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"The Wind is a Medium of the Sky"

Higgins is a big man with big ideas. I told him once 'you're setting out to recapitulate the whole of history,' and damned if he hasn't nearly done it. He has produced a mass of works and unnamables. They and he spill into each other; they step on toes. He can get away with leading a crowd of artists in health exercises to the tune of a 1910 scratchy record; he can give a lecture at a picnic; he can shave his head as a concert piece — and make us believe in it, absolutely... Higgins's talent is his irreverence. — Allan Kaprow¹

Richard Carter Higgins (1938-1998) coined the term "intermedia" to describe an emerging international and interdisciplinary direction in art in his landmark essay of the same name published in the first issue of his *Something Else Newsletter*: "I would like to suggest that the use of intermedia is more or less universal throughout the fine arts, since continuity rather than categorization is the hallmark of our new mentality."²

Dick Higgins was already well known as a major force in the defining of Fluxus during its lively years (1962-1965) when that group professed that change was the only constant and that the highest form of experience was the merging of art with ordinary life. Intermedia, however, was something else. Intermedia referred to art that fell conceptually between established media and that used materials and methods at the service of an idea. Intermedia included works of which Higgins had first-hand experience, such as Happenings, environmental pieces, installation, performance, and Fluxus. Within a year of Higgins's "Intermedia" article, this term that proposed a radical new way for transforming the categories of traditional art was adopted as a title

1. Dick Higgins, *Jefferson's Birthday/Postface* (New York: Something Else Press, 1964), liner notes, dust jacket.

2. Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," *Something Else Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (February 1966): 3.

and organizing principle by academic programs and government art agencies, such as New York State Council on the Arts.³ Much later, in 1999, Martha Wilson noted that “ [T]he term ‘intermedia’...popularized time-based performance, video, film, installation and published multiple forms that artists and the public take for granted today.”⁴

From Origin to Contemporary

Higgins found the term in an essay “Lecture III: On Spenser” by Samuel Coleridge (1812). Coleridge writes that “Narrative allegory is distinguished from mythology as reality from symbol; it is, in short, the proper intermedium between person and personification.”⁵

Coleridge constructs the word “intermedium” to compare Edmund Spenser’s (16th century) traditional use of medieval allegory with William Shakespeare’s (17th century) superior sense of timelessness in his work.⁶

Intermedium itself is likely the compound of intermediate and medium. Archaically, medium refers to the influencing or intervening agencies of the environment. “The wind is a medium of the sky.”⁷ Later, medium was used to describe a means or instrument by which something is conveyed or accomplished (words are a medium of expression). Today, of course, medium additionally is used to mean a tool or material for artistic expression or a means of mass communication, such as radio, television, journalism, or the Internet. Media, the plural form of medium, began in the 1920s to be used as a single collective noun, and that use included the introduction of the plural term medias.⁸

Intermediate as an adjective refers to a position between two points, persons, or things; the term is related to an intermediary, who acts between two people. An intermediate agent in chemistry is a temporary substance derived during a natural action or chemical process. Thus, it is not surprising that we find by 1610 the term intermedium used by chemists (and since 1611 by theaters to describe the interval between the acts of a play or musical).⁹ In 1756, for example, C. Lucas used the compound term when he wrote: “Oils [are] insoluble in water, without some proper intermedium.”¹⁰ Given Coleridge’s interests, it is not a stretch to introduce the chemical etymology of intermedium to this discussion. Coleridge was quite good friends with the famous chemist and lecturer Sir Humphry Davy; together they had planned to set up a chemical laboratory. Also, Coleridge claimed that to renew his stock of metaphors he attended Davy’s lectures.¹¹

Within the last decade, the term intermedia has expanded internationally to refer to programs on and works in new

3. Alison Knowles, in discussion with the author, August 10, 2003.

4. Ken Friedman and others, “FLUXLIST” <http://www.fluxus.org/FLUXLIST/faq.htm>. This site officially appeared on

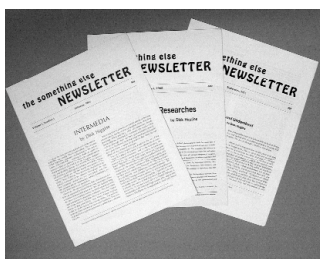
April 19, 1996 with Dick Higgins as one of its launchers.

5. Thomas Middleton Rayson ed., *Coleridge’s Miscellaneous Criticism* (London: Constable & Co., 1936), 33.

6. *Ibid.*, 32.

