

Bob Cobbing 1950-1978: Performance, Poetry and the Institution

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**Bob Cobbing 1950-1978: Performance, Poetry and the
Institution**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, 2012

I confirm that this is my own work and that use of material from other sources has been fully acknowledged.

Abstract

Bob Cobbing (1920-2002) was a poet known for his performances and as an organiser of poetry events, as a participant in the British Poetry Revival, as a late-modernist and as a sound and concrete poet. This thesis seeks to reconfigure our view of Cobbing as a performer by considering his performances across a range of institutions to argue that this institutionalised nature was their defining aspect. It maps the transition from Cobbing's defence of amateurism and localism in the 1950s to his self-definition as a professional poet in the mid 1960s and his attempt to professionalise poetry in the 1970s. This process was not uncontested: at each stage the idea of the poet and the reality of what it meant to live as a poet were at stake

The first chapter considers Cobbing's poems and visual artworks of the 1950s in the context of Hendon Arts Together, the suburban amateur arts organisation he ran for ten years, and it situates both in Britain's postwar social and cultural welfare system. Chapter two analyses Cobbing's transition from Finchley's local art circles to his creative and organisational participation in London's international counterculture, specifically the Destruction in Art Symposium (9-11 September 1966). Chapter three considers *ABC in Sound* in the context of the International Poetry Incarnation (11 June 1965) and analyses Cobbing's emergence as a professional poet. Chapter four examines Cobbing's tape-based poems of 1965-1970 and their associated visual scores in the context of audio technology, and the role they played in Cobbing's professionalisation. The final chapter examines Cobbing's performances at the Poetry Society (1968-1978) in order to investigate the effects of subsidy and friendship on poetic performance.

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Introduction:
Bob Cobbing's Performances 1950 – 1978

My diary records a Sub Voicive reading for Cobbing's 65th birthday on 30th July 1985. After a performance which probably included 'The Processual Nonny-Nonny', which he had published (and possibly composed) that day, Fencott, disillusioned with the lack of direction and structure during the performance of the work with Metcalfe, asked Patricia Farrell and I: 'Is Bird Yak one of the most significant artistic achievements of today?' to which we replied simultaneously, 'No!' Nor would Cobbing have intended it thus, deliberately revelling in the outer limits of performativity with this group, as he growled and rattled percussion instruments, but sometimes incongruously followed a carefully elaborated text or score, while Metcalfe, ignoring this, sawed a dead guitar with a violin bow, or drilled it with a Black and Decker, crashed cymbals, gargled submarine noises through his amplified gas mask, smashed beer glasses, or – worse of all – farted. If, as Cobbing said in 1981, 'art has been taken out of our hands, it seems to me, and we must be artless,' then Bird Yak developed artlessness into a fine art.¹

In this recollection of a Bird Yak performance, Robert Sheppard relates a conversation he had about the band's aesthetics. The members of the band were Bob Cobbing (1920-2008), the free improviser Hugh Metcalfe and Clive Fencott, a sound poet who according to Sheppard left the group a few years later to pursue a career as a lecturer in computing. In some respects the eclectic, genre-crossing composition of the group was typical of Cobbing's collaborative artistic practice throughout his career, but in other ways this performance took place in a space and time far removed from many of his earlier activities. In part, this thesis seeks to explain how and why Cobbing's aesthetic developed to the point at which the artlessness of Bird Yak was considered by some of its audience to be fine art. Sheppard's description includes several details that relate to different aspects of Cobbing's identity and can serve as starting points for the present enquiry.

The importance and complexity of the sound that Sheppard perceived in the Bird Yak performance is the first thing to consider. Cobbing did not articulate

¹ Robert Sheppard, *When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry: Episodes in the History of the Poetics of Innovation* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2011), 123-124. Shepherd wrote Cobbing's obituary in the *Guardian* (7 October 2002).

actual words, but rather ‘growled’, and this guttural form of vocalisation was produced from a ‘score’ while percussion instruments ‘rattled’ and Metcalfe made mechanical sounds on a Black and Decker drill and ‘gargled’ noises through a gas mask which were then ‘amplified’ and sounded around the reading space. Embodied sounds and other noises produced through artificial means become enmeshed in the performance space through collaboration. A central question this thesis attempts to establish is what this kind of sound meant to Cobbing, and the role that collaboration played in structuring that sound. The Bird Yak performance reminds us that for much of his career, Cobbing was identified as a sound poet: for example, he is included in *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue For The Eleventh International Sound Poetry Festival* (1978) and is also described as such much later, in *A Dictionary of The Avant-Gardes* (2001).²

Secondly, the remark ‘we must be artless’ suggests that Bird Yak sought to disrupt notions of artistic taste in order for taste to be reconstructed on new grounds. To accept farting – the sound of an embodied and unpleasant intimacy – as an acceptable public act, let alone as art requires a different kind of taste to that needed to appreciate a painting in a gallery. Yet it is evident from the positive tenor of Sheppard’s remarks that his own disposition was sufficiently sympathetic to the Bird Yak performance to understand why the performance might be enjoyable. While Metcalfe’s use of the hand drill and the ‘dead’ guitar gestures to 1960s experiments in destruction in art and the 1970s do-it-yourself aesthetic of punk, it also signals Cobbing’s idea of art as part of a larger project of construction and reconstruction of taste. How such realignments of taste occurred in Cobbing’s audience is an important aspect of his own identity as a professional poet, artist and arts organiser. As I will show, these preoccupations also contributed to his identity as an amateur artist and arts organiser in 1950s Hendon.

The third part of the enquiry that Sheppard’s description opens up is the genuine regard, fondness and even love that other poets felt (and still feel) for Cobbing. Personal affection contributed strongly to the meaning of his performances. The Bird Yak performance was part of a birthday celebration at

² *A Catalogue For The Eleventh International Sound Poetry Festival, Toronto, Canada, October 14-21, 1978*, ed. Steve McCaffery and bpNichol (Toronto: Underwhich Editions, 1978).
Dictionary of the Avant Gardes, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (2000, 2nd ed. 2001).

which close friends and fellow poets such as Sheppard joined him in a series of reciprocal performances. There is a sense of a trusting community in the conversation that Sheppard recalls between himself, Patricia Farrell and Clive Fencott, who evidently trusted the others enough to ask whether Bird Yak were actually any good. Fencott's self-doubts, deriving from the fact that his own taste had been tested by the Bird Yak performance, provide a counterpoint to this intimate community of listeners, as does the way that Metcalfe (many years Cobbing's junior) is said to have irreverently ignored Cobbing on stage and made little attempt to ensure that he was giving an adequate performance of Cobbing's poems. This mix of intimacy and distance, community and atomisation, trust and self-doubt, celebration and irreverence, collaboration and individual expression, which was key to the Bird Yak performances that Sheppard remembers, is a central concern of this thesis.

