

Intermedial Aesthetics: Selected Poems by Dick Higgins

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Abstract

This study attempts to explore and navigate the artistic contributions of Dick Higgins, a postmodern figure whose work blurs the boundaries between art, literature, and criticism. Higgins is particularly known for developing the concept of intermedia. To highlight how Higgins' ideas challenge conventional boundaries between artistic disciplines, this study explores his critical theories, artistic works, and influence on the avant-garde movement. In so doing, this research employs an analytical approach to scrutinize selected works by Higgins to assess the impact of his intermedia theory on contemporary artistic landscape. The research findings reveal that Higgins' innovative perspectives contributed to shaping the avant-garde landscape of contemporary art. Ultimately, this study underlines the enduring relevance of Higgins' critical theories and their application in contemporary creative artistic expression, offering insights into the evolving exchange between different forms of media in the arts.

Keywords: Intermedial Aesthetics, Dick Higgins

الجماليات الوسيطة: قصائد مختارة بقلم ديك هيغنز

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ملخص

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف ودراسة الإسهامات الفنية لديك هيغنز، أحد رواد ما بعد الحداثة، الذي يطمس عمله الحدود الفاصلة بين الفن والأدب والنقد. يُعرف هيغنز بشكل خاص بتطويره لمفهوم الوسائط المتداخلة. ولإبراز كيف تتحدى أفكار هيغنز الحدود التقليدية بين التخصصات الفنية، تستكشف هذه الدراسة نظرياته النقدية وأعماله الفنية وتأثيره على الحركة الطليعية. ولتحقيق ذلك، يستخدم هذا البحث منهجاً تحليلياً لدراسة أعمال مختارة لهيغنز لتقييم أثر نظريته في الوسائط المتداخلة على المشهد الفني المعاصر. تكشف نتائج البحث أن رؤى هيغنز المبتكرة ساهمت في تشكيل المشهد الطليعي للفن المعاصر. في نهاية المطاف، تؤكد هذه الدراسة على الأهمية الدائمة لنظريات هيغنز النقدية وتطبيقها في التعبير الفني الإبداعي المعاصر، مقدمة رؤى ثاقبة حول التبادل المتطور بين مختلف أشكال الوسائط في الفنون.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الجماليات الوسيطة، ديك هيغنز

Research Statement

Dick Higgins (1938-1998) is an influential artist and critic who is known for his pioneering work in the field of intermedia—an artistic practice that blurs the conventional boundaries between different forms of media, such as literature, visual art, and performance. This research aims to explore Higgins' contributions to the avant-garde movement, his role in promoting intermedia, and the impact of his ideas on contemporary art and literature.

Research Objectives

This study attempts to analyze the key concepts and theories proposed by Dick Higgins regarding intermedia and their implications for contemporary artistic practices. It also investigates the nature and significance of his artistic

creations, including visual art, poetry, and performance pieces. Eventually, it evaluates Higgins' role in the avant-garde movement and how his work influenced other artists and writers.

Research Questions

1. What are the foundational concepts of Dick Higgins' theory of intermedia?
2. In what ways did Higgins' artistic works embody the principles of intermedia?
3. What significance does Higgins' work hold within the broader context of the avant-garde movement?

Introduction

Dick Higgins was born on March 15, 1938, in Cambridge, England to Katharine Bigelow and Carter Chapin Higgins. In 1955, he graduated from St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire. He attended Yale University for two years but eventually moved out to New York in 1958 and continued his studies at Columbia School of General Studies where he received a bachelor's degree in English in 1960. Higgins' move to New York seems to have been influential since he was able to study music with Henry Cowell, Cage's teacher, at Columbia and to attend Cage's infamous experimental composition class at the New School of Social Research (Gagné 129). Consequently, Higgins was able to collaborate with like-minded artists such as Allan Kaprow, George Brecht and Al Hansen, Jackson Mac Low, among others, who all became more or less associated with the artistic movements known under the rubrics Happenings, Fluxus and Pop Art (Kaye 15).

