



Commentaries on Bob Cobbing

Lawrence Upton

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Contents

Acknowledgements	6
Introduction	7
Writings Not Included in This Book	9
Review of <i>Pattern of Performance</i>	10
Bob Cobbing at The Voice Box	12
Bob Cobbing at The Klinker	14
Co-editing <i>Word Score Utterance Choreography</i>	16
Cobbing and Upton at the Barbican	23
Introduction of Bob Cobbing at the 5th Eric Mottram Celebration	24
Bob Cobbing and Eric Mottram Celebration	27
Bells, Whistles; and Sounds and Words	29
Introduction to Bob Cobbing at Sub Voicive Poetry	36
Cobbing, Pike and Upton at 291 Gallery	39
Bob Cobbing: A Worker in Progress	42
Funeral Oration for Cobbing	46
Celebrating the Memory of Bob Cobbing At Sub Voicive Poetry	48
Bob Cobbing: A Talk Given at Boat Ting	50
After Bob Cobbing's Death are Xeroxographic Manipulations Going Anywhere?	53
SVP Bob Cobbing Celebration Opening Remarks at Camden People's Theatre	57
Reissue of Kroklok	58
Republication of Bob Cobbing's <i>Lightsong 2</i>	60
Lecture Notes on Bob Cobbing	63
Review of <i>With Our Tongue Our Drils and Quadras</i>	70
<i>Collaborations for Peter Finch</i>	74
Introduction to <i>Bob Cobbing and Writers Forum</i>	78
Bob Cobbing's <i>Sound Poems</i>	83
One Story of Bob Cobbing	89
Another Story of Bob Cobbing	100
Notes from 'Bob Cobbing and the Book'	103
Further Acknowledgments	105
End Notes	107

Commentaries on Bob Cobbing

Acknowledgements

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See also Further Acknowledgements at end of the book.

Introduction

The commentary herein is largely of my authorship. The only exception is that of an article by Caroline Andrews that, by accident, it falls to me to make available again.

The writing is arranged chronologically to the degree that is possible.

I do not offer my work as the only route to appreciating Bob's art. Far from it! It is one approach, or set of approaches, almost certainly partial and blinkered; but it may be of some use. What I have to say arises from practice and, for many years, collaborative practice. It is the opinions of one who worked with Bob Cobbing quite a lot.

I never did take book-learned theories and test Cobbing's output or anybody's with them. On the contrary, I learned and developed such theory as you will find here *through practice*, often alongside or in the company of Bob Cobbing.

The distinction is important. In recent years I have found myself interviewed and in discussions of Cobbing's work, both with and without the formality of an interview; and I have quite often concluded that my colleague has made up her or his mind regarding what my answers are likely to be before we have started. One sign of this is a resistance to many answers I have given as being, apparently, improbable, often also because they do not match instruction they have already received or read. This resistance occurs not only in the case of opinion, but also over questions of fact to which I was and am a primary witness!

These writings were scattered. I began to gather them to supplement the descriptive documentation I wrote for *Variations on a Theme of Bob*, the exhibition I curated at Space Studios in 2011. Copies of all that documentation ran out a year ago.

Furthermore, some texts I should have included there had evaded me. This time, I hope, I have them all; but this collection is not comprehensive because some published texts are still easy to locate, and it seems pointless, even perverse, to duplicate them. There is also one new text yet to be published. (See the short list, following this Introduction, of writings not included herein.)*

It was not my intention when I began writing about Bob Cobbing three decades and a bit ago to write a book. What I have written about him has always had a purpose, usually my desire to draw attention to Bob and his work; but, latterly, because people have invited me to write or speak of him. As a result, the sections here repeat ideas and data, now and then, to some extent; but I prefer not to engage in a total rewrite. I want the original circumstances of the writing to be discernible. What I have written I have written! Most but not all of what is here is unrevised; and the revisions are minimal. I have made a few silent corrections and alterations when it does not alter the nature of what I had said.

I start with a very early attempt to write about a mode of writing for which I had no critical vocabulary and have applied to it, that is, to my writing, an approach I developed later and in other circumstances or other texts: basically, cutting out the good or ok bits from the less good or to let them stand on their own here. This is the review of *Pattern of Performance*.

That first essay, from over 30 years ago, may still be useful in showing an approach to reading Cobbing.

I ran Sub Voicive Poetry from 1994 and had instituted the series of celebrations of Eric Mottram within the SVP programme; hence my making the introductory remarks of events.

There were three Bob Cobbing appearances at SVP in 2000. I organised it like that to make clear just how important I thought his work was. It seemed to me that was the way to say it, primarily, and then add in appropriate commentary: rather than saying how important he was, to actually stage performances, and then see what there was to say.

Cobbing celebrated the memory of Eric Mottram in January 2000. He read for us, for two hours, in July, from his own work; and then we had a celebration of his birthday in the late summer. It was felt then, by me and the nominal co-organiser of the third event, Adrian Clarke, that a scheduled Writers Forum workshop as such was not an appropriate environment for the third event; so we had a separate related event, planned in advance.

After Bob's death, I sought to stage celebrations of his work; but that was only partially successful. It was intended to be its own reward with no ulterior benefits to the attendees; but, in that, it became unworkable. That series of celebrations ceased with the series as a whole, when it became clear that Poetry was best served by letting other more recently-founded series make the running.

I have not attempted to document every reference I have made to Bob Cobbing over the years, only to the pieces that specifically address his work throughout. I have left the reader to locate the works referred to; but I do so knowing that many will be included in the still in preparation *Selected Poems*.

Lawrence Upton
Goldsmiths, University of London
August 2012

Writings Not Included in This Book

- 'Writers Forum—Life by 1000 Books' (article included in *A Book of the Book: Some Works & Projections about the Book & Writing*, edited by Jerome Rothenberg & Steven Clay, Granary Books, New York, 1999); Paperback ISBN: 1-887123-28-8. Cloth ISBN: 1-887123-29-6.
- 'Hot Mazing on Time' published by *Pores #3*
- 'Bob Cobbing and the Book as Medium' published by *Readings #5*
- 'Working with Bob Cobbing'; *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* Vol 4 # 2; pp 143 - 158; 2012; eds Sheppard & Thurston; UK ISSN 1758-2733 (Print) ISSN 1758-972X (Online)
- Notes to "Variations on a theme of Bob"
<http://lawrenceupton.org/reviews/varnotes.pdf>
- Photographs of "Bob Cobbing and the book"
http://lawrenceupton.org/reviews/cob_bris_pho_rep.pdf

Review of *Pattern of Performance*

(April 1980)

A4 portrait; 10 pages; duplicated; ISBN 0 86162 256 1; Writers Forum; 12/79

Pattern of Performance confirms that Bob Cobbing is capable now of producing work of major significance influence beneficial usefulness whatever. This hesitation on my part over the correct word is not vagueness but an unsuccessful sifting. Each of the words I tried carries connotations of systems of artistic appreciation and assessment with which I disagree and which I see as being associated with artistic malaise. [1]

The process employed in the making of this book is the photo-stencil. And Cobbing long ago found ways to expand the technical possibilities of that—as planned by the manufacturer—boring machine. I think that some of the source material is photographic—photographs perhaps from magazines and newspapers etc have been put into the scanner regardless of whether or not they had been screened—as well as monotypes made with crumpling stencils. The result is a fine set of texts providing contrasts of tone rhythm and line that are largely new to Cobbing while, seen as a whole, each page and the book itself is obviously his; almost typical one might say? These pages are very exciting visually without being particularly figurative.

In this book, Cobbing has abstracted his texts almost completely from their sources, making them new. The source material has been assimilated. It is recognisably Cobbing and yet unfamiliar. Cobbing entering new territory using well-tried techniques.

The A4 format is interfered with by the rough border; each poem has its own indefinite area—but the poem's shape exists separately from that area which is like the selection of a camera's lens rather than a space which had to be filled. The poem passes before the viewer and would provide the poet raiding his poem with an opportunity to step right through the space in the page into the audience/performer space and leave the record of the text behind, making the imagined text spread beyond the border of the print, really improvising. Opposing pages match and contrast—one pair is the same stencil I think but printing (duplicating) variations cause visual stereophony.

The space illusioned is three-dimensional as consistently and convincingly as anything he has done. Here is voice. Many strong voice a long time and varying and foreshading. Material voice perhaps—perhaps—against author's judgment neither transcendent nor transcendental but interstices of interaction—hopefully with himself rather than the god be with you and with you multivoice.

Fine duplicating. Areas this black with this much contrast are hard indeed to print in quantity. [2] The ink still comes off on the hands and smudges. The three staple binding's as humble and efficient as could be.

My last excitement like this over a Cobbing book was *Jade Sound Poems* and his first performances of it... Those first performances were high power and rapid, as are the texts. Later performances

tended to be slower and softer.

Transfer and therefore separation of texts to slides for one performance (in West Berlin) showed me how close text and text-in-the-book's-format were one and the same.

Bob Cobbing at The Voice Box

Cobbing opened with good humour... leaning on the lectern, growling sequences of synonyms that would have warmed [Stefan] Themerson's heart in his semantic poetry mode...

Another time he was off round the room. I'm sure it's a nice dais and I'm sure it cost a lot of money, but it throws sound back up and into the microphone.

Cobbing approaching the dais, looks frail; at the lectern, he's in control; later he turns the frailty on and off.

He went off round the room, performing, getting to the end of his text, from memory, at the riverside/west end corner of the room, whereupon he crept up on the picture on the wall and began to perform it—wide gestures tracing out its markings—a rather fine impromptu sound composition.

As musicians often return to the same piece from different angles, Ellington say, Cobbing here did a most extraordinary *soma haoma*. I used really not to like it, though I remember backing up Clive Fencott 20 years ago when he said Cobbing could have a No 1 with it. "Tha's righ", I said and had another drink. But maybe he could have. I didn't like it because at that stage I had a very odd feeling that Cobbing might just offer to give everyone Holy Communion in the middle, deep sonorous chanting, repetition, and the whole thing being *Hymn to the Sacred Mushroom* and at one time subtitled 'which promotes health and well-being', or something like that.

Since then, it has returned, by being performed without the Hammer film DIY religion trappings (What would *Top of the Pops* have done with it?), to being one of his many permutational poems. Today's was an astonishing performance: breathy, breathy as if he were gasping for breath, though he wasn't, sometimes quite loud, loud enough to be heard, loud enough to make one turn round if it had been a social gathering, sometimes fading out like someone falling asleep or fading away, and both within the same phrases; and there was also a quality of forgetfulness, like someone saying their prayers by rote; yet all the time one could hear the permutational patterns rolling through like an undercurrent, an under rhythm he seemed to ignore, determining the basis of his utterance, the written text he was recalling.

A freeze frame of the encounter at the picture. Cobbing, lurching his right arm rightwards along a bold line uttering it loudly; the Voice Box warder, uniformed, staring straight ahead, no emotion; and then, unfreeze, Cobbing shuffling past her, daiswards, Prisoner Group H, without her acknowledging anything. People looking in at the room through the closed door. Art in progress. Do not disturb.

Sort of sub-vocal recitative from Cobbing till he gets to the dais and then he leans forward, and then arm reach lengthening over his whisky and then over his beer, towards his drum, lengthening, cantilevering himself, slower and slower and nearer, but it's going to be a close run thing—will he make it? Will he give up? Will he give up and go round? Will he fall? And if he falls is it appropriate to help a person in performance—stand back please; is there a theoretician here,

a nice little Beckett moment as a rather small thing—man wants drum—became enlarged by progressive failure to succeed into a major event, (I am quite sure he knew exactly what he was about) and then he got it, gripped it, raised it and with one dead beat began. *Soma haoma*. Drumming irregularly where once he would have drummed all the time. Half beating the drum. Using it mostly to mark out the variations from the basic rhythm...

Arriving back at his seat, he continued sounding until he sat down, making quite a groan as he did so—which prompted solicitous concern from the Master of Ceremonies. Are you exhausted? He shook his head. No, not at all.

Bob Cobbing at The Klinker

(29th April 1999)

I was told afterwards by part of the audience, a contingent from the series formerly known as *Vertical Images*, that this was the best Cobbing performance they had ever seen... So I shall tell you about it.

It was billed as “Bob Cobbing, solo”, but he interpreted that as *not Birdyak, not Domestic Ambient Buoy*s. He performed for about half an hour, divided into three performances, each approximately ten minutes long, running into each other. The texts were projected on to white cloth across the back of the performance area and were read from there.

It started with a game on the word “solo”, performed by [Bob] Cobbing and [Lawrence] Upton, a piece of some vintage, included (if my memory is correct) in *Bill Jubobe: Selected Texts of Bob Cobbing 1942-1975* (Coach House Press, Toronto, 1976). It opens with a play on the word “solo”, doubling it as “oslo” and breaking both words into alphabetical rather than phonemic fragments—“sol”, “los”, “o”, “os”, “so”—playing combinations of the fragments against each other. The next three pages are visual variations on the opening page, enlargements, overlays, fragmentations. The first page is columnar and orderly but we went beyond the notational indications from the beginning, overlaying and repeating the utterance elements improvisationally, responding to each other as much as to the text. This was reinforced and encouraged by Jennifer Pike, personing the slide projector, as she, responding I imagine to our departures, changed the focus of the projector with considerable ingenuity, producing a DIY movie of variations which I would be very happy to have produced by any means. Bob and I followed; Jennifer followed Bob and me. She did the same with the other three pages of the text. I wish I could give a sense of what it was like in addition to saying the details of what we did; I think we did well!

Then I got out of the way while Bob did a solo with a series of images called, according to the note he sent me at the beginning of the week, “game and set”. I should have said that during the first section I stood alone—as usual we didn’t use amplification—in the middle of the large room while Bob stood behind the (unused) bar—where he stayed throughout the performance so that during the second section, unless they craned their necks, the audience had only the images to watch.

From the end of the first section, Bob did not use his voice! *Game and set*—& again I am working from memory—is images built up of asymmetric blobs spread asymmetrically across the field of the image. “Blob” might seem a pejorative term, but I don’t mean it like that. These are visually interesting and pleasing images. Bob realised the texts by drumming, drumming largely on things which are not or were not until then drums. Arrhythmic drumming and manic regular tin drum kind of drumming switching between the two rapidly. Barmy drumming. And it worked beautifully. Half way through a barperson came in and went between the tables collecting beer glasses which went chink - chink over and into and with Bob’s drumming as she built a stack of glass which scintillated as she carried it through the light of the projector.

At the end of which I took over the slide projector; and Jennifer donned a white mask, which stared softly glaring atop her black clothing, and moved to the texts, which are striking thick vertical rather than horizontal black streaks and written text fragments struck in among the streaks, which I have seen but do not have a name for—and to Bob's sound realisation of the texts and her movement which he performed with a various and disparate series of whistles, close up to the projection cloth, her hands fluttering through the black and white (the lights were right down so nothing much could be seen away from the images) to birdlike—if you're not a bird—sounds; and she disappeared behind the screen and came back draped in and covered by a white cloth so that she became a part of the fluttering projection screen as Bob's sounding became less and less apparently representational, more and more as fragmentary and staccato as his texts... and moving the cloth away from herself and back she, or the space she created in the whitenesses by doing so, reappeared. She's a great mover. I wish I could do it. See me on my zimmer frame in my late seventies.

So that's it. I may not have gained any converts with such a description, perhaps confirmed a few doubts; but for the enthusiasts I think a bit of new ground was broken.

For those who might be persuaded to come to the workshop—next one Saturday 3.30 p m Victoria pub at Mornington Crescent—most of the basics were worked out at the last workshop, particularly the idea of having the score/text projected.. not a new idea for any of us but something we hadn't done for a while. We had quite a long discussion about the effect of how one "held" the text—in your hand as Bob likes, on the floor as I like or on a music stand—upon the manner of interpretation. The idea of moving in the image developed, some of you will remember, at our brief interventions in cris cheek's contribution to the Third Sub Voicive Colloquium last January. Enough already. Time to top up the compost heap.

Co-editing *Word Score Utterance Choreography*

My preference is for speaking extempore. I used to pride myself on being able to fit any time frame appropriately, without notes; but then I was doing it all the time. Three and a half years away from teaching has led to my loss of some of that skill.

As time is tight today, I have written myself a script, which I am now reading. I have changed slightly the order of items in my original proposal and combined points where their separation made what I have to say clumsy, but otherwise I am sticking to the proposal. To fit the time, I have, in some places, gone into less detail than I intended originally; and that's probably for the good.

My subject is the anthology *Word Score Utterance Choreography* [1], which I co-edited with Bob Cobbing, its genesis and my feelings about the book now.

I walked in to The Victoria pub near Mornington Crescent in London one Saturday, to wait for the start of the workshop that Bob Cobbing runs; and, as I sat down, Bob said he'd been thinking that what was really needed was a kind of primer which would explain to people how one might approach the performance of visual poetry. I said that would be a tall order, not being an exactly straight-forward thing to explain; and he said something like 'Well I am sure that you and I can manage it'. I said: 'You're thinking of making one then'. 'Well', he said, 'I will if you'll help me edit it'.

I protested that it would have to be an extensive book if it was to do the job and he agreed. 'Can you afford it?' I asked. 'No', he said, laughing; 'we'll have to get a grant'. He said this with the same level of matter of factness that one might use to remark that another drink was called for or that it was time to start the workshop.

At that point, I lost faith and, with it, practical interest. 'I can't be bothered with all that', I said. 'They won't give us a grant'. The conversation wound on. Others joined in as they arrived. Everyone thought it a good idea.

It was exciting, but I knew they wouldn't give us the money and eventually said something like 'Look, Bob, if you manage to get some money together so we can do it properly then count me in to share the work—I'd love to do a book like that'.

For a while the idea was a topic of conversation & I even started talking about it as if it were going to happen. But then the idea went to the back of my mind.

After some months, I forgot all about it.

About six months after that, Bob said to me one day: 'So when are you coming to talk about this book on visual poetry?'

'Have you got the money to do it?'

'Oh yes', he said, quite casually. 'I got a grant'.

In fact, I found subsequently that he had written a very powerful and well-reasoned application, though not a long one; & that combined with the newness of the lottery grants and there being people involved who didn't have an inbuilt prejudice against Bob, delivered the necessary goodwill.

The idea that there is such a prejudice in some grant-giving quarters does seem real.

To us, the need for the publication was quite clear. At book fairs and performances, the same questions would be asked repeatedly; the same ambiguous responses would be shown. People were interested in both visual and sound poetry when they experienced it, but they seemed confused about the relationship of the two, what happened when someone took a visual poem and performed it as a sound poem, and how does one know what is and what is not to be performed?

It seemed to us that the lack of easily-accessible information denied practitioners a potential audience. I have noted a definite drop in audience numbers at Sub Voicive Poetry [2] when such work is presented. We believed that many students of poetry are not adequately taught about the visual and sound aspects of the craft; and we knew, also, that some practitioners of what is a set of international movements are ignorant of the work of each other.

Bob Cobbing has been one of the best advocates for and promoters of visual and sound poetry during nearly half a century. He has made readings happen and publications appear. He has taught by example. As a publisher and event organiser, I too have done what I can to extend the audience for visually and sound-oriented poetry; but what was needed, we felt, was something which would inform others undogmatically, in clear language requiring a minimum of prior knowledge, and which would support those others in telling others still. Furthermore, we saw the need for a book that could inform the individual working alone.

Therefore, it needed to be not just an anthology but also a primer, and not just a primer but a guide and resource. In that way, potential students, whether they were studying literature or art or anything, whether or not they were students in the conventional sense, could start from where they were rather than from where we are: and that I have found is really the only effective way to teach anything, even if it does contain some of its own impossibility. We wanted, above all, to show a wider audience not just that such work exists but to demonstrate the vivacity and variety of the work.

I quote from an article of mine [3] on Writers Forum:

The achievement of the press and its founder/operator/proprietor, Bob Cobbing, is not just in its volume of output, but also the philosophy behind all the press's activities and the application of that philosophy to produce a unique and invaluable series of aesthetically-pleasing publications. Writers Forum is also one of the most important little presses in UK, perhaps because it has responded primarily to needs felt by artists and poets rather than to a series of business plans. In terms of the quantity of titles output by the press (on average, about one a fortnight for a working life), Writers Forum is becoming more productive as the years pass.

It took Cobbing 10 years—or 20 years, depending how you date the origin of Writers Forum, to reach his 100th publication and that was called simply 'WF100'. The 200th, *Concerning Concrete Poetry*, came in September 1978, 5 years later. Number 500 in 1992 was the anthology *VerbiVisiVoco*. Writers Forum publications are now numbered in the 900s.

As well as filling the need for such an anthology, *Word Score Utterance Choreography* also celebrates the ongoing achievement of Writers Forum. It is, and was planned as, Writers Forum's 750th publication.

The Writers Forum range is enormous; and its choice of authors is often very perceptive. Although Cobbing is nearly 80, when one might expect him to slow up, he is still trying new ideas, honing his own skills and encouraging new and not so new poets by offering to publish them. A few nights ago, I was looking at Bill Griffiths' new Writers Forum book, to be published on Saturday, and Bill remarked how well-designed and well-produced it is by any reasonable standard.

I have already described my ignominious involvement in the fund-raising, so I shan't go back over that. We got the money; but we didn't get enough and we had to deal with that. For a start, of course, we took no fee for our work and offered none to the poets published. And we soon abandoned our plans to allow examples of the notational use of colour.

We had to limit the number of pages, quite severely, to an artificial 3 per poet. Really that is ridiculous given the scale and complexity of the subject; and in solving the cost problem we created an editorial problem.

Writers Forum has its own fairly large photocopier and I have a decent enough home computer. Bob is an expert with his photocopier, reproducing what cannot, according to the manufacturers of the copier, be reproduced, and I am fairly adept with the computer.

We both keep an eye out for cheap and co-operative printers and from the beginning we planned to present the chosen printer with camera ready artwork produced on my laser and/or Bob's photocopier. We asked the poets for camera-ready artwork wherever possible: this made our lives easier and also went a long way to solving the homogenising tendency of any collection of disparate material. Knowing the page size, the poets were able—if they wished—to redesign their pages accordingly. As a result, we have managed to maintain both continuity and individual difference through our design.

The title page came about quite easily.

I prepared some sheets to illustrate how one could use the features of the word-processor I use to make interesting title pages; and how with a bit of trouble one could make the words seem to dance. I intended my work to be taken as an example for discussion; but Bob said he thought what I had done was fine and so it stuck.

We met about once a month, except towards the end when we seemed to meet every other day, and tried to make the work fun. We have any number of projects on the go so there is always plenty to talk about. We would start with a cup of tea or coffee and cheer ourselves up with a bit of gossip, then we'd concentrate extremely hard on the book for three or four hours. After that, we'd

have a beer or another cup of tea. By such means, we managed to plan and design and make camera-ready a book of just over 40 poets, just under 160 pages, without noticing too much and without spending too much money.

The real problem was enabling the poets to say what they had to say in so few pages. As I have indicated, Cobbing and I were used to collaborating with each other and with others; but we had never done anything like this before, and we each had a different history of working in the specific areas covered by the anthology.

Cobbing had co-edited the earlier *verbivivoco*, Writers Forum's 500th publication; but the source material for that remarkable book was the other 499 Writers Forum publications. *Verbivivoco* showcases aspects of the work that Writers Forum had already published. *Word Score Utterance Choreography* was entirely different and it was new territory for both of us.

I had thought that our aesthetic differences might be a problem, but in fact they seem to have been productive! There is an energy to the finished product, for which we can take no individual credit, which would not have been there if one of us had put the book together on their own.

Throughout, there was the need to co-operate with each other and reconcile, in this context, aesthetic differences amicably and easily without compromising them. That isn't necessarily easy and I am not sure quite how we did it, but we did.

There was no way that we could include all the poets who might be included so we had to be selective and that meant that we had to discuss exactly what the inclusion of each and every poet would bring to the whole.

There were a few whom I knew through contacts on the Internet, a facility Cobbing does not have; and he has contacts and information going back decades before I was thinking on these matters. Initially, we each drew up a list of proposed contributors. Although we shared a few names, the lists were fairly different in their priorities so that, although neither of us started with anything like enough definite names, we had nearly enough by the end of the first editorial meeting; but the list did change as we worked.