Finally, the phrase 'smashed beer glasses' identifies the location of the pubs in which Bird Yak often performed as being vital to the meaning of those performances. While Cobbing's declared intent was to be 'artless' (an expression of his feeling that art had been taken out of the hands of the artist), the word also declares an intention to perform in an uncultured, naïve manner and without deception. It is difficult to establish from Sheppard's description whether the physical nature of the performance was wholly artful or artless: is it ironic that Cobbing and Metcalfe cunningly mimicked the childlike and drunken behaviour that an extended visit to the pub might induce while claiming to be 'artless'? Or were they in fact getting tipsy? If by chance or design they actually got drunk in the process of performing, their deception would have been all the more complete. Mapping the relation between Cobbing's personal behaviour and his poetic endeavours, and how both were dependent on their context, is also crucial to understanding his performances and who Cobbing was.

This thesis argues that these four aspects of Cobbing's performance identity are actually part of a more fundamental tendency, which is the defining feature of his work across time: the physical, conceptual and external situation of a work's production becomes a creative component of internal form in Cobbing's performances. In the case of Bird Yak, the immediate context of the performance becomes the art while Cobbing continues to present his 'text' within it. The poet Mark Jackson recalled that at Bird Yak performances (of which he attended

around thirty) Cobbing would literally read the room by vocalising sounds in response to objects he found there: the shape of a pint glass, or the pattern of the grain in one of the pub's wooden tables.³ While the quality of sound is always altered by the space in which it is heard, Jackson's recollection suggests that Cobbing drew explicit attention to this fact by making sounds in response to particular objects he found there. The texture of the space becomes the text.

Sheppard's description of Bird Yak's pub performances is best understood as a microcosm of Cobbing's lifelong performance practice. This thesis begins at a point before the separate elements of that practice were presented in a single space as a fully enmeshed, body-centred, aural and spontaneous aesthetic. It shows how these elements are in fact traceable to different stages and contexts in Cobbing's life as a poet, artist and arts organiser.

Cobbing's identity as an artist is best understood by investigating his work in the context of his institutional affiliations. In the period from 1950s and early 1960s, these included local arts organisations in Hendon and Finchley. From 1965 onwards he was primarily associated with countercultural sites and events including the Better Books shops in Soho, the Destruction in Art Symposium, the Antiuniversity of London and the International Poetry Incarnation. From the late 1960s onwards, he brought his work to national institutions such as the BBC and the Poetry Society.

The first section of this introduction demonstrates that the prevailing critical view of Cobbing's work is largely informed by an ongoing (albeit latent) preoccupation with the aesthetics and social atmosphere of a single institution and period: the nine years Cobbing spent as a member of the Poetry Society (1968-1977). One reason for this is that Cobbing helped draw his associates (new and old) to the Poetry Society while he was a member. Eric Mottram, Lawrence Upton, cris cheek, Paula Claire, Bill Griffiths and Adrian Clarke are all poets who were close friends with Cobbing and who incorporate responses to Cobbing into their critical writing, and sometimes into their poems as well.⁴ Their interactions and experience of watching Cobbing perform in Poetry Society contexts during the 1970s were formative for their understanding of Cobbing's work, for their own poetic practice and for the way they have figured Cobbing in

³ Mark Jackson interviewed by Steve Willey, 5 March 2010, unpublished interview.

⁴ cheek does not capitalize the initial letters of his name.

their criticism. While there is much to be learned from their work, this thesis takes a different approach by concentrating on each particular phase of Cobbing's early career. This enables the relation between Cobbing's performances and his poems, which are understood in many of these other accounts as 'scores', to be reassessed.

It is important to note that though many of his collaborators engaged critically with Cobbing's practice, he himself largely avoided theorizing his own work. Though he made some important (if insufficiently nuanced) statements in interviews, and produced a two-page series of manifesto statements about concrete and sound poetry, none of this can be construed as a thoroughgoing poetics. Instead, he devoted his energies to varied commitments as a poet and pedagogue and conducted constant reappraisal of poetic forms, modes of production and sites for poetry. The few statements that do exist are best understood as an aspect of his engagement with a particular institution at a particular time, as I will demonstrate over the coming pages. They can therefore prove misleading if understood or presented as isolated instances of critical reflection. To clarify the key arguments in debate about Cobbing and to identify my own place within these, I will first reflect on the critical work of Eric Mottram.

1) Eric Mottram and the Collaborator as Critic: Upton, Goode and cheek

As well as being Cobbing's close friend, Mottram was the first to articulate a complete conceptual framework in which Cobbing's entire practice could be understood: that of 'performance'. For Mottram, 'performance' did not only denote live performance, it also described 'the poet's total performance in society'.⁵ The first archived piece of correspondence between Mottram and Cobbing (dated 26 September 1965) gives an early indication of the mutually supportive nature of their friendship and of their wider work as poets in society. This shared disposition came to inform Mottram's conceptual frame of 'performance'.

⁵ Eric Mottram to Tom Pickard, 15 February 1972, in *The Unruly Garden: Robert Duncan and Eric Mottram Letters and Essays*, ed. Amy Evans and Shamoon Zamir (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 79-86 (80).

In 1965, Mottram had been a lecturer in American Literature at King's College, London for five years.⁶ Writing from New York, he informed Cobbing that he had just convinced the Phoenix Bookshop to stock Writers Forum books (the press that Cobbing had run since 1959).⁷ Many of the poets published by Writers Forum press also attended the poetry workshop of the same name, and this project was brought into closer association with Mottram's intellectual commitments when their friendship was instituted at the Poetry Society in the 1970s.

Mottram was the editor of *Poetry Review* (the official journal of the Poetry Society) from 1971-77, and he used this platform to continue his work of introducing American poets to British audiences, as well as including a wider range of British poets than had previously appeared in the magazine.⁸ Cobbing was an Executive member of the Poetry Society's General Council from 1970, and its Treasurer between 1973 and 1976. His agenda dovetailed with Mottram's: both were eager to internationalise the Poetry Society and bring new poets into it.

