

ALDEN PROJECTS™

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**Publishing the Portable Museum:
William N. Copley's The Letter Edged in Black Press**

March 16 – May 6, 2018 | Opening Reception: Sunday, March 18 at 6pm

The Letter Edged in Black Press Inc. has been established by William Copley, President and Provocateur, and Dimitri Petrov, Vice-President and Henchman. The first production of the Press will be the bi-monthly portfolio, S.M.S. Each portfolio will contain personal manifestations by the new as well as the established contemporary artists in all media. The primary concern of the publisher is to realize the poetic statement in review form and to liberate the artist from the restrictions of format.

– The Letter Edged in Black Press, undated
manifesto printed on vellum (c. 1968)

S.M.S. is a portable gallery of contemporary hyper-awareness.

– The Letter Edged in Black Press, undated
manifesto printed on pink paper (c. 1968)

With his oil on canvas hanging in the landmark *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage* exhibition at MoMA (opening March 1968), William N. Copley temporarily turned his back on the solitary activity of painting to found The Letter Edged in Black Press, a collaborative publishing venture inspired by his mentor and friend, Marcel Duchamp. With Copley announced as “President and Provocateur,” the first undertaking of the press—which would also be its last—was *S.M.S.* (short for *Shit Must Stop*), a bi-monthly portfolio invoking urgent artistic innovation at all levels: production, reception, and distribution. Rather than inviting conventional reproductions (e.g. “prints”) intended to occupy a gallery wall, Copley formed a new kind of collaborative enterprise, aiming to commission and distribute original multiples by all types of creators to be carefully organized in curated gangs of between 11 and 14 loosely laid-in to artist-designed portfolios. Distributed through the mail by subscription, *S.M.S.* was also offered individually, for example at George Wittenborn’s unusual bookstore.¹

An early flyer announced the production as follows: “*S.M.S.* is produced in a relatively small quantity to satisfy the demands of a highly selective audience. A special, limited edition of sets of the year’s six issues personally signed by all participating artists will be made available to collectors at the end of the year.” Defying categories and expectations about original art and its reception, Copley’s epic gambit emerged out of the tumultuous historical conditions of 1968. Copley’s Letter Edged in Black Press set out to publish “a gallery in a portfolio,” but it ended up igniting a publishing revolution. 50 years later, *S.M.S.* is a portable museum.

Organized by Alden Projects™ in association with the William N. Copley Estate, this exhibition takes a comprehensive look at *S.M.S.*, but also at the artist’s broader publishing activities, including enduring

¹ Individual portfolios of *S.M.S.* were offered at Wittenborn & Co., the artist-friendly Madison Avenue hybrid bookstore and publisher of the first English translations of Duchamp’s *The Green Box* (1951 and 1960) and among other distinctions, the primary distributor of Ed Ruscha’s early, perplexing publications since around 1963. George Wittenborn published an accordion folded prospectus for both Ed Ruscha’s books and later for *S.M.S.* (Fall 1968). During the late 1960s, Ruscha exhibited at the same New York gallery as Copley—Alexandre Iolas—whom Copley introduced to his artist friend. In a Letter Edged in Black Press communiqué, probably 1967, “Edward Roucha” (sic) is announced as a forthcoming contributor to *S.M.S.* (so too is “Walter Hoppes” [sic]). Ruscha’s contribution to *S.M.S.*, unfortunately, never materialized.

collaborations with Marcel Duchamp, Richard Hamilton, and Dieter Roth Present are unique works made in association with Copley's The Letter Edged in Black Press many never previously exhibited – by Marcel Duchamp, Bruce Nauman, Dieter Roth, On Kawara, Neil Jenney, and Billy B. Copley. Also present is archival correspondence from invited artists, including John Cage, Bruce Conner, Bruce Nauman, and Lucas Samaras. Original art by Colleen Riley, age 9 (used on the cover of the contribution by her father, Terry Riley) is also present.

No ordinary portfolio of artists' editions, *S.M.S.* issued challenging works in unorthodox and heteroclitic formats. A partial list of contributors to *S.M.S.* includes Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Méret Oppenheim, Roy Lichtenstein, Bruce Nauman, John Cage, Nicolas Calas, Bruce Conner, Christo, Claes Oldenburg, John Cage, Arman, Richard Hamilton, Walter de Maria, James Lee Byars, Ray Johnson, Dieter Roth, On Kawara, Joseph Kosuth, Julien Levy, Hannah Weiner, Lawrence Weiner, Edward Boreal, Lee Lozano, Yoko Ono, Princess Winifred, Kasper König, La Monte Young, Richard Artschwager, Hollis Frampton, John Giorno, H.C. Westermann, Robert Watts, Mimmo Rotella, Billy Copley, Bernar Venet, Diane Wakowski, Mel Ramos, Angus MacLise, Terry Riley, and Congo (a chimpanzee).

GUESTS, HOSTS, AND GHOSTS IN THE MACHINE

I'll come with Copley...who is going to take charge of getting the 'valises' into production and I'll show him your new ideas for the construction.