In his critical essay in *Postface* (1964), Higgins recalls the significance of Cage's class: "what I got from it was a sense of general activity and a taste for my own direction. I agreed with much of Cage's aesthetic, but not with his taste" (50). As will be seen, Cage's influence is evident in Higgins' incorporation of indeterminacy, chance-based composition, mundane activities and everyday actions as well as the ambient environment as part of the work of art. In so doing, Higgins seems to propel the conventional boundaries of the aesthetic and poetic experience into new realms blurring the distinctions between composer and performer as well as between art and life in general.

During Cage's compositional classes, Higgins also met visual and performance artist Alison Knowles, and they got married in 1960. Their marriage significantly influenced them, both motivating them to pursue their interest in visual and performance art. In 1961, Higgins, along with Knowles, collaborated and participated in a series of performances held at Maciunas' AG gallery, which was influential in bringing together like-minded artists whose work would shape the Fluxus' artistic ethos. However, their major contribution to Fluxus, as co-founders, was in 1962 when they travelled to Wiesbaden, Germany, among many other European cities, in order to participate in Maciunas' commercial concerts, which led to the emergence of Fluxus (Beal 121).

In 1964, they had their twin daughters Hannah, a critic and art historian, and Jessica, a performance artist. Although they got divorced in 1970, they remarried in 1984. In New York, Higgins was also able to join the New York

University, from 1975 to 1977, where he received a Master of Arts degree in English. This helped him pursue his preoccupation with visual and pattern poetry as well as literary criticism in general. This is evident in his enormous contribution of theoretical essays and books. His theoretical books include: *Fantastic architecture* (1971), *George Herbert's pattern poems: In Their Tradition* (1977), *A Dialectic of Centuries* (1978), *The Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia* (1984), *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature* (1987) and *Modernism since Postmodernism: Essays on Intermedia* (1997).

More to the same effect, in New York, Higgins was able to pursue his life-long preoccupation with printmaking, which would eventually lead to establishing two of the most influential small presses in the United States at the time. Higgins' professional encounter with printmaking dates back to 1959 when he joined a printing school in lower Manhattan (Jury 174). In his interview with artist Nicholas Zurbrugg (1999), Higgins points out:

. . . by 1959 I was producing a large body of material . . .

I was doing graphic notation, I was doing sound poems, I was doing visual poems, and there were no magazines for things of this sort, so I realized that it would behove me to try to move into a profession where I would be able to cause some of these things to appear. So . . . I went to printing school, to a small printing school in Lower Manhattan . . . I learned the normal printing techniques on a journeyman level. I got my certificate, and worked for a printer for several years . . . (28)

This might explain the unconventional formats and typesetting of many of Higgins' books. His first book, *What are Legends* (1960) published by Bern Porter Books, is a manifestation of his life-long interest in visual art as well as printmaking. This collaborative work is composed of poetic texts, drawings and collages. It is handwritten by American artist Bern Porter with illustrations by Higgins. In 1964, Higgins started out a professional publishing career by establishing his landmark small press house, Something Else Press (S.E.P). Another reason behind the emergence of the S.E.P was also, at least partially, Maciunas' repeated delays of getting Higgins' book, *Jefferson's Birthday/Postface* (1964), published (Crawford 177). Higgins retrieved his book from Maciunas and decided he would publish it himself (Frank 4).

Higgins repeats his exploration of printmaking and unconventional formats in his book, *foew&ombwhnw* (1969) which is also published by Higgins' Something Else Press. In this book, each page is divided into two columns; each column is concerned with a specific genre such as poetry, "event" scores or essays. Higgins also included a ribbon as a page marker; hence, the book resembles a prayer book (HI 121). However, besides Higgins' work, Something Else Press also published many books by influential artists of the 20th century such as Gertrude Stein, John Cage, Emmett Williams, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Claes Oldenburg, Dieter Roth, Ray Johnson, George Brecht and Robert Filliou, among