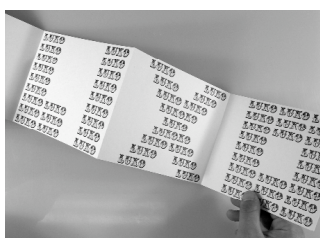
7. *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd Edition, Stuart Berg Flexner, ed. (New York: Random House, 1993).

8. *Ibid.*



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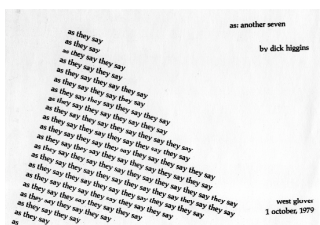
The Something Else Newsletter



bl 2

LUXO

Augusto de Campos
1965



bl 3

as they say

Dick Higgins

Print

From *Le Point d'Ironie n.5*

1979

media, site-specific art, interactive art, installation, new genres, and performance art. Currently, there is a particular emphasis on the media affix, due to the popularity of sonic, video, and computer media in the arts. In North America, there are over a dozen colleges and universities that offer a BFA and/or MFA in Intermedia, including University of Florida, Arizona State University, University of North Carolina, Mills College, Pacific Northwest College of Art (PCA), and the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. It is no accident that intermedia is used in Central and Eastern Europe, including former Slovenia, Slovakia, Romania, and Budapest, Hungary, for contemporary projects and programs. During the emergence of Fluxus, performance art, conceptual art, and intermedial concepts, these countries experienced a short-lived, relatively free opportunity to explore contemporary art. With the appearance of free democratic governments in the 1990s, the artists of these countries returned to the previous avant-garde for points from which to proceed. For instance, during the Hungarian revolution of 1989, students at the Hungarian Art Academy revolted against the rigid, outdated academy backed by politically appointed professors and that led to the founding of a rudimentary media department named Intermedia by Peternák Miklós and Janos Sugar. Miklós, also Director of C3, backed by the Soros Center for Contemporary Art, has collaborated with Hull Time Based Arts, United Kingdom and ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany.¹² He used "Intermedia" as the title for his in-depth program that described the contemporary moment of Hungarian art through on-going conference series, exhibitions, and catalogs.¹³

Appropriately, intermedia has been linked both with conceptual art and made distinct from it. For instance, the University of California, Berkeley; The Walker Art Center; Getty Research Institute; Franklin Furnace; and others have collaborated to produce "Conceptual and Intermedia Arts Online," a project which addresses the challenges of documenting and preserving non-traditional collections of art.¹⁴ The reference to intermedia within the digital and electronic art community represents a dichotomy of thought that exists within that community. On the one hand, there are hardware and software projects that are liberally technical and require high levels of programming and electronic craft. Within this category, works often refer to the language, history, and theory within either the digital or the scientific realm, and artists, such as Eduardo Kac or Lynn Herschman, may or may not employ the technical skill themselves. On the other hand, there are artists whose methods may or may not employ a highly technical component but whose context and form fuses with other media, such as performance, poetry, drawing, installation, sound art, etc. This category would include a range from @rtmark and

9. Oxford University Press, "Oxford English Dictionary On-line," <http://oed.com/>.

10. Ibid.

11. David Knight, *Humphry Davy: Science and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 1992), 53.

12. Intermedia Department of the Hungarian Academy of Fine Art, http://www.heise.de/tp/deutsch/pop/topic_0/4015/g1.html.

13. Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts Intermedia

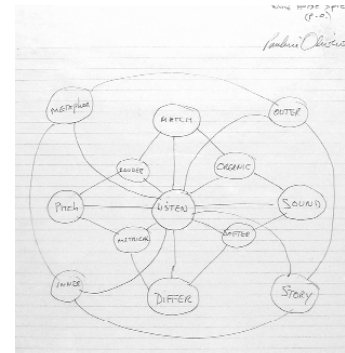
Department, <http://intermedia.c3.hu>.

14. Richard Rinehart, "Conceptual and Intermedia Arts Online: The Challenge of Documenting and Presenting Non-traditional Art Collections," *Archives & Museum Informatics*, http://www.archimuse.com/mw99/abstracts/prg_1090.