Mottram's first ideas about 'performance' as they relate to Cobbing's practice specifically were established in this context and were set out in two places, one public and one private: firstly, in a long essay in the magazine *Second Aeon* under the title 'A prosthetics of poetry: the art of Bob Cobbing' (1973), which was reissued by Cobbing in 1974 as a Writers Forum book, and secondly in a series of letters to the American poet Robert Duncan in the early 1970s.⁹ In 'A prosthetics of poetry' Mottram identifies Cobbing as a 'unique part of the international sound-text concrete poetry scene', and reads his creative works in the theoretical, historical and publishing contexts of that scene.¹⁰ In his letters to Duncan there is a stronger insistence on the actual work that poets do, and the impact this has on the lived experience of 'performance' and their aesthetic

⁶ 'A generous invitation to plan his own grand tour of the country was extended by the American authorities.' Amy Evans and Shamoan Zamir, 'Entertaining Interference: Robert Duncan & Eric Mottram', in *The Unruly Garden*, 11-25 (18).

⁷ Eric Mottram to Bob Cobbing, 26 September 1965, 'Letters Received (1960-1969): H-L', British Library Additional Manuscript 88909/35/5 (The Papers of Bob Cobbing). All subsequent references to this archive have been abbreviated to 'BL Add. MS', followed by the reference number.

⁸ The first issue of the journal edited by Mottram was Vol. 62 no. 3, autumn 1971; the last was a double issue (67:1/2), published in August 1977. See Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* (Cambridge: Salt, 2006), 22, 106.

⁹ It was republished a year later by Cobbing himself through Writers Forum press.

¹⁰ Mottram, 'A prosthetics of poetry: the art of Bob Cobbing', *Second Aeon* 16-17 (1973), 105-132 (105).

commitments. I shall return to this distinction towards the end of this section to argue that Cobbing's performances are best thought of in relation to this later definition of 'performance'. First, I want to examine the ideas of 'performance' set out in 'A prosthetics of poetry', as this was the version that influenced subsequent critical writing on Cobbing.

Here is Mottram's explanation to Duncan of what he thought was unique about his essay on Cobbing, written on 11 October 1972:

It's a first I think: more important—it registers what performance now must mean—the whole action of script as print or graphics (as in the German 'musikalische grafik'), degrees of repetition and creation (or like jazz, change on improvisational methods and skills), decisions about print or some kind of visual reproduction or not (perhaps just a tape or perhaps not even that), and the problem of using words or simply syllables, particles of sound, micro-sounds—the nature of language as word and bodysounds: plus the visible action of the reader or performer, and the acoustic or whatever medium he uses—air, tape, room... So I went through all Cobbing's printed and recorded works, and also studied his once-only performances. I think you might be interested—it's in the next *Second Aeon*, an enterprising magazine brought out by Peter Finch in Cardiff.¹¹

This is an attempt to find a language that can address the expansiveness of Cobbing's 'performance' as a poet. In this respect, it is an important reference point for how the term has been used in this thesis. 'Performance' describes the relation between developments in poetry's formal technique, the setting or medium in which poetry is received and the moment when the delivery, reception and creation of poetry fuse. 'Performance' suggests that poetry expresses and initiates this fusion even when it does not look theatrical. Further, because 'performance' includes the 'whole action of script as print or graphics' it is a theory that places a high degree of importance on the materiality of the text, not just on the performer's body.¹²

The idea that 'performance' is a quality inherent in Cobbing's work with texts is necessary if we are to address his prolific output as a poet. From 1963

¹¹ Eric Mottram to Robert Duncan, 11 October 1972, in *The Unruly Garden*, 93-97 (95).

¹² Mottram, 'A prosthetics', *Second Aeon*, 105.

(the date that Cobbing identified in 1974 as the ‘real beginning of Writers Forum as a publishing venture’) to the publication of ‘A prosthetics of poetry’ in 1973, Cobbing produced thirty poetry publications.¹³ The periodicity of these publications, twenty-four of which were published by Writers Forum, and which became more frequent from 1969 onwards, indicates that Cobbing’s relation to all aspects of the production of his books was a central part of his identity as a poet and became more so at the Poetry Society.

Mottram’s attention to the book as a space of performance is developed in Lawrence Upton’s writings on Cobbing. In many respects his views do not differ substantially from Mottram’s, partly because his conception of performance was formed in the same institutional and historical frame. Upton held an official position at the Poetry Society during the 1970s: he was an Executive member of the General Council of the Poetry Society 1974-1975, and a non-Executive member from 1975-1977. Upton co-authored publications with Cobbing and performed with him frequently. He was also one of the two poets Cobbing handed Writers Forum over to when he died (the other was Adrian Clarke).

In ‘Bob Cobbing: And [*sic*] The Book As Medium; Designs For Poetry’ (2009) Upton takes as the subject for his article ‘two not always separable aspects of Bob Cobbing’s work as a poet: his making of poems and his making of poetry publications’.¹⁴ Like Mottram, Upton describes Cobbing’s methods and materials across a number of publications. He argues that Cobbing’s ‘performance decisions’ reflected the form of the book which was ‘their starting score’.¹⁵ Yet Upton is careful to note that ‘Cobbing never abandoned the word; never abandoned the linguistic; and denied his work was abstract’.¹⁶ In making this point Upton explicitly draws upon Eric Mottram’s definition of Cobbing’s approach as a “a prosthesis of poetry”, and stated that ‘Cobbing was very pleased with that judgement’.¹⁷ Upton also notes that Cobbing used Mottram’s critical writings in his poetry, and points to Cobbing’s 1997 poem ‘Vispo for Eric’

¹³ This figure does not include the many items, which were circulated but which were not for sale, nor does it include the important work that he produced before 1963, which is covered in this thesis.

¹⁴ Lawrence Upton, ‘Bob Cobbing: and the Book as Medium; Designs for Poetry’, *Readings* 4, ed. Piers Hugill, Aodan McCardle, & Stephen Mooney (2009) <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/readings/issues/issue4/upton_on_cobbing> [accessed 27 June 2012].

¹⁵ Upton, ‘Bob Cobbing’.

¹⁶ Upton, ‘Bob Cobbing’.

¹⁷ Upton, ‘Bob Cobbing’.

which incorporates ‘copies of what Eric has written...into what Cobbing is saying’.¹⁸ Upton comments on the visual nature of the integration that Cobbing effects, but is less acute in his analysis of the way that the poem figures critical reception as part of its horizon of expectation, which was a feature of many of Cobbing’s poems.

