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TOWARDS THE 1970's

by DICK HIGGINS

Looking back at the period 1959 (when the 1960's began in the arts) through 1968 (when they began to end), one is conscious of a really remarkable amount of change in the cultural environment and in the arts themselves. But then isn't that true of all decades? A person who can remember the years 1897-1906 may recall major shifts in the French literary scene, in the Russian political and intellectual situation, etc. Historians can vouch for shift in mentality between 1827 and 1836 in America, with the rise of Jacksonian Democracy, in Europe, with the replacement of the Biedermeier spirit by the militant democratic spirit which would climax in 1848, in England with Cobden's reforms, etc. Those who really have a flair for understanding the past can see the same kind of shift between 1756 and 1765, 1605 and 1614, A.D. 30 and A.D. 39 (a critical period in Chinese history, as in Roman), etc. In other words, continuity is something of an illusion, and it is not at all academic to consider just what happened when and where, since these events are what define the sequence of change, which is the stuff of which experience consists.

Ten years ago this would have been less obvious. At that time the illusion of continuity and eternity was far stronger than today. The work of many avant-gardists of that time stressed this—the music of La Monte Young comes to mind, for instance, or that of Morton Feldman. Others stressed the other aspect of the eternal—impermanence, the transient and ephemeral. This was implicit in the environments of the early Happenings—made of delicate paper, plastic sheets and chicken wire, all utterly fugitive. It was a conscious element in the Fluxus movement.

But such experiences as the peace and civil rights movements, during the 1960's, led to a greater sense of change, event and experience. This has led to a shift in the nature of our perception

of time, away from the endless continuum or discontinuum, towards a sequential perception that is more akin to narrative. The sense of great events taking place, of making a profound revolution which affects everything from our economic and social structures (the black revolution), our mores (the sexual revolution), our economics (the new communalism and tribalism, and the student revolts) to our deepest physical and psychological insights (the psychedelic explosion), this sense of the occurrence of great events leads to a taste for content, in the arts, more than for the abstract values and structures which were characteristic of the 1960's.

Through the 1960's there was a great deal of emphasis on the medium of work, and so it was inevitable that artists should investigate the intermedia, the mid-ground between traditional media. This was a new concept and a new field to explore. As it happened I coined the term to distinguish a certain body of work which already existed from "mixed media," a term which designates works and situations in which the musical, visual, sculptural or whatever other elements all exist simultaneously, but in which each is perceived as a separate entity. Operas, animated cartoons and rock and roll concerts with light shows are all mixed media, but not intermedia. In intermedia these elements would be fused, both conceptually and practically.

Many major innovations of the 1960's were in the direction of intermedia. Happenings are the intermedium between visual art, music and drama. Concrete poetry lies between poetry and the fine arts. Op art is just one of the many possibilities lying between art and technology (an increasingly important class of intermedia, apparently). Minimal art lies between art and the concept of nothing, rest or void. All of these are media, formats, just as painting and collage are media, formats. For better or for worse they have been added to the repertoire of formal possibilities. But in and of themselves they have no intrinsic worth except to those who make a study of forms, *per se*.

However the market place has not kept tabs on this. It has continually mistaken the grammar of the communication of the new arts for its entire message, rather than seeing that it was the intended message which caused the grammar to form itself as it did. There-

fore those in the market place— commercial critics of all sorts— have created the illusion of a Happenings movement, a concrete poetry movement, an op art movement, a pop art movement, a minimal art movement, and so on. This error, akin in its naivety to describing certain works of Mozart as “belonging to the sonata movement,” is what gives the illusion of an unbelievably rapid succession of art movements in the last years, when actually the dominant tendencies in the 1960’s were relatively simple— one set of artists using intermedia and trying to make their work concrete with the external world, and the other set of artists using other intermedia trying to make their work discrete from the external world, conforming instead with their ideals, insights or personal concepts. These tendencies have their roots in far earlier periods, and the concretists and the idealists are the two main schools of the last sixty years, being heirs to the classicist and the romantics respectively.