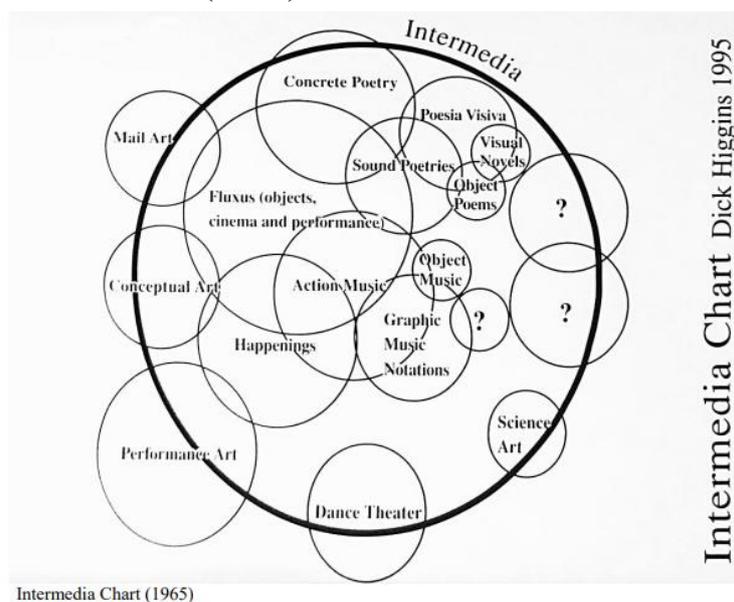
many others. In 1966, S.E.P also started to publish the Great Bear Pamphlet series, which contained works, manifestos and artistic statements by many artists such as Yoko Ono, George Brecht, Robert Filliou and Emmett Williams.

In his interview with artist Nicholas Zurbrugg, “Looking Back” (1998), Higgins comments on his logic beyond establishing his S.E.P:

I wanted to publish whatever had not been done that I felt really needed to be done. I also felt like limiting myself in competition . . . So that’s why I wrote “A Something Else Manifesto”: “Whatever the other people are doing, I’ll do something else.” . . . We brought out concrete poetry, musical scores and graphics of various sorts and tried to push the limits of publishing and of the nature of the book. (62)

Aesthetics of Intermedialty

Higgins’ notion of “intermedia” is one of his major theoretical contributions defined and elaborated in his seminal essays, *Intermedia* (1965), and *Statement on Intermedia* (1966) as well as in his book, *Horizons, the poetics and theory of the intermedia* (1984).



Intermedia Chart (1965)

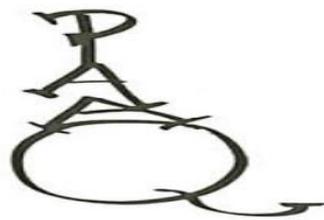
Higgins use the generic term “intermedia” to designate works of art that are “between media” (49). Higgins also distinguishes between the concept of “intermedia” represented by Duchamp’s ready-mades and the concept of “pure medium” as in painting (49). As put by Higgins:

The ready-made or found object, in a sense an intermedium since it was not intended to conform to the pure medium, usually suggests this, and therefore suggests a location in the field between the general area of art media and those of life media. However, at this time, the locations of this sort are relatively unexplored, as compared with media between the arts. (49)

As such, Dick Higgins’ theory of intermedia is rooted in several foundational concepts that challenge traditional boundaries between different

forms of art and expression. Combining textual and visual elements creates forms of expression and meaning beyond what either form could achieve alone. For example, the following visual piece features handwritten text that conveys a sense of immediacy and personal expression. The phrase “that comes of the well fought thing being” suggests a struggle or a process, inviting interpretation regarding its meaning.

that comes of the well
fought thing being
upgraded →



(foew&ombwhnw 249)

The combination of text and visuals requires the audience to actively interpret the work.

The ambiguity inherent in visual poetry allows for multiple interpretations. Different viewers may derive various meanings based on their backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, reflecting Higgins' concept of audience participation in intermedia. Moreover, the previous piece can be seen as a commentary on the nature of language itself: how words shape thought and perception. The visual component challenges traditional notions of poetry as solely text-based, expanding the dialogue around what constitutes poetic expression. Higgins' prolific theoretical contribution includes statements on his work as well as his conceptions concerning both art production and perception.