While ‘Vispo for Eric’ literally figures Mottram’s critical writing on the page, Mottram’s sense that performance can take place on the page is echoed in more recent assertions by theatre practitioner Chris Goode who (in conversation with Upton) stated that Cobbing’s performances are ‘at work on the page’.¹⁹ For Goode, this ‘has to do with visible and productive tensions within the text or graphics’, which he distinguishes from plays which merely ‘work on the page’ as ‘literature’. He clarifies the distinction thus:

a good play by definition works on the page because it has fully submitted to its literariness. This has nothing to do with theatre: a good play may not make good theatre; literature is, more often than not, deadly to theatre.²⁰

Goode argues that a form of ‘irresolvability that may well create a theatrical argument’ characterizes Cobbing’s visual pieces, and that they are not literature in any conventional way.²¹ The conception of the page as a performance space, which Mottram, Goode and Upton all develop, is central to this thesis. Each chapter presents readings of Cobbing’s poems that are based on the materials and processes that have been employed in their making to think about how they model social and institutionalized space. Cobbing’s texts are not concerned with formal innovation for its own sake.

Goode’s background in theatre, which exerts a strong influence on his thinking about the relation between the page and performance, is relevant to my argument about the centrality of Cobbing’s institutional affiliations to his performance. Goode notes his own interest in creating plays that embrace ideas and formal techniques of ‘simultaneity’, ‘layering’, and ‘stacking’

¹⁸ Upton, ‘Bob Cobbing’.

¹⁹ Chris Goode in ‘The Desire to Testify: Interview with Chris Goode December 2008 – February 2010’, by Chris Goode and Lawrence Upton, *Intercapillary Space*, ed. Edmund Hardy (2010) <<http://www.intercapillaryspace.org/2010/02/desire-to-testify.html>> [accessed 19 September 2012].

²⁰ Goode, ‘The Desire to Testify’.

²¹ Goode, ‘The Desire to Testify’.

because the relations that can develop ‘between these elements’ figure a ‘theatrical’ and ‘social space’, and avoid linear dialogue, which Goode argues is the ‘default structure for much literary drama’.²²

As a theatre practitioner, Goode’s desire to work in ‘bigger’ theatrical spaces is not ‘about graduating from small scale work or wanting the prestige of association with the big institutional spaces’, rather it is a central consideration of his aesthetic practice: ‘it’s about being able to work on a sufficiently large stage so that two or three things – images, behaviours, text elements – can be separately staged at the same time.’²³ The relations between the institutional realities of poetry, poetic form and the way that poetry’s performance models and intervenes in social relations might seem to be less intense in poetry, which is often thought to have less well established institutional frameworks than theatre. However, by analyzing Cobbing’s texts in the context of his poetic career I demonstrate the centrality of Cobbing’s institutional existence to his poetic forms, which in the later 1960s developed many of the qualities that Goode associates with his own theatrical practice. This is explored in Chapters Two and Four of this thesis which trace developments in Cobbing’s visual and aural practice to his interest in theatre, specifically Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958) and Eugène Ionesco’s *The Lesson* (1951), and in Chapter Three to Cobbing’s conceptual and physical distance from one of the large seminal performance events of the 1960s, the International Poetry Incarnation (June 1965).

Despite the important contribution that Mottram, Upton and Goode’s critical insights have had in formulating the idea that Cobbing’s performances occur both on the page and in social space, they all assert ‘performance’ as an improvisatory and embodied practice conveyed through the ‘visible action of the reader and performer’.²⁴ A significant conceptual problem this thesis addresses is how to reconfigure ‘performance’ in light of the fact that Cobbing is no longer physically present.

Doing so is vital because Mottram emphasised the relation between Cobbing’s physical presence and the politics of his performance. For

²² Goode, ‘The Desire to Testify’.

²³ Goode, ‘The Desire to Testify’.

²⁴ Mottram to Duncan, 11 October 1972, *The Unruly Garden*, 95.

Mottram, Cobbing's work was 'profoundly democratic in its political implications' and that 'to experience him in action of solo or group performance' was 'to know it.'²⁵ This formulation raises the question of whether Cobbing's work can still be democratic in Cobbing's absence. In this thesis I have looked at other ways that concepts of democracy entered, and are still communicated through, Cobbing's work. For example, in Chapter One I explore how the democratic implications of Cobbing's performance practice did not derive through live performance alone, but were also formulated through a series of institutional engagements in postwar Hendon. By looking at Cobbing's visual artworks and poems that he produced in the 1950s I argue that these engagements are still alive in the appearance of his artworks. The readings I offer are part of a wider challenge to the role that presence plays in Mottram's theory of Cobbing's 'performance'.

The idea that Cobbing's absence demands an alteration of Mottram's theory is in fact suggested by Mottram's own inference that there are ontological and epistemological dimensions to Cobbing's work: 'to experience him...was to know it'.²⁶ These ideas are addressed in Chapter Two, which traces Cobbing's artistic contribution to the Destruction in Art Symposium (1966) in order to show that the ontological commitments of Cobbing's poems are founded on ideas of absence as well as presence.

My attempt to reconfigure Mottram's theory of performance so that it can be understood to emerge through Cobbing's poems is complicated by Mottram's definition of the poem itself. When Mottram argued in 'A prosthetics of poetry' that 'making the poem consists of making decisions concerning information, measure, notation and performance, so that energy is transferred through certain structures', he was drawing on Charles Olson's definition of the poem in his essay 'Projective Verse':

A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader.

²⁵ Mottram, 'A prosthetics', *Second Aeon*, 115.

²⁶ Mottram, 'A prosthetics', *Second Aeon*, 115.

Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge.²⁷

Mottram's allusion to this definition presents Cobbing's poems as scores, which were – much like the typewriter was for Olson – a prosthetic extension of Cobbing's body in performance. One of the problems with thinking about Cobbing's poems in this way is that vocal performance is often seen as necessary to their full expression. As every vocal performance is potentially different any meaning attributable to Cobbing's poems becomes at risk of being seen as provisional.

