, "Five Myths of Postmodernism" in *Art Papers* 13 n. 1 (1989).

²² There were also others. Somehow these publications can also be viewed as early Artists' Books.

²³ I used to have a photograph of the rack of Great Bear Pamphlets beside the green peppers.