Nina Katchadourian to Critical Art Ensemble of conceptual artists, who are working intermedially with technology. Furthermore, thousands of contemporary artists have adopted the term intermedia to refer to their own working methodology, especially when they produce works that have a digital or mass media component. The reason these artists have adopted the term intermedia is precisely due to the fact that many contemporary artists are working conceptually and often, though not exclusively, with digital tools. An example is Critical Art Ensemble's Nomadmedia in which the term intermedial art describes their work that fuses performance, biology, and corporate tools.¹⁵

However, problems arise when artists whose output is strictly within the digital box, such as artists working in hypertext¹⁶ or hypermedia, assert that their research is within an intermedia framework. In 1965, philosopher and visionary Ted Nelson coined the terms "hypertext" (hypertext was later adopted by Tim Berners-Lee of CERN when that company implemented a coding language for the World Wide Web) and "hypermedia." Hypertext referred to non-sequential writing, which Nelson believed was closer to human thought than linear writing. Nelson's vision was to manifest a deeply interconnected literary source database. His primary inspiration came from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan," cited as the most intertextual poem in the history of literature.¹⁷ Nelson imagined that all of thought was "intertwined" and that, perhaps, all of literature could be hypertextually linked through a database network similar to an endless footnoting system. "Let me introduce the word hypertext to mean a body of written or pictorial material interconnected in such a complex way that it could not conveniently be presented or represented on paper."¹⁸ Although Higgins and Nelson both advocated a similar new conceptual space and both were inspired by Coleridge, neither were aware that their theories were simultaneously coming into being.¹⁹

Hypertext pertains to multiple gestures that are interconnected, while the use of intermedia concerns a single gesture conceptually existing between medias. Active contributors to digital conferences, such as SIGGRAPH and International Society on Electronics Arts (ISEA)²⁰ and journals such as *Leonardo* (MIT Press), argue for a "digital intermedia [that] is the high-level process that corresponds to the low-level truism: all media is data, a single substance."²¹ This synesthesia concept differs significantly from Higgins's proposal because media is reduced to a single digital paradigm. Even digitizing analog medias, such as drawing, sound, and video performance, exist for the intermedia purists as an interpretation that is more multi-media than intermedia. Furthermore, this interpretation seems to negate what Higgins advo-



[1] 4

Wind Horse Spiel
Pauline Oliveros
Ink on paper
n.d.

15. Rebecca Schneider, "The Critical Art Ensemble Nomadmedia," *The Drama Review* 44:4 T168 (Winter 2000), <http://mitpress.mit.edu/journals/DRAM/44-4/abs/Schneider.html>.

16. Webnox Corporation, "HyperDictionary," <http://HyperDictionary.com/>. This on-line dictionary defines intermedia as a "hypertext system developed by a research group at IRIS (Brown University)."

17. Dr. James C. McKusick (Coleridge scholar and former English Department chair, UMBC), in discussion with the author, November 2001.

18. Ted Nelson, "Project Xanadu," <http://xanadu.com/>.

cated as the conceptual structures between medias, a view which is quite distinct from the craft of programming structures used in digital media. It is little wonder that Simon Penny argues for a more in-depth understanding of intermedial works by artists working in technology:

A vast untapped knowledge base for the development of interactive media exists in the corpus of Happening, Environment, Installation, Performance, Fluxus artwork of the last thirty years. These radical, experimental genres took the user interface and interaction as their subject matter before anyone thought in such terms....Not only is the cognitive science/computer science community generally unaware of this knowledge base, but the general tendency for art research to preempt technological problems remains largely unremarked.²²

Paradigms and Publishing

Higgins developed the foundation for the concepts he held throughout his life in the late 1950s after studying literature at Yale and Columbia and becoming a pioneering voice in the emerging performance scene. He wrote highly experimental plays, such as *Stacked Deck*, and performed in Allan Kaprow's first Happening - *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*.²³ (Happenings were "things that happened" with performers creating a collage of visual events.) In 1957-9, John Cage's influential experimental composition class at the New School for Social Research in New York brought individuals together who became a seminal force in the evolution of performance art. Artist Al Hansen, Dick Higgins, composer Richard Maxfield, chemist George Brecht, painter Larry Poons, and poet Jackson Mac Low all met in Cage's class and were exposed to his use of chance operation methods (rolling the dice or counting traffic patterns), the I-Ching, and indeterminacy when composing music. With this approach, the composer's taste could be abolished, thus liberating music from the artist's ego in favor of a more universal music. One of the outcomes of this course is what became known as the "event score." These were simple text-based directions prompting an action on the part of a reader or performer. From Higgins's *Danger Music* series, the May 1962 event score *Danger Music Number 17* reads simply:

Scream! Scream!
Scream! Scream!
Scream! Scream!