This is the central problem with the critical work of Chris Cheek who, like Upton, cemented his relationship with Cobbing at the Poetry Society. A regular attendee of the Writers Forum workshop from 1975-77, and a member of the Poetry Society's General Council (1976-77), Cheek also became the manager of the print shop which had been established at the Poetry Society from the mid-1970s. In the following anecdote he describes his meeting with Cobbing in this context:

Bob was 55 and I was a young punk turning 20. One day an offset litho was delivered to Earls Court Square and Bob, together with others of the regular staff there were stood around it in the wide corridors. "Lovely Machine", or some such he said, very excited, then turning sort of in the direction of anyone who'd listen followed with something along the line of "pity nobody knows how to use it". "I do" I said, blagging with brashness. Bob took a long look at me and smiled a little. The result was that I spent the upcoming weekend downstairs with manuals trying to get ink to stay on a page. Bill Griffiths was certainly in on this act and together with Bob we set about producing an issue of *Poetry Review*.²⁸

While this anecdote ostensibly describes how an issue of *Poetry Review* was printed, it is theatrical, its convivial tone naturalises the theory of performance presented therein. Depicted as indirect, cunning but unthreatening 'Bob' assumes a guise of naivety. He addresses his words to an imagined audience but he

²⁷ Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse', in *Postmodern American Poetry*, ed. Paul Hoover (Chicago, New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 613-621 (614). 'A prosthetics', *Second Aeon*, 113.

²⁸ Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 160-161.

intends them for cheek. We are invited by the anecdote to recognise how Cobbing used cheek's youthful over-confidence, and the conspiratorial presence of other poets such as Griffiths who was in on the 'act', to induct cheek into the Poetry Society through the production of *Poetry Review*. cheek carefully positions himself in relation to these poets, while his use of direct speech lends his highly constructed account a sense of immediacy. Cobbing's role as pedagogue, publisher, friend and performer meet in cheek's description, and that is cheek's way of suggesting that Cobbing did not seek to separate these roles.

cheek's personal experience of Cobbing at the Poetry Society is part of his understanding of 'performance'. This becomes a feature of his critical writing, notably in his essay 'Bob Cobbing's Performances: Of Production and Circulation'.²⁹ Cheek argues that Cobbing's 'understanding of the dynamics of the live increasingly informed and influenced all aspects of poetic production and circulation for him'.³⁰ This is actually the inverse of Upton's argument, which connected performance with Cobbing's 'initial image making'.³¹ However, the priority for both is how Cobbing figured the relation between the 'live' and the material of the page. In cheek's case, his privileging of the 'live' in Cobbing's early work is anachronistic and reflects his own experience of the Writers Forum workshop in the 1970s.

To illustrate the potential for misinterpretation this tendency risks, let us follow the trajectory of one of cheek's readings, beginning with his description of a performance he witnessed in the mid-1970s:

Some poems were arranged on the floor, others hung cascading from the ceiling. Sheaves of pages fluttered loose in the hand. Listening was premium. Spatial sonic placement became an arena of perceptual investigation... In workshop presentations a dynamic interchange between improvisation and composition occurred. Potential live performances of a piece of writing would give rise to consecutive versions in which two or three different possibilities were offered.³²

²⁹ cris cheek, 'Bob Cobbing's Performances: Of Production and Circulation', posted on *Academia.edu*, <http://muohio.academia.edu/ccheek/Papers/1109414/Bob_Cobbings_Performances_Of_Production_and_Circulation> [accessed 19 September 2012] (n.d.).

³⁰ cheek, 'Bob Cobbing's Performances'.

³¹ Upton, 'Bob Cobbing'.

³² cheek, 'Bob Cobbing's Performances'.

Words like ‘cascading’ and ‘fluttered’ create a sense of fleeting motion while ‘improvisation’ and ‘live’ help him make the argument that the creative environment of the workshop cannot be usefully reconstructed. On the one hand, cheek insists that Cobbing’s performances are context dependent. He states that any ‘vocabulary for improvisation and the confidence to employ that vocabulary is constructed through practice’, and he discusses Cobbing’s performance of particular poems at specific events.³³ On the other hand, he often concludes his readings of these poems and events by reasserting provisionality as a value in and of itself. After offering an insightful analysis of the ‘R’ section from an *ABC In Sound* in terms of how performance takes place on the page, he undercuts his analysis by quoting an argument that Cobbing made in 1998, over thirty years after the poem’s composition in 1965.³⁴ He states that the words of ‘R’ were ‘only part of communication, much of which occurred “through gesture, through looks through sounds other than words, through bodily movement and so on.”’³⁵ In cheek’s final analysis, the meaning of ‘R’ remains beyond critical attention.

This problem has dogged the majority of critical writing on Cobbing. It can be circumvented in two ways. Firstly, we need to recognize that it is one thing for Cobbing to have continually represented and revisited certain poems across his life as a poet, as he did with the *ABC In Sound* – adjusting the poem to suit the occasion of performance, and adjusting his performance in relation to the formal indeterminacy of the poem encountered in live performance – but quite another to take Cobbing’s acts of re-presentation, and his provisional relation to his poems, as the meaning of the poem itself.

Secondly, we can avoid the tendency to universalise Cobbing’s performances in this way by historically grounding Cobbing’s practice of improvisation. In this respect Mottram’s definition of the ‘score’ in *Towards Design In Poetry* (1977) is useful. He extends the idea of the ‘score’ to the whole life of the poet, and claims that ‘the publication of poetic experience usually involves a choice of notation’.³⁶ Building on this definition of the ‘score’, in Chapter Five I argue that Cobbing’s decision to use improvisation in his

³³ cheek, ‘Bob Cobbing’s Performances’.

³⁴ For Cobbing’s argument presented in its original form, see Bob Cobbing interviewed by Steven Ross Smith in *Ballet of the Speech Organs: Bob Cobbing on Bob Cobbing* (Toronto: Underwhich Editions, 1998), 1.

³⁵ cheek, ‘Bob Cobbing’s Performances’.

³⁶ Eric Mottram, *Towards Design in Poetry* (1977; 4th edn. 1995), 3.

performances was itself a ‘choice of notation’, which acquires locatable meanings in relation to his work at the Poetry Society in the 1970s. This is something that Mottram cannot fully appreciate because the social relations at the Poetry Society, and Cobbing’s practice of performance there, form part of the structure of Mottram’s theory of ‘performance’.

This can be seen in Mottram’s overt concern in ‘A prosthetics of poetry’ to place Cobbing’s poetry in an international context. In the essay he introduces Cobbing as ‘a painter, a poet, a musician and a maker of musical graphics and sound structures of originality, beauty and power’, and is careful to note that since 1971 Cobbing used the term ‘sound-text’ to describe his work rather than the more limited terms of ‘sound poetry’ or ‘concrete poetry’.³⁷ Fixing on such a capacious and timeless definition for Cobbing and Cobbing’s poetic identity allows Mottram to demonstrate the international context of Cobbing’s work.