There were several conflicts of opinion and, in retrospect, I find them to have been only useful. One had to give reasons for inclusion and exclusion, reasons good enough to persuade the other. In trying to give them one began to see the other side.

Because space was so tight, we needed a guiding structure and that was to have a linear poem, that is a conventionally-presented poem, a visual poem and a statement, linking, comparing and commenting upon the poems as exemplary. To help with the statement, we provided a series of questions that could be answered directly, indirectly or thrown away:

- Are your visual texts intended for performance or for the page alone?
- If used for performance, to what extent are your visual texts strict notation and to what extent are they starting points?
- Do you make/perform non-alphabetic signs?

- Do you use machines/technology in the preparation of your work? Why?/Why not?

And so on. The entire questionnaire is reproduced in the book. We did not want the book to mystify anything, certainly not the editorial process. The letter of invitation is included also and you will see that we hinted that 3 pages might be exceeded if there was good reason.

Generally, poets co-operated with the limit, understanding the problem. Some ignored it initially but none whom we cut back to 3 pages seem to have resented it. During the final days of our work, we decided to reduce the resource pages at the end of the book in order to allow some poets a wider spread and I am still happy with that decision.

A few missed the point entirely and that necessitated an exchange of correspondence. We shared such work, such as it was, usually basing the division of labour upon who knew whom best. In some cases, we had to arrange, as politely as possible, for second language English to be rewritten. The book changed a little conceptually as we went along, but only a little.

There is a wide range of ages and we had to wait for illnesses to be recovered from to include a few of the more aged; that led to delay in publishing; but we felt it was appropriate to do so. That is one of the freedoms of publishing a book from your kitchen table.

Although, of necessity, we set the page size from the beginning, other design matters were left to the later stages of the process. When all the work was in, we mocked up the book and made final allocations of pages. In addition to the three plus pages per poet, there was an introduction by Robert Sheppard, another by me and a preface.

The hardest work was in the thinking, both in planning the book's potential contents and in designing the final look of the thing. I think that the title page and cover design were second only in the time they took to develop to the time it took to prepare the text of the invitation and guiding questions. Bob's wife, the artist Jennifer Pike, spent ages with colour swatches getting the whole thing just right; and the printer obliged by changing the tone of the colours slightly without asking, just enough so that instead of being just right it looks, to me, a bit odd. But I am pleased to say that everyone else seems to think it looks fine.

While all of that was going on, we were playing with titles. So many titles... I am happy with what we have, though it is a bit of a mouthful. It isn't just me who thinks that—I've noticed how many people refer to it as "your anthology of visual poetry"

Writers Forum doesn't have a promotional budget. It doesn't have sales reps.

We launched *Word Score Utterance Choreography* at the Artists Book Fair and sold some. We launched it again at Sub Voicive Poetry and sold a few more; and again at Bob's workshop. Two days ago I had an email from a colleague in the USA who is hoping to promote it in ways as yet unclear to me.

We had hoped to see it in college libraries throughout the world and, indeed, one or two have bought it. It has been used as a teaching tool at a number of institutions and we have had some

truly enthusiastic responses

Charles Bernstein emailed me: 'This book is terrific! A delight to have and perform with. Also very much along with lines of what we were advocating with *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*'; and an editor who was then putting together an anthology of visual poetry wrote me that he had decided to rethink his entire approach having read *Word Score Utterance Choreography*. I don't think I could ask for more than that.

Word Score Utterance Choreography was an attempt to educate and inform. As a tool for doing so, I think it succeeds. The problem is distribution, not just of our book but of the mass of material to which it refers.

When it came from the printers, I tried to look at it objectively and was surprised perhaps shocked to see how few women there are in it. Somehow, that was never addressed at the planning stage; and it does seem to be a bit of a boys' area at present. That is something I would like to look into. I think it is an objective fact, or was. Since then I have discovered a number of poets I would have liked to have known about before, in time to consider for the anthology, and they are all women. The decision to publish the work in alphabetical order of the artists' names was for practical reasons of being able to find the poets because it is an unofficial house rule of Writers Forum that page numbers are to be avoided. It has also, inadvertently, produced some exciting juxtapositions. I wish we could have a book that could auto-shuffle its pages.

In our selection of poets we deliberately crossed schools, countries, ideologies and ages, and I am happy with that. I wanted the book to show the possibilities of an area of artistic activity and not to promote one school over another. Having said that, I am sure that the editing shows prejudice and ignorance. I am not happy about that. One works against it; but I can live with the certainty of failure or incomplete success.

We considered adding suggestions as to how the material we have anthologised might be used for teaching; we considered it at some length and decided finally to let the materials speak for themselves to the readers, who could then use them as they wished.

We both learned a great deal. It was extremely interesting to find how strongly I felt for or against particular works, and valuable to try to make the case for them. I had been so busy making poetry prior to this project I had spent relatively little time thinking about my own work and the work of others; so it was good for my brain. The range of approaches which I took part in clarifying has also led me to question almost all of my positions over again.

I presented some of my latest thought on the subject at a Kings Talk in London a few weeks back, and I hope that I shall have a booklet ready to publish by the end of the year. Writers Forum has already taken it although much of it is still in my head [4].

Bob Cobbing and Writers Forum too are looking towards the future. The 1000th Writers Forum publication has been announced as appearing in the year 2000. It will, funds permitting, be another anthology, co-edited by Bob and myself, an international anthology, and it will build on this book, *Word Score Utterance Choreography*, but widening the scope considerably. [5]

I would like to see the visual integrated with other poetic modes in collections.

It seems sometimes that editors find the inclusion of visual poetry inherently problematic. One wrote to me, for instance, saying that although he acknowledged the importance of visually-oriented texts he found the problems of presenting them in an anthology too great—*Word Score Utterance Choreography* has shown that one is able to do so quite easily.

The new anthology will be investigative and speculative. What it will look like, I don't know because, this time, we are being refused grants.

Cobbing and Upton at the Barbican

(19th November 1999)

Bob Cobbing and Lawrence Upton performed from *Domestic Ambient Noise* at the Arts Book Fair at *The Barbican*, London on 19. 11. 99 (5 pm - 5.15 pm)

The performance was one of a series running throughout the fair called Book Activation. The contents of books are displayed in front of the audience via a video camera.

The texts used were *time goes as bought* (Writers Forum 1999 ISBN 0861629124) and *barbacana* (Writers Forum 1999 ISBN 086162913 2), two new issues of D.A.N., made for the book fair.

Only one book could be displayed at a time. The plan had been to fight over which book was displayed, Upton promoting *time goes as bought* and Cobbing promoting *barbacana*, with the text in camera-view being the one to be performed. Unfortunately, the arrangement of lectern, microphone stands and camera angle did not permit this, so, by agreement, Cobbing controlled both books at the lectern, switching them quite rapidly at times. Upton stood behind him, responding to Cobbing and reading from his own copy of *time goes as bought* and from the screen, the latter sometimes showing *barbacana*.

At one point Cobbing pointed to the book, first here and then there, so that his finger appeared on the screen and both performed what he pointed at.

The performance was well attended and well received.

Both old gits perform again Saturday, 20 November 1999 at 3.30.

Time goes as bought and *barbacana* will be performed again, but more briefly. Also to be launched/performed are:

Traces by Peter French (Writers Forum 1999 ISBN 0861629722)

and two new publications by Bob Cobbing put out by Nicholas Johnson:

kob bok: selected text of bob cobbing (1949-1999) (Etruscan Books, ISBN 1901538273)

and

shrieks & hisses: collected poems volume sixteen (Etruscan Books, ISBN 1901538265)

No time yet to pay any attention to them beyond seeing that they are handsome production jobs

Introduction of Bob Cobbing at the 5th Eric Mottram Celebration

(18th Jan 2000)

We start the first Sub Voicive Poetry season of the last year of the millennium with the 5th Eric Mottram Celebration. Our main performer tonight is Bob Cobbing. He will be joined by others of his own choosing.

There was a period when I considered ending the series with tonight's reading. I can't think of a better way of ending. I can't think of a better way of declaring the necessity of continuing.

Jeff Nuttall once spoke to me of Bob Cobbing as being 'a man of total commitment'; and I would extend that, in this context, to say that both Bob Cobbing and Eric Mottram are/were, in their separate ways, men of total commitment to poetry. As Richard Holmes wrote of Coleridge: 'So much of his writing was poetry by other means'.

Born within a few years of each other, but of different backgrounds, both work/worked long hours and devote/devoted almost all their energies, directly and indirectly, to the making, promotion and welfare of poetry, especially poetry which is generative, investigative and lively.

Both have/had that intransitive kind of commitment Jeff Nuttall expressed which does everything thoroughly, extensively and as if single-mindedly. Both are/were capable of immense generosity and support to others, are/were campaigners and lobbyists, are/were stout friends and fierce enemies.

As Eric Mottram committed himself to formal education, extending his professional activity into his private time and private space, so too Bob Cobbing is held in the highest regard by innumerable poets who have him to thank for their first experience of reading in public, possibly the idea of reading, or their first experience of being published, possibly the idea of being published, or guidance on how they might advance their craft, so craftily slipped into the conversation one might hardly notice it being given. Bob Cobbing, as Writers Forum, has published many of my publications, has opened a few mental doors for me and always has time, or makes it, to help me when I need his advice or assistance. And Eric Mottram made just as much effort for people, without drawing any attention to himself.

Mottram and Cobbing had a long association. They were early of that splendid temporary enlivenment and partial democratisation of The Poetry Society, which gave us the Mottram-edited *Poetry Review*, dozens upon dozens of remarkable poetry performances, talks, exhibitions and publications. I can speculate as to who got whom interested in that, but I do not know. When I paid careful attention first, they were there, each in his own way opening up the resources of the Society to a wide range of poets and confounding the self-serving and narrow-minded, though they are with us still. If those days are remembered by fewer and fewer—and I remember, for example, Ed Dorn filling the performance room with his presence, Bunting reading *Briggflatts*, Hugh MacDiarmid expressing doubt as to the point of his being President of what he called the English Poetry Society in his one and only Presidential address, and then drinking me and Nuttall into stunned compliance... and they are all gone out of the light. Though they are remembered by

fewer and fewer, those achievements, in no small part attributable to Mottram and Cobbing in conception, are still of the same worth as they were at the time, even if the actual experience is no longer directly available; just as Eric Mottram's achievement remains. Creatively, the dying of the light is someone else's affair; creativity denies it by ignoring it.

Cobbing published Mottram's first book of poetry, *Inside the Whale*, and remained one of his publishers throughout the rest of Mottram's life. He published Mottram's *Towards Design in Poetry*; and, as a posthumous tribute to Mottram, produced one of the most conceptually odd items I have ever come across: *Towards Design in Poetry for and by? Eric Mottram*.

How I wish I could sit in the downstairs at Guernsey Grove at tea time, with Eric waving a copy of that at me: What do you think of this?! But then I wish that Eric could be here tonight. Maybe Bill Griffiths could write us the story in which that happens.

Mottram championed Cobbing in many ways. I will mention here his articles in *Ceolfrith 26* where he supported the imprint Writers Forum, which is almost entirely Cobbing's creature, as 'a successful campaign'—notice the word "campaign"—and in *Second Aeon* where he addressed and assessed Cobbing's poetic output as of the early 70s, regarding it with great insight and proposing it with the memorable phrase 'a prosthetics of poetry'. Others had written before, most memorably Dom Sylvester Houédard and others have written since, most usefully Robert Sheppard, but Eric Mottram's analysis remains essential reading.

We are here tonight because we don't have Eric with us any more, but we do have Bob.

I offended some people when we met at Sub Voicive Poetry on the night after Eric's death by saying that his dying was a very silly thing to do. Eric himself tutted at my facetious levity more than once; but I stand by what I said, ever pessimistically hopeful I had a letter from Eric in the mid-70s where he responded to a reference I had made to this year, the year 2000, and saying that he will be long gone by then, that is now: far seeing, regrettably, as ever.

Bob, however, just persists, renews his own art and encourages others. He saw the New Year in by improvising a performance of *Domestic Ambient Noise*, impersonating, he says, me performing my contribution, and then discussing it with me, I being impersonated by him for the purpose of the discussion, although I was physically many miles away. This is, at any age, unusual behaviour; and, at any age, it is exemplary.

As with Eric Mottram, Bob Cobbing, though he distinguishes between his private and his public, does not keep them entirely separate, but allows them to inform each other; and the poetic pervades and to a considerable extent gives shape to both. Going back to Nuttall's remark to me, this is another aspect, and a more important aspect, of their response, the total commitment, not just in volume but in scope, commitment wherever commitment is needed, response where there is response, compound interest in everything open which renders fiscal manipulative interaction with the world shadowy and of no lasting substance.

Through the relative permanence of publication, response is still possible despite Eric's absence. His multi-voice poems, which have never been performed publicly, to my knowledge, will be heard

tonight at Bob's instigation, a fitting tribute, and only part of tonight's tribute, to a man who has done as much as anyone to support Cobbing's creativity. It goes further because it could be strongly argued that, without Eric, there would be no Sub Voicive Poetry. Without Eric, I wonder what many of us would be doing now; that generative energy of Mottram's remains in so much that we do; and it remains in what Bob Cobbing is about to present.

Bob Cobbing is in his 80th year. To mark this ridiculous and splendid fact, I have offered him two readings in the one season in the firm belief that you will all support that by turning up again to hear him. At the end of the season, we shall ask him to celebrate himself. Tonight, we ask Bob to celebrate our much-missed friend and colleague, Eric Mottram.

Ladies and gentlemen, Bob Cobbing.

Bob Cobbing and Eric Mottram Celebration

(18th Jan 2000)

Tonight, Bob Cobbing gives the Eric Mottram Celebration Reading.

Both men, Bob and Eric, undertook considerable amounts of the basic hard work involved in building the infrastructure, to slightly stretch the word, of what Mottram later called The British Poetry Revival. A major physical and emblematic manifestation of that hard work was the gradual but steady change in the make up of The Poetry Society's General Council, 30 years ago; the appointment of Eric Mottram as editor of *Poetry Review*; and changes in the activities of the Society which were spurred on, to no small degree, by the fact of Mottram's editorship.

As repeatedly-re-elected Treasurer of The Poetry Society/National Poetry Centre, Bob Cobbing was involved with many of the practicalities of publishing Eric Mottram's *Poetry Review*, and some of them are quite bizarre—ask him about the printer who was worried he was printing obscenity—just as he had been among those who made it possible for Eric to be appointed to the editorship in the first place.

As an aside, anticipating future statements malicious towards Eric's reputation, from at least one source, let me quote a message by Ric Caddel, dated 20th November 1998, to the British and Irish Poets List: 'legends of a collapse-in-sales of *Poetry Review* in the Mottram era... have no place in a serious critical argument'. As Bill Griffiths has pointed out, the figures, such as they are, suggest an increase in sales. Sales are, of course, no indicator of quality anyway.

When the Arts Council of Great Britain put the financial squeeze on all the Society's activities, it was Cobbing primarily who got his head round the problem and came up with the solution we adopted, helped to found the Consortium of London Presses, and organised volunteers to set up and run the print shop which printed in-house not only *Poetry Review* but a mass of other publications under a welter of existing and ad hoc imprints.

Cobbing, in the form of Writers Forum, published Eric Mottram's first book of poetry, *Inside the Whale*, in 1970; and he continued to be one of Mottram's poetry publishers until and beyond Mottram's death with *Local Movement* (1973), *Precipice of Fishes* (1979), *Season of Monsters: Poems 1989-1990* (1991), *Inheritance: Masks Book One, Poems 1993-1994* (1994) and, posthumously, *Pollock Record*.

Writers Forum also published *Towards Design in Poetry* in 1977.

Eric Mottram championed Bob Cobbing in print with, among others, *A Prosthetics of Poetry: The Art of Bob Cobbing* in *Second Aeon* 16-17 (1973) and *Writers Forum: A Successful Campaign* in *Ceolfrith* 26 (1974) and Introductions to publications.

Just before Eric died, I invited him to write a further appreciation of Bob's work for what became the tribute to Bob Cobbing section of *And # 9* with which we marked Bob's 75th birthday. But of course that was, to my knowledge, never even started.

I shall quote now from a slightly-cut version of Cobbing's bit of the cover notes of Writers Forum's 750th publication: *Word Score Utterance Choreography*. I wrote them and they remain, I believe, to the point:

Bob Cobbing is one of the great sound and visual poets, still producing after over half a century of innovative work, and not limiting himself to what is called "sound poetry" and "visual poetry".

Cobbing founded Writers Forum in the 50s and it is approaching its 1000th publication; yet Writers Forum retains its independence, aesthetic and financial, in totality. It remains one of the main outlets for "experimental writing", putting out a torrent of cheap but sensitively designed publications.

Bob Cobbing is an inveterate collaborator. He has worked with a huge range of poets, musicians and artists, especially in performances.

Cobbing has single-handedly and single-mindedly changed the way we view Poetry, opening up the possibilities available to poets. In addition to making his own poetry, and to publishing the work of others, Cobbing has also been active in the promotion of poetry through a variety of organisations and associations, official and ad hoc. His Writers Forum Workshop continues to meet every few weeks well over 40 years after its first meeting.

Jeff Nuttall, who knows a thing or two about Bob, once said of him to me: 'He is a man of total conviction'. I took and take that to mean that he is a man who trusts completely in his artistic instincts and is committed to them.

There are many in this room or who would wish to be in this room, myself among them, who owe the publication of the otherwise unpublished to Bob Cobbing, and/or their continuation as poets and/or the perception of necessary changes in their practice. He has that rare gift of being able to teach without the pupil noticing that they are being taught. And he shares with the late Eric Mottram practical faith in the importance of imagination, creativity, concomitant hard work and the opening up of audiences to new work.

Ladies and Gentlemen, a formidable foe and a generous friend, Bob Cobbing.

Bells, Whistles; and Sounds and Words

This article derives from recent experiences in making poetry this spring and summer; and from a number of exchanges on the British and Irish Poets List. I have reworked some of my messages, front-channel and back-channel, quoting them directly into this text without much reference to the previous discussion.

I am aware of the visual appearance of my writing, using the spacing and lineation, sometimes, to score reading aloud, using typographical and visual effects as attenuations and extensions of the alphabet, which, as I have remarked elsewhere, is a poor notational system.

Nevertheless, much of my writing is published in linear form, with relatively little formatting and little or no graphical addition to the standard alphabet. Like many others, I often refer to such writing, of my own and of others, as “linear verse”; and I often refer to the rest of my writing as “visual text”.

The latter is in widespread use, but we use the term often without making entirely clear what we mean by it. The danger of that might be that our usage will become sloppy and ambiguous. On the other hand, too close a definition leads to exceptions or exclusions, both of which are not useful. In my case, the use of “visual” in this phrase indicates poetry which is not limited to plain or slightly formatted text in lines but which also is not necessarily concrete poetry.

I do not propose here to say what merit there may be in distinguishing between visual poetry and concrete poetry. Not only are such terms used in different ways by different practitioners and critics; but I am at a loss to know how to reconcile these differences. I recall discussing this with Derek Beaulieu when he was preparing what was published as *Courier: An Anthology of Concrete and Visual Poetry* [1] and expressing my concern about the wide use of the term “concrete poetry” and consequent dilution of any meaning it may still have; yet also having to express my concern, and dismay, that I had no alternative suggestion.

My use of the word “text” in “visual text”, instead of “poem”, is an avoidance of arguments over whether or not what I am talking about is poetry! That’s a line of inquiry which I find unproductive.

In fact, disputes about the nature and category of what one is doing are more likely to occur when poems are taken from the page and performed, and at that point, when visual poetry meets sound poetry. There isn’t even an agreed vocabulary for the transition and what happens there.

As Bob Cobbing and I demonstrated in *Word Score Utterance Choreography* [2], the practice here is extremely various; and one cannot simply say that the performance of a visual poem/text is a sound poem because a great many practitioners will disagree. The inherited word “reading” hardly does it; and “performance” has all sorts of connotations.

Recently Ralph Hawkins and Bob Cobbing launched their collaborative publication *G Curled Ribbon* by performance [3]. A look at *G Curled Ribbon* may be illuminating in this context because it links two entirely different praxes whose practitioners know each other’s practice well and with mutual

respect.

The contents are linear poetry by Hawkins and graphics by Cobbing. As I understand it, Bob Cobbing had sent Ralph Hawkins postage stamps on envelope fragments, to which Ralph responded with linear poems and by adding some of his own stamps + poems. Cobbing then arranged the whole thing on the page, enlarging and thereby emphasising the fragmentary visual material upon which the poems were based.

For Cobbing, the mix would not have presented difficulties as the starting point for performance. I do not think that I exaggerate if I say that he'll have a go at anything; and, in this case, he was fulfilling a role he has taken before, in Paul Dutton's *Partial Additives* [4] for instance, where the semantic texts came from Dutton, and Cobbing extended them visually. However, in that case, both poets are familiar and content with texts that include non-alphabetical elements; and they are each accomplished performers of such texts.

In their unrehearsed launch performance, Cobbing and Hawkins did not actually read the same text, but different parts of the same text, as if they were separate to some extent. Cobbing took the envelope and frank marks and Hawkins the linear texts. They analysed what Cobbing had synthesised, choosing without direct comment not to engage with the book as it had been made. Indeed, at the first page, Hawkins complained, good-naturedly, that he could not read his text because Bob had printed graphic material over some of it. To Cobbing that would not be the obscuration of an existing readable sign but the creation of a new one.

Cobbing vocalised the visuals only, even though the pages had large blocks of semantic text, without verbalising; and he used a number of disparate musical instruments. He was seen to be paying considerable attention to the text before him and was presumably acting on his often expressed belief, which I do not share, that every mark has its particular sound. Hawkins read the words that he had written which were on the page, apparently regardless of the visuals.

It seemed to me that neither of them was making much effort to reach the other in terms of technique though somehow that made their performance, as performance, all the more interesting and enjoyable. They were listening to each other. They were performing simultaneously and together.

Some "discomfiture" was expressed on the British and Irish Poets List to which I sought to respond. It was felt that, in my words, the two poets were doing different things.

Now, there may be something in that; in this case.

Hawkins response to what I shall call the stimulus material had produced texts which were at some distance in terms of structure and medium from that stimulus material. On the other hand, the graphical material output by Cobbing is only slightly modified and not particularly visually interesting of itself, although the arrangement on the page overcomes that, making it extremely interesting. The bulk of Cobbing's transformation took place in performance whereas Hawkins had effected his transformations already except for the transformation of alphabetical text into uttered word which we almost take for granted. In that regard, they were doing exactly the same

except that Cobbing had his own script.

The degree of full collaboration in the book is minimal because the feedback loop had not been completed. Hawkins responded to visual material with a linear response and then the book appeared. With Cobbing being, in addition to collaborator, also the designer, printer and publisher, it is not surprising if he felt more at ease with the product than Hawkins.

However, wide apart as the different making processes may have been, I do not see any reason to see the makers as engaging in separate practice. If the performance was a little more of a jam session than it might have been and a little less of a definitive performance, if such a thing is either desired or possible... well, I can live with that. I enjoyed it.

The wide gulf between the kinds of material in *G Curled Ribbon* is deceptive. (Apart from everything else, we should remember that both poets' names are on the book in its entirety.) Cobbing's work ranges from the linear into many areas of the visual: this book finds him at the far end of one axis of his engagement with the literal.

There is, too, an interesting element to *G Curled Ribbon*, in that it contains clear evidence of its process; and retains its sources. How often I have sought to restrain a yawn as, at the front of the room, the poet I have come to hear read has told a string of anecdotes to explain the background to their writing with the clear separation of experience and/or material and the poem based on or in that experience and/or material. *G Curled Ribbon* gives us the whole thing, both as product and as stimulus material for further production.

Given this dual nature and the disparity of kinds of texts, it is unlikely that there will be any one possible definitive performance.

In performance, the utterance that we make may be directly (reading) or indirectly (improvising from) related to the text, but so much depends on context; and in that way there is a great similarity between the linear text and the visual. The linear text can be read in many ways, because the notational element is so small. The reader provides much that is only implicit in the text.

Similarly with a visual text.

Of course, the visual text is not made in the context of a consensus as to its utterance, but some consensus may be reached by sympathetic performers working with similar or related assumptions. The longer you work together the greater the empathy, with good will. (Thus, Cobbing and I work together without much difficulty, even though we do not agree on the nature of the connection between mark and sound in the texts we use.)