Higgins' concept of “art as a paradigm” or “exemplative” art is one of his most valuable critical and aesthetic approaches (HI 7) defined and elaborated in his manifesto, “An Exemplativist Manifesto” (1976), and in his book, *Horizons, the poetics and theory of the intermedia* (1984). In this manifesto, Higgins defines “exemplative” art in relation to the role of the reader/performer in the interpretation of the work of art. Higgins argues: The audience constructs, by means of the notation and work, an image of the set of possibilities intended by the artist. Any realization of such a set will necessarily be to some extent arbitrary and is therefore an example rather than a fixity. For this reason, such art can be called exemplative. The emphasis rests on precisely what the work is an example of, and not on the precise structure or realization of the work. (1)

This might explain Higgins' employment of indeterminate structures whether through chance-based composition or incorporating the performers into

the process of art making. Higgins' performance piece, "bodies electric: arches" (1982), is a case in point:

```

and and and and                and and and and
And as as                        bodies
account and                      engirth engirth
a appears and also and and and as as    go
      and and
and and as as and a and and and and all  I I I
      at and and a axe apprentice-boys
      at after and and and and and and
      again alert attitudes and and and
      am And and and and and and
a a and and                      let love
and and and and and and also and and all  men me me

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(*Bodies electric: arches*, 5)

The repetitions employed by this visual poem evoke a sense of accumulation, suggesting a stream of consciousness or an unending flow of thoughts. However, the absence of regular grammar introduces a sense of disjunction, challenging conventional syntax and grammar. This disjointedness reflects the chaotic nature of modern existence and the complexities of communication. The organization, or lack of it, of the text forces the reader to navigate the poem in a non-linear fashion, mirroring the unpredictability of thought and language. The poem's fragmented structure invites readers to engage actively with the text. The ambiguity within the poem allows for multiple interpretations, reflecting the diverse experiences and perspectives of readers.

This openness aligns with intermedia's emphasis on audience involvement in meaning-making. "Bodies electric: arches" employs sound motifs, sound patterns repeated throughout the poem, whose effects tend to redirect our aesthetic perception toward the poem as a sound phenomenon rather than conventionally linear semantic or syntactic language. As Higgins explains in his interview with artist Nicholas Zurbrugg (1999), "Bodies electric: arches" is a "long sound poem" that uses the words of Walt Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric," strung out into alphabetical order, section by section, and as a whole, and interplaying the two so that they coincide at certain points and suggest arches in that way. It's to be performed live by two people whose voices are relatively similar. (31) As such, the poetic text is meant as a notation for simultaneous performance in which the overlapping voices induce an anarchic multiplicity that tend to decentralize the hegemony of the ego during its making and enactment.

As Higgins points out, each performance of the work of art is only one possibility of its realization or an "example" among many. As put by Higgins in his book, *Horizons, the poetics and theory of the intermedia* (1984), in "exemplative" art,

The work is not a definitive realization of some kind but is, rather, an example- one possibility, or a sampling of possible realizations. By implying its set of alternatives, the viewer, faced with such work and seeing these in her imagination, projects her own horizon and fuses it with that of the artist. The artist's paradigmatic realization is compared by the viewer with her own. (HI 7)