It is with this agenda that Mottram’s essay provides a literature review of previous criticism on Cobbing and of the key texts, artists, poets and theories in twentieth-century radical poetry.³⁸ Mottram mentions the names of Schwitters, Apollinaire, Malevich, Fontana and Raoul Hausman as reference points for Cobbing, but also argues that Cobbing’s poetry is part of the history of invented languages, ‘the range of attempts at onomatopoeia, mantras, spells, cave drawings, [and] amulets’.³⁹ Mottram also draws comparisons between Cobbing’s work and that of ‘Eugen Gomringer, founder of the “concrete poetry” movement in Europe.’⁴⁰ By noting that Gomringer acknowledged his precursor in Arno Holz ‘who understood language as a plastic medium’ and who used ‘sound and visual arrangement independent of metrics and conventions’, Mottram associates Cobbing with Russian artists including Vladimir Mayakovsky and Ilya Zdanevitch (inventor of *zaum*). Mottram also seeks to place Cobbing’s poetry within the broad field of 1950s and 1960s ‘phonetic’ or ‘phonic’ poetry and discusses Ernst Jandl, Henry Chopin and François Dufrené in this regard. Mottram’s array of international contexts for Cobbing’s poetry is excessively

³⁷ Mottram, ‘A prosthetics’, *Second Aeon*, 105.

³⁸ Two of the key texts that Mottram cites are: Dom Silvester Houédard, ‘Ancestry and Chronology’, introductory book to the split LP of Ernst Jandl *Sprechgedichte* and Bob Cobbing *Sound Poems* (London: Writers Form, 1965), and Glyn Pursglove, ‘Man’s Five Senses’, in *Approach Magazine*, ed. Philip Hodson, Trevor Pateman, 3, (1968), 9-20.

³⁹ Mottram, ‘A prosthetics’, *Second Aeon*, 107.

⁴⁰ Mottram, ‘A prosthetics’, *Second Aeon*, 108.

determined by his wish to write Cobbing into literary history as an avant-gardist.

While Mottram usefully observes that Cobbing's earliest poems contained visual, spatial and permutational elements, he treats Cobbing's decade of work with the Hendon Experimental Art Club (founded in 1951) as a biographical detail to be moved past rather than as the foundation stone of Cobbing's aesthetics. I redress this crucial omission by devoting a chapter of the thesis to this early context, specifically drawing out some connections between Cobbing's work and that of the influential art critic and pedagogue Herbert Read.

Mottram did not see such connections, nor did he want to. The variety of artistic and intellectual traditions he maps in order to contextualize Cobbing's work tend towards a single distinction: that Cobbing's poetry's is not the 'Poetry Establishment'.⁴¹ While Cobbing's poetry treats the sign, symbol and sound as 'elements' in a more extensive poetics the 'categorization of their forms is only relevant to the Establishment security-corps', who are always looking for 'criteria of safety'.⁴² Mottram's vibrant constellation of influences gives way to a reductive binary that inaccurately circumscribes the meaning of Cobbing's 'performance'. This aspect of Mottram's criticism reflects the personally acrimonious and increasingly vicious divide that existed between two groups of poets at the Poetry Society during the 1970s. In his recent history of the Poetry Wars, Peter Barry describes how a small group of 'radical', 'experimental' poets, 'took over' the Poetry Society, which he describes as 'one of the most conservative of British cultural institutions'.⁴³ For Barry, as for Mottram, the term 'radical' is an alternative term for the poets and values of the British Poetry Revival, including the work of Upton, cheek and Cobbing.

The term 'British Poetry Revival' (BPR) was 'first proposed by Tina Morris and Dave Cunliffe in the eighth issue of their underground magazine *Poetmeat* around 1965', and was subsequently used by Mottram as the title of a 1974 Polytechnic of Central London conference: 'The British Poetry Revival (1960-1974)'.⁴⁴ It has acquired strong valence in critical writing on postwar British poetry and amongst the expanded range of poets that Mottram identified

⁴¹ Mottram, 'A prosthetics', *Second Aeon*, 105.

⁴² Mottram, 'A prosthetics', *Second Aeon*, 110.

⁴³ Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 1.

⁴⁴ Robert Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents 1950-2000* (Liverpool University Press: 2005), 35.

with the term.⁴⁵ In 1979, the poet Ken Edwards defined the BPR as “an exciting growth and flowering that encompasses an immense variety of forms and procedures and that has gone largely unheeded by the British Literary establishment.”⁴⁶ This definition identifies the BPR with a particular way of writing poetry which is modernist and international in its influences and which takes an oppositional stance towards literary institutions that are perceived to be supportive of the non-modernists of the 1950s. The editors of *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible* (1993) historicize the definition by noting that the BPR ‘was briefly visible at the Poetry Society (1969-74) and in the pages of *Poetry Review* (1971-77).’⁴⁷ The problem is this: the conflation of an oppositional stance towards a ‘conservative’ institution and the aesthetic values of the BPR is inadequate when thinking about how institutions (established and countercultural) enabled Cobbing’s poetry over the course of his life.

2) The Social Purpose of Performance

I would now like to return to the concept of ‘performance’ that is outlined in Mottram’s letters to Duncan. In a letter that Mottram wrote to Duncan on 1 May 1972 (five months before he outlined his approach to Cobbing’s poems as a ‘performance’ in ‘A prosthetics of poetry’), Mottram enclosed copies of two further letters that he had sent to ‘two close friends’.⁴⁸ One had been sent to ‘Tom Pickard, the Newcastle poet—in connection with the reading he organized there for the benefit of the miners striking against the Tory government’s wage restrictions’, and the other to Tony Dunn, a student of Mottram’s who was teaching at Portsmouth Polytechnic and who was ‘involved in a sit-in of students and staff against local authorities’.⁴⁹ Mottram explained to Duncan that this letter concerned the ‘outrageous plans for changes in the course and student intake.’⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Mottram reinforced and expanded both his claims and terms in ‘The British Poetry Revival, 1960-75’, in *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. Robert Hampson and Peter Barry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 15-30, and in ‘Poetic interface: American poetry and the British Poetry Revival, 1960-1975’, *Forked tongues? Comparing Twentieth-Century British and American literature*, ed. Ann Massa and Alistair Stead (Harlow: Longman, 1994), 152-68.

⁴⁶ Ken Edwards quoted in Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying*, 35.

⁴⁷ Robert Hampson and Peter Barry, ‘The Scope of the Possible’, in *New British Poetry the Scope of the Possible*, ed. Robert Hampson and Peter Barry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 1-15 (8).