It seems to me that *G Curled Ribbon* is a hybrid, where Hawkins was doing something different to Cobbing compositionally, responding to semantic or semantically-associated elements in the visual material, while Cobbing was working visually in order, later, to utter his visual production. The book is good to look at, but it lacks an integration between the two textual elements, though there is a sympathetic correspondence. And that I think is where the problem lay, if there is one, at

the level of the book rather than at the level of individual poetic.

I question that a problem exists because I quite like the unintegrated feel of the book. It seems to ask: What do I sound like? It makes us ask: Why? What it isn't is an illustrated book. It doesn't tell a story although it is full of fragmented stories. It asks the witnessing reader for the story. The feeling that it isn't complete is quite welcome even if that makes it less than conventionally entertaining.

Some "edginess" and "embarrassment" was identified in Hawkins... Well, some edginess and embarrassment can be productive. Before a performance of *Domestic Ambient Noise* [5], I have often thought: I'm not sure how this is going to sound? What is this doing to my/our text? How will this come across? Would I/should I have agreed to do this (if I'd known)? And from such edginess comes the energy that gives the performance its edge. It's a matter of context, and of expectation.

If it's not an illustrated book then it's a visual text. I think anything can be a visual text. I see no reason not to think that anything can be a visual text. I see no use in identifying anything as not a visual text. I do see possible problems in identifying anything as not a visual text. I'd prefer to be descriptive rather than prescriptive.

It follows for me that the best we can do is to say what kinds of visual text are or have been in use and try to spot what kinds of visual text might now be made.

Sometimes, for denotative purposes, I make a distinction between "the linear text" and "the visual"; but I do not think that such a distinction is widely applicable.

In much visual work, not least Cobbing's, the visual retains, and sometimes acquires, linearity. These differences and similarities were what Cobbing and I set ourselves to investigate post-DAN [*Domestic Ambient Noise*], although we did not express it that way to each other at the time. We set up some procedures in draft form and went away from each other for the purpose of generating our individual starting materials. We haven't yet (July 2000) met to take it further; but, at the same time, we have been making two other sequences of which the latter, *plouk* [6], is relevant here.

The starting point is printed material, advertisements, fliers etc. that have been sampled and the samples transformed. It retains its alphabetical origins; I might be prepared to argue that it is very heavily formatted text; it cannot, though, be "read" as if it were only alphabetical—the formatting has gone beyond the supportive.

I tried using the term "visually-emphatic text" which, whatever its virtues as terminology, is a mouthful, though it has been used by others at least once!

The point was to argue that "it" is "all" one field of practice with the individual instances differently-located along various axes. So not something which is a separate genre or sub genre but poetry which emphasises one aspect of itself to a great extent.

I am up for “aurally-emphatic”, except that it too is orally-ungainly, + olfactorily—and tactilely—etc... that’s 4 senses out of 5... oh yes—Here’s my new book of poetry. Would you like to lick it?

I am very interested by associations that I certainly feel between the text and expressive and responsive gesture and movement: body as readable shape, line as physical movement, page as room and so on.

I was impressed by Robert Sheppard’s work presented with dancers a few years back, although that seemed to be a case of a poet reading and a dancer dancing at the same time. I feel I might have followed that up for myself. I have, increasingly I think, used gesture in my performance; but there’s a long way to go.

It’s a pity that touch screens have not become more popular. I’d be much more interested in offering you the chance to point to places on your screen than I am in getting you to click there with a sophisticated flick of the wrist, the rest of the body hardly moving. [When, earlier this year, I referred to the use of a touch screen as a gestural interaction, in an email exchange, I mistyped and spoke of ‘getting you to lick on the screen’; and I may follow that up at some point in an installation, if I can think my way round the hygiene problems.]

Going beyond the linear is something which happens again and again. It is not, therefore, something happening for the first time at the end of the end of the twentieth century along with mobile phones, the commercialisation of the Internet and the pill for men. History isn’t linear.

The visual text is the text that is not, or is less, cleaned up, rationalised, standardised, made ungraphic, et cetera... But this is my perspective from where I believe we are now.

I am not saying that the visual is prior to the linear. I expect that, chronologically, the linear precedes or sometimes precedes the ailinear.

In this context, I don’t think that it matters.

I do not see what Cobbing is doing has anything to do with concepts such as ur-language. The visual text is an attempt at a whole response. It isn’t, therefore, that the visual text is a special case, a variation from the norm of the linear.

Perhaps, when it is necessary to denote one’s linear poetry as distinct from the visual, the term “lineated poetry” might be better, indicating that it is writing to which someone has taken a physical limitation.

One has to be trained to write in straight lines; and writing paper often comes with straight lines on it. This indicates a non-linear tendency; although that is not necessarily an indication of priority, only that linearity is a cultural option.

Perhaps, however, that linearity affects how we structure our writing.

Perversely, just regarding lined paper or the word-wrapping word-processor as a recording

medium may leave us more flexibility of poetic thought than acceptance of the linear as the way things are.

The word-processor might be thought to be the triumph of the linear; but it could also be seen as an unfortunate survival of an earlier technology, in this case the limited teletype, like the qwerty keyboard surviving from the typewriter.

Writing on blank paper could be a liberation, if one is needed. Unlined paper is perhaps more easily thought of as a space in which to work than is lined paper.

cris cheek has quoted Johanna Drucker saying that all writing appears to be hypertextual in our retrospective view [7]; and, at a colloquium held at Birkbeck College, London on 5th July 2000, John Cayley softly remarked that everything is digital, which he later glossed as meaning structured so as to be easily manipulated, prefatory to speaking of his own 'writing with programmable media'.

There is something to be said for these observations though I would wish to say that some texts are more hypertextual than others.

Domestic Ambient Noise, already mentioned, does have many hypertextual qualities. You can start anywhere on any page and go anywhere to any other page or pamphlet; and there is most definitely the effect of going through a link as you turn a page. The page is a compositional and performative unit, not just a writeable volume. A hypertext with coded links would be much more limiting.

Making a hypertext recently, I noticed my initial inclination was to write as many links as possible... and then I thought it would be much more interesting to make unexpected links and not so many of them, to make it a bit of a maze, to make some of the links conceptual jumps and others expansions.

I came to the conclusion that if I wanted to have a great many links then I'd be happier to do that on paper and hand my reader a pile of paper to shuffle through, because that would give the greatest freedom of navigation.

There are advantages to network-based text over paper-based text: it's available to many people cheaply regardless of where they are (providing they have access to the net); it enables the handling of large quantities of pages that would be unmanageable on paper on a desk or in a hand; it provides hit certainty and search facilities that can be accurate.

There are advantages to the paper-based text: text changes its properties when it is on a screen, as I have argued elsewhere; getting lost and losing control and place can be extremely stimulating and illuminating.

As it is at present, the computer kit necessary to interact with the web isolates the reader. Where the reader is a performer to many, there's a lot to be said for the physical performer with paper pages.

Having said all that, especially that the visual text tends to be that which is not clean and not rationalised, both virtues, there are some qualifications to be made. Moving away from or beyond pencil and paper is not compulsory!

For instance, a play makes use, often, of multiple performers, of space, of props, perhaps of sound effects and music; but a bad play remains a bad play no matter how much time effort and resource it takes to be produced.

Generally speaking, I prefer to listen to a lyric poem that I enjoy, even though it uses nothing beyond the voice of the poet/reader and the paper it is written on, if indeed it is written down, to a multimedia presentation from which I derive little enjoyment.

It might be thought that it is efficient use of one's time to use as technically uncomplicated methods of writing as possible, given that each new piece of writing is, in manufacturing terms, a process of research and development.

And taking that lyric poem and making a multi-media event of it may well over blow it. There is nothing inherently productive or creative in using one medium rather than another. On the contrary, less is probably always more.

If one has a technical interest in a medium, something that fails artistically may still be of interest. I find some web art interesting technically, but uninteresting in terms of content and presentation; but I am interested in the web medium as a medium and so in examples of its use even if they fail in what is, presumably, their main purpose.

One may wish to examine a book of poetry in which one has no poetical interest because of the binding or the papers used.

In linear poetry, I find it hard to fully distinguish between the technique and content. What is said and the how of saying it are close together; and studying how the poet made their poem is part of the process of reading that poem.

That is much less likely to be the case with web art, I think.

I do not favour a direct comparison between linguistic skills in natural language and linguistic skills in programming languages. Programming languages are more limited in scope than natural languages and they do not evolve in the same way—the “evolution of programming languages” is likely to be a metaphorical evolution. In natural language, the oral and the literal interpenetrate; and it carries, simultaneously, the denotational, the connotational and the emotional. A programming language makes a computer behave and that's it.

Let's not confuse the quantity of dry ice or the number of lights with whether or not we wish to listen to the guitar playing. If a piece doesn't work, all the bells and whistles one can obtain will be no more than diversion.

Introduction to Bob Cobbing at Sub Voicive Poetry

(11th July 2000)

I have spoken here of Bob Cobbing on a number of occasions, and there is no point in repeating myself. Yet tonight's reading must be prefaced, not to point out its importance but because it is so important, our reading to mark Bob's coming 80th birthday. And yet to say something both new and useful in the short time I shall allow myself is rather difficult. Without time to expand and develop ideas, one needs to make general observations; but one does not want to waffle.

Generalisations often turn into waffle. Nevertheless, the attempt must be made; and I shall start with a fundamental observation.

Bob Cobbing's poetry is diverse. This is particularly apparent if the poetry is viewed procedurally instead of chronologically or by subject matter.

Those who were here last week may recall my exchange with Bob, which occurred as part of the announcements. Advertising tonight's event, I asked Bob 'Am I right that you won't be doing any sound pieces as such?' I knew what I meant! Bob denied my question, quite validly: he would, he said, be performing linear verbal poetry, but sound would come considerably into it.

As soon as he said that, the slackness of my question was exposed.

Our terminology is often inadequate to refer easily to poetry that is so wide-ranging, formally and methodologically, but which tends to be consonant and organically coherent as a set of active responses.

Bob Cobbing's poetry is expressive, but not anecdotally self-expressive.

There are often stories which could be attached to the poems; and many of his poems could be called "occasional writing" (which is not, for me, an abusive term); but the poems come first, remaining after the details of their composition have been somewhat forgotten.

Cobbing's poems may exist in multiple forms and versions. A text may stand alone, but it's likely that it has cousins and friends. Though it stands alone, it exists to be, in performance, instigative of solo utterance or multiple voice or percussion or dance et cetera, or mixtures of those.

The poetry is, of itself, various; the ways of our seeing it are diverse; there is no one way of cataloguing it. To look at this work openly, one may need to revise almost all criteria; only to find those revised criteria repeatedly falling short of the phenomena one had thought they might measure.

Serendipity and contingency feature strongly in the composition, the performance and the curation of Bob Cobbing's poetry; and it seems to me that much of it asks, by answering in exemplary manner, the implicit question: What possibilities are there here? Whether that "here" refers to a sound environment; a visual environment; a nexus of formal or material constraints; a

medium; a method; or certain materials, lexical or otherwise.

The answers embedded in these questions are so rich that they ask their questions reflexively, in a readerly form: What are the possibilities for reading/performing this? Leaving the nature of “this” open. In short, many Cobbing poems ask both what do we know & how do we know it.

Shorter still: Where in the poem are we?

I am not saying this is unique to Cobbing.

Bob Cobbing revisits themes almost incessantly, whilst transposing and varying his content material. The musical connotation (of transposition) is intentional. One should also think of the painter identifying in visual utterance the same constellation of visual events by different lights on different days.

So themes and subjects change, largely asynchronously, and repeat; methods change and repeat, mimicking each other’s effects and affects, emphasising thereby their partial differences. In that way, the work, seen collectively, is about itself, meditatively but not self-referentially, because “itself” here is poetic activity in general. Since the first *ABC in Sound*, if not before, Bob Cobbing’s poetry has been, amongst other things, rumination upon the characteristics of the poetic.

And that takes me back, quite deliberately, to my remark about organic coherence. The accumulating work grows at its tips, and on its old wood, which is still supple. And the new growth is both new and a direct development of what has gone before.

The scale of Bob Cobbing’s innovation is great, perhaps in a number of senses. Look at *ABC in Sound* published in 1965; and then at *Song Signals* published in 1972; and you’ll see its extent over those few years, how far he moved from type-based lineation, though he became more thoroughgoing still in his apparent departure. Such radicalism might distract from the degree to which he has retained his concern for and involvement with the linear and lexical. Look at his work in the book *plouk*, which he and I made recently, and you’ll see both of those properties, alive and mutational. Cobbing’s originality is radical in many senses, producing hybrids and cultivars, and welcoming sports.

Then there is the bewilderment, a denotative confusion, induced in some by poetry which glories in the versatility of our linguistic faculties and the degree to which we can find convincing analogues for the brain’s multifarious association and synthesis by treating all the arts as if they are facets of one art.

Bob has chosen not to work as narrowly as many poets, including, in particular, those who see his practice as narrow. His poetry is extensible and open-ended, unfinished work, producing connotative complexity. Its content discloses, with generosity and purpose, the method of its own origination and organisation: open, elegant transformations and expansions, usually made stepwise, though with many steps implicit or assumed, phenomena themselves rather than being abstractions from phenomena - an inclusive and accepting poetic, permitting and encouraging participation, collaboration and enjoyment.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Bob Cobbing.

Cobbing, Pike and Upton at 291 Gallery

By Caroline Andrews

(31st May 2001)

It was primarily a music festival. The main area of the 291 Gallery was given over to derivative sound sculptures that were not without a little interest, though most of it was empty, while the performances were crushed into the narrow space of the bar.

Most of the performers seemed happy in that space, but Cobbing, Pike and Upton needed the extra space. It was clear that they had expected to have more space. Upton had described to me something of his plans. He was expecting to be able to create a range of sonic environments.

Instead they performed at the end of the long narrow bar, an area with poor acoustics which suited or did no harm to the less ambitious and less accomplished performances before and after Upton and Cobbing. Only the final understated performances of sound poetry classics by Hugh Davies and Bob Cobbing compared.

Cobbing, Pike and Upton were head and shoulders above everything else that evening with Upton in particular, minute by minute, pushing aside the boundaries of how one thinks of "poetry".

As usual, Cobbing and Upton had made a new text. The approach seems to change each time; but in general terms it can be said that they each alter and reorder the work repeatedly until there is total agreement. This time they came up with a large pamphlet called *Oi!*

Each had a copy of the text with them. They worked through it. I think Cobbing went through his methodically. Upton is usually methodical, but this time he jumped about and once at least repeated pages, turning them through 180 or 90 degrees between interpretations.

Images from the text were projected in an order which is different to the pamphlet whichever direction one takes through it. It is a feature of the duo's performances that these projections feature real-time changes—Jennifer Pike, who usually dances the images as well, swings the projector around and changes the focus. She did some of that this time; but it seemed to me that it was much less imaginative than sometimes in this regard. I am aware that this is subjective!

The performance started with a shout of "Oi!" from a prepared tape which ran throughout the performance. It was a solo vocal performance of the text by Upton. It was difficult to be sure but it seemed to me that yet another page order was used. Sometimes it was very loud indeed, and for long stretches it was absolutely silent.

As the tape shouted "Oi", Cobbing responded in kind and began to play simple percussion. Upton advanced upon him yelling "Oi" and then went past him going almost into the audience still shouting "Oi!", gesturing and glaring menacingly at them.

It was a talkative audience all evening, but Upton kept shouting "Oi!" until almost everyone was

silent. Then he turned intense attention upon the text.

Later, when the talking had started again, although I am not sure that any of the performers really cared, Upton went into one his famous gestural arguments with himself growling and chanting with great bombast in what I think are invented and probably improvised languages.

Few of the audience paid any attention. I could see little response to what always is to me a riveting sight. I have never seen anything like it. Though one knows it is an act, the spectacle can be terrifying. Generally he will maintain apparently wild aggression for many minutes. He slowly pushes it completely over the top until the whole thing is undermined and it collapses into general laughter.

On this occasion he engaged in a virtuoso two-hander with a speaker emitting one channel of the pre-recorded tape which was playing his own voice. There was a moment when all was fairly quiet. Then the speaker roared. Upton spun round as if surprised, like a startled animal. The speaker roared again. Upton queried it with a growl. Then he spoke to it in words that weren't quite words...

The tone was perfect. There was a long debate between the man and the speaker and it was obvious that the whole thing had been prepared for if not exactly planned.

After a while he turned back to the audience. He performed a sort of loping ape dance, hooting and shouting.

Perhaps the lack of response disheartened him. He stopped quite suddenly.

Meanwhile Cobbing produced an inventive variety of sound with simple percussion instruments and also spoke and chanted though it was quite hard to hear him because of the poor acoustics and the chattering audience.

Upton has a karaoke machine with which he performs complex sound structures and duets with himself. I was looking forward to seeing and hearing him. I have read accounts of his improvisations with the simple mechanism, but I had never seen it myself.

He did make a start but the sound didn't carry. He was clearly putting a lot into the microphone and his hands moved quickly over the controls, but I didn't hear any sound which seemed at all different to the other kinds of sound the duo generate. The work needed the space that was denied it. What I have read tells me the karaoke effects are distinctive. Within minutes he abandoned the karaoke machine and did not go near it for the rest of the performance which last nearly three quarters of an hour in all.

Increasingly he paced around the small area. I saw him gesturing at the technician to stop reducing the volume of the live microphone. The techie obliged, only to slowly pull the slide down a few minutes later. Late on in the performance Upton leaned over and took control of the desk himself.

The part-improvised composition was very good though in an email Lawrence Upton tells me they want to perform *Oi!* again, which must be significant because it is usual for them to move on to the next work. I thought they were good & the audience was highly appreciative. The applause was long and loud. I wonder what they would have made of the performance in better conditions. Perhaps they wouldn't have liked it so much.

If the large hall had been available, then there would have been no one piece to be heard. I was told to expect "a sound landscape". What we heard was more homogenous than that and the empty spaces in the prepared tape were filled with live sounds which should have been heard in different performance areas with the audience sharing the entire space with the three performers.

Even so they were highly inventive with Upton on his feet and on the move the whole time, and wet with his own sweat almost from the start.

I have concentrated on his behaviour; but it was a three hander. Nowadays, Bob Cobbing tends not to move around much in performance; and it is easy for the observer to concentrate on what attracts the eye; particularly, large gestures and knock about. This was emphasised by the small space available to both Bob and Jennifer. Jennifer's performances are stunning; but they need space.

I suspect that the desire for volume was, in part, to overcome the noise of an audience too crowded together. It was clear from what I was told to expect that the intention was to make something much more subtle and less relentless. It is in the nature of their approach that they will abandon a plan actually in performance if that is needed to produce the best possible performance. See them if you can.

Bob Cobbing: A Worker in Progress

I've known Bob Cobbing for over three decades... I was one of those he encouraged to join The Poetry Society and stand for election to the council, so that we could change its policy—there was a time when Cobbing was Treasurer, Jeff Nuttall was Chair and I was Deputy Chair; and that's a conceptual work of art in itself.

We've made poems together and co-edited. We've performed together. For some years, we didn't speak to each other.

He's all right. A bit contrary sometimes. Frequently casually brilliant. Has a very good taste in whiskey. Sometimes slightly curmudgeonly. Always generous. Full of energy, physical and mental. Immensely creative.

Our first collaborations left little record. If you listen to my text-sound composition *The Last Man's Song* then you'll hear traces of Cobbing's voice mixed in with mine and heavily treated. Similarly, if you listen to Cobbing's *Round Dance* from the same period (mid 1970s), you'll hear my percussion, again heavily treated. We'd known each other for five or six years by then; and I had learned a great deal from him, though not exclusively of course.

Those tape pieces were made at Fylkingen in Stockholm, which I learned about through Cobbing. He'd organised an evening of tape work, much of it made at Fylkingen, at The Poetry Society early in the 70s, where I first heard the work of Chopin, Dufrière, Lars-Gunnar Bodin, Bengt-Emil Johnson, Åke Hodell and others.

Cobbing is quite a teacher. He teaches by example. There's no plan. He's doing his own thing, but he takes you along, if you let him. He lets you know what he regards as important by the seriousness with which he treats it. So it was, in part, that I attended that seminar on text-sound composition...

Throughout the time that I have known Bob Cobbing, he has created space for other people to work and learn.

He has been chairing workshops for half a century. They've changed somewhat in various ways over the years; and the membership is always shifting; but, as far as any I know can remember, one thing is constant: the way that Cobbing chairs so gently and sensitively.

The workshops are open and he treats all comers with respect.

Where someone clearly needs to make a bit of a noise one day, he lets them.

As a result, all participants tend to be more inclined to self-control!

The emphasis is on people taking their turn to show or perform their work, though there is no agreed running order and sometimes nothing happens for minutes on end.

After a workshop performance, and everything done at the workshop is a performance, if someone else is moved to comment on what they have witnessed, they do so. The ethos inculcated by Cobbing is to comment positively, if there is any comment.

You don't say something is badly done; you say how it could be done better.

This too creates a self-critical atmosphere in which the poet her- or himself will tend to identify problems for themselves, under the pressure of performance to peers, rather than under the pressure of others' opinions; and they may well seek advice in the interval or afterwards, over a beer; so that, except when a newcomer blunders in and comments before picking up the regulars' habits, the inexperienced or insecure are rarely exposed to harsh criticism until and if they are both ready for it and in need of it. The emphasis is on the individual's creativity, not on training it to match the creative behaviour of others.

The workshops are avowedly experimental, yet Bob does not exclude anyone.

Sometimes people continue coming back even when their work is quite at variance with the approaches of the others; and their own practice usually expands as a result.

I don't quite know what I'd do without the workshops. I had to stay away for several meetings in a row during the early part of 2002 and I felt the lack. It's an emotionally safe place to try things out. You can screw up and it doesn't matter in social terms.

And yet it creates a desire to do the best one can; I often rehearse at home before going to the workshop, although usually what I do at the workshop diverges from what has been rehearsed. Many who have come to the workshop have been offered publication by Writers Forum, Cobbing's own small press. He is the most sympathetic of publishers who, though he will take risks, never publishes work that he does not believe in. Through his editing and publishing, he has repeatedly brought out some of the best in others, which other others may not have seen.

Writers Forum alone would be a considerable achievement. At the time of writing, June 2002, it has published about 1100 items over at least 40 years, or roughly one every two weeks; and it is still active despite Cobbing's age and growing infirmity. There is still a need for it.

I've spoken here of collaboration. Bob Cobbing is an inveterate collaborator. On one level, one can see collaboration as a way of completing projects—e.g. you need a particular kind of voice so you go out and get it... But there's more to it than that in Cobbing's practice. Whether on tape or on the page or in performance, he tends to produce work which is person-specific so that not only does Cobbing get new Cobbing art, by working with others, but enables others to make what they would not otherwise have made, might not have thought of making.

Bob Cobbing was hardly a young man when George MacBeth brought his work to a wider audience via radio; and he seems to have hit that ground running. In the 10 years or so following publication of *ABC in Sound* took his own writing and, conceptually, Poetry in general (for those who wished to follow) through an astonishing series of developments and leaps. Much of his work at that time remains exemplary.

It was during that time that I met him. And it wasn't long after that the balance of power began to shift at The Poetry Society.

In the scale of things, it wasn't a tremendous or long-lasting change; but, combined with Eric Mottram's editorship of *Poetry Review*, it did suggest what might be possible.

For those who could get to the Society then, the changes were enormous, as the *Poetry Review* changes were, both to those who were genuinely interested in contemporary poetry and for those who looked to poetry for behavioural reassurance.

Some of us lost the sense of dismal mediocre continuity with our accession; and others who saw an opportunity for a fight did become quite vitriolic; and much of the linguistic vitriol was thrown at Eric Mottram, who was grievously hurt and upset, and Bob Cobbing, who seemed sometimes to thrive on the abuse.

It has been suggested that the changes to *The Poetry Society's* policies, changes which were interrupted before they were completed, narrowed the range of what was promoted. It was suggested that only "experimental poetry", whatever that is, was allowed; and that Bob Cobbing was in some way responsible for banning and excluding other poetries.

This is an important point because without Cobbing's belief that the changes could be made the attempt might not have got off the ground.