The significance of Cage's influence on his students was precisely due to the fact that they were not exclusively musical but came from a variety of disciplines. These students applied Cage's composition techniques, such as chance operations and indeterminacy, to their particular disciplines, especially once they began working in publishing, gallery, and performance venues.



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The Store
From *Store Days*
Claes Oldenburg
Something Else Press
1968

In 1961-2 pop artist Claes Oldenburg ran a lower east side of Manhattan store, which included a performance space named Ray Gun Theater.

19. Ted Nelson, e-mail message to author, June 2001.

20. SIGGRAPH is an annual computer and animation conference with an attendance of thirty to forty thousand

corporate vendors and computer researchers. The International Society on Electronic Arts (ISEA) is a smaller annual conference that focuses on fine art researchers.

21. Jack Hertz, "Synesthesia" (conference notes from SIGGRAPH 2001).

22. Simon Penny, *Critical Issues in Electronic Media* (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), 53.

23. Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 112.

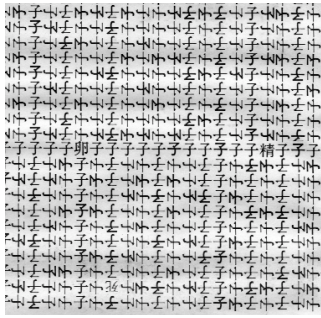
Higgins saw that these techniques offered “independence”²⁴ from the traditions of modern art, if they were extended and expanded in order to create a systemic theory of art. Higgins recognized that the innovative significance was in constructing the paradigm and not in the execution of the ready-made structure or event. This would be the foundation for his own intermedial work. For Higgins, intermedia intermingles ideas and inquiries and alters meaning by the exchange of paradigms from one media to another. For instance, when does a theatrical event “act” like a musical composition or a poem “act” like a painting? *Haydn in the Forest* by Dick Higgins (see fig. 6) suggests that the graphical image of trees on the score might be treated as silences or a combination of chords, silences, tempos, etc. During these altered silences, we demand both the silent moments between the audible experience of the piano and the graphical experience of the trees in order to mentally leap into imagining a real forest’s sights and sounds. In one way, *Haydn in the Forest* is an analysis of a musical score, and in another way, it is a graphical piece. But for the artist as the provider of theory, these fusions are of a moment, an obvious space outside both music and graphics. For Higgins specifically, these fusions are not the gentle cross-sensories of synesthesia. Rather, his fusions clash into each other and alarm our sense of boundaries with vivid simplicity.

Higgins’s own publishing ventures began with a falling out between Higgins and Fluxus organizer George Maciunas. When Higgins founded the Something Else Press (SEP) in 1964, SEP truly was something other than Fluxus. Prior to his Fluxus collaborations, Higgins had forged a synthesis of art concepts, and when he formed his own press, he mandated that it was always to publish what was not the “going thing”²⁵ and was continuously to publish something else. Similar to Fluxus, the nature of “something else” would always be in transition. Most significantly, in conjunction with his use of the term intermedia, Higgins would through his establishment of a gallery and his publication of books, newsletters, and pamphlets espouse and promote a theory for a long-term, worldwide direction in art. In publishing archival trade books by artists, Higgins initiated a concept that even today is unprecedented. With cutting-edge source material that included experimental content and layouts, SEP books ensured that, among the shelves of popular trade books, the intermedial voices of artists, composers, choreographers, poets, and theorists would be not only accessible but ordinary. Higgins further framed his mission within history by republishing influential forces that had helped shape his theories, including six obscure and out-of-print works by Gertrude Stein and *Dada Almanach* by Richard Huelsenbeck.

24. Ibid., *Jefferson’s Birthday/Postface* 51.

25. Ibid., 24-27. Higgins’s reference to the “going thing” predates

Something Else Press, but he states a clear position of the work he will support.