⁴⁸ Mottram to Duncan, 1 May 1972, in *The Unruly Garden*, 71.

⁴⁹ Mottram to Duncan, 1 May 1972, in *The Unruly Garden*, 71-72

⁵⁰ Mottram to Duncan, 1 May 1972, in *The Unruly Garden*, 72.

Mottram thought that Duncan would be able to ‘read between the lines to see what both letters were in response to—what urgencies’, and he explained that he had sent them because the letters Duncan had sent to him were in ‘exactly [...] the same area’.⁵¹ These letters strongly register Mottram’s concern with the poet’s role in society, which in his letter to Pickard he tries to capture with various phrases: ‘the poet’s total performance in society’; ‘man’s performance as a whole’; and with one further variation as the poet’s ‘total performance as a citizen’.⁵²

The poets that read at ‘The Miners’ Poetry Reading were Bob Cobbing, Tony Harrison (then poet in residence at Durham University), Alex Glasgow, Barry MacSweeney, Adrian Mitchell, Jeff Nuttall, Brian Patten, Tom Pickard and Jon Silkin. The reading took place at the University of Newcastle on 12 February 1972 and the next day some of the poets participated in a symposium at Morden Tower in Newcastle on the theme of ‘The Writer in Isolation’.⁵³ Mottram’s letter to Pickard was in large part a response to these two events, which enacted two sides of life as a poet that reciprocally influenced one another: the idea of what it means to be a poet amongst other poets (the symposium) and the reality and the duty of the poet (the benefit reading). While Mottram mentions the miner’s strike benefit reading in ‘A prosthetics of poetry’, he does so in terms of Cobbing’s ability to generate participation in an audience: ‘It was there, too, when Cobbing performed in Newcastle for the 1972 Miners Benefit organized by Tom Pickard. It is extraordinary and heartening to hear an audience trying to say the sounds, remembering them, and finally performing them.’⁵⁴ There is no extended reflection on the writer’s role in society the kind of which is found in his letters to Duncan.

To think about these relations of ‘performance’ as Mottram understands them in his letters is to think about how a poet communicates to an audience and how class relations structure this communication. In Mottram’s letter to Pickard he wrote that most of what he heard at the Newcastle symposium was ‘not towards revolution’, and that ‘being ostensibly working class and refusing education and trying to be a common-man-type poet’ were being used quite

⁵¹ Mottram to Duncan, 1 May 1972, in *The Unruly Garden*, 72

⁵² Mottram to Pickard, 15 February 1972, in *The Unruly Garden*, 80-82.

⁵³ Mottram to Duncan, 1 May 1972, in *The Unruly Garden*, 71.

⁵⁴ Mottram, ‘A prosthetics’, *Second Aeon*, 128.

wrongly by poets as the basis for a counter-revolutionary aesthetics which actually patronized the working class.⁵⁵ In Mottram's letter to Duncan he sets out the dilemma with more force:

[...] at Newcastle during the miners' strike reading, I felt that the bourgeois liberalism of poets trying to be workers was painfully inept. And on the other side, the Royal-family-loving, Law-respecting miners and their families, only now understanding that perhaps keeping the Law was a politically reactionary action which was undermining the very case they fought.⁵⁶

The intransigence of this situation is not something that Mottram has a clear answer to, but it is striking to see how various institutions, bourgeois liberalism, the Royal family and the Law, structure his thoughts here, which in the wider context of the essay are about performance. In his letter to Pickard he ambiguously notes that poets 'are all isolated in one sense in that there are people who we [Cobbing, Nuttall, Silkin, Pickard, and Mottram *et al.*] don't get to and who don't care whether we do or not', while he also points out that as poets they 'communicate with a good range of people all the time, through [...] various activities as men in the world.'⁵⁷

Although it is not explicitly stated here, the 'various activities' that Cobbing and Mottram were involved in included work at the Poetry Society, and it is clear from Mottram's letters to Duncan (which mention Cobbing occasionally and the Poetry Society and its magazine *Poetry Review* quite frequently) that this institutional work should not be separated from the issues raised by their attempt to communicate revolutionary ideas through poetry to a group of miners who were engaged in strike action against the state.⁵⁸

Mottram argued in his letter to Pickard that radicalism meant 'getting the intersections of power right and presenting them forcibly', insisting that 'truth'

⁵⁵ Mottram to Pickard, 15 February 1972, in *The Unruly Garden*, 80.

⁵⁶ Mottram to Duncan, 1 May 1972, in *The Unruly Garden*, 76.

⁵⁷ Mottram to Pickard, 15 February 1972, in *The Unruly Garden*, 82.

⁵⁸ Mottram to Duncan, 1 May 1972, regarding *Poetry Review's* 'reputation after three issues' noting that it had made his 'other, and once primary, life, the university, [...] rather less necessary', and he thanks Duncan for 'sending the Moly poems' for inclusion in *Poetry Review*, 71. In a subsequent letter on 10 January 1972, Mottram describes the contents of the second issue of *Poetry Review*, and while noting Cobbing's inclusion describes him as 'dear old Bob Cobbing, a fantastic force for poetry round here, and my good and endlessly helpful friend.' 61.

only ‘equals being radical—*now*’. Mottram took Ezra Pound’s dictum ‘poetry is news that stays news’ and redefined it to mean: ‘giving the human condition by present example, whether it is meaningful to posterity or not,’ arguing that ‘posterity is meaningless’, and that to be ‘counter *now*, no matter what the medium’ is ‘the real meaning of communication’.⁵⁹ Towards the end of Mottram’s letter he reaffirms this view when he writes: ‘I take it, that whatever [Ted] Heath and [Richard] Nixon mean by society, we do not.’⁶⁰ This interpretation of Pound’s dictum stresses the need for poetry to remain responsive: the aesthetic requirements of the poem are dictated by the context of one’s immediate struggles and the consciousness of those with whom the poet seeks to communicate. Yet Mottram also proposes that there ‘are ways in which a poet is in class and outside it at the same instance he creates: the new is not inside a class structure is it?’⁶¹ The shift to a rhetorical question at the end of the proposition reveals the uncertainty Mottram felt in the sharp discrepancy between the lessons he was learning from the actual work he engaged in (such as the benefit reading), and the modernist tradition that continued to frame his ideas, and which suggested an a priori aesthetic and program of communication for poetry to take to the masses.