A lot of the angst arose from Mottram's daring to publish Americans... and a great deal of the other nonsense was an attempt to camouflage that risible xenophobia. Originating in the sort of mentalities which look to see what the rest of the pack are doing before acting themselves, the conspiracy theories did not allow the possibility that the Society was being changed by more than a dozen people who acted independently but happened broadly to agree.

In fact, Cobbing demonstrated his usual small "c" catholicity of taste from Vachel Lindsey to Dom Sylvester Houédard and Mac Low to Kipling to Charlotte Mew etc, the same excitement at all kinds of poetry making which seems to have motivated him before, during and after *les evenements*.

The reception of *ABC in Sound* may have released an immense amount of innovative creativity for, I have suggested, 10 years or so; but I wouldn't want to suggest that was the end of it.

I have no doubt that many of us spent far too much time on the always lost cause of The Poetry Society; and Bob, spending more time there than anyone, misspent more time than anyone.

At times, especially as whoever they were fought back successfully, he seemed to be trying to be The Poetry Society single-handedly, which was neither good for his health nor sound diplomatically. And I think it may have taken him a little while longer than it might have to recover equilibrium when we all walked out in the second half of the 70s.

But he did recover it and he went on producing work at a high rate, much of it of exceptional quality.

However, I think it may be harder to express just how aesthetically remarkable the “later” work is because one lacks a shared vocabulary.

But the Coach House anthology of 1976, *bill jubobe*, and the later *bob jubile* speak for themselves. (The more recent *kob bok* is a little disappointing.) Just take either of those books and use it slowly as a flip book and you will see not just the astonishing range of forms which the poet has invented but also the equally astonishing range of relationships between form and content.

This line of inquiry might be continued by a consideration of the range of sources and chosen circumstances, the techniques employed, the media involved. Yet those books are a selection from a larger oeuvre and were made some time ago. His tape work deserves attention too; and his solo and collaborative improvisation. Again, the range alone is striking.

Bob and I largely lost contact during the 80s, but we have collaborated hugely in the 1990s. On how good or bad that writing is, I shall express no opinion beyond saying that I think it is of some importance, which is not the same thing. I would point, however, to the quantity of it, (one collaboration, *Domestic Ambient Noise*, is 300 pamphlets of 6+ pages each) and the range of approaches (including form, technique and materials), both within *D.A.N* and between all the sequences, including *D.A.N*. And I would point out that, as *D.A.N* was getting under way, Bob was turning 75.

Robert Sheppard has made astute observations on Cobbing’s transition from the ink duplicator to the photocopier both as printing machine and as means of image production and modification; and on the energy, dexterity and imagination of his processual series. Whether solo or in collaboration, Cobbing remains mentally dynamic and animated.

One other thing. Bob Cobbing is married to a remarkable woman. Her name is Jennifer Pike. If you would know Bob Cobbing then you must take account of the importance of Jennifer’s benign influence, companionship and support through the decades.

In my judgement, she is equally outstanding in her different artistic achievements. And she performs with Cobbing, interpreting his work in movement—she too is an octogenarian but you wouldn’t know it—and providing bodily calligraphy for Bob to interpret in improvised sound.

The more “theatrical” performances of *Birdyak* (Cobbing, Pike, Coxhill, Metcalfe) and *Domestic Ambient Buoys/Ghoyles* (Cobbing, Pike, Upton) are generally the products of her plans and prop-making.

I do not for a moment mean to detract at all from Cobbing’s achievement. On the contrary! Both Bob and Jennifer, separately and collaboratively, devote each of their days to producing new and often arresting work. When one sees the totality of that shared commitment in practice, I think the quantity of Bob’s output seems less inhuman than it might! And one is free to consider what one human can achieve with determination and a degree of opportunity.

Funeral Oration for Cobbing

(11th October 2002)

[One of a number of orations and/or performances made on the day by friends and colleagues]

Bob Cobbing was among the most outstanding of human beings; his influence is great. Many who were out of sympathy with his poetry because it was not like theirs will be forgotten; he will not.

Bob Cobbing changed and expanded poetry; and he encouraged others to do likewise. He gave people confidence. He changed the way we read and the way we perform. Few have done more.

Two days before he died, aware of his situation, he declared himself happy.

He did not welcome his death; but he did accept it.

His loss is total and irreparable, but it is beyond us. What we are doing here is for us; and I am still looking to accept that he has died. He was, as always, before me.

I've written quite a lot about Bob in my time, and even more with him; but just now I feel so overwhelmed by loss that little seems to move in me. It is a kind of winter. I am at my coldest, and frost gives way to further deeper frost even if it seems to be getting lighter. I need more time to write an appropriate poem to Bob.

That last time I saw him, he asked how long Eric Mottram had been in hospital during his final illness. When I told him, he said, 'I've beaten him' with some satisfaction, though I am sure it was also a kind of joke. They figured large in each other's artistic lives and held each other in high regard. They quite loved each other, though they wouldn't have expressed it like that.

I am going to read the last few lines of my own poem addressed posthumously to Eric Mottram.

The landscape is Cornish Spring rather than English autumn, but the need and my obvious answer are the same.

The ship has almost gone... It's sinking fast
beneath the blue on bluer horizon...
Loe Bar's quite empty,
Porthleven tiny
what there is of it showing round Penrose;
and the grass is thick, rushing green about me;
and the sea's rolling smoothly ultramarine;
It's time for this to end.
Three largish dogs have tumbled up
and formed a hopeful line.
They face me now, certain I shall assert
that it exists and is the world's centre,

its axle and its outer curve! Good dog
is all it takes. A simple spell, except
there is no magic, only mutual trust, so one
must say it strongly with good heart.
Good bye.

Celebrating the Memory of Bob Cobbing At Sub Voicive Poetry

(2003)

[Sub Voicive Poetry staged a series of celebrations of Cobbing in the early years of this millennium. This was the brief introduction to the first.]

We have been saddened by the death of Bob Cobbing, but tonight we are celebrating him. And let us remember that he lived to a decent age, declaring himself in the last days of his life to be happy.

He was in action right to the end of his life despite increasing infirmity and physical immobility directing the activities of Writers Forum the day before he died.

In case anyone here does not know, Writers Forum passed to me and Adrian Clarke jointly—the last workshop was two days ago, and the next is on 24th of this month—and the latest Writers Forum publication is on sale tonight.

Bob's artistic career was a lifelong affair, but he was recognised internationally as a major artist for the last 4 decades of his life, from the publication of *ABC in Sound*.

And the range of artists who acknowledged him then with enthusiasm speaks for itself, from the various artists working at the Fylking in Stockholm to Henri Chopin to Dom Sylvester Houédard—and I am mentioning only a few.

The *ABC* is deceptive. It can appear simple. But its sophistication is immediately apparent in its performance.

It is a masterwork. And it releases its meanings with benign slyness.

Don't be fooled by Cobbing's stories about one or both of flu and whiskey, whether they are true or not.

It is one of many masterworks.

That binary of eye and ear throughout Cobbing's work is a cleaving in both senses, what he originally called, following Dom Sylvester Houédard, eye and ear versions feed back to each other.

But despite that continuity, in the decade following *ABC*, Cobbing's work performed an extraordinary leap.

I centre that in *Sonic Icons*, but one could place it in several other titles—in this case we have the intermediate stages resulting from new properties that Cobbing's work accreted—for example, the idea of the graphical being readable into utterance; the idea of text on the page as being a landscape.

I'd also identify among his major works the processual series and *Domestic Ambient Noise*. Many

commentators ignore the first and almost all ignore the second.

Bob Cobbing: A Talk Given at Boat Ting

(29th September 2003)

I have little idea what kind of speech you want to hear—something short probably—and less still what you expect to hear, assuming that differs from what you want.

I have spoken of Bob Cobbing before; and I feel it appropriate to say something other than what I have said before.

I could say that Bob Cobbing was a bloody good bloke, wait for agreement, and then say something equally trite; but I'd rather say something with an edge to it, with a purpose. So I am going to say something fairly specific and then follow it up with some concomitant generalisations that we can, I hope, all agree.

What I am about to say, though it lasts less than ten minutes, will be qualified and then qualified again.

I am not going to seek to trace Cobbing's development as a poet. It's what I did at the last Sub Voicive Poetry celebration. That he developed as a poet is, however, germane, in so far as categories such as poet, musician and painter mean much in the context of what the practitioners among us, probably everyone, do artistically.

I want to insist that Bob was primarily a poet. His fundamental concern was with language; and he said that his output was always to do with language, attenuated language, perhaps; but language. Unquote.

Terms like poetry and music are not defined in a way appropriate to the working spaces of an artist like Cobbing. He took or borrowed what he needed from wherever he found it. Sten Hanson, in the Ceolfrith Cobbing exhibition catalogue, remarks upon Cobbing's use of musical technique in his tape poems, where he generally stuck to the term text-sound composition, with the emphasis on text.

Text was always there. Think of his *Whississippi* booklets, where the basic content itself is not separable as performance text from the working notes, declarative and executive written language generated in the realisation of the text at the Fylking.

Text came first for Bob in *abAna* performances; and, I believe, *Birdyak*. There is poetry in a lot of music, and music in a lot of poetry; and Bob's distinction was to offer us a body of work which seems to function in both areas at once. And in other areas! He started out as a painter; and there is a graphical emphasis in most of his mature output. Dance was always important in his writing and performance.

There's a hybridity and multiplicity in all of his writing; but it is writing; and he remains a poet. A very good one.

Until the late 70s, that talent took him repeatedly to Fylkingen in Stockholm, where he was able to work with and among others—musicians and poet/musicians—performing and making works on tape.

Generally, he did not do his own engineering. He left that to others. It isn't that he couldn't have acquired those skills; but that wasn't where he was at.

The exceptions include his Fylkingen pieces of the mid-70s, which were engineered by him; and they are processually different to the other engineered work.

A version of *The Five Vowels* used and exploited the localised acoustic properties of an old stone staircase in Facklan, the disused cinema on Östgötagatan which then housed the Fylking.

He had access to a studio full of processes and effects at his disposal, but preferred to sound his way up and down that staircase, working with the space in an attempt to make the piece in one take.

Round Dance, which was made either the same year or a year one side or other of *The Five Vowels*, uses speed changes and overlay of a previously recorded performance of the text by him and me in an otherwise empty echoing auditorium.

While he had been perfectly happy for his ideas to be realised by complicated technological methods, his own inclination was to use simple techniques, but in such a way as to suggest and encourage implicit complexity.

That's how his poetry works—puns, permutations, progressions, jump cuts.

Jump cut.

Bob Cobbing's many activities over and above the making of poetry reflect his regard for the straightforward and simple. Look at the fourteen hundred publications he was largely responsible for. Look at their means of production.

Simple sophistication.

And look at his workshops, still running after half a century on the simple premise of allowing space and time for poets to be heard in a sympathetic environment so that each may learn from each without point-scoring, an environment in which the focus is on poetry and not on the individual making it.

I value that workshop more than any; and yet it operates on a simple unadorned idea.

When asked once what he called his poetry, poetry or music, he replied 'Depends who's paying'—but all of it was derived from human linguistic utterance and the sign systems associated with it. But his openness and clear-headedness enabled him to work in almost any genre.

As well as the simplicity of approach and the complexity of meaning it engendered, Bob brought to his art hard work, personal dedication and generosity towards his fellow practitioners.

And he practised intellectual self-reliance, and mistrust of administrators who are not also practitioners.

Let's not beatify Bob Cobbing or build unuseful monuments.

I don't suggest that we try to extract a philosophy or a message from his work—apart perhaps from an apparent belief that the making of art is one of the more significant things that we do. I think that Bob Cobbing was one of the more significant makers of art I have met.

It has been said that good artists copy and great artists steal. In what I believe to be Bob's spirit, I call upon us not to worry just now whether we are good bad or indifferent. Let us copy and steal from him.

Let us add what we have of ourselves. And let us celebrate his considerable achievement.

Ladies, gentlemen, musicians, poets, a boast and a toast—Bob Cobbing.

[After these words, there was extempore exchange between Upton and members of the audience. Upton had brought along an opened bottle of Bob's whiskey, given to him (Upton) by Jennifer Cobbing, and he and several others toasted ("Bob Cobbing!") Cobbing with Cobbing's own whiskey, swigging it from the bottle.]

After Bob Cobbing's Death are Xeroxographic Manipulations Going Anywhere?

This is an odd or unexpected question which could by its openness be very fruitful. This is very much a first and short draft of a possible reply, which will concentrate on worrying at the question.

The term "xeroxographic" is a very suggestive coinage; but in such a question I would prefer to be a little surer that I know what it means. It may be that some image manipulations are going somewhere and others are not; though I have to say that I know of no case where, long term, a medium or a technique has been used up; I have found that it is only ever a failure of commitment, or imagination on the part of the artist which fails.

At first reading, I glossed the word along with "xerolage", a coining of mIEKAL aND which is, he says, intended 'to suggest the world of 8.5 x 11 art propagated by Xerox technology'.

That would certainly include the later Cobbing; although quite clearly, I believe, photocopier technology was chosen by Cobbing to meet a particular publishing need; and his art was originally not directly propagated, in the sense of initiation, by the technology. It is, of course, quite true, that the needs, limits and possibilities of the medium affected the nature of the output.

Of his magazine *Xerolage*, aND says: 'The primary investigation of this magazine is how collage technique of 20th century art, visual & concrete poetry movements & the art of the Xerox have been combined'.

One could draw some interesting parallels between aND's publishing and that of Cobbing's. There is the quantity; the refusal to engage in market testing and determination to decide what needs to be published as the primary task rather than researching what will sell; there is the use of cheap and available technology.

But Cobbing's Writers Forum was wider in its aesthetic than aND's declaration, both in what he chose to publish of others and in what he made for himself.

I am inclined to say that Cobbing started out as a visual artist, but, by his own account, he always was interested in music and poetry alongside visual art; and, through various groups such as Group H, he was co-operating with others in all artistic areas from his early 30s.

Yet he starts his surviving poetry with a duplicator print from his early 20s. That's an ink duplicator. A mimeo machine. He preferred Gestetner to Roneo; and there are substantial technical differences.

In his hands at least the Gestetner was nearer to a silk screen than to a Xerox machine.

Rather than thinking of a specific printing process, one might rather think of a musician blowing into the mouthpiece of his instrument alone, or tapping it... etc.

The *Destruction in Art* volume recently published by Writers Forum will give some indication of this, where some of the manipulations are quite visible in their effects.

The stencil could be reversed, so that the typing ran backwards. The wet stencil could be removed and used to monotype a sheet of paper, so that the reversal was combined with a mode of negativity, black on white. The stencils were not made to last; and, while that was a problem for the person trying to print a consistently readable booklet, it was suggestive of further manipulations to the visual poet.

He used these changing techniques to various extents from the mid-60s to the mid-80s.

As one who copied many of his techniques, to see which were useful to me, I can tell you authoritatively how much control there is available in using a wet stencil to monotype a sheet of paper. He certainly painted with them; and, if he got more than he wanted or what he wanted spread across several sheets, then he collaged them and made an electro-stencil of the result.

The electro-stencil machine introduced its own variations; and after a while he got to know those variations and anticipated them, though the machine was always able to surprise him.

Thus, a great deal of what Bob did was to use found material even if he had to put it there to find it.

What the mimeo does and the copier doesn't, to my knowledge, is to have the image run as if it were paint. The ink oozes and blurs. In looking at the later Writers Forum pamphlets by Cobbing, those produced on his photocopier, it is as well to check the first date, because often you are looking at a photocopy of a mimeo print and the effects are not necessarily photocopy produced, only copied. The switch to photocopying came in the mid-80s.

This is where mIEKAL aND's comment on "xerolage" as "The mimeo of the 80s" comes in. While artists used Xerox technology increasingly, that change came about through changes that are more socio-economic than aesthetic.

I disposed of my ink duplicator because it was messy and because I moved into a smaller space. Bob, I believe, dropped his in a house move; and by then it was getting more difficult to get supplies and maintenance. (Recently a colleague emailed me in some excitement saying that he had acquired a mimeo machine and wanted to investigate it. The difficulty was he had no idea where to get supplies.)

Cobbing had a computer quite early and did make some use of it. There are some images made with dot matrix printers; but it seems to me that he never went very deeply into it and never got to the point of confident abuse (from the manufacturers' point of view) as he did with his photocopier and duplicators. [1]

His wife, Jennifer Pike, however, had made some very fine visual work with computer printers. Whether she would regard it as being of the same genres as Cobbing's work is another matter, but they did make collaborative work.

When we worked together on *Domestic Ambient Noise* from 1994 to 2000, I used computers quite often to write visually; and because the process worked by varying each other's material, pixel-based d. m. p., ink jet and laser imagery entered into his body of work from me, though not exclusively from me by any means. Often in that and other work, switching between technologies was part of the process—note that one of the filters in Adobe's Photoshop is "photocopying"!

Towards the end of his life he had a colour photocopier and produced some interesting colour material.

There are two things to be said here. One is that, by our economic standards, the process was hideously expensive; and the other is a belief in Cobbing's words that 'there are more colours in black and white'.

He and I made a couple of titles on a single pass photocopier, laying down each layer of colour separately—because that was the only way that our technology allowed us to do it. That was very near to silk-screening.

I can't remember any poetry as such that he made alone on that single pass copier, although that may just be my memory; but colour appears in some Writers Forum publications.

With the later machine, acquired around the turn of the millennium, one saw him beginning to take control. It was easy to get some results—with the earlier machine there was the compensation of working with another for all that effort, and he liked co-operative working—and he started to use them and, as it were, train them.

And throughout he was using found materials and not necessarily treating them.

Cobbing's poems were always for performance. In the 60s he was producing "eye version" and "ear version". (He wasn't really a concrete poet as I was taught to understand that term.) He developed the landscape version of a poem and that's largely an aural landscape.

At the same time, he was happy to explore or have explored other ways of notating potential sound. Note, for example, his acceptance of the visual treatment of 'Variations on a Theme of Tan' from *Sound Poems/ABC in Sound*—recently brought back into print by Writers Forum. That is not *his* visual version although the typewritten text is his; but it is now how most of us know it. And note also his collaboration with Lawrence Casserley which, in the case of 'Hydrangea' produced two versions. The first was in the mid-70s, an image sourced in dry print, made up of the letters of the word. The second, in the mid-80s, was more of a musical score, still allowing a considerable degree of improvisation—four of us performed it in the autumn of 2003 and there was plenty of scope for invention—putting some guidelines down for what might (not what might not) be done.

Sometimes he would read a text very closely, other times loosely. I have noted an instance when he read a flier of mine advertising readings, but upside down. Sometimes he would read the room as a text. (*Reading* in this context of course means starting from but moving out from a text.)

Thus, the visual manipulations, xeroxographic or otherwise, were not entirely an end in

themselves and not a completion in themselves.

In the hands of Cobbing they went a long way; but he was never the only one involved, he was never consciously leading, and they were not really an end in themselves.

I have spoken to people who were at Eyerhymes in Canada who have spoken of the shock of hearing Cobbing perform what they had taken to be purely visual pieces; and recently the same has been said at the Writers Forum workshops. In performance the poem, in Cobbing's words, 'becomes more like itself'.

From another point of view, Cobbing was one among many. The kinds of material he was using were being used by others. That is not to try to lessen his importance. If I avoid applying the word "great" to the poet Bob Cobbing, it is only because I try not to apply it to any poet for reasons quite outside of these arguments.

What is so important about Cobbing is the links that he made and the emphases that he put, and the commitment. He synthesised a multitude of activities and techniques in a way that no other poet I know has done. But he was not alone; and from some directions he was one among equals. So his death stops nothing and no one except him.

That we do not have the graphical manipulations in the work of someone like Dufrêne, for example, does not alter the importance of Dufrêne, or many others one might mention. He/they were doing slightly different things.

I would prefer to ask two questions:

One How far do you want to go with the manipulation of images? (And I prefer that to Where do you want to go? because I am more interested in those who go in unmapped directions)

Two Do you really want to abandon the link between the visual and the sounded? The energy that sustained Cobbing through decades of excellent work derived I believe from that interface between the I and the ear and the eye and the thou in collaboration (terms deliberately cross-linked).

Sub Voicive Poetry Bob Cobbing Celebration Opening Remarks at Camden People's Theatre

(14th March 2005)

Those of you who were at the Boat Ting Celebration of Bob Cobbing may remember a few words I spoke. It was to do with alcohol, in part; and Bob's liking for good whiskey. But more importantly it was to do with the kind of artist that Bob was.

I'd looked at the bill and realised that someone attending who didn't know Bob's work might have assumed that he was a musician.

And I'm not saying he wasn't a musician.

I quoted then his reply to a question as to whether or not he was a poet or a musician; and he replied that it depended who was paying. A fine answer.

The same problems might be said to arise if we view Bob as a graphic artist. It doesn't quite fit. And yet he certainly was.

This is not Bob's fault. It derives from the frequent narrowness of the vocabulary and behaviour of public curation, a word cognate with the noun "curare", which I believe paralyses and kills those at whom it is targeted.

At Boat Ting, I asserted Bob's "poetness" whilst acknowledging his indebtedness elsewhere. I meant it, but I also advanced it that way as a debating point. Unfortunately, five minutes after, I don't know if anyone there could have repeated what I said or been sure I hadn't done conjuring tricks.

Tonight, at alertly freedom-loving Sub Voicive, where we are able to exercise choice, we celebrate without categorising Bob with three creative artists with whom he was happy to be associated, who are, between them, practitioners in graphics, poetry and music.

They may or may not speak of Bob. I leave that to them.

I have nothing more prepared to say about Bob now, though I am more than half way through an extended piece of commentary which I hope to bring to the light of your day shortly.

Reissue of *Kroklok*

Kroklok was an enterprise, if that's not too strong a word, of Cobbing and Dom Sylvester Houédard—Houédard making available his collection of visual poetry and his often arcane learning, with Cobbing the printer publisher and practitioner.

Of course, both were fine practitioners and both knew a lot of out of the way things.

Kroklok #1 names Houédard as editor, with Henri Chopin, Stefan Themerson & Bob Cobbing advisers. *Kroklok* #2 names Houédard as editor and Cobbing as executive editor of Writers Forum; but the syntax is ambiguous and might be naming Cobbing as executive editor of the magazine; and later Writers Forum publications lists show Houédard and Cobbing as joint editors. *Kroklok* #3 'is edited by Dom Sylvester Houédard with Bob Cobbing as Executive Editor and Peter Mayer as Associate Editor'; whereas Writers Forum lists after the event have it 'edited by Dom Sylvester Houédard with Bob Cobbing and Peter Mayer'.

Kroklok #4 repeats the formula of #3 while Writers Forum listings after 1976 say #4 was 'edited by Dom Sylvester Houédard and Bob Cobbing'.

Certainly I am sure that some materials in #4 were included ad hoc by Bob's fiat, with Sylvester finding out later. I do not offer that as a criticism. In all his editing and publishing work, if Bob had an idea that he liked consistently for any length of time, then he tended to act on it. And, in this context, presumably that is what is meant by "executive editor".

So... it always was Sylvester's magazine; and it always was something of a double act between Sylvester and Bob, with others being involved at particular times.

Originally, they hoped *Kroklok* would be a quarterly magazine.

The first issue appeared in February 1971; followed in September 1971 by #2; but #3 appeared in December 1972, and the final issue, #4, in May 1976. And that was the last issue. A little over five years in all.

Quite how it was that there wasn't a fifth issue, I do not know. It doesn't seem to have been the result of a decision as such.

In 2001 or 2002, a decade after Sylvester had died, Bob spoke to me of the possibility of republishing *Kroklok*. He may have raised the idea with others. I don't know.

When he asked me, I said yes, I thought it was a good idea. We discussed the idea of actually reviving the magazine and publishing a *Kroklok* #5; but Bob felt that was inappropriate. That's a feeling with which I concur now.

In so far as a decision was taken, it was to republish issues 1 - 4.

It was a decision which Bob did not live to implement; but Writers Forum is now in a position to do

so. [1] It would be pleasant to reissue all four in one go; but the work involved is considerable and a little painstaking. Rather than hold up what is available, we are starting with issue two.

Here it is. It is entirely printed by Bob Cobbing. My work has been to locate the remains, [2] a few here and a few there; to sort them, weeding out the pages that were too damaged; to fold them; to collate them; and to staple them.