However the preservation of the error has served an important function. In a time when institutions must compete for support, it serves their interests to have as many important shows as possible, and for promotional reasons it is therefore advantageous not to show, simply, the best work of our time, but to make instead every show a new movement, based on its format. Similarly, let us assume that Mr. Bones is a collector of modern art, a very serious and somewhat affluent one. He will want, of course, to have every movement represented in his collection, and being a responsible person will conscientiously acquire a work from each movement. Suppose Mr. Bones suddenly comes to agree with my assertion that there are really only two movements going on. He will then realize that he has merely been conscientious about trying to acquire something in each format, which is, on the face of it, a bit absurd and unnecessary. He will also see that it has all along been in the galleries’ best interests to preserve the illusion of so many movements, in order that they can sell him more work. Not merely him, either, but virtually all the major collectors. This increases the demand, and therefore it explains the inflated prices of art. Now that Mr. Bones sees that the illusion of these movements is huxterism, and realizes that a number of other collectors have the same thoughts crossing their mind, he begins to be concerned what will happen to the value of his collection in case a financial crisis develops. And so he immediately

sells off those works he has acquired in order to have things of each format, but, alas, only to find that his colleagues are doing the same.

One would have to be a complete hay-seed to buy a work of art in a New York gallery in 1969 and the years immediately following. The situation is simply too inflated and artificial. The realities of the valid art of the 1960's are too remote from the image which the media, museums and galleries have found it to their advantage to promote. Within a year it should be possible to purchase a Poons, a Stella or a Morris for 1/10th of what it costs today, to name only major artists who have been huxtered for the wrong reasons. And so probably the visual artists, who are the elite of all artists today as regards their prestige and impact, will play a far less important role in the avant garde of the 1970's. Even though, almost paradoxically, those artists who don't seem to fit into the huxterized picture of the "movements" of the 1960's, will slowly be becoming recognized for their impact on the basis of work,— artists such as Ay-o, Diter Rot, Robert Filliou, George Brecht, Ray Johnson, etc. Not to mention those new figures whose work is only now maturing, but who have remained hidden through the 60's because their medium was not their message, radical though this medium might be.

Concrete poetry has now been introduced around the world. New York missed it for the most part. There were three gallery shows— a little publicized one at the Kornblee Gallery, a less noticed one at our own Something Else Gallery, and a slightly better publicized one at the gallery of the School of Visual Arts. But to arrange now for a huge public exhibition of concrete poetry would be to waken the dead, to continue the illusion of the 1960's of over-emphasizing media and the illusion of "movements." Two related intermedia, sound poetry (poetry → music/sound) and object poetry (poetry → sculpture/objects) are hardly known in the United States at all, even though major figures are working in them, people such as Jackson Mac Low, Brion Gysin and others in the former, and Carl Fernbach-Flarsheim, Bici Hendricks and many more in the latter. However the availability of all three of these intermedia has become obvious, and each is being increasingly widely used by artists of very divergent views.

My projected view is therefore of a collapse of the financial structure and economic bases by which all the arts have been supported and according to the needs of which they have been presented or mis-presented. Already the young people are calling out that the emperor has no clothes. In Frankfurt am Main in February of this year some students broke up a performance of electronic music of Karlheinz Stockhausen, Gottfried Koenig and John Cage as being bourgeois art. While their accusation is no doubt incorrect, since the old method of presenting work has become obsolescent and the new method (records and private performances) is not yet taken sufficiently seriously, it is small wonder that they should attribute one kind of anachronism to the labels of another. Again, increasingly one hears the young people say that the art of our time is revolution. To this feeling we can ascribe the penchant of the young people for disrupting the huxters at their art-world events, e.g., the student disturbances at the Milan and Venice biennales in the Spring and Summer of 1968, and the riots at the Cologne Kunstmarkt and Frankfurt Book Fair the following Autumn. This is a tendency which is not likely to be replaced by some other until the huxter element is either destroyed or drastically reduced. It would appear that "truth in packaging" does not apply to the arts and why shouldn't the students protest until it does?