A more productive way to figure the relation between Cobbing’s aesthetic commitments and his institutional affiliations is suggested by Libbie Rifkin and her work on American poets contemporaneous with Cobbing but with whom he is seldom compared. Examining the working lives and reputations of postwar American poets who worked under ‘modernism’s shadow’ and who had watched ‘modernism’s breach become an institution’ she develops a framework for understanding careers as part of a poetics.⁶² This approach enables ‘an examination of institutions from the interested perspective of particular, historically situated individuals’.⁶³

Rifkin argues that while ‘the “academicization” of poetry has been well documented the institutional history of postwar poetic avant-garde formations’

⁵⁹ Mottram to Pickard, 15 February 1972, in *The Unruly Garden*, 83.

⁶⁰ Mottram to Pickard, 15 February 1972, in *The Unruly Garden*, 85.

⁶¹ Mottram to Pickard, 15 February 1972, in *The Unruly Garden*, 80.

⁶² Libbie Rifkin, *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berigan, and the American Avant-Garde* (Wisconsin and London: The University of Wisconsin Press: 2000), 9

⁶³ Rifkin, *Career Moves*, 6.

has not received a similar amount of scholarly attention.⁶⁴ She suggests this is partially attributable to the fact that Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* has controlled the terms of the discussion since its publication in English in 1984.⁶⁵ Rifkin explains that in Bürger's account 'the institution of art became visible through the agency of the avant-garde sometime around 1915', and that after that singular historical moment, 'the terms lose their materiality: "institution" and "avant-garde" remain frozen forever in a bloodless battle, opponents in theory only.'⁶⁶ Rifkin contends that in the aftermath of Bürger's work, 'scholars of innovative art movements, and theorists of the avant-garde, who prefer to work on the level of the concept rather than on the level of history, have taken the two terms to be mutually exclusive.'⁶⁷

The reality of Cobbing's career as a poet is such that his performances are seen to work in and through 'institutions' (both real and imagined, inherited and self-fashioned). Rifkin's theoretical work and Cobbing's actual practice both suggest that while it may appear that 'an institutional analysis of postwar poetic avant-gardes' is 'oxymoronic', this need not be the case.⁶⁸ Mottram and Cheek argue that Cobbing developed avant-garde practices analogous to those of the historical avant-garde of the 1920s, but I contend that Cobbing's definition as an avant-gardist was a result of his own considered habit of putting himself into different areas and institutions, including but not restricted to the Poetry Society. Rather than collapsing the distinction between life and art, Cobbing's performances both open up and interrogate the space between the poem and the institution. The shape of Cobbing's career as a poet was characterized (perhaps paradoxically) by a continual shift between institutions and long-term commitment to particular institutions, and he recognised the perpetual institutionality of the poetic *per se*. The institutions that Cobbing identified to work within enter into a complex relation with his poems via performance, but it is his poems that direct us towards these performances which are themselves grounded in institutions. The performance is what opens up the space between the poem and the institution in this circuit. It is through these interactions, which

⁶⁴ Rifkin, *Career Moves*, 14.

⁶⁵ Rifkin, *Career Moves*, 14.

⁶⁶ Rifkin, *Career Moves*, 15.

⁶⁷ Rifkin, *Career Moves*, 15.

⁶⁸ Rifkin, *Career Moves*, 16.

Cobbing continually reformulates, that the meaning of his poetry is to be found. This strategy requires us to understand institutions, and Cobbing's often bureaucratic and organizational role within them, as an aspect of his poetry for his work is muted if we only attend to his poems in isolation.

3) Robert Sheppard and the Irrecuperability of Performance

In her study Rifkin defines the archive literally as the 'buildings and the financial and social transactions through which the material traces of poets' careers come to be located in them'.⁶⁹ She argues that archives don't 'constrain writerly agency; rather they are extensions and even instruments in it.'⁷⁰ In my account I turn to the archive frequently and figure the documents found within in terms of performance, and yet much of Cobbing's archive is still embodied as memory. Reminiscences of Cobbing himself play a key role in his ongoing critical reception. Robert Sheppard, for instance, tends to ground his analysis in recollection of personal encounters. His article 'Bob Cobbing: Sightings and Soundings' (1995) begins by remembering what Cobbing was like outside the Poetry Society during the 1970s. Sheppard wrote the article in honour of Cobbing's seventy-fifth birthday, and it begins by recalling his first meeting with Cobbing. Sheppard visited Cobbing on 3 November 1973 while still a school student, because he wanted to put on an exhibition of concrete poetry at his school. He presents it as a foundational moment: '[I] met my first poet'. He claims to have learnt two lessons from Cobbing that day, 'one immediate, the other lasting', and articulated both in a critical vocabulary which he presumably had not possessed as a school student that day in 1973. The first lesson was that there 'was a world of poetry which did not hypostacise the Poem as a closed structure'.⁷¹ Secondly, he learnt the importance of radical consistency for an artist: 'to refuse to mark out an aesthetic territory which is then colonised, but to move on confidently on, to create structures, large and small, for continued experiment.'⁷² He privileges his personal memory of an encounter with Cobbing as the wellspring of his lifelong poetics.

⁶⁹ Rifkin, *Career Moves*, 11-12.

⁷⁰ Rifkin, *Career Moves*, 12.

⁷¹ Robert Sheppard, *Far Language: Poetics and Linguistically Innovative Poetry 1978-1997* (1999; 2nd edn. 2002), 61.

⁷² Sheppard, *Far Language*, 61.

In Sheppard's most recent contribution to Cobbing scholarship, he attempts to move beyond reminiscence and the kind of contextualisation and theorisation proffered by Mottram. In *When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry* (2011) Sheppard calls for more 'evaluation' of the history of the British Poetry Revival given that it has already been extensively memorialised and archived.⁷³ Despite the importance of this aim, his chapter about the history of London's creative environment in the 1980s and Cobbing's place within it demonstrates the difficulties faced by critics attempting to adopt an evaluative stance towards Cobbing. Sheppard provides a 'thick description' of the period, which he says was a choice informed by Barry's use of it in *Poetry Wars*.⁷⁴ Thus Cobbing's poetic life and institutional work across two decades has been presented in terms of thick description by different scholars in recent years. In practical terms this methodology means that Sheppard appears intermittently as a witness to the literary history that he describes, and makes frequent reference to his own records and diaries. While it is certainly important not to separate Cobbing's poetry from the people he met, the events he performed at and the things he did, using thick description to talk about Cobbing forecloses the opportunity for distinct evaluative claims. Despite providing a detailed, exact and intriguing history of the period, which does 'capture the sense of community