From the first the magazine was to be, in the words of its editor, Houédard, in the introduction to *Kroklok* # 1, the Writers Forum anthology of sound poetry.

That is, poetry on the page which is identified as sound poetry.

And this is differentiated from “visual poetry”.

To me, now, these seem odd separations, not least in the light of the work of Bob Cobbing himself. Nevertheless, it might be remembered that during what we might call the *Kroklok* period, the Writers Forum workshop met according to a schedule concentrating by turns on sound poetry, visual poetry and performance of poetry. Or so I remember. Others may correct me; but it was something like that.

I am not going to worry too much about it; and I point these things out because it may help you read these magazines.

In the introduction to #1, Houédard expresses the hope that it will be possible to publish recordings along with the texts. That never happened, but how much more ambitious one would have to be now to include the wide variety of soundwork, not least the material made possible by new media.

Retrospectively, it all seems very ambitious; but it indicates something of the mood of the times.

Republication of Bob Cobbing's *Lightsong 2*

This is an item which hasn't been seen by many for some years.

There are 6 pages and they're somewhat roughly hand cut; so that, though the images remain the same size, the page sizes vary by up to approximately half an inch.

It was hand-printed by Bob Cobbing on a Gestetner ink duplicator and they vary slightly in image; but, looking from another mental angle, the set is remarkably consistent considering the depth of black ink required.

This is a particular problem with ink duplicating and it is a greater and greater problem as one increases the amount of black. In a case like this it would have been difficult to even hold the stencil together.

It is so easy to end up with a mess & it is even easier to make each print look quite different to all the others. When the image is very black, as here, the greatest likelihood is that ink will not be evenly distributed across and down, but will instead come out blotchily or in excess.

Incidentally, when pages are this black, they never quite dry out, so even now it is still possible for ink to transfer—that's one of the reasons for putting the booklet in an envelope—to stop ink transfer and to stop damage to the books as they are handled by prospective buyers.

There isn't much that Bob couldn't make that duplicator do; and this object is proof of it.

He is not the only person who achieved such heights. Here and there among the output of what was hyperbolically called "the mimeo revolution", one finds prints of great Gestetner skill. I don't know anyone, however, who did quite so much of it and in some many versions of mechanical impossibility over such a long time. It wasn't the occasional surprising job, but a sustained exhibition of expertise.

Originally, Cobbing wrote the title of the publication in capital letters at the top left hand of the back of the final page and signed his name and the press name at the bottom right hand. It was done demotically.

This reissue uses some copies he had not so inscribed; and the data have been written on, in the same place and in the same manner; but not attempting to imitate Cobbing's writing.

Because everything is so dark, it would be easy to give in to lazy observation and dismiss an object like this as having pages which are all the same or pages which are just black... or maybe "too black".

But look again and you will see variation and order and wit. This is Cobbing the painter, transposed into an art mode and genre of his own making; though few painters lay the dark colour on quite so. But I'll qualify that remark in a minute.

Comparing it with specific painters would mislead us and likely demean Cobbing's work; but some ignorant types have made comparisons with Pollock: any comparison to Pollock, except perhaps in the idiosyncratic difference to almost everything else that has been done, would be misleading. Cobbing liked Pollock's painting; but that's something else.

One needs to look carelessly to think that it's like Pollock. In Cobbing's work, the image has been placed carefully in all its parts and the means of delivering it to the carrier paper has been mechanically controlled at a remove.

The process of the reproduction of the poem has its own method within the generic method of ink-duplication.

It's not the layering of pigment that you get with, say, Auerbach. The ink would never dry! It's of a different kind. The blackness of these pages stands out because it is so unexpected and perhaps because many of us know it is so difficult to achieve. He pushed the duplicator beyond its intended capabilities by a long way.

It isn't just putting more and more colour on. It may feel that the ink is thickly applied as one looks at it, but actually it isn't like that. There is only one application here, one pass through the machine.

There may be a connection here with his often repeated Cagean advice that if a performance wasn't working then one kept going till it did. Not that I suggest that this poem didn't work at an earlier stage. I mean that there is a point or points, extremes to some maybe, at which the poem works; it may be difficult to access that point; but one just sticks to it till one gets there.

He did put the paper through the machine twice on some occasions. He did that in *Winter Poem 1* where, it seems he judged, the only way to get two quite different effects of very light ink output and very heavy ink output in much the same space was to use two different stencils. Note, therefore, that he knew where the apparently impossible became actually impossible; and he had a way round it.

It is, of course, for that reason that each image copy made by Cobbing was slightly different to all the others, because registration is not the ink duplicator's strongest point.

Thus, one could not use this fix in every situation. Mixing non-alphabetic image and text would be difficult to handle with a misregistering printing machine; so that, as Mottram noted the appropriateness of design to the contents of Writers Forum publications, printing techniques were also applied as appropriate. Simply put, Cobbing knew what he was doing; it was just that he was doing things few people had thought of. And he didn't say what he was doing. Instead he urged you to read the products attentively. That makes more sense. He wanted people to enjoy the outputs, rather than write about them, copying quotes from him, without engaged understanding.

Look at the blackness of these pages; and remember that the title is *Lightsong 2*. Where's the light? Is it the white or is it the black? I'd say it's both. I'd say that as a text for reading he would have been reading the differences, the changes, the conversation between the background of the paper

and the foreground of the image; and I think I could go some way to substantiating that.

Imagine it in negative and you will find something quite different to the positive. This way is the right way round. It's not "darkness visible" then; but it's not "darkness visible".

Finally, a few words about consistency of production. The need to get the same image every time from a printing machine is a human idea, not an innate fault of the machine. The tendency is inherent in the machine's tolerances. We choose to reproduce the image the same way each time, as if repeatability is the same as quality. Perhaps, though, variability is also a characteristic of quality if one lets it be.

This suggestion may not be very popular with those who deduce from their muddy ideas of the properties of democratic life that everyone should have complete access to everything.

Cobbing was quite a democrat and his hand-made books could be seen as artistic multiples without that name; but he also accepted variations in production.

Mass production need not be the same as identical production. Repeatability in production originated because of the manufacturers' desire to make everything as cheaply as possible and sell as many as possible.

I like the carefree—not careless—way that these booklets vary in size. He rarely allowed a page size to vary quite so widely; so there is a suggestion here of deliberation on the poet's part, of appropriateness to the poem.

There aren't many copies of this booklet left; and it presents some problems to reprint. Ink duplication is out, were the equipment and materials available now anyway. Photocopying is possible, but there will be probably be dropout.

In some ways, we are up against the problem—for those who want accessibility at all costs—of the original work; but it may be valid to select one version and reproduce it by photocopying, or high resolution ink jet or litho and live with any slight degradation of the image from the original. A copy has already been put on one side for that purpose in case it's needed.

Of course, however good the reproduction, that will freeze one version as the version, subject to any variations which the process may introduce. In the meantime, you may buy one of the originals.

Lecture Notes on Bob Cobbing

[Much of 'Lecture Notes on Bob Cobbing' is little more than a few sheets of paper carrying key words which refer largely to Cobbing and others who had been produced at or who worked at Fylkingen in Stockholm in the early years of text-sound composition.

The notes resulted from my response to a situation where I had been asked to address issues of sound art in the context of the Fylking. I would either present recordings or scores or both. The actual talk would be improvised to a considerable extent, aiming to produce conversation.

Though I call them "Lecture Notes" they were used for a variety of purposes between 2006 and the present day and were rarely the substance of a formal lecture.

Now and then I have developed sections of these notes elsewhere; and the cut material that leaves may be a little disjunctive, a disjunction I would have smooth out extempore in delivery!]

The following, brief as they are, consider some aspects of Cobbing's work beyond Fylkingen's studio; and use another preparation method whereby I would write out an argument or a fragment of an argument but then actually deliver it extempore, the writing having been a kind of rehearsal which I could then abandon or revise.

In *Bob Cobbing & Writers Forum* [1], Cobbing is listed as having provided documentation to it; but my memory suggests that his involvement was more that of a contributing editor. The short essay by Sten Hanson, for instance, was solicited by Cobbing in Stockholm in the summer of 1974—I was in the room when he asked—but that may well have been discussed with Peter Mayer, the editor, beforehand.

Thus the volume is an excellent source of reliable commentary; but it is also a volume that Cobbing wanted and for which Cobbing, in current jargon, felt "ownership".

Consider Hanson's text therein: *Bob Cobbing: The Sound Poet* [2].

Hanson addresses the work as "sound poetry" rather than as "text-sound composition", which William Brunson, in his paper 'Text-Sound Composition: The Second Generation', declares to be Fylkingen's 'expression of interests in multi-disciplinary art at the nexus of text, music and technology'. Brunson stresses the Swedish gränsöverskridande, boundary crossing, as a watchword of those concerned.

Hanson was Director of Fylkingen at the time of the essay—and was, later, its Chairman—but he uses "sound poetry", Cobbing's term.

Bob would, when speaking informally of his work and sound poetry in general often say 'the Swedes, for instance, call it text-sound composition'. Now that is not entirely true.

It's vague to refer to any artistic activity as applying across an entire national culture, especially one that tends to value individual innovative creativity like the Swedish; and it may be that there

has been more difference in aesthetic position between artists in Sweden than there was between some Swedish artists and some British artists.

The actual term, text-sound composition (coined—as “text-ljud komposition”—by Lars-Gunnar Bodin and Bengt-Emil Johnson), as Brunson makes clear, was intended as ‘an umbrella characterization for a complex confluence of diverse interests, the most common being language, music and the use of technology’. So it is not surprising that they welcomed Cobbing.

To me, there was an emphasis in Fylkingen on radio, not least perhaps because the text-sound composition festivals were put on with the support of Sveriges Radio, which included technical support. Bengt-Emil worked at Sveriges Radio as a radio producer.

One of the routes by which Cobbing came to Swedish attention was via the BBC Radiophonic Workshop production of *ABC in Sound*; but it is clear now and probably was then, that Cobbing’s own main attention was on live performance.

Teddy Hulberg, in *Visions of the Present in Retrospect* [3] cites Öyvind Fahlström’s 1963 ‘Fåglar i Sverige’ (‘Birds in Sweden’ or ‘Birds of Sweden’) as ‘illustrating the potentiality of tape recorder technology and that of radio’; an example of text-sound composition which, from the introduction of the term in 1967, ‘became a new inter-media genre that since then has come to be associated with Fylkingen’, particularly, he suggests, because of the ‘important impetus’ of Fahlström’s 1963 work.

There is a problem. It goes: What do we call it, the artistic artefact? It afflicts anyone who is making art anew.

The Fylking may have thought it had been solved by having coined “text-sound composition” but I remember conversations in several countries which began with an assertion that such and such a piece was not really text-sound composition; and that certainly happened when the original term “text-ljud komposition” went abroad in translation and came back to Europe in untranslated English proposing itself in some mouths as an aesthetic artefact of the new world.

Cobbing went with “sound poetry” *and* with “visual poetry” *and* with “concrete poetry”.

Twenty five years later in ‘Domestic Ambient Buoys’ (Bob Cobbing and Lawrence Upton in Discussion with Alaric Sumner, in August 1999) published in *Riding the Meridian* issue 2.1, (edited by Jennifer Ley), there took place the following exchange:

Upton: I only say “sound poetry”, if and when I say it, well now I only say it because other people say it.

Cobbing: Exactly: We are influenced by what other people say and the concepts they have of what we do.

Upton: [...] I don’t know about “sound poetry”. I’m not going to deny the term, but because it means so many things to so many people—

Cobbing: You can't escape it.

I can say from personal experience that reflects Cobbing's opinion throughout the period. I do not say that his attitude did not change; but the changes such as they were, reflected changes of emphasis.

I imagine him learning at some point, probably rather early, of the category "sound poetry" and finding it approximated to what he did or wanted to do. As an existing category, it gave him permission; but it also constrained. It obviated those who proscribed with "that's not poetry" but it left him open to discussions of the category; and I am unsure how much he welcomed that.

Going back to Hanson's essay and to the interview in *Riding the Meridian*, there is this:

Cobbing: [...] Music and sound poetry are not the same thing at all. [...] sound poetry is much more concerned with articulated speech than it is with melody and harmony and so on. It may sound like music sometimes but it's much nearer to speech than it is to music.

Upton: That's really interesting. I don't really disagree with you. But you have used the word "song" in your—

Cobbing: All right, I called a publication *Song Signals*, but I still don't think the result is song. [...] The notation is stimulus for sound and a lot of people wouldn't distinguish between what we do and song; but I do. I think what we do is articulated speech rather than song.

Despite his informed awareness of how Bob classified his poetry, Hanson stresses the tape-recorder and recording studio, the basic tools of text-sound composition, as both a new medium and as a means of analysis of the poet's own voice. He sees "taped works" and "live performances" as likely outcomes of such analysis.

Hanson's judgment of the literary rather than musical attributes of the tape work that he sees as Cobbing's most assured work matches Cobbing's judgments of 1999. When I was working on the Hanson essay, for its inclusion in the Ceolfrith book, I asked Bob how he reacted to what Hanson had said (including, for instance, that there was a lack of confidence in his means of expression prior to 1999); and he said that he agreed with everything Hanson said.

And yet, in 'An Approach to Notation', he describes his "blotting" poems in *Song Signals* [4] as 'very musical... and seems to need instrumental participation as well as voices'.

He makes this statement after telling us 'it is used for its sound and visual qualities rather than its objective meaning'; but I am not sure that the assertion of its musicality is explained. That seems to me to inhere in Cobbing's expectation of how it will be read as notation rather than in the notation itself.

Further on, he refers to Jerome Rothenberg's saying that 'in Navajo experience poetry and music and dance haven't suffered separation'. For me, that sits uncomfortably with his claim that music and sound poetry are not the same, along with his endorsement of Hanson's analysis.

It might be that he changed his mind by the late 1990s and that Hanson is more of a critical analyst than he. I am not convinced. Existing terminologies are ill adapted to intermedia. A term like “musical” may have denotational and connotational meanings which contend. If one stretches the denotational meaning of “poetry” into music and graphics it is likely that meaning, and maybe meaning of “meaning”, will ambiguate. One need only consider the variety of meaning evoked by the word “line” in the various but related contexts of music, poetry and drawing [5] to understand this.

The critical vocabulary is put under strain, especially when the artist uses that vocabulary colloquially!

At the same time, the practicing artist, especially one contravening accepted boundaries between artistic genres, will be continually evaluating and re-evaluating, resulting in a constant adjustment of emphases.

And, finally, Cobbing’s work presents us with the terminological challenge of work which is read, seen and heard, often simultaneously, with all the descriptive challenges that presents.

Hanson, in his short essay, concentrates upon the performance of works, both tape and live, saying that these two strands complement each other; but he is careful, too, to stress the importance of Cobbing’s poem on the page.

This brings me to a more detailed reading of Cobbing’s very useful and intriguing essay ‘An Approach to Notation’ (pages 32- 42).

The words “cunning” and “crafty” nowadays are not pleasant things to say of someone; but go back in time and the words in their earlier form mean knowledgeable and strong; and it might be taken as something wrong with our culture that we have come to see knowledge and strength as causes of suspicion.

It seems to me that Cobbing’s purpose in poetry is based on strength of knowledge and strength of craft. He offers it, to some extent without explanation, leaving the potential reader to make their own decision. That is an attitude that runs through all his life.

Yet he does not abandon the confused reader. Witness his perception that what was really needed was a kind of primer which would explain to people how one might approach the performance of visual poetry when he was arguing the case for what became *Word Score Utterance Choreography*.

Those potential readers who are inclined to say that a text, because of its form rather than its content, is “just like all the others” or is “meaningless” (and I have heard both) could be trained to respond to the name Cobbing; but that deals with an instance of a problem rather than the problem. His late difficulty with being interviewed may have stemmed from the experience of would be scholars who had learned of his work’s importance by rote rather than by perceiving it for themselves.

Hence, I believe, the importance he attached to meeting in a workshop. It was not to develop a

strategy or discuss tactics or to found schools, but to learn from each other at a level where language almost fails as we try to make better our new linguistic artefacts.

'An Approach to Notation' commences with a crafty pedagogical approach by asserting, without seeming to assert, that there is 'ear verse with an eye equivalent, eye verse with an ear equivalent' and verse 'in which the two aspects are equally important or so closely interwoven as to be almost inseparable'.

He does this by telling us that Houédard distinguished between them.

Not only does this avoid the proposition that a visually-emphatic poem [7] is a poem, and that proposition was far more contentious then than now, but it also enables Cobbing to elaborate and depart from the narrow meaning of "Notation" allowing him to speak of poems visually as such. That matters when one remembers that Cobbing held that the poem must work visually before one considers what it might sound like.

This indirect approach takes me back to the idea of Cobbing's ability to disarm, at least partially, those who would criticise his aesthetic.

He says of his 1954 poem, 'Worm', 'this poem seemed to need different treatment' and thus asserts, implicitly, something that was implied by something he sometimes said, particularly in the 1970s when talking of using recording equipment: 'making the poem more like itself'.

Making a poem more like itself could mean performing it in such a way that most nearly represents what the poet wants or imagines the poem to sound like. It could also mean that he felt his poems, perhaps all poems, had something of the noumenal about them.

I'm sure he did not. And yet...

In his comment on Steve Dwoskin's version of the poem Cobbing calls here 'Tan Tandinanan' ('He has very successfully attempted to match the shape of the sound performance with his visual interpretation') we are clearly speaking of the poem as it is in the world of time and space; as with his note to *Sound Poems* ('These poems are SOUND poems so much of the creative work must be done by the reader').

'Panzologicomineralogia', he tells us, 'is not an exact notation to be followed rigidly' and then: 'intended to stimulate the voices into a free and spontaneous interpretation', an explanation expanded in Section II as 'intended for several spontaneous and independent voices, and the layout enables the voices to find their way around the poem more easily'. That is a rather good definition of notation, I think.

'Are your children safe in the sea?' may be equally indicative; but Cobbing skilfully directs us around that simplistic categorisation by concentrating on its different history. In terms of his opening summary of Houédard's position, it makes the case well and indicates the variety of Cobbing's approach.

So far, within a page, Cobbing has offered us a poem to which he has returned, in order to work on it visually out of what seems to be a sense of dissatisfaction with the poem as a notation; a poem which has been worked on visually by another; a visual poem which was conceived as a notation for sound poetry; and a poem which has been developed visually; and all this under the heading “an approach to notation” (my emphasis). It would seem, therefore, that what Cobbing is proposing is an approach which is a multiplicity of approaches, using what is available and what is possible, going with the grain of possibility, as he used sound studios when they were available, ink duplicators when they were available, photocopiers when they were available; and so on.

That, however, is only in Section I.

In Section 2, he offers us a partial narrative and analysis of ‘Chamber Music’ on the page but on the page, in part, as *notation*, as he speaks of the vowel sounds.

His comment that ‘the visual element separates one-syllable words from two-syllable words... This separation facilitates performance’ strikes me as unusual; normally, it seems to me, he leaves the reader/performer to discover such matters.

His comments on ‘Cascade’ provide an interesting comparison with his commentary on ‘Chamber Music’ in that he tells us how it works, but without detail, saying what the poem’s patterns suggest but not how.

This constant change of methodological approaches, which nevertheless remains genuinely informative, encourages the reader to do much of the work in fleshing out the practice theory; or, in Dom Sylvester Houédard’s inimitable words ‘translate him to their own fruitmachines’ [7].

One is being informed, but not spoon-fed. The information one is given encourages the reader to ask more questions and poses thereby the essential pedagogical question: What do you think?

He throws off the remark ‘It becomes almost a picture-poem’ so smoothly that it only occurred to me quite recently to wonder if he was distinguishing between *a picture poem* and *a visual poem*. I suspect that he does not mean any difference. It may be that he was then using the terms interchangeably; it may be that he was offering a seemingly tangible term to support any readers who were finding the argument difficult.

‘Three Poems for Voice and Movement’ brings more narrative, using the words “notation” and “score” and “signal” whilst leaving it implicitly clear that the work is indicative but not directive; and stating explicitly that the work is for dancers, for choirs, for voice(s) and for instrumental musicians. Later, he says explicitly: ‘These notations seek to stimulate rather than dictate’.

Speaking of *The Judith Poem*, he uses the word “pictorial” alongside “dramatic”; and expands “signal” to “signal to action”. And the range of performers is now vocalists, instrumentalists, dancers or actors, or any combination of these.

Told, then, that ‘Landscape versions’ of parts of *The Judith Poem* ‘are even more pictorial in intention’; we might wonder if that makes them less signal-like. We are not told. What do we think?

We can demand that he tell us; but that would do no good. It never would. If he were alive, as Alan Riddell found, he'd respond 'That's exactly my question!'

And that is the approach that he is communicating: 'Often, the first spontaneous reaction is the best guide to procedure.'

*

The technical personnel and methodologies of text-sound composition matter a great deal. I will not say that any approach is superior to any other; it does not work like that; but the personnel and equipment affect what can be done and how it is done. This is rarely discussed or even noted. One exception would be Julian Cowley, speaking of 'Oral Complex' [10], who says: 'Whiting's technical input has made 'Oral Complex' a distinctly different performance from other groups in which Cobbing has been involved'—Konkrete Canticle, Abana, Bird Yak. I have some doubts about that observation. The other groups mentioned brought different kinds of input and one might equally note just how different all of the groups are from each other. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly true that the technical facilities available affect the possible output—obviously.

In a way that story tells the reader nothing. Perhaps one can say that Whiting's technical input allowed Cobbing to utilise his, by then, considerable experience of vocalising from graphical language and making tape work without acquiring skill with machines with which he was unfamiliar. It all takes time and effort; and, in some ways, for Bob it was the artefacts that mattered the most if a short cut produced an artefact he approved.

*

'Winter Poem 1' (1974) rocks on the edge between representation and non-representation. The representational elements in Cobbing, even if ambiguous, are fairly specific. 'Self-portrait with Glasses' contains glasses; but they are not foregrounded. In 'Winter Poem 1' one feels oneself seeing trees laden with snow, small animals etc; but in performance are found stimuli for vocal utterance.

The visual experimentation continued with an ever-varying flow. In particular, we can look at *Pattern of Performance* where he utilised not just the transforming capabilities of his stencil scanner, but also its quirks and his knowledge of those quirks.

Experience teaches the attentive; and, increasingly, he knew what he would get from that machine and from the duplicator. In the late 1970s, he was still exploiting the use of inadvertent monotypes arising from the ink duplication process; and farming them, as it were; and transforming the mundane output of the print media via scanning; and he reached for various of these methods much as he might reach for an instrument or a compositional process; or an electronic effect.

He never quite repeated; but he built on what had gone before.

Review of *With Our Tongue Our Drils and Quadras*

24 pp colour; 6 in. x 4 in.; ISBN 1 84254 051 5; Writers Forum; 1st reprint October 2010 (first published 25th December 2001)

This is one of the last things that Bob Cobbing made, a set of colour collages entitled *With our Tongue Our Drils and Quadras* which he published and sent out Christmas Day 2001 to a very few people. It seems that he made few copies.

I understand that he interpreted its reception as negative feedback; and he stopped making it and sending it, and turned to other things.

I am not going to be able today to explicate its title. I had hoped that the phrase would occur on the Internet; but I had no success that way.

I do not know why “drils” is spelled as it is. “Quadra” has a number of commercial meanings, as well as meaning “a small moulding”, none of which seem relevant; and it is a prefix indicating four which also does not seem relevant.

Someone yesterday said: ‘It looks like a line from *Finnegan’s Wake*’; and that excited me; but I have not been able to do anything with it. If anyone has a complete digitised text of the *Wake*, which I do not have, they might pursue that. [1] Doing what I could with a carefully-constructed web query, I discovered the existence, in the Augustan Age, of Hostius Quadra who was into group sex with mirrors until his slaves murdered him.

I can’t say that it helps much either.

I look forward to a response from someone, somewhere, beginning: Honestly, Lawrence, that’s so obvious!

That Cobbing sent the book out on Christmas Day will indicate to those who know his habits how important this work was to him. It would have been a waymark if not a culmination of some years’ work. However, it is quite clear from studies of his surviving colour work which I have made recently that the collection of images herein had been worked on and built up over quite a long period of time.