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Individual
 Seiichi Niikuni
 Pen and ink
 Signed "For Dick the great"
 1976

Chance and Concepts

By 1965, Fluxus affiliate Henry Flynt had already coined the term "concept art" and Higgins had, in the period of a decade, become well-versed in the international movements of Nouveau Réaliste (France and Italy), Gruppe Zaj (Spain), Dé-Coll/age (Germany), Happenings (USA), Gutai Group (Japan), Viennese Actionism (Switzerland), and Fluxus (Germany, Scandinavia, New York and later Fluxus West). At the time that these international concept artists were emerging and working across mediums and disciplines, Higgins wrote his seminal article "Intermedia," describing and defining the interdisciplinary protocol of a new direction in art that delineated a theoretical and material break with the recent past. Higgins saw the interconnectedness among these emerging forms as allowing a unique central expression between gesture and thought, without favoring a specific art medium. While previous art movements had been based on abstraction, expressionism, the release of the unconscious, and a genius's intuition, by the 1960s, many artists had abandoned these theories, while others had translated these notions into life-like formats of ordinary procedures that were concrete, scientific, and minimal, including methods based upon Zen influences that anyone could perform or produce. This elevated a perception of a natural world where art objects and materials emerged as resonant artifacts and where the artist's persona was subdued within that world. Owen Smith explains:

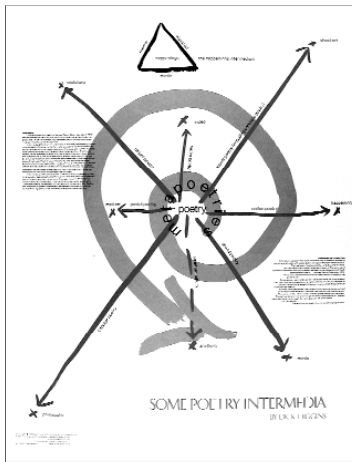
The study of Zen...had taught Cage that rationality gives a false impression of the world as static, for Zen holds that the world is a united web of interrelationships that are in a state of constant flux and change....Zen metaphysics also extends to notions of the self and led Cage to a critique of the notion of the artist as genius. Zen looks at the individual not as an isolated entity, but as parts of an essentially integrated whole.²⁶

In the pamphlet *Chance-Imagery*, Fluxus artist George Brecht uses the word "chance" as an intermedium when he describes Jackson Pollock's material evidence of the unconscious expressed through the utilization of automatic methods. Brecht views Pollack's paintings as "...much less manifestations of one of a group of techniques for releasing the unconscious... than... of a single, integrated use of chance as a means of unlocking the deepest possible grasp of nature in its broadest sense."²⁷ Here the method of chance becomes the intermedium between the personification of an allegorical Pollack and the corporeal work of the post-Cagean artists. This relates to Brecht's grasp of chance (borrowed from Cage and Pollack) as a technique which puts ordinary artists in the service of nature's phenomena.

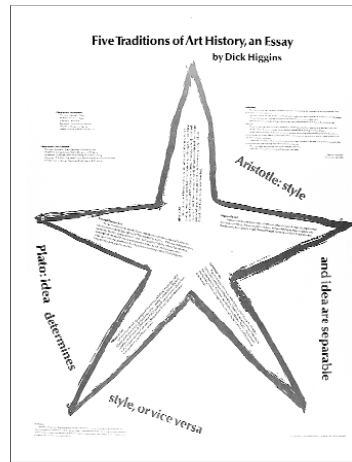
Higgins explained that Coleridge used the term inter-

26. Owen F. Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego, CA: San Diego State University Press, 1998).

27. George Brecht, *Chance-Imagery* (New York: Something Else Press, 1966), 6.



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medium “in its exact contemporary sense.”²⁸ He says that “you can see its constituent parts hopefully adding up and fusing into an articulate whole... you can use an intermedial approach to an unfamiliar work of art ... and you don’t have to be puzzled by it.”²⁹ In Higgins’s poster essay *5 Traditions of Art History*, he utilizes the five points of a star as an example of an intermedial approach in which an art work may be understood by any of five analytical entry points he offers: expressive, exemplativist (referring to paradigms), mimetic, pragmatic, and subjective. However, a spectator’s intermedial analysis is distinct from creating an intermedial work of art. Higgins explains, “The artist can set out to do something that is intermedial or you can use it as a spectator.”³⁰

Therefore, intermedium is a tool, and intermedia is a theoretical position. As a theoretical position, intermedia articulates points between, among, and above the genres, rigid categories, and tools solidified by the institutions of culture. Both Coleridge and Higgins fused visual and sonic methods to position their work outside the conventions of their literary canons. In Samuel Coleridge’s handwritten works, he often visually highlighted handwritten letters to emphasize their phonetic rhythm. In the onomatopoeic Coleridge line “I skimmed the smooth thin stone along thy breast,” James McKusick notes that “we can see how “the repetition of ‘S’ sounds echoes the skipping of the stone, while the words ‘smooth thin stone’ (three long syllables) serve to slow the line and thus to mimic the way the stone lingers on the surface of the water, refusing to sink.”³¹ When describing twentieth-century poetry, Higgins experiences this type of visual-sonic-literary form as intermedial in his event score *Danger Music Number 17* (Scream!). The piercing sound of the long “e” in the words screech, shriek, and scream seem audibly coupled to the ambiguously endless syllable of the word cry (cri in French). In fact, scream, screech, shriek are all imitative forms of