In this sense, for Higgins, a work of art should supply the reader with possibilities for its potential realizations and actualizations, and thus, allowing the fusion of the artist's experience with that of the reader or performer or what Higgins identifies as a "fusion of horizons" (HI 6). For this process to occur, for Higgins, an "exemplative" work of art should induce what he calls an "allusive referential" by which he means "a displacement between what one expects to see or what one would logically regard as normative and what one does, in fact, see (or hear or read)" (HI 7). For Higgins, this experience is what makes the reader engage with the work of art rather than being just a passive receiver of imposed values or meanings. As put by Higgins:

But it is in exemplative art—musical realizations of works by Cage, sound poems and aleatoric works by myself or Jackson Mac Low or many of the current European avant-garde, that this allusive referential is useful to explain why the work does not simply leave even a sophisticated listener "cold" as it were, but continues to engage him or her. (HI 8)

In this particular sense, language seems to be much more a material for construction, rather than a medium for communication. As Higgins points out, it becomes a site for the reader to bring his or her experience engaging with that of the artist. Higgins books, *A Book about Love & War & Death. Canto One* (1965), *A Book about Love & War & Death* (1969) and *A Book about Love & War & Death 3* (1972), represent Higgins' employment of language as material for construction rather than conventional communication.

In these books, as Higgins puts it in his essay, "Towards an allusive referential" (1977), "the style of the language is more what the artist is concerned with than what he or she is saying in that language" (175). As Higgins points out in his introduction to *A Book about Love & War & Death*, he "wanted to apply chance structures to complete units of ideas in a systematic way" (1). Higgins used the dice to choose words and phrases from an Indonesian dictionary. However, Higgins' composition was not entirely nonintentional. As Higgins explains:

At the start of some sections I would think, let's have a psalm. And I'd think my acts of writing in terms of a psalm. Or let's do straight prose, and I'd do it. As far as I could tell I was putting everything I knew into the book, and would cover all the subjects in the dictionary. (2)

Therefore, these books aesthetically blend both intentional and nonintentional methods of composition. However, conventionality also lurks into them since the title indicates personal events for Higgins during 1960: his brother's, Mark, traveling to the Congo where he was murdered and his marriage to Alison Knowles. The following excerpt from *A Book about Love & War & Death: Canto One*, reads:

Or happy Jove.

Dismal as a serviette, slender as a slice, objective as a channel, a vegetable might be well packaged as jam.

To approve what is surely wanton.

Oh dusky, introductory.

This bobbin is attached to an aircraft.

Chaos was not present in the case of hydrophobia. (5)

As obvious, the text adheres neither to conventional semantics nor to completely regular syntax. In so doing, Higgins' use of language is not self-expressive or about the self. Rather, it is a site for the reader to engage with the experience offered by the text. This kind of experience in which the reader engages with the text itself is what Higgins, in *Horizons, the poetics and theory of the intermedia* (1984), distinguishes as the output of what he calls the "post cognitive" art. For Higgins:

However, we can distinguish between the use of expression in the material of artwork, and the use of expression to reveal the subjective persona of the artist. This last would be the way of the cognitive artist, while the former has its place in the work of the non- or post cognitive artist. (13)