Colour always figured in Cobbing’s work; and, in August 1999, the late Alaric Sumner elicited the following from him in the context of his work with me on the long sequence *Domestic Ambient Noise*, which we made together between late 1994 and early 2000; and other works: ‘colour sounds differently but mostly [Lawrence and I] can’t afford it’.

and: ‘[Lawrence and I have] done performances of colour and definitely the colour does colour the performance’.

and, referring to the need for more experience with performing colour: ‘If we did a lot more work

in colour, it would enrich the performance quite a lot'.

but then: 'One could almost say that working in black and white is richer than working in colour in some ways. There are tremendous subtleties in black and white which can get lost in colour'.

He had had colour printing machines. His Gestetner A3 ink duplicator, the one in the famous print shop of the Consortium of London Presses in the mid-1970s used colour; but it was potentially a lot of work to change the colour.

Incidentally, as I have mentioned the print shop, I'll depart briefly from my script on that account. I recently reread Robert Sheppard's review in *Jacket* magazine of Peter Barry's book about The Poetry Society [1]. Not long ago, some people sent me a letter telling me their opinions on the "world of poetry" which reminded me in a quite odd way of the Poetry Round manifesto. That, by association, took me back to Robert's article where I was struck by his quotation from Peter Barry: 'the reluctance... to make the print-shop facilities available to poets beyond a narrow circle of like-minded radicals', which he says 'was a recipe for resentment that would inevitably backfire, but it was emblematic of the refusal on the parts of the radicals to countenance their work as part of a possible plural poetry scene, which might have emerged if they had behaved differently". (p. 172)

The only problem with the statement and the conclusion which Professor Sheppard draws from it is that the reluctance was not there. I do not doubt that it was reported; but I do not think it was checked with anyone who was involved with the print shop. The accusation may have been useful to malcontents; but that does not make it true.

A conclusion drawn from a false or invalid assertion is likely to be false or invalid.

And, being a member of the group he calls "the Radicals", unlike Professor Sheppard and Barry, I can say that what many of us, Cobbing included, were seeking was a plural poetry scene. Yes, there were refusals to oblige a number of people, but there were reasons for those, contingent rather than ideological, such as, short notice, unreasonable time demands or their lack of skill to use the equipment. The print shop was open.

In some ways, it always has been special pleading that has been the problem. Those making the special pleas are responsible for them; but it is a pity when others believe them without checking. I digress, but it is worth saying. Confidently stated but untrue statements can stick, as I keep finding in a variety of contexts nowadays; and it is of little comfort to know that, as in this case, they were not repeated with any malice.

In the mid to late 1990s, Cobbing had an expensive to use, slow and awkward colour photocopier on which, for instance, he and I made *Fuming* (Writers Forum 1997) one page at a time, one colour at a time.

And then a year or two later, he obtained a three-in-one machine, scanner, printer and copier; and he went to town.

Concepts like "Good" and "Better" can be troublesome because one needs to know the underlying

criteria before being sure of them; and artistic creativity has a way of getting through and under those criteria and making them wrong-headed in retrospect—which is not to say that criteria are no use, just that they work with the stuff that's ok but not necessarily with the stuff that's good but risky or the stuff that's rather bad, and they don't distinguish between the two.

Nevertheless, I need to say that Bob Cobbing, in his very late 70s, began a programme of experimentation in collage at which he got better and better; and this book, *With Our Tongues*, is one example of that, an example of what he achieved after having tried many things and left some of them behind him when he thought they didn't work.

Although I spoke of a degree of distress at the reception of this book, we find him at MERZ NITE, an event held under the dome of the Victoria & Albert Museum on Friday 25 January 2002, three and a bit weeks later. His material then was of the same genre.

I am inclined to think, having looked at it quite carefully, that what he came up with for MERZ NITE is interesting over and above that context.

I am not going to waste my time and yours making a comparison with Schwitters. Rather I am saying that he had learned from Schwitters, among many others—Norman McLaren, Canadian film director and animator (born in Scotland) is one not always mentioned but who was tremendously important.

It seemed that if you just sat near Cobbing and had something he could learn from you, he learned it, though he didn't then turn and put you down as so many do.

And Schwitters was, in 2001/2, *then*, and Bob was still living. What Bob did in his *now* had other vectors as well as Schwitters'. Formally and methodologically, you can see Schwitters as one of his sources; but Bob was his own artist.

This work is asemic; but I have come recently to realise that there are many asemics, as there are many blacks and many whites.

In my essay 'Bob Cobbing: And the Book as Medium; Designs For Poetry' (*Readings* 4), I took Bury Art Gallery to task for saying Cobbing moved from words and conventionally written text to the non-lexical sign, as if the movement were a straight line rather than a constant movement within and around a field of activity; and also for saying 'Cobbing is famous for his use of the photocopier to generate visual pieces that explode the conventions of reading and even the very idea of words'.

I have worried at that. It seemed to be idiotic; but it had to have come from somewhere: they did not seem to be generating any ideas of their own.

I wondered if it might have come from the title of an article by Richard Truhlar, 'Exploding the Word', which is quoted in *A Peal in Air* by Bob Cobbing (collected poems volume three 1968-1970; anonbeyondgrOnkontaktewild presses, Toronto 1978).

Truhlar does not say what Phil Davenport, the poet in residence at Bury, says.

In the section quoted in *A Peal in Air*, he speaks of Cobbing '[exploring] the word and/or letter as hieroglyph, as phonetic symbol, and as concrete graphic interaction of language image with eye and body rhythms. Cobbing releases language from the strictures of grammar and commonplace verbal communication in order to speak to the human nervous system bypassing the intellectual and rational faculties'.

Nothing like that got into the Bury documentation; and it's more than slightly different to "exploding the word" when taken out of context; and, I think, more interesting, if superficially less dramatic. Yet that is the title that Truhlar has used in the original which was published in *Contemporary Verse II*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Winnipeg, 1977.

Richard Truhlar kindly supplied me a copy of his article and now that I have read it all I begin to understand what he is saying. He says: '*The word as a concept* is exploded and new energy is released in the form of basic language elements'. (My emphasis.)

There is a subtle difference between "the word as a concept" and "the very idea of the word". One phrase is analytical and the other, Bury's, exclamatory. Truhlar goes on to say that 'Form in language, as the atom in nuclear physics, is a condensed and restricted bundle of energy. By breaking the form, new energy is released, and can be used for further growth and change in language'.

Truhlar suggests that '[Cobbing's] phonetic and concrete texts have their roots in the work of Gertrude Stein, the Dadaists, Hugo Ball's 'Verse ohne Worte', and Marinetti's 'Parole in Liberta'. which, taken with my referencing of Schwitters and McClaren, begins to show Cobbing's range. This work, republished today, was excluded from the Bury Art Gallery exhibition although it points to one of the directions Cobbing's work and artistic thinking were going at the end of his life.

I hope to make it and other work available to view in the first half of 2011 in exhibition. I am investigating it myself and with colleagues as a performer; and this publication, which has been very expensive! is intended to make it known to the wider poetry public.

Collaborations for Peter Finch

Lawrence Upton/Bob Cobbing; Writers Forum; ISBN 0 86162 784 9; October 1997 (reprinted 1998, and in November 2010)

Between late 1994 and Easter 2000, Bob Cobbing and I collaborated on *Domestic Ambient Noise* or *D.A.N.*

When we were about a third of the way into the project, Peter Manson asked us to submit collaborative work for the magazine *Object Permanence*. We responded with the poems which make up this book, *Collaborations for Peter Finch*, from which Manson selected.

Thus, we fulfilled the commission, without impinging upon the process of *D.A.N.*, using different procedures, so one set of work did not conflict with or become confused with the other, and agreeing on a relatively modest maximum length in order to return quickly to the ongoing work.

After Manson's selection had been published, the whole of *Collaborations for Peter Finch* appeared from Writers Forum in 1997.

It was reprinted in 1998 and went out of print by 2000.

This is the second reprint, timed to be available for the forthcoming Bob Cobbing exhibition [1], in 2011, which is being curated by Lawrence Upton.

The title dedication is quite explicable. There is no hidden message. Regard the book as an artistic homage by the two of us out of admiration for Finch's achievement as a visual poet, regarding Peter Finch as our peer in the making of various and inventive texts for live performance, a body of work of importance and distinction.

I spoke of different procedures to those used in *Domestic Ambient Noise*.

Briefly, in *D.A.N.*, one image by one artist was taken by the other to make 6 or more variations upon it. (Sometimes more than one image would be taken; but let's keep it simple: the basic idea was for one image to be varied six times.)

In the case of *Collaborations for Peter Finch*, the variation was undertaken as part of the making process of each image.

Each artist could initiate work on half of the page only. Each initiated half of the pages.

Thus, half of the 64 pages would have been blank before I, say, put any marks on them. Those were my 32 pages to initiate. Cobbing also had 32 pages which were blank before he put anything on them.

We could take our half of the page to be half horizontally or vertically or diagonally. Same with Cobbing.

So one initiated 32 pages and also responded to 32 pages, on those pages, on which one's colleague/collaborator had worked.

The pages were made one or a few at a time so that one was aware of how the whole was developing and changing. Neither initiated 32 images at one and the same time or anything like it. When both sides of the page had been made, the page went back to the initiator who could make changes; and that included changing what had been the other's contribution. So one could add to or subtract from one's work or one's collaborator's because it was all the collaborative text now.

One of the things that happened at this third stage was a process of blending the two elements if that had not happened already as part of the initiation stage and the first response stage.

Here was an engagement in a process I have since called "benign artistic trespass" [2]. The primary aim here was to get the whole image right in such a way that both were happy with it.

By this point, we had been making images with each other for some time and were beginning to open each other to our own ways of seeing.

Most pages went through the prescribed two stages, a few went through three and maybe one or two went through four. I once identified one page which had been through five stages; but, when I looked again, I could not be sure which one it was!

Collaborations for Peter Finch does not have any pages made by one only of us; and in some cases the work of one has been changed by the other and not just added to. The writing is there without attribution of individual efforts.

The length of book we settled on was about the maximum number of pages that could be managed in Writers Forum's then preferred publication style (sheets folded to make 4 pages, centrally stapled). The page size was Cobbing's favourite; and I think it's *all right*. He was doing the actual production. I just did half the artistic bit. So I agreed, though left to myself perhaps I might have wanted to try different page shapes.

We wrote up to that limit, pages having been abandoned along the way, usually half way through their completion by the first artist, sometimes by the other artist. (Typically, we would give each other a batch of pages half finished or a number of responses to the same page; and give with them permission or instruction to choose some but not all.)

Near the very end, we had a look through and weeded a couple which we felt—in tranquility—were weak.

All the pages were laid out on Cobbing's living room floor and the order discussed. When a link was agreed, the pages were moved together until we had the entire order worked out.

The writing/ordering process speeded up as the project progressed; and on the last day we finalised the last few pages and determined the whole order of the book. I think that the order of pages works; but it was not in any sense predetermined or foreseen.

The working order of pages changed constantly while the number of pages in all slowly built, to fluctuate towards the end of the entire process.

Order of composition, order of responsive composition and place in the book are all different. The spatial context for each page was different.

And then, when the book was finished, a few pages were performed at its launch; and then the two moved on. That is how Cobbing and I behaved separately, with a few poems being revisited; and the two of us together reinforced that behaviour. (In the case of *D.A.N.* we were much more thorough in our performance coverage.)

Some of this has been said previously in an essay called 'Hot Mazing on Time', from 2004, which you will find on the web in *Pores 3*. As well as this book, it deals with performing with Cobbing, particularly his book *Members Only*.

I should say, in case anyone has read my talk 'Collaboration, Not Just Cooperation' given at the University of Surrey in November 2009, you might be confused about my use of "cooperation" and its comparison with "collaboration" in that essay as opposed to my usage in 'Hot Mazing on Time'.

My ideas have changed and, when I was writing the talk for Surrey, I forgot that I had said something different but using the same words in 2004 for Birkbeck, University of London. That is, I knew that I was changing my usage but had forgotten that I had gone into print using the old idea. I am hopeful that is something I shall clarify in the forthcoming *Lab Book*, due for publication in 2011.

I was and am inclined to say that Collaborations for Peter Finch is my favourite work with Cobbing. I think there's a lot going on there. I think we were breaking new ground. That may well be true of the other works; but, I suggest, you get a lot in a few pages here!

I am still deeply pleased with and somewhat proud of *D.A.N.*, but there is something of *Moby Dick's* expansiveness about it! That is both a strength and a weakness.

In *Collaborations*, our sourcing from pop imagery of the time, in some places, may be more apparent now. (One is aware of that sort of source in the images from Cobbing's *With our Tongue Our Drills and Quadras* from 2001, which Writers Forum republished a few weeks ago; but, in both cases, I think the re-use of that imagery survives the original's inevitable datedness.

As a performance text, it is somewhat problematic in that it is written by both of us for both of us to perform. And now one of us is dead.

I have thought of proposing pages as performable with John Drever, as if he and I had anywhere near enough time to make the pieces we already want to make. At present, however, the vocal source is me; and I do not feel that one of the original readers with his voice treated by another artist quite makes up for the absence. I need to think more. It's a pity Peter Finch and I don't live nearer to each other.

The texts still ask their intriguing question: And just how would you perform this? They still engage us visually. And it is possible that something can be done by other artists or by myself and other artists towards sounding *Collaborations for Peter Finch*.

Introduction to *Bob Cobbing and Writers Forum*

I am pleased to have this book back in print; and I thank our donor, who wishes to remain anonymous, for making it possible.

It was first published in 1974 by Ceolfrith Press as the catalogue to the Ceolfrith exhibition of the same title.

Later, Bob republished it by photocopy at considerable labour; and he made a good job of it. He copied; he folded; he stapled; he guillotined.

It is an excellent introduction to the work of Bob Cobbing both as an artist and as a publisher. The essays it contains are perceptive and interesting.

But it would be easy to note it, even read some of it perhaps, and move on, using it as a frame or just prop for other things; and perhaps a source an academic essay.

Let us, however, consider how remarkable it was that the exhibition happened a decade after Writers Forum cut itself free of other organisational matters; and when Cobbing was in his mid 50s.

And, in this case, Writers Forum means the press.

Nowadays, it might mean, primarily, the workshop, a tendency, *perhaps*—it's arguable—of the last few years of Bob's tenure, and certainly a tendency now almost a policy almost a decade since his death.

Adrian Clarke and I started out with a plan for major reprinting *and* new publishing; and that didn't happen for a variety of reasons that hardly matter here and now.

It was asserted a little while ago that this is in some way a major failure. I do not see it like that. Yes, we failed to do what we said we planned to do; but now I am not—and for some time we were not—even trying to be, for instance, at the forefront of avant-garde poetry publishing.

One who finds themselves thinking that they really must get on with publishing more work or else they won't be able to be known any more as the leading publisher in their aesthetic area is *not* the person I want running anything.

One could argue that Writers Forum became as important as it has been as a publisher because of the failure of almost everyone else to pull their weight. It was not in competition.

But, actually, that *is* how competition works: the loser loses and the winner wins. It is a zero brain process and one is well advised to ignore it if possible. Personally, I have never felt very competitive; and I don't intend to start trying now to be first. There are other presses now. There is variety. That is healthy.

So Writers Forum here means the extraordinary publishing which Bob undertook and maintained for decades, and for which he was largely taken for granted. (It is probably worth noting that, for Bob Cobbing, the workshop and the press were complementary activities.)

It is the appropriateness of the book form chosen to the content which made Cobbing's Writers Forum so remarkable.

A lot of the criticism levelled at the press is simply wrong, based on bad observation; and the assumption by some that their opinions, without any supporting evidence or argument, matter.

For instance, Andrew Duncan's 2009 blog nonsense on the hijacking of the name of this workshop might be an example, condemning *Verbi Visi Voco* because he thinks a lot of it bad. That is, he judges it bad by what he thinks the editorial criteria should have been.

Verbi Visi Voco is not my favourite book either; yet I do not condemn it, because I think I understand Bob's purpose in making it as he did; and that is the result of trying to understand.

Duncan's is, it seems to me, a market-oriented Thatcherite approach as he blames the press's production methods for failing to reach all of its potential customers.

In the early days, Writers Forum books were often printed in runs of five hundred; but, later, that was lowered considerably because of the economics of holding large quantities of stock, some of which were slow to sell. (Commercial publishers may pulp theirs.) Instead, Cobbing switched to the policy of reprinting and began to proclaim a policy of all books being indefinitely available which someone termed "out in print".

It was an interesting ethic which both aimed to sell as many books as possible and also acknowledged that, if demand were too great, then the whole operation might become unsustainable because stock would not be replenished quickly enough.

And you might consider that often the books were sold for less than production cost, so that the more they sold the more in debt the press could become.

In modern management terms, that is all ridiculous. Contemporary managers live with different conundra and impossibilities such as constant growth in a finite world; and ignore foreseeable unplanned consequences. They would neither entertain nor live with the policies such as I have just described.

It is what made Cobbing such an interesting arts activist and an interesting artist that he did live by and with them. He could believe impossible things not just before breakfast but all day and every day. His colloquial explanation of Writers Forum's editorial policy was that it published the unpublishable.

It was, therefore, neither just another small press nor a competing small press. It was in a different space to that kind of thinking.

The supposed improvement in production this century which Duncan noted—or perhaps just repeated from hearsay—but did not examine, results from a number of factors, including the relative drop in printing costs. Cobbing was not against books being commercially printed; Writers Forum just didn't have the finance to do it all the time or even very often.

Commercial printing also homogenises the product. To some that will be a bonus. Homogeneity is somewhat necessary in a world where poetry writing, poetry reading and poetry criticism are all part of one consumptive process. Variation is allowed within standardised limits.

Occasionally, until 1984, a very dark ink-duplicated graphic on a book rushed out might be wet still at distribution; but the idea is sometimes still heard that Writers Forum books are “inky”; and it's untrue. More waffle.

I commented on the one example that I know of persistent inkiness, *Lightsong 2*, when we relaunched it in 2007. I commented on it because it is so unusual; and it was an example of Cobbing pushing his chosen medium way beyond its limits; and, though he achieved his aim in making a fairly consistent set of images, there was the payoff.

Some days, when there was urgency, a few copies of the product might be washed out because ink, or later toner, was low; or otherwise unsatisfactory because the wrong paper was delivered; and I am sure that Bob would have wanted to avoid that. He wanted to publish in a timely fashion even more than he wanted to avoid substandard printing.

However, such problems introduced a form of seasonality into the enterprise.

Every year brings benefits and demerits to food produce, for instance; and the drive towards standard quality products has led to tastelessness and to lack of variety, and *not* to quality across the board.

It seems to me sometimes that in some poetry publishing we are not far from a “guaranteed innovative” mark.

How will our students know what is good without such a guarantee?

The answer might be: it sounds as if they are not up to the study; or else it is their tutors who need to learn more and to think more critically.

When Bob and I performed at 291 Gallery in 2001, an undergrad wanted to interview us and I was the only one willing to oblige. She asked me a question and interrupted my answer with: Can't you say it any simpler?

I said I could not.

She had asked me how one goes from looking at a visual image to making an utterance. I am not sure that can be fully answered. I am certain it cannot be answered in about 100 words; which is what she asked.

I did what I could.

She went away without letting me finish, saying she only needed an interview, didn't care who it was with and wasn't going to waste time with anything too difficult. She's probably working in Arts Administration now.

Such laziness has ever been with us. It was of course a student and not a professional academic and I don't lose sight of that. It may have been a one off, but I don't think so. I have had a number of similar experiences. I take it as a sign of factory farming. Feel free to ignore me as grumpy.

Let's go by another route.

I was told recently, that I am the leader of the British visual poetry movement; that it used to be Bob Cobbing but that now he is dead it is me.

I denied that vehemently; and she told me her tutor says it is so, in a tone that said it is a clinching argument. I got a sense that, in her case at least, Poetry is not seen as a human activity which is pursued for pleasure whatever else is going on, but rather is judged as an industrial product or material, subject to markets and measurable by tests.

I also thought of the Mormon position on Baptism, as I understand it, which may be poorly: it does not take any account of the individual's opinion; they just process you at a distance!

No matter how resistant you are to being competitive, you will be ranked upon your competitiveness. Underlying all this is the familiar misapprehension of Darwin; and of survival of the fittest.

In 2005 there was seemingly an attempt to identify a UK "e-poetry" movement! Interestingly, at one point, I was to be excluded from it by local curators who thought that sending text by email turned it into e-poetry.

Things change; things stay the same. Changes in production technology have benefited an organisation like Writers Forum. I am not so sure that attitudes have changed in their essentials: there is still a drive towards maintenance of status quo, even if that status quo is a drive towards change, and maintenance of ascendancies, by those ascendancies; a drive towards personal fiefdoms.

But because things have changed in other ways, the achievement of something like Writers Forum may be missed.

Writers Forum published a record, Cobbing and Jandl; only the one. I might have gone on to do more, perhaps—and here I am guessing completely—if Fylking had not published its gramophone records. And if the money had been available.

The reception of Bob's *Sound Poems/ABC in Sound*, his BBC appearances, Fylking and other invitations to and appearances on the London South Bank might make the Ceolfrith exhibition look

inevitable. I am not sure it was so. In some ways it may have been a high point in worldly terms; though maybe that was the Coach House Press selection in 1976.

He kept going before and after... before and after every event.

To what extent the nonsense at The Poetry Society had a negative effect upon him and his work, I cannot say. I don't think it helped. It was, in many ways, inevitable: inevitable that it would happen, inevitable that careerism and mediocrity would win out; it always does.

People have written theses about Bob since but I have yet to see anything much as good as some of what is in this book.

Few engage with him as what we might now call an intermedia artist. Few see his post 1970s work as an ongoing development and expansion of what had gone before.

Many now seem to see Writers Forum as some kind of SME; and both it and Bob as something to be taken over or bought up and packaged.

Few address his publishing for what it is: a call to cooperative and collaborative arms and alms in an implicit assertion that practice comes before theory, if the practice is to be any good.

So what happened in 1974? In this context! Well, a lot of idealism. Witness the farce at The Poetry Society supported in words by a lot of people who said they were all for what we were doing and they'd be along to help maybe next week, sorry, not this week.

And Bob managed to show, seemingly effortlessly but in fact by hard work and attentiveness, just what could be done *in* Poetry and *for* Poetry; and what could be done in publishing by stressing idealism and ethics rather than entrepreneurship.

There was a lot of politics in that; but he didn't say much about that; he did it.

Thank you.

Bob Cobbing's *Sound Poems*

Once, I was inclined to say that *Sound Poems* is poorly titled. What is a sound poem? Certainly, for me, his later title, *ABC in Sound* [1], is more appropriate.

Yet Cobbing usually knew what he was doing, even if it took the rest of us a while to catch up. Now, I think that his first title was declarative as much as it was descriptive. He was calling attention to a primary aspect of the poems; and to their sonic qualities; as well as announcing himself to those others he thought would be interested.

It was not a commercial title; but Writers Forum [2] was not (and is not) a commercially oriented enterprise; and I imagine that the work was not issued in anticipation of financial gain by sales.

Cobbing's aim as poet/publisher of *Sound Poems* was to network, as we might nowadays express it; and it seems that he succeeded considerably in that. He made contact with a wide range of artistically influential artists who were excited by his achievement.

Within a short time, he had been invited to the Fylking in Stockholm to make and present new work; was living, if precariously, as a professional poet; was heard on BBC radio; and, within a decade, had appeared on the South Bank [3].

Yet, seen retrospectively, "Sound Poems" as a title does not do the poems justice in that they are also Semantic Poems.

There may have been a shift in his thinking. He wrote: 'These poems are SOUND poems so much of the creative work must be done by the reader'. Later, he did not make that distinction of "sound poems" from all others, just as he only briefly borrowed Dom Sylvester Houédard's distinction between an ear version and an eye version of a poem.

He always did think, quite sensibly, that the reader/auditor shares creative activity with the maker; but that early special plea for a supposed class of poem does not seem to be one that he adhered to long. There may have been an attempt at advocacy on the part of the unfamiliar in form and content.

Similarly, the directives (e.g. 'Rising to Jubilaire', central section insistent, rising again to 'Jubilante') are introduced—separated from the poems themselves—gently with 'a few indications may help'—in other words, there is even more to be said. And, in that context, the layout of the poems (are they ranged left or centered, and where and why are there line breaks?) become clearly notational, an idea usually subsumed into the doubtful concept of "intelligent reading".