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Some Poetry Intermedia
Dick Higgins
Offset print
1976

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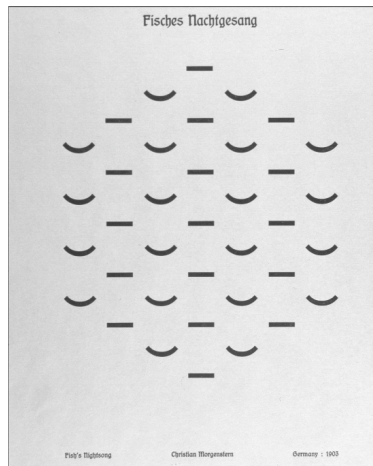
Five Traditions of Art History
Dick Higgins
Offset print
1976

28. Dick Higgins, *Horizons: The Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 23.

29. Larry Miller, *Interview with Dick Higgins*, © Larry Miller 1992/2003, video, Hi8 format, 2:25 min.

30. Ibid.

31. James C. McKusick, “‘Singing of Mount Abora:’ Coleridge’s Quest for Linguistic Origins” in *Critical Essays on Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Leonard Orr (New York: G. K. Hall, 1994), 60.



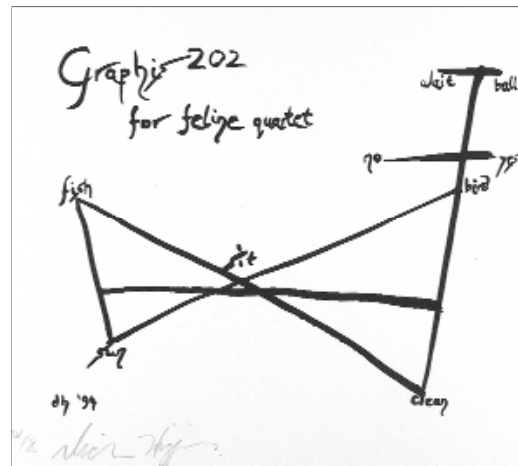
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Fisches Nachtgesang (Fish's Night Song)
Christian Morgenstern
1903
Reproduction by Glenn Todd
From *Shaped Poetry*
The Arion Press
1981

[1] 10

Graphis 202 for feline quartet
Dick Higgins
Artist proof IV/X
1997



[1] 10

[1] "The Wind is a Medium of the Sky"

the Old English "skrei" (and krei) a word echoing the sound of a number of birds, including the crow and raven. Before giving a scholarly examination of *Danger Music Number 17*, Hannah Higgins delightfully portrays the primitive experience of her father's performance when she describes witnessing *Danger Music Number 17* as a five-year-old girl: "The screams have no words, yet we know he can speak...The sound weakens as he exhausts himself, giving way to intermittent hisses, squeaks, and occasional rusty screams...The animals, like the people in that room, wait and wonder when the peace will be disturbed again."³²

With his broad knowledge of the humanities, Higgins consistently applied a diachronic analysis to the work of his Fluxus, Happening, and Intermedia colleagues. He also identified avant-garde elements in classical literature that seemed to foretell modern techniques. Higgins suggests that the term media refers to genres or categories of the arts that emerged during the Renaissance. However, it is romantic as well as utopian to envision a pre-categorical humanistic moment when ideas were an "intertwined" Tower of Babel, or an ancient shriek of crows and cry of ravens. These institutional categories have always existed. They have always been in flux, and the use of intermedia has always been possible — and has always been shifting. It is precisely at the moment that any genres cease to communicate their inquiries with each other that the possibility arises for the use of the intermedia. Intermedia does not judge the quality of an artwork; it is an opportunity for a way of working that has always existed. Intermedia happens to be a central tendency in the later half of the twentieth century.

What we've done, I hope, is that in the last part of this century we've made a revolution in the subject matter as profound as the revolution in form in the beginning of the century. By that I don't mean simply using unusual subjects, I mean we've come to give them different roles within the art that we're using.³³

32. Hannah B. Higgins, "Critical Refluxions or Fluxscribnotes by the daughter of Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles" in *The New Art Examiner* March, 1994, 18-19.

33. Ibid., Miller, *Interview*.