As such, "exemplative" and "postcognitive" art, for Higgins, seems to be that in which a "conceptual fusion" occurs between the reader's experience as well as that of the artist's since this fusion challenges the hegemony of the ego, be it of the artist or the reader. It is also in which the work of art is suggestive for many realizations and actualizations upon performance as each performance is just an "example" or a possibility among many others. In "postcognitive" art, as put by Higgins, "the overt message follows the narrative into the near- limbo of being mere ornament, the artist ceases to create his own myth (as he had been doing, typically, since the mid-nineteenth century), and the areas of sensual experience or discipline came to be less discrete than they had been" (73).

That is to say, the conventional meaning inherent in words as such is not what the work of art is trying to impose. Rather, the work of art tends to reconfigure our aesthetic attention toward the process of art making itself as well as the meaning(s) this process stirs in relation to our own experience and culture. In this sense, Higgins' aesthetics, as is the case in Mac Low and Fluxus in general, tends to dematerialize the work of art, and thus, allowing more aesthetic emphasis on the conceptual and experiential significance beyond performance. In other words, although a work of art as an object exists, it resists final fixity since it is

always indeterminate and in a state of flux as indicative of the “unpresentable” through presentation.

In April 1959, Higgins performed part of his piece, “twenty-seven Episodes for the Aquarian Theater to the Recognition of Antonin Artaud” (1957). (Jacobs & Marter 73). As the title indicates, these episodes pay homage to prominent French poet, artist, and playwright Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) and his experimental theatrical approach, which “attempts to rediscover the primitive ritual functional of theatre” (Innes 5). In Higgins’ episodes, primitive, natural and ritual elements dominate the scenes:

i—the moon rises

the back of the theater is opened up
the rising moon is seen
the moon rises up and out of sight
the back of the theater is closed
there is ceremony

ii—the burning bush

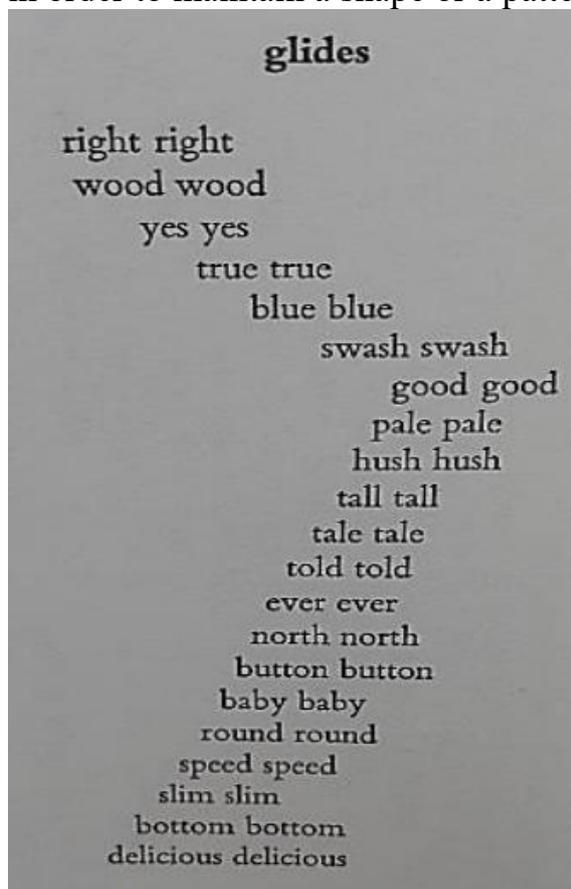
the curtains open
there is quiet
there is darkness on the face of the earth
flames appear
a burning scarecrow
or a burning cross
or a small and twisted tree
the flames have their dinner (Foew&omBWhnw 249)

As obvious in these two episodes, the scenes are void of any performers doing action or a spoken dialogue which significantly gives space to the expressive potential of the components of the setting itself. That is, the audience interact directly with the visual elements of light, color and darkness. In this sense, this ‘happening’ foregrounds sensory perception through sound coming from the “ceremony” and the “burning bush” as well as silence. This dialectic of absence and presence represents what Artaud identifies as the “expression in space,” which he developed later in his manifesto, “The Theatre of Cruelty (First Manifesto)” (1964). In this manifesto, Artaud argues, “instead of continuing to rely upon texts considered definitive and sacred, it is essential to put an end to the subjugation of the theater to the text, and to recover the notion of a kind of unique language halfway between gesture and thought” (242).

As such, this performance piece tends to propel the poetic experience into new realms of both conceptual and physical performance, and thus, dematerializing the work of art in the sense that it directs our esthetic reception toward the process of art making as well as toward de-familiarized everyday actions. In this particular sense, for Higgins, poetry is not just words on page, as was in Concrete Poetry for example, following linear meaning(s) as in conventional poetry, nor the simple presentation of ideas, as in Conceptual Poetry,

or some structure of melodies and sounds, as in Sound Poetry. Rather, the poetic, for Higgins, seems to indicate a mental state of mind or the condition of aesthetic perception encompassing most known, or imaginable, materials and tools.