On that point, let me refer to 'An Approach to Notation' because one thing which strikes me about that essay is the degree to which Cobbing does not, there, discuss the typewritten poem as notation. He speaks of 'type-written or type set poems, where the eye element is minimal' and moves on.

That is a strange thing to say. Except perhaps with Braille and audio books, typescript is nothing

but eye elements! A notional alien not conversant with English language and literature might not notice a difference between Cobbing's *Sound Poems* and a book of Georgian verse. Yet as soon as one knew even a little, the difference would be obvious.

There is little visual variation from an apparent norm between typescripts. You have to know the code. The initial interest of his poetry for the eye is painterly.

Cobbing was always an interesting reader of poetry and that applies to his reading of others' work. Not for him the semi-audible drone, words half swallowed. He read the layout intelligently and sensitively so that when, on occasion, he pointed to areas of a visual text and said, to sceptics, that here and here he saw rhymes; this might be a half-rhyme; and here it was clearly to be uttered loudly, it carried conviction.

In *Sound Poems*, the poems are presented, as I say, in typescript; but the notes that comes with them are strongly directive:

Monotonously rhythmical, louder in the middle [H]

and

Two heavy accented beats per line except last liners in each stanza which are much quicker [X]

Thus, the idea of scoring the poem is there in 1964 (the year of *Sound Poems*' composition) even if what was in the poet's mind was more like hearing the poem so that it sounds as the poet imagines it ought to sound rather than stimulating others into their own responses. (Cobbing says little or nothing about how a group of performers coordinate their readings of a score. Again, as always, he put faith in others' creative resources)

In these typescripts, the poet has chosen his words, to a considerable extent, for their sonic values and qualities, not restricting himself to English; but it is clear that their semantic meaning, or something akin to it, is being engaged by the poems' processes:

Adventure
Aventure
Aventureux
Adventure
Aventure
Aventureuse
Adventurous
A L'aventure
Dire la bonne aventure
Aventurier
Aventuriere
Aveugle
Aveugle

A L'aveuglette

Cobbing claimed that the sequence had been written in a few days during the Christmas 1964/ New Year holiday. Often, he added to that claim that he had influenza at the time of writing and had drunk Scotch whiskey to alleviate the symptoms.

I am in no position to deny or even doubt that he had influenza. Nor that he drank whiskey. However, it has occurred to me that the story, whatever its reliability as fact, might be seen as being a little defensive, initially at least, before he could be sure of the tone of wide reception of the book.

I can say no more than that. I did not know him then. By the time I met him, perhaps five years later, he was rather confident of his achievements; but I suspect that he would always have seemed that confident. Nevertheless, I find it an odd story which, it seems to me, he adapted later to a different kind of defensiveness whereby he made light of the poems' perceived brilliance. They contain no delirium or intoxication. *Sound Poems* is work of great clarity:

Bombast bombast
Bomb bomb bomb bast
Bombast
Emphas
Em- em- em- phase
Bombast emphase
Bombast
Phebus

If he finished it, dotting each letter I as it were, with drink and or a virus in his veins, that is something else, because it had been the work of many months at least to get to that point in the writing.

Then there is the variety of approaches, formal approaches. 'He is just playing with word sounds', someone has said [4]. Yes, he is playing; but I hesitate at and even object to just playing. Play is the basis for almost all learning; and it is "learning" which is the process necessary to keep art from degenerating into the flaccidity of entertainment. (Art is often entertaining; but it is not much if that is all it is.)

It may be that the more we play the more we learn; and I want to go further than any of these statements and assert that play is the basis of all art even though some art is rather serious. These poems are serious for all their joie de vivre. What may alarm some readers, or give them pause to shut themselves out from the poetry, is that the verse does not offer itself for reduction into prose statement of the functional kind.

I am seeking here to differentiate purposes in writing. I see no validity in the idea that verse is different to prose, a priori, in terms of its value. It is clearly different in a number of mechanical ways; but it is useful to avoid, in this context, all sense that prose is superior to or inferior to verse.

However, there is functional writing which says one thing at a time and as unambiguously as possible: business letters, instruction manuals, this essay—and, unfortunately, quite a lot of verse. Of course, to say that Cobbing's poems cannot be reduced to prose statement is not to say that they are poems without meaning.

On the contrary, their lack of reducibility to statements is a reminder that no poem worth the label "poem" can be reduced to functional statements. Prosaic meanings may be extracted; but a great deal would be lost thereby. As William Wordsworth wrote in 1798:

Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—
We murder to dissect.

Too often, if what has been lost to the main abstracted discourse, by exclusion, is mentioned in the analyst's account of their investigation, it, the excluded material, is necessarily rendered as a mode of decoration because it is seen as not intrinsic. Thus, a poem's rhyme scheme, rhythmic structure and other aspects of its versification, including its form and diction, are often taught as supporting the poem's meaning rather than being part of it, effectively an unsayable part in colloquial terms.

Nowadays, in UK schools, many aspects of poetry are not mentioned adequately in its teaching; and, widely, poems are liable to be seen as odd or "fun" ways of saying something which is more clearly said in other ways. Cobbing's *Sound Poems* strongly suggest that Poetry is a form of meaning other than "prose meaning".

The mechanism of the poem is different from the approach of the instruction manual or the self-help book, neither of which even attempt what C. S. Lewis called "The doubling, splitting, and recombining of thoughts... the counterpoint of the mind, the mastery of doubled and trebled vision', [5] which Poetry offers—if we exclude unintentional ambiguity in manuals et cetera arising from linguistic incompetence!

Not all will agree with me, but I shall still assert that Poetry concerns itself primarily with telling Truth. (This is sometimes far removed from the identification and uncovering of "truths", a search which is almost certainly the hunt for a philosopher's stone.)

Yet, what a poem says, what we are told by the voice or voices of the poem, may not be factually true, or not tenable by the lights of the reader. Take, for example, Milton's 1655 poem 'On the Late Massacre in Piedmont'. There is a lot in that with which I disagree; yet I greatly value the poem. It depends on the broadness of the definition of "truth" that one uses. Something approaching Keats' much quoted 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' [6] might perhaps be my choice. (That is, there is more to "truth" than what is deemed to be functionally useful.)

When a poem includes the word "I" followed by a verb, the reader is ill advised to believe she is being told something which has happened factually. In a poem, "I walk", "I love", "I see" et cetera are propositions rather than data about physical behaviour. In the worldview of prose readers, we might argue that Poetry offers us models of the existential in all its complexity, which becomes mere tangled complication if we try to cherry-pick from it.

It is likely that the complexity, flexibility and adaptability of natural language has been (unwittingly) achieved to a considerable extent by its use in song and literature and its use by those influenced by song and literature. That is, we are as linguistically competent as we are because of our playfulness and the aesthetic urge, which has taken us way beyond the capacity for denotative indication.

The morning song of the blackbird in my garden may be a set of challenges and invitations to other birds; but it is joy which makes him eloquent and musical.

And so Cobbing:

Loop
La lune Loop
Ontala ontala tala tala
Low loom Bleep
Bleep la lune Loop
La nuit est morte

Not, please note, just another letter-based poem, but another poetic procedure too. And he doesn't say "I". He doesn't use any pronouns. He doesn't write many full sentences.

Each poems starts mechanically differently:

N
Ndue
Ndemic

and

iji iji-baru ijo

and

pot/pot/potpourri pot/ollapodrida

and

McAllister
MacAlpine
MacArthur

and I could go on, easily. They all are different.

In these poems, one sees a conscious departure from received communicative method, as distinct from using the topsoil of slowly accreted linguistic change by natural selection, which communicates nevertheless.

There are those poets who inherit their poetic forms and manner from forebears and/or peers, put their own mark on it and... well, often, that's it. And there are those poets who, in one way or another, say "This won't do" and produce some or all of their own forms and manners. Cobbing is one of the latter.

It is worth noting one thing that he does not do: the typographical encoding of the sort that Graves and Riding read off from cummings' poem, among and which, perhaps inevitably, results in some rather odd conclusions about clarity of composition and the needs of the reader [7]. Cobbing did not work like that. (He tended to be rather dismissive of cummings.) We might compare the Riding/Graves analysis of how one might read cummings' typography, with Cobbing's own comments on 'Cascade' [8]. "The visualization breaks the words into their component patterns which suggest aspects of water, light etc, and which at the same time indicate the pattern of performance".

Notice the word "visualization" for a version of two lines of an earlier poem he describes as having been written in orthodox fashion:

A voluble cascade of rippling water
Emancipates the light

This is Cobbing applying a process to pre-existing material, and we shall see that again and again in his career. On the one hand, as I suggest, Cobbing not concerning himself with typographical encoding and yet using the potential of the typewriter released from linearity to indicate ways of performing the aural/visual emancipation that the poem proposes. It is concrete poetry; it is other than concrete poetry.

If there is no convenient term for it, then it is that much harder to classify it and turn the page. Something is happening here and we don't know what it's called.

One Story of Bob Cobbing

In March 2005, there was an immense amount of Bob's work gathered posthumously at Bury Art Gallery; and I thought, once, that putting the exhibition together would be a matter of selecting from the returns.

Unfortunately, much of that work is no longer readily obtainable; and I had a larger and complicated task than I had expected.

Also, I did not want, for *my* exhibition, just to bring a lot of works and material into a room, good as Cobbing's work is, and say: "There you are! Look at that!"

Many people felt themselves overwhelmed by the Bury exhibition, and rightly so, because the *work itself* is overwhelming. Here, I wanted more. Here, I did not have the space the earlier exhibitors could have used, nor all the opportunities that were on offer to them; but I realised that much can be done, as I hope this exhibition shows.

I could try to avoid exhibiting work that was not Bob Cobbing's in *this* exhibition. I could try to offer decent documentation.

The exhibition at University of Pennsylvania Libraries in Philadelphia USA from August 30th to December 16th 2007, showing material from the Sackner archives, was an excellent example, I feel, of what one might aim for.

Please, if I have something wrongly, let me know.

In the last stages of assembling the exhibition, as, I like to think, my understanding has deepened, I departed from its anticipatory description written late in 2010:

including a sample of his early sound work, a look at the period in the 1980s when he switched from ink duplicator to photocopier as general purpose tool, and an examination of some of his last works, when he was still experimenting.

You can see the change in my direction for yourselves: I have added much earlier imagery, back to the 50s and even early 40s, to show his continuity; and there is a small concentration on his early years, from middle 1960s into 1970s.

Posters etc. and recordings indicate to us the notational aspects of this intermedia work (lest any see it as unsounded graphics).

And there are indications of his campaigning for Poetry; and quite a bit, implicitly, on his editing and publishing.

I have provided some writing of my own on Cobbing in the documentation, with pointers to other writing.

I have included less on the 1980s' switch from photocopier to duplicator than I had thought I would, feeling, in the circumstances, it is more important to stress continuities of imagery and approach. *Processual*, the main immediate output of the acquisition of the photocopier, really deserves an exhibition to itself.

At the start, I was anxious to point strongly to the difference between photocopier and ink duplicator as tools for making, because it seemed that was being denied by Bury; but I have dealt with that in my essay 'Bob Cobbing and the Book as Medium', a copy of which is available during the exhibition and which can be found on the web.

There had been hope of bringing in an ink duplicator and giving a demonstration of just how it worked and how it was worked by Cobbing; but that has not been possible. And, having pointed out that there is a major difference in media, the difference itself becomes less important than the fact that Bob Cobbing had mastered both.

Early on, a decision was made to exclude *Domestic Ambient Noise* from this exhibition merely on the grounds of size; though I hope to see it exhibited itself at some time: the making of it rather dominated six years of our lives, albeit pleasantly.

I have sought to exclude *all of our* collaborations except a copy in a vitrine of the primer, *Word Score Utterance Choreography*, which we co-edited; and a book of poetry, *Collaborations for Peter Finch*, we wrote collaboratively. Both are there to represent the work of Cobbing's press, Writers Forum, still going.

The relative smallness of this exhibition has enabled me to concentrate on Bob, rather than on Bob and his collaborators. You will see some of them mentioned, including me, made ghostly almost though they are not ghostly, at its fringes; but Cobbing himself is the subject of this exhibition. Jennifer Pike appears in several places. That's only appropriate. And there's a score by Lawrence Casserley and Bob Cobbing in the library, but that is based on a poem by Bob, extending it.

It is possible, then, in a space-limited exhibition, to present him as a solo artist, and that points to the solidity and richness of Cobbing's artistic achievement, upon which the many achievements of his collaboration rest securely if not exclusively.

I stress, as I write this, just prior to the final hang, there are alternative exhibitions potential in the greater selection that I have chosen. There is not room for everything and I have had to choose what to emphasise.

Different selections can be made for future exhibitions, making different portraits of Bob Cobbing, each versions of the truth.

There's a poem by Browning which begins: 'Ah, did you once see Shelley plain', and then, after a large handful of lines, 'Well, I forget the rest'.

That works in part on the brevity of Shelley's life, while Cobbing made it to eighty two years; but the problem of not seeing him plain is there, and perhaps for similar reasons.

By the time of Cobbing's death, the slowest wits were beginning to see his probable importance; and, unfortunately, some were soon making sure they were seen on the right side, assuring us, unreliably, that they had always been supportive. They gave their accounts. It's understandable, if reprehensible; but it blurs the picture.

In the last twelve months, I have corrected major statements of fact about Bob Cobbing and about Writers Forum which have been made, apparently, in respected institutions of learning by some who knew him, and by those who did not.

A few quote him out of context, or make it up, or attribute to him views that were not his in defence of their own chosen approaches.

Now... There is a problem in contemporary UK poetry beyond anything the purveyors of official verse can do.

You will hear, in some circles, the phrase "linguistically innovative poetry". And, generally, I do not argue with it.

I do wonder perhaps what worthwhile poetry would not be innovative; and why one needs to say "linguistically" of a linguistic art.

Sonically innovative music anyone?

Graphically innovative painting?

This terminology is now part of what looks to me like the infrastructure of the industrialisation, for no apparent reason, of poetry production and consumption. It relies upon simple propositions—if this then that—which are ok used themselves. In bulk, they move towards artificial expertise and its mistakes; but, used singly to produce a bulk output, they produce or may produce nothing but intelligent mediocrity.

I remember the late Hugh MacDiarmid, in the mid 1970s, telling a room full of people: 'You want to be poets; you think that you are; but you don't know enough'.

I think how it works is this: for some reason, you accept without question that poetry held to be good is innovative; you make sure that you do something differently to everyone else; claim it as an innovation; and assume you have made poetry.

The contradiction with other approaches is easily resolved by explaining that literature, like all arts, advances by schools and movements and we are here dealing with a new movement which interprets the meaning of meaning differently.

High street post-modernism has been a boon to this kind of mentation.

Sometimes "innovative" is an honorific term. A recent *Guardian* obituary headlined chairman of Wedgwood Pottery, Sir Arthur Bryan, as "innovative"; but the text of the obituary does not use the

word or any inflection of it; nor does it list any innovatory actions, unless one counts his decision to only offer for export products people wanted to buy.

So perhaps you call someone innovative because you like them; and they say the same of you. Earlier ages and other fashions claim other qualities as marks of distinction and advancement among mutual self-interest groups.

On another tangent, there is the mass teaching of poetry by the *What is the poet saying?* school of thought to prepare students for non-denotational communication.

Shall we see Cobbing plain? Probably not; but that does not mean that all statements about him are equally true. And we can and should try for clarity.

It is my intention that this exhibition be only the first of its kind; it, and those exhibitions that follow it, will, I hope, encourage more study and more work of what remains; as well as promoting an adventurous approach to poetry and art in general rather than the approach of some who currently claim to admire Cobbing's approach but seemingly do not.

My forthcoming selected poems of Cobbing will assist understanding; and I shall return soon to that editing task with renewed energy.

Space Studios proposed the exhibition and have been supportive and enthusiastic throughout; and I thank them for that.

And, then, secondly as well as firstly really, Jennifer Pike Cobbing is to be thanked for her support and for her advice.

I should mention Adrian Clarke who contributed three loose leaf Cobbing pages from his cache of *And* magazines; but finally they are not exhibited here, along with much else, interesting though they are. I thank Adrian for his cooperation.

Please note that, therefore, I am keen to take this exhibition or one like it elsewhere. It would be criminal for this work to be here now, after a lot of work and expense, and then dispersed.

I am working on various possibilities for the autumn and welcome further opportunities.

Cobbing is an artistic exemplar. On the one hand, he took play a long way beyond what most players would do. On the other hand, there was a reason of some or other kind behind almost everything he did.

I want to steer clear of possible traps here—intuition, inspiration and so on. There may or may not be something to them and others; but they are such familiar rat runs of low grade thought about the art process that I see little good coming of them.

I have often advised seekers after truth and proof in poetry to learn all they can on the poets' terms, avoid assumptions, particularly those they are unaware of (that's a good trick) and, when

they know enough, to ask themselves if they trust a poem or set of poems: the kind of trust involved in friendship and love.

Never mind about whether it fits the categories you have; categories are made to follow limited evidence; and when we run into them then perhaps they are in the wrong place. Is it poetry—if the poet says so? Germaine Greer resurrected this one recently, of art in general; but, for all her cleverness, she left out any limitation. Any biped, apparently, is free to declare what they have done as art.

It's a point of view; but I find it alien. I find it alien in the way that, when the aliens assert their presence, all our electrical processes come to a stop. So you allow the self-declared artist to declare her output art; but you can't logically say much, beyond description, because you have already defined art without reference to any form of Virtue.

It's a Behaviourists' view of art. It works; it's defensible; and it's as useful as a cheap sugary drink. Cobbing's approach to self-serving debates was to make new work; lots of it; probably declaring himself unable to understand the issues. When a colleague gave Bob the Bob Cobbing chunk of his doctorate, Bob asked me if I had read it and if I understood. I said I thought so; he said he didn't and he'd cut it up and made a poem. The second part of that was true.

A few years on, the work Bob made, masses of it, stands out, in general, from gimmicky self-declarative claptrap of the time. *That* stuff can be studied, but it won't be heard or seen with pleasure. The question of trust doesn't arise there because few of us want to be near it anyway.

I have chosen not to clutter the exhibition with too many images, hoping that visitors will concentrate on what is shown; and that they will ask themselves that there might be song signals to be found

Song Signals was the title of his 1972 book; but it is also a useful term for all of his work, all of which was intended to be sounded or imagined sounded.

The variety of his approaches that I have illustrated is wide though; and you may think that you have understood what he's about only to find that, next, he offers an entirely different approach. I have deliberately not arranged the images chronologically to obviate any temptation to a reading of historical development.

I do not think it works simply like that.

He repeated himself but not by an exact repetition. It is the repetition of an artist still learning. Cobbing's innovation is, I believe, always formal; and that may be more clear here in an art gallery than in an overtly poetry context.

Cobbing emphasised his poetical essence, and quite rightly, but what he meant by Poetry was rather inclusive. Poetry, as he meant it, tended to include many or perhaps all of the other arts.

Cobbing innovated, genuinely, and without noticing. He did it as part of trying to be better at

making poetry than he had been.

And part of that facility was his range, which wasn't limited to poetry.

Cobbing's work is of a simplicity which generates complexity, not complicatedness, from a few generative ideas—the name of Beethoven repeated; the permutations of 'are your children safe in the sea' overlaid serendipitously and then selected and collaged; a square poem that says, 'This is a square poem'.

Apart from those, I have largely excluded semantic poems from the wall displays. They are important as I have already asserted in my writing on Cobbing; semantic poetry is an important part of Cobbing's dialogue with us and with himself.

I do not wish to emphasise them here.

They were also crowd pleasers; but that's ok; and they were crowd pleasers on his terms. Say and show what is appropriate.

Cobbing knew that well. That's how he could bring an improvised performance to an end at just the right moment.

That's why he was able to progress from work to work interestingly.

Do something.

Do something else.

Go back and do the first something differently.

Do something else again.

Is that the something else that we have had or a new one? Oh yes, both of those at least.

Now let's do something else, but differently.

And so on.

It is, perhaps, to some extent, the difference between industrial harvesting at somebody else's behest and kitchen gardening.

This applies to performance, where Cobbing often quickly built a rapport with fellow performers; and it applies to making the visual work.

Regarding performance, I recall a long exchange between Cobbing and the late Eric Mottram in March 1973; you'll see the cover of the Writers Forum edition of the text in one of the vitrines, where he spoke of the abandonment of making as a way to bring making to completion. That is,

you knew when to stop; and you stopped.

In some ways, he made little distinction between poetry and painting.

Every Cobbing image here, at least those made in or since the mid 1960s, with the possible exception of the photo image made with Jennifer Pike, was intended to be readable *as a score*.

Some pieces might be more readily readable than others. *Square Poem*, for instance, offers limited vocalisation possibilities. I heard him do it entertainingly; but that was more to do with rhetoric than musicality.

If all his scores lend themselves to multivoice vocalisation, then they also invite other sonic expression.

There is no orchestration in advance here. You all have the same score.

There are few directives, an obvious exception being the Casserley/Cobbing version of *Hydrangea*; it is nearly all indicative.

The non-directional score requires intense intellectual concentration in order to know when to shut up.

Colour is not necessarily an enhancement to black and white and the grey scale. Cobbing used colour superbly in *The Five Vowels* from the early 1970s. That was a tour de force in terms of the physical production of the score and in terms of final performance.

The colour in terms of notational signing is more problematic; and it is not shown here for that reason, there being more unambiguous or explicit use of colour.

A little while later, however, he remade *Portrait of Robin Crozier* both in terms of content and in use of colour, using silk screen; and the sonic potential of the latter change is clear. A copy of the original ink duplicator print and a copy of the silk screen version are included—there is of course no original as such, only various forms of paste up and various forms of stencil. Much of Cobbing's art is inherently multiple and potentially mass producible.

I present “computer generated poems” as he called them, as “experiments”, and I try to narrow down the use of a word I normally hate in the notes provided.

Art here is experimental as a definition of “state”, body and mind state, and that could go in many directions rather than being held back as a genre of artwork where anything goes. It is therefore related to the nexus of words which, in Greek, I am told, refer to judgment and give us the word crisis—that is a state where, far from things being terrible, though they may be, we are led to new ways of seeing. It could be related to laboratory experimentation; but it is other than that.

I could spend a long time suggesting what Cobbing learned from those experiments; but you can see it for yourselves in terms of the later output. However, my interest is more that you see what

he did formally, in a context of the painting. Just what he did. Career analysis, contributions to the human good... that can be done another time. Here, now, look at what is, please: we don't do enough of that.

Late in the 1990s he acquired a good 3-in-1 colour machine and it enabled him to make a series of exciting work. One set of it is here.

Its key, in so far as there is one, may be in seeing, in this late work, the evidence of feedback as he tore from colour magazines and collaged and copied and then reworked. Think, but not too specifically, of the late Matisse, in the gesture of his action.

Around and around.

The colour and the textures refine.

The elements begin to merge as a consequence of the mechanism of the machine process. It is all developed into a visual statement of the world which is not abstract but is representational of the world non-photographically, a representation not for unusual light receptors in the eye but for rigorous mental processes, pictures of what the world might become—and not in terms of expo-celebration. Have a look at the *Dynamic Progress* images in the library, from the era of the Festival of Britain.

Come at this from the certainty that he was a concrete poet, whatever that means—well you know! no, I'm sorry I don't—and you may miss it.

One could argue then that late Cobbing is Cobbing going back to his roots; but then we know now that he died within the year of making those images. And that knowledge feeds back into our interpretation of what we know of Cobbing.

We should also know that he was always going back to his roots.

The duplicator print of 1942, the monotypes of the 1950s are not only where he came from but are also conceptually one of the places he always was, having learned.

Similarly, towards the end of his life, he dedicated *Sign Writing* to his father, who had been a sign writer; and, as he re-sighted his father, he cited him as one of his inspirations. Thus, the emphasis is creative rather than nostalgic.

Always going back.

Always not going back.

He was often deeply engaged on a number of different writing approaches; and so to in his last year.

In this last colour set, he was going into what I see as new territory—as *Sound Poems, Are Your*

Children Safe in the Sea?, *Song Signals*, the silk-screen *Portrait of Robin Crozier*, *Processual* and others were new territory.