– Marcel Duchamp writing to Iliasz in January, 1955²

This exhibition traces the genealogy of Duchamp's collaborations with Copley, but also the former's role in, and impact upon, Copley's publishing activities. Copley not only collected major works by Duchamp, including a deluxe *Boite-en-Valise* (1948) (there were 20 in all), a suitcase filled with 69 reproductions and one unique work, as well as a *Green Box*, but he also owned a collection of 9 *Discs Inscribed With Puns* (1926). (*S.M.S.* collaborator, Dimitri Petrov, replicated one in smaller scale for the front of Duchamp's 1968 multiple for *S.M.S.*) Importantly, Copley oversaw the production of Duchamp's second series of valises, during the 1950s. For his part, Duchamp served for more than 12 years as one of three Directors of the William and Noma Copley Foundation (later the Cassandra Foundation), which funded an extraordinary list of artists (a number of whom later contributed to *S.M.S.*), but also published a series of at least ten monographs. Nearly all are present in this exhibition. Among these, Dieter Roth's *Copley Book* (1961-66) and Eduardo Paolozzi's *Kex* (1966) stand apart as extraordinary artist's books.

Overseeing the production of the publishing enterprise of the William and Noma Copley Foundation was another close and sustained collaborator, Richard Hamilton, whose 1960 typographic version of *The Green Box*--it is dedicated to William and Noma Copley--was the first translation into English. Published by George Wittenborn, this extraordinary artist's book united Duchamp, Hamilton, and Copley. The three were connected again on Richard Hamilton's *The Large Glass* (1965-66), which Copley commissioned around the same time that Hamilton was also supervising the production of *Copley Book* (1961-66), by Dieter Roth, the recipient of a Copley Foundation grant. This signal work consists of scores of loosely laid-in (i.e. unbound) correspondence and facsimiles about the process of making a book.

With Duchamp playing the role of ghost in the machine, Roth, Hamilton, and Copley's signal achievement anticipates the latter's approach to publishing *S.M.S.*

Finally, this exhibition also points towards Copley's broader interest in artist's books, of which he distributed one of his own as a multiple in *S.M.S. # 5, The Barber Shop*, a bright orange folder containing facsimile reproductions of documents related to legal copyright dispute about the Chicago barber's use of a sketch of a Picasso sculpture owned by the city of Chicago on one of his business cards. Interestingly,

² Marcel Duchamp, as cited in Paul B. Franklin, "A Guest + A Host = A Ghost: The Friendship and Collaborations Marcel Duchamp and William N. Copley," ed. Germano Celant, *William N. Copley* (Milano: Fondazione Prada & The Menil Collection, Houston, 2016), p. 64.

Richard Hamilton oversaw the production of Copley's artist's book, *The Evil I or The Story of My Life* (1965). Another artist's book by Copley, *Notes on a Project for a Dictionary of Ridiculous Images* (1972), underscores the artist's keen appreciation of the printed legacy of Dada and Surrealism's peculiar publications.

NOTES ON SPECIAL WORKS FOR SALE AT ALDEN PROJECTS™

Rare signed deluxe editions of *S.M.S.* have been made available for sale by Alden Projects™ in association with the William N. Copley Estate for this definitive exhibition.

Also in association with the William N. Copley Estate, Alden Projects™ is offering for sale a limited number of archive examples of the Duchamp record reserved from the original edition of *S.M.S.* #2. These archive copies are pristine examples of Duchamp's contribution. Stored in the manufacturer's original dust-sleeves, the records have never been unsheathed, played, or pinned to *S.M.S.* portfolio covers. Archive examples are issued with a letter of provenance from the William N. Copley Estate.

The William N. Copley Estate is also making available for sale for the first time ever a small number of unissued Dorothy Iannone multiples for *The Letter Edged in Black's* abandoned issue of *S.M.S.* #7. The work is a die-cut, stand-up cardboard cutout of the American president L.B.J., depicted with little pink genitalia visible through his trousers.

Finally, select signed multiples reserved for the Deluxe edition will be available individually, including key *S.M.S.* works *Folded Hat* by Roy Lichtenstein and *Footsteps* by Bruce Nauman.

Thanks are due to the William N. Copley Estate—Claire Copley, Theo Copley, and Billy B. Copley—for entrusting Alden Projects™ with William N. Copley's extraordinary work and that of his collaborators. Alden Projects™ would also like to thank, in particular, Billy B. Copley, an original collaborator on *S.M.S.*, and Anthony Atlas; both encouraged Alden Projects™ with this undertaking, gave generously of their knowledge and time, and patiently assisted with every aspect of this exhibition. Susan Rheinhold-Brown graciously loaned materials to this exhibition, but she also generously shared many stories and insights about William Copley, *S.M.S.*, and her important history in connection with it. Finally, a tip of the hat also goes to Paul Kasmin, Nick Olney, Katherine Jaensch, Randy Moore, and Melissa Stewart. Thanks also to the Getty Research Institute at the J. Paul Getty Trust.