I have already mentioned that the new revolution in the arts is the revolution of subject matter. By 1972 it will be commonplace to see all kinds of art works devoted to specific programmatic goals (not necessarily political, of course). Already concrete poets are producing poster poems for a wide variety of purposes which would have seemed bizarre—or too limited—even a short time ago, for instance José Lino Grünewald's nationalistic "Save Our Oil" poem from Brazil. Today there is a tendency for any impromptu mass event to be called a happening. But very soon there will be real art rituals—Happenings in the more specific sense—with the participation of scores, hundreds or thousands of participants, intended for everything from the reform of this or that labor union to the protesting of police violence or some unjust law. Or the honoring of some dead but admired individual. Happenings may, on some scale, replace marriages and funerals. Vostell and Kaprow (to name two originators of Happenings—in fact Kaprow is the man

who named the form) have already provided the techniques and forms for this to happen. It remains only to fill in the subject matter.

I already have noted at the beginning of this article the narrative, sequential sensibility which seems to be replacing the extreme media-consciousness of the 1960's, in connection with the shift in the nature of views towards time. In literature this will probably lead to a substantial revival of interest in the story *per se*, and will cause a new kind of novel to come about, perhaps with multiple stories blending into an aggregate. I think it will also result in greater attention being given to arts which have hitherto, at least in their avant-garde phases, had relatively little prestige except for their own aficionados: the dance and cinema. In the 1960's many poets were deeply affected by ideas originating in music, especially those of John Cage. But now many of the ideas which become current will probably be arriving out of the dance and the cinema. In the 1950's the avant-garde dancers—James Waring, Katherine Litz, etc.—appeared to keep pretty much to their own world, influencing and touching upon little outside of it. But in the 1960's this became less true. The dancers associated with the Judson Memorial Church, such as Yvonne Rainer, Judith Dunn and Trisha Brown, began to have a much wider impact on the other arts, and even to attract artists from other disciplines into their companies. This trend seems to be intensifying. Listening to one of the best of the new sound-poets read, Denis Dunn, I was struck by the essentiality of the choreographic twists and turns his free hand made in relationship with his voice. Hearing him read the same poem a little later, I noted that the hand movement was repeated exactly. In other words, a choreographic movement had become embedded into the poem, which would have seemed very bizarre ten years ago. Some of the new dancers, such as Meredith Monk, create social relationships in the course of their work which are a new thing to theater (except, perhaps, for Happenings), and whose impact is original and profound.

In the early 1960's film-makers went to showings of "underground" (i.e. independent artists') cinema. Few others bothered. One admired certain film-makers, to the extent that one admired *any* film makers, simply because there were so few trying to do *anything*, not because one really liked their work. However the

appearance of the various film-makers' coöps solved a number of the material problems implicit in the making of films— shipping, storing, cataloging, etc. More and more interesting work came to be done by increasing numbers of people, and, informed by the achievements of others more than before, the films began to be really exciting. Rather than simply the best available. Incidentally, one might note the increasing numbers of dancers who are making "motion pictures." The correspondence between the two arts seems suggested by this.

Furthermore the cinema is an art which captures its subject matter. Therefore the kinds of forms which were developed in poetry and Happenings in the 1960's can easily be adapted to structure objective bodies of subject matter. In this way also the cinema seems peculiarly timely as a medium. In the 1970's the elite artists will not be the visual ones, in all likelihood, but the film-makers and the choreographers. Both arts use time. And, for now, that seems to be the name of the game.

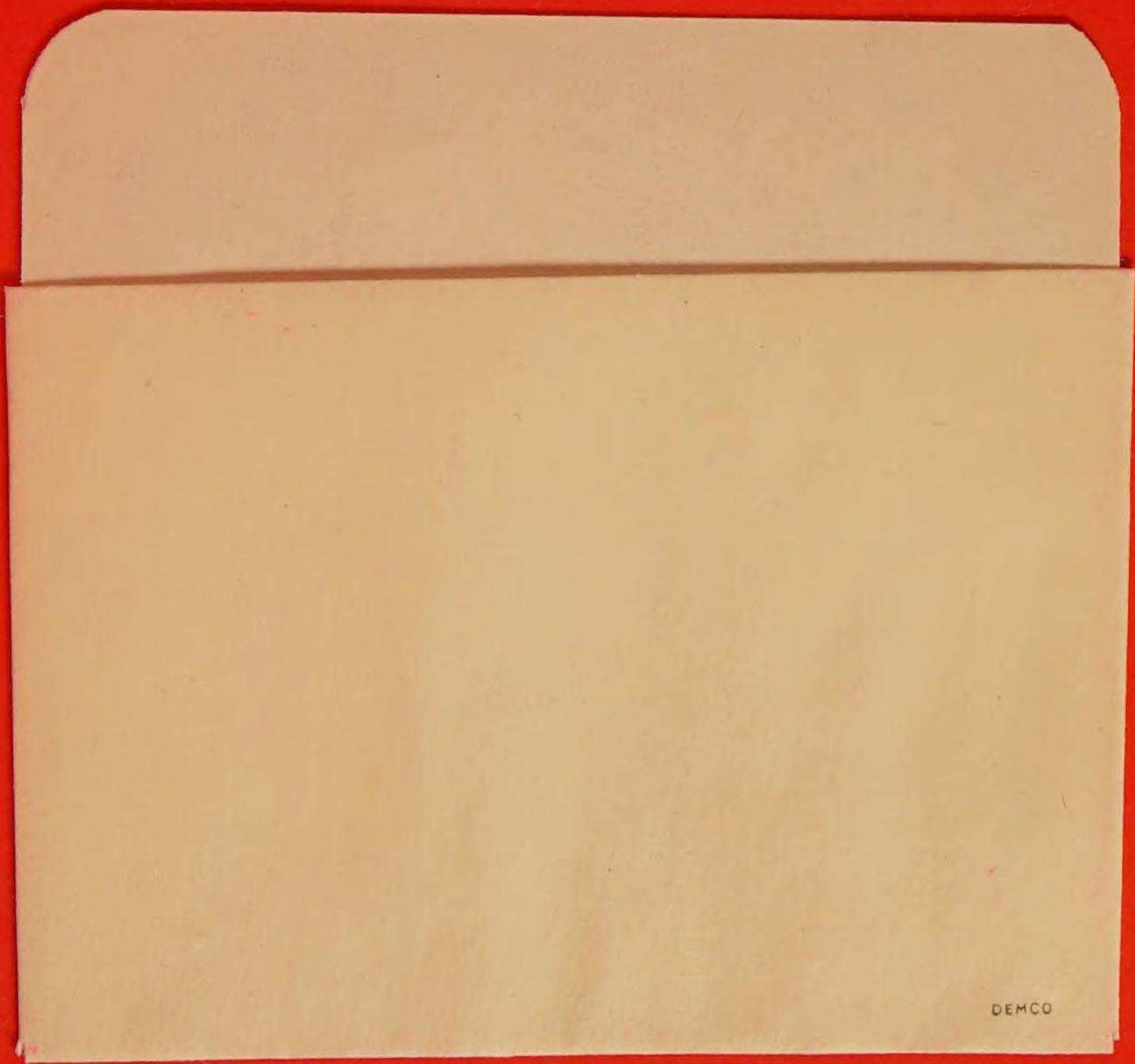
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Dick Higgins is the founder of Something Else Press and the author of various books including Jefferson's Birthday/Post Face, What Are Legends. A collection of his essays, poems, speculations and performance works titled FOEW & OMBWHNW will soon be published by Something Else Press.





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