That, I suggest, is a generative way to view this work.

It has been said that Cobbing's work is all the same: it is the same in the way that each of his poems is unlike the majority of the rest and most unlike the generality of what passes for poetry. Call that "innovation" if you want. I think you may be missing the important point.

The idea of not offering a chronological exhibition is to encourage you to take each piece on its own terms in so far as those terms are discernible to you.

If you are troubled at all by awareness that these works are said to be linguistic, then just put that out of your mind. If he were here, I know that Bob's approach would be to start from where you are.

If it doesn't bother you, then you might ask yourself what that means and what it might or could mean.

Cobbing was a generous encourager of others. He was patient. He wasn't much taken by laziness. He hated disloyalty and dishonesty. He was impatient with that.

He never had much interest in controlling.

I make that last comment because it was asserted on BBC Radio 4 last week that he excluded poetry which was not like his or not to his liking from the programme of The Poetry Society. (He never had such power over the events programme. Any member of the general council of The Poetry Society, like the accuser, would know that.)

It was also said by the same person that 'Beethoven Today' works on variations on both words of the title. Well, there are two versions of that poem here and you may check the gentleman's reliability.

Perhaps the struggle of the 1970s, in what has been called "The Poetry Wars", was not for Modernism; but *between* Mediocrity and however we describe its opposite. (We can't really say "excellence" because the word has already been hijacked to the service of Mediocrity.)

Cobbing as campaigner sought, amongst other things, to open the door to all Poetries against the wishes of a *de facto* Mediocrity elite which limited access to a few forms; and that included including what was then usually called "experimental". This was happening already; Cobbing was part of a *zeitgeist*. He was regarded as an experimentalist; but he did not want it to stop there. From Cobbing, I learned first to listen to Ornette Coleman. I also read Vachel Lindsey and Charlotte Mew.

Those mediocre poets we'd hear of *then* had followed The Movement et cetera; now some followed the "experimental" or "the Americans" and so on. (I simplify grossly.)

And now as poetry more and more becomes product in the eyes of many, contemporary mediocrities only pretend to be like what they would once have emulated.

They fake a label, like “tradition of Bob Cobbing”, or “tradition of Writers Forum” as if they are selling fake designer clothes—in a way, they are.

It can be a sociological study. Earlier today I was served by email a do-it-yourself analysis of Cobbing and Writers Forum, claiming to identify their best traditions—a meta discourse in place of a descriptive statement when it is the descriptive statement which is needed.

By this method, you exchange denotation with a general statement of aspiration; declare that you share that aspiration; and conclude that you speak for the forgotten original. The same thing works in politics: *I am the General Will*. Nowadays, and in poetry, mediocrities make smaller claims; but they make them.

And so they lose the ability to understand even as they are penning their own *What is to be done?* because they do not really know what they are doing and forget completely when they try to juggle falsehoods as well; they don't put in the work. It is daydreaming, like wanting to be an astronaut. An unfulfillable desire backed up by ruthlessness.

If you look at their behaviour, you see they do not understand what is needed. They do not even see the ethical drive of, for example, Cobbing's work.

If you look at the poetry which they claim is in the tradition of Cobbing, you will see they do not understand.

Yes, they may get doctorates out of it; not being a fake is not an academic criterion; but they have no inner necessity to do anything. So they fake it. They have appetite but no educable desire. Watch young pigs at feeding time.

And so, about fifty years after Cobbing and others declared Writers Forum, we have its wayward pupils disparaging some poetry because *they* don't describe it as linguistically innovative, a term with no particular meaning, where, before, other poetries were disregarded because they didn't doff their caps to Larkin or Hughes etc.

It is not just lack of understanding but, as always it seems, desire for control. In all cases, we have people, usually mediocre in their personal achievement but perhaps lauded, telling others what Poetry should be with the diligence of fundamentalist jobsworths; and they cannot usefully be corrected because they know they are right—as fundamentalist jobsworths always do.

Poetic ability in their schemes is rated below Public Relations Technique. Perhaps it always was by some. The perpetrators are ambitious for themselves seen as poets rather than for poetry.

I am most concerned with the ignorant misrepresentation of Bob Cobbing and the willful misrepresentation of Writers Forum; but it is everywhere. As even Norman Mailer remarked: 'The shits have got us'.

And this crisis is where Bob started. Nothing has changed. Within weeks of his death there were mediocrities seeking his kudos.

As the Taoists know, the true leader is never in the van, a fact forgotten by the self-styled avant-garde who refer sometimes to Bob as part of their own self-justification; just as they quote selectively from Eric Mottram.

If Cobbing organised where others did not, that's because the others did not when organization was needed.

There have been Cobbing exhibitions of various shapes and size. Perhaps the most noteworthy is Bob Cobbing & Writers Forum in 1974. The catalogue of the same title is very good. Writers Forum has just reprinted it.

Only a decade into Writers Forum's forty-five plus year history, it was clear that Cobbing was its focal point, first among equals.

In the vitrines, you will see a range of Writers Forum books, mostly Cobbing's, as I've said, but with a few others, both to show the continuing strength of our press and workshop and its continuing range. I have included a book by the Chilean Martin Gubbins and the Australian Richard Tipping, both influenced by Cobbing and both available in books in this country from us. Jeff Nuttall is there; and Barry MacSweeney, for what they show—see my notes.

The 1974 catalogue stresses poetry painting and music.

I cut my cloth appropriately, I hope, and have chosen to stress painting and poetry although later tonight I shall be joined by the musician Benedict Taylor to interpret some of Cobbing's work sonically.

I can state my overriding thesis very simply: Bob Cobbing, the painter, was poetic; Bob Cobbing, the poet, was painterly.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you enjoy this exhibition and find it stimulates new critical thoughts and new creative work of your own. I welcome your comments.

Another Story of Bob Cobbing

Welcome to today's talk. My first talk, on 24th March, was relatively long. This one is much shorter. If you missed that first talk, you might like to seek out prints of the text which should be available here, by the reception, to read; and perhaps there are still copies to take away.

The title of that talk is 'One Story of Bob Cobbing', meaning, I intended, that the narrative is open to some debate. When a person is absent or dead, we are deprived of their reality and stories and versions of the stories multiply. Those of you who heard the talk will know that I was disputing some versions of Cobbing because, I believe, they are self-serving, seeking to utilise the man's name to support a particular poetic practice; and not to tell us about him on his terms.

This talk *is* a story, an anecdote. Bruce Chatwin says at the start of *What Am I Doing Here?* that when he includes the word *story* in one of his titles, he is admitting to a degree of fictionalisation. In this case, I am not *trying* to fictionalise, but am sure that I must be doing so. It is not written yet, but I know more or less what I shall say because I have thought it through this morning before switching on the word-processor. This is the story.

Some time towards the end of his life—I couldn't put a date to it, but believe it was in the last couple of years—I went to see Bob. Increasingly, such work meetings, and all meetings with him were work meetings, started with talk. Increasingly, the work *was* the talk, certainly in substantial part, and we then went on to realise what we had spoken of, what we had imagined in our conversation. This is one of the many things that I learned from Cobbing even if it arose from something like necessity. A lot of my current collaborative work now is conducted over cups of coffee, the small detail of realisation defined during and deferred till after the conversation.

At the time it was a sign of his increasing infirmity. Yet he was still energetic, just less indiscriminately so.

I think that I asked him how he was and he said that he wasn't so bad; and so on. A normal human conversation, side-stepping much personal detail.

At some point we were speaking of eyesight, of how an individual's particular sight quirks might affect not only how they saw but also how they portrayed. I remember that we made that distinction, as we made the distinction between what the eye sees and what the brain sees in what the eye has sent it. And we were derisory of over-reliance on medical biography to explain what an artist does. It may, we said to each other, reinforcing certain uncertainties that we may have shared, point us toward some questions that we should ask; but the main question should be *What did the artist learn?* and not *How can we explain what the artist did?*

We spoke of our own particular ocular oddities and misapprehensions. I remember speaking of a number of mis-seeings, some of which I have used in poems, with and without identifying them, including three of us seeing the dark shadow beneath a bridge which suggested shelter from a sudden downfall of rain somewhere north of Lewes in Sussex—we ran towards this welcoming shadow only to realise that it was no bridge but a big pile of dung left by the roadside in the shape of a believable space beneath a hump-back bridge. Our desires had turned its dark colour into the

shadow of something desired.

Bob had never heard that story and was interested, especially because three people who did not know each other that well had seen it simultaneously; and we talked about various aspects of vision as we had experienced them.

Somewhere in that discussion, Bob said, 'I went blind the other day; well, I lost my sight for a while'.

It was such an unexpected thing for him to say that I did not quite comprehend it. And perhaps that is another example of a brain tending to reject what it had not expected to receive.

Did you? I asked, hanging on to what I knew he had said; and he said yes, but it was all right now; and he steered the conversation back to where it had been. I imagine that we were drinking tea; but that's all it is, imagining: I don't remember.

We drifted on to colour, something we worried at from time to time, as we practised it from time to time, and Bob more than I. And, from there, different perceptions of colour, depending on the number and quality of receptors in body or machine. Not that either of us really knew much about that.

Who knew, I asked, what either of us was seeing? What hope of knowing if the perception were consistent?

Just now, said Bob, out of one of his eyes, everything was blue or blueish; and then we went on to say what he could see in colour terms out of the other eye; but oddly I have no recollection of what that was. I had been overwhelmed by the mention of blue, because there wasn't very much blue in that room, except as an element of more complex colour, as there will be in any room.

This somewhat overpowering blueness had arrived after his temporary loss of sight and was gradually fading as what he remembered to be normality of vision returned.

He had been going up the stairs. You entered the home downstairs and went upstairs to the living area, where we were while we were talking. Downstairs were the toilet/bathroom and the two work areas, one for Bob, centred on his photocopier, and one for Jennifer.

Half way up, he said, his sight went.

I asked what he did and he said that he stood still, holding the recent output of the photocopier, which was both his working tool and printing machine. He had been going to look at what he had done in the light from the kitchen window.

I asked him what he felt while he stood there waiting to find out what would happen and he said 'I thought: How am I going to get this bloody poem finished?'

I do not doubt that; but there must have been other emotions.

Yet, as I have said before, Bob Cobbing got up, made poetry all day and then went to bed. He had been doing that as a default for decades. It would make a kind of sense if he did prioritise that work above everything else.

I could, though, express it a different way. The potential disruption of his habits alone must have been alarming; one is much less able to cope with changes of routine as one gets older.

You see I am interpreting reality on the basis of very partial information, subjecting the artist and his work to the filter of an outline life story. It's very easy to do; but it is not actually a good idea. It must fictionalise whilst seeming to be evidence-based.

Back on the dingy staircase, he stood there for a long time but could not now say how long that was. Slowly some vision returned. It was largely blueness, a kind of scintillation of blue, or that is how I have remembered it.

Then in one eye another colour began to dominate. I said that I cannot remember this detail, but I am tending towards the idea of red. However, that may be the storyteller in me.

What happened? I wanted to know.

Well, he said, it went on getting better and after a while he finished climbing the stairs and had a cup of tea. And? And then, he said, as he was seeing better and better, he went back down and finished the poem: it was after all a grey scale piece so the colour he was seeing was an annoyance rather than a hindrance.

Some weeks later, I asked after his sight, and he said it was fine.

There had been something of a confidentiality in his tones that led me to believe he had kept some or all of the experience to himself. Jennifer was working on her own stuff downstairs so there was no difficulty in acquiescing.

I think I'll stop there. If I say any more it is going to be almost entirely evidence-free; but I am happy to continue in individual or group conversation. I don't know if I have helped you see the exhibition any better. I nearly said *in a new light*. Do feel free to ask about anything you can see here; if I can answer you then be sure that I shall.

Notes from 'Bob Cobbing and the Book'

From *General Comments*

Cobbing's approach to publishing, as possibly to most things, was egalitarian. (I think those who say he was democratic may have misread him; not that he wasn't, but the word doesn't quite catch the man. Similarly, undue emphasis is sometimes placed on his artistic innovation: of course he was innovative, but that was part of a wider approach, which seems to be beyond the comprehension of those who take a catechismal approach to art.)

He wanted everybody's work to be affordably available; and, for him, that meant cheap. You'll see sales post it notes attached to a couple of publications, with rather low prices considering the effort taken to produce them. Actually, low without any such consideration. Another element of his approach was relaxed time-efficiency. He was quite capable of undertaking long and complex projects; but he did not like to make what could be achieved simply into something complex or slow to be finished.

So the ink duplicator, and later the photocopier, suited him. He could use them in his home when he had a free moment. If he couldn't sleep, he would use them in the middle of the night. An office stapler is quicker to use than a needle and thread; so he used the office stapler on most pamphlets. Judicious purchase of papers made for pleasing designs. Staples were pressed down with a coin or knife. Pages and whole books were guillotined when appropriate. He explored the potential of the chapbook made from one sheet of card. He published books in plastic wallets where it suited the contents. A book could be conceived and published within 24 hours. The Writers Forum Workshop provided one outlet; and that met frequently. Sometimes these methods were supplemented by use of silk screen; and, later, colour photocopy; and, when money was available, by litho. (From early on, he had used coloured inks in the ink duplicator; but it was a lot of work.) Writers Forum also produced posters, audiocassettes and an LP record. *Verbi Visi Voco*, on display here, is one example of what could be achieved by way of camera-ready copy at the Cobbing kitchen table. When Cobbing handed over Writers Forum in 2002, I asked him about his own work, which he had not mentioned; and he said it didn't matter or words to that effect. I think it was only partly rhetorical on his part. He knew his own worth; but his main interest had been here and now and in knowing that we would try to continue something of his approach.

Now the sticky tape is failing and some of the publications are a little battered. One tries to maintain them; but such decay is a risk of the approach.

There are collections where pristine copies are maintained although there is no one comprehensive holding of the output of this productive and creative man. In the years since Cobbing's death, printing has become cheaper; and the press relies more on that than in Bob's day, although the process is slower and somewhat reliant on donation to pay for it. I am not sure that Bob would have entirely approved.

A few examples of the post 2002 work of Writers Forum are included where there is a direct link back to Cobbing's methods and interests. *Bill Jubobe* and *Bob Jubile*, the two large selections of his own work from Coach House Press (1976) and New River Project (1990), are not included here.

Both afford ample evidence of Cobbing's aesthetic approaches but are felt to stand outside of what is achievable here.

Further Acknowledgements

Review of *Pattern of Performance*: An outtake from an article dated 15th April 1980. First published in *Lobby Press Newsletter* on 15th May 1980.

Bob Cobbing at The Voice Box: A cut down and edited version of 'REPORT Maggie O'Sullivan & Bob Cobbing at The Voice Box', posted immediately after the event on the British and Irish Poets discussion list. The bulk of the report was on Bob from the start; and I edited it at an early date to its current extent. There was no antipathy to Maggie O'Sullivan of whom I had written separately.

Bob Cobbing at The Klinker: Posted immediately after the event on the British and Irish Poets discussion list.

Co-editing *Word Score Utterance Choreography*: A talk given at 'Unpacking the Anthology: A Conference on Anthologies, Anthologists and Anthologising in Literary Studies' at Edge Hill University College on 16th July 1999. The text was published as a booklet by Housepress Canada in 2001.

Cobbing and Upton at the Barbican: Originally entitled 'Cobbing & Upton—Barbican 19 11 99—a Note by Upton', posted immediately after the event on the British and Irish Poets discussion list.

Introduction of Bob Cobbing at the 5th Eric Mottram Celebration: Subsequently posted on the British and Irish Poets discussion list, and later on the Sub Voicive Poetry website.

Bob Cobbing and Eric Mottram Celebration: A first draft, not previously published.

Bells, Whistles; and Sounds and Words: Published in *Cauldron & Net* (edited by Claire Dinsmore).

Introduction to Bob Cobbing at Sub Voicive Poetry: Published on the British and Irish Poets discussion list, and then posted on the Sub Voicive Poetry website.

Cobbing, Pike and Upton at 291 Gallery: First published on the website of Caroline Andrews. My thanks to Ms Andrews for permission to reprint.

Bob Cobbing: A Worker in Progress: Written on request during Summer 2002 for a project which did not happen. An earlier version of the paragraphs on the Writers Forum Workshop, come from a posting by the author on the Wrying discussion list on 25th May 2002. Published by Lollipop in October 2002.

Funeral Oration for Cobbing: Given on Friday, 11th October 2002.

Celebrating the Memory of Bob Cobbing At Sub Voicive Poetry: Sub Voicive Poetry staged a series of celebrations of Cobbing in the early years of this millennium. This was the brief introduction to the first in 2003

Bob Cobbing: A Talk Given at Boat Ting: Text of talk about given at Boat Ting. Posted on the Wrying discussion list on 1st October 2003.

After Bob Cobbing's Death are Xeroxographic Manipulations Going Anywhere?: Written for a project that seems never to have happened. What is here is labelled as Draft1-1, St Ives Sunday, 22nd August 2004.

Sub Voicive Poetry Bob Cobbing Celebration Opening Remarks at Camden People's Theatre: This was the last such celebration. Sub Voicive Poetry was moving towards its closure after about a quarter of a century, just less than half of it under Lawrence Upton's direction.

Reissue of Kroklok: A talk given at Writers Forum Workshop in 2007 on the occasion of the reissue of the publication. Previously published on the Writers Forum website.

Republication of Bob Cobbing's Lightsong 2: A talk given at Writers Forum Workshop on 3rd February 2007 on the occasion of the reissue of the publication. Previously published on the Writers Forum website.

Lecture Notes on Bob Cobbing: See explanatory note at the start of the text. This version was tidied up in Spring 2012.

Review of *With Our Tongue Our Drils and Quadras*: Launch introduction (edited) to the publication given at Writers Forum Workshop on Saturday, 9 October 2010. Previously published on the Writers Forum website.

***Collaborations for Peter Finch*:** Reprint launch introduction (edited) to the publication given at Writers Forum Workshop on Saturday, 20th November 2010.

Introduction to *Bob Cobbing and Writers Forum*: Reprint launch introduction (somewhat rewritten) to the publication given at Writers Forum Workshop Saturday, 8th January 2011.

Bob Cobbing's *Sound Poems* : Invited paper for *Cazar Truenos* #1(Peru), May 2011. Published there in a translation into Spanish by Martin Gubbins.

One Story of Bob Cobbing: A talk at Space Studios on 24th March 2011. Published by Space Studios as part of its exhibition.

Another Story of Bob Cobbing: A Talk at Space Studios on 30th April 2011.

Notes from 'Bob Cobbing and the Book': From the exhibition of that name (December 2011—January 2012) curated by Lawrence Upton. Reproduced here are the introductory remarks and not the detailed notes to each exhibit. Published on Lawrence Upton's own website.

Endnotes

Review of *Pattern of Performance*

1. This assertive and perhaps combative tone was more a product of my youth than my insight. My apologies. And I regret that it's discernible in the next piece too.
2. The difficulty described refers to the use of an ink duplicator.

Co-editing *Word Score Utterance Choreography*

[The fourth and fifth notes were added in 2012 as part of the editorial process of compiling this book, adding information that might be useful rather than changing statements.]

- 1 *Word Score Utterance Choreography* published by Writers Forum in 1998. Co-edited by Bob Cobbing and Lawrence Upton, with a preface by Cobbing and introductions by Upton and Robert Sheppard.
2. A poetry reading series which ran for about a quarter century. Founded by Gilbert Adair and Patricia Farrell. For the last ten years or so it was run by Lawrence Upton.
3. 'Writers Forum: Life by 1000 books', an article included in *A Book of the Book: Some Works & Projections about the Book & Writing*, edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay, and published by Granary Books in 1999.
4. That pamphlet never appeared for the simple reason that the text was never presented to Writers Forum by the author. One section of the talk, a detailed examination of a visual poem by Vaclav Havel, was rewritten and published by the Canadian magazine *Open Letter*. The rest remains unpublished although many, but not all, of its ideas have found their ways into later writing, which has been published.
5. The new anthology was called *On Word*. In order to obviate the severe problem of financing a publication for which all grants were refused, we opted for serial publication: sell some, print another. In retrospect, that allowed us to relax too much because we decided to edit one issue before going on to the next. There were plans. There were many lists of names, long lists; but we never approached closely the problem of excluding someone that one of us wanted included. It could have been a very productive association and I would be intrigued to know what we would have made—except that Bob died when we had produced issues 1 and 2. We must have known that would happen with a schedule that called for one issue every quarter; but we did not allow it to control us.

Bells, Whistles; and Sounds and Words

1. Edited by Derek Beaulieu and published by Housepress in 1999, in an edition of 115.
2. Edited by Lawrence Upton and Bob Cobbing and published by Writers Forum in 1998.

3. Published by Writers Forum in 2000, and launched by performance at Sub Voicive Poetry on 18th July 2000.
4. Published by Writers Forum in 1994.
5. Bob Cobbing and Lawrence Upton, Writers Forum, 300 pamphlets, 1994-2000.
6. Published by Writers Forum in 2000.
7. British and Irish Poets Discussion list, 27th July 2000.

After Bob Cobbing's Death are Xeroxographic Manipulations Going Anywhere?

[Note is editorial, added in 2012]

1. I have revised my opinion in this regard, following the preparatory work that I did for the Space Studios exhibition. I see more confidence and more skill in his 1980s work with computers than I had; and I would not now have made that statement. It is something to which I hope to return. Apologies to you, Bob.

Reissue of *Kroklok*

[Both notes are editorial, added in 2012]

1. Writers Forum's plan now is to issue *Kroklok* 1, 3 and 4 as e-publications. *Kroklok* 2 is available in hard copy.
2. That is, the un-collated pages printed by Cobbing in the 1970s and never removed from storage.

Lecture Notes on Bob Cobbing

1. *Bob Cobbing and Writers Forum*, edited by Peter Mayer published by Ceolfrith Press in October 1974, and republished twice by Writers Forum, the third edition being in 2010. It accompanied the Ceolfrith retrospective exhibition in November 1974.
2. *Bob Cobbing and Writers Forum*, *ibid* pp. 43-45.
3. In *HZ-journal* 4, 2003: His title is, I believe, intended to reference the 1966 festival Visioner av Nuet (Visions of Now) at the Stockholm Museum of Technology, Tekniskamuseet.
4. *Second Aeon*, 1972.
5. For this observation, I am greatly indebted to my reading of *Lines: A Brief History* by T. Ingold and published by Routledge in 2007.
6. I am using my own terminology here. I first used it in my essay 'Utterance and Notation of

Poetry' published in *Riding the Meridian* 2.1, 1999.

7. *Extra Verse* No.17, 1966.

8. 'Performing the Wor(l)d; Contemporary British Concrete Poetry' by Julian Cowley, in *In Black and Gold: Contiguous Traditions in Post-War British and Irish Poetry*; edited by C. C. Barfoot, 1964.

Review of *With Our Tongue Our Drils and Quadras*

1. A web edition of *Finnegan's Wake* has now been published by University of Adelaide under the imprint eBooks@Adelaide; and I have been able to make myself the check which I proposed. *Finnegan's Wake* does not appear to be the source of the title.

2. *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* by Peter Barry published by Salt, 2006.

Collaborations for Peter Finch

1. Space Studios, London Fields, 25th March 2011 until 7th May 2011.

2. Talk at the University of Miami in Ohio, Spring 2010.

Bob Cobbing's *Sound Poems*

1, Published by Writers Forum as *Sound Poems* in January 1965, reprinted in October 1965 and again in June 1967. Published by Writers Forum as *ABC in Sound* in March 1986 and again in May 1990, June 1992, March 1994, April 2000 and 2004.

2. Writers Forum may be found at wfuk.org.uk.

3. The arts complex then centered on Royal Festival Hall.

4. I made a paper note at the time; but cannot now locate it. However, I have heard the same or similar remarks in the years since; and one still hears the set dismissed as triviality.

5. Chapter 15, *That Hideous Strength* by C. S. Lewis, 1946.

6. 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'.

7. *A survey of Modernist Poetry* by Laura Riding and Robert Graves, published by Heinemann 1927, reprinted in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry and a Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, published by Carcanet in 2002. The book is an idiosyncratic and selective approach but this particular analysis is sound on its own terms.

8. *Bob Cobbing and Writers Forum*, *ibid* p.33.