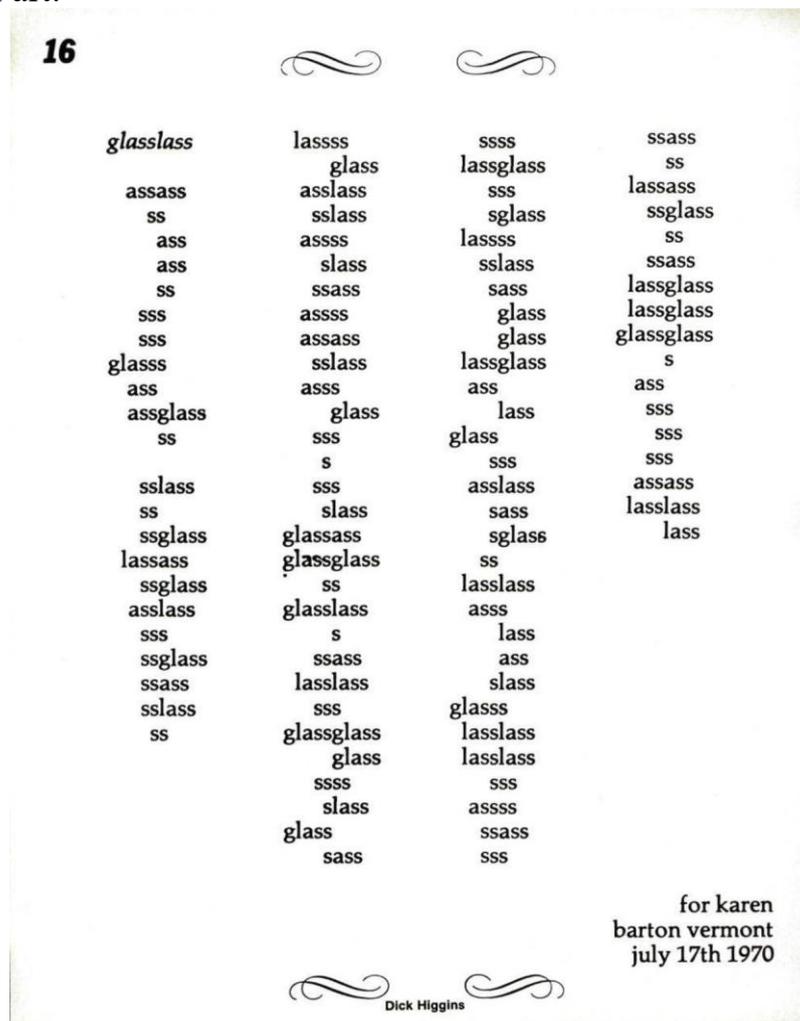
Higgins' poetry is thus intermedial in tools, incorporating sound and visual poetry. That is to say, the typographical distribution of the poem on page is inseparable from the sound motifs throughout the poem. This is evident in Higgins' poetry books, such as *Poems Plain & Fancy* (1961), *Everyone has her favorite (his or hers)* (1971) and *Some Recent Snowflakes* (1979). Higgins' poem, "glides" is a case in point. As obvious, the poem's shape is reminiscent of Apollinaire's Calligrammes and the form-content correlation typical of Concrete poetry. In other words, this poem unconventionally utilizes lineation and spacing in order to maintain a shape or a pattern that echoes its title.



Some Recent Snowflakes, 52

More to the same effect, this poem does not follow any motion of narrative. Rather, its lines, a set of two words each, seem to be disparate collages. In this sense, the demolition of any conventional semantic and syntactic relations paves the way for the sound feature of the poem. As such, this poem seems to draw the reader/viewer into the words as such, as both sound and visual signs. That is to say, it draws our attention to the process beyond conventional language, which serves as a material for construction rather than traditional communication. In this sense, "glides" tends to propel the conventional poem in new directions by blending both visual or graphic and sound elements in a way that makes them indispensable to the realization of the poem.

The following poem also offers insights into the interplay of language, sound, and visual aesthetics. The repetition of "glass" emphasizes both the material and the concept of transparency, fragility, and reflection. This title invites multiple interpretations, hinting at fragility in communication and human experience. The playfulness of the phonetic sounds invites readers to engage with the poem on an auditory level, considering how the sounds evoke different associations. The arrangement of words and the use of different line lengths create a visually dynamic composition. This layout encourages readers to explore the poem not just as text but as a visual artwork, blurring the line between poetry and visual art:



The use of playful language and nonsensical combinations such as “lasslass” and “assglass” introduces an element of absurdity. This playfulness can be seen as a commentary on the limitations of language and the ways in which meaning can be constructed and deconstructed.

Conclusion

Higgins’s poetics does not tend to invalidate established cultural and aesthetic centers in favor of new ones. Rather, it enriches both art making and perception experiences by propelling art into new realms of intermedial art

pushing the boundaries of the sublime sentiment to include the infinite and the “unpresentable” beyond everyday actions and experiences. This is particularly evident in Higgins’ incorporation of the ambient environment or the real world itself in art making. More to the same effect, Higgins’ concept of “metapoetries” represents a culmination of his logic of intermedial art taking advantage of any creative possibilities stemming from the intersection of poetry and any other artistic or non- artistic mediums.

Higgins’ poetry offers an anarchic inclination through intermedial aesthetics that falls in the intersection of poetry with visual, sound and performance arts. Higgins’ employment of sound and visual motifs redirects conventional aesthetic perception toward language itself, as a historical dimension. However, his concentration on the visual and sound phenomenon, evident in the typical lack of linear language, stanzaic structures, and subject matter, balances this historical dimension by emphasizing both his critique of it and his insistence on taking his experiments beyond conventional linguistic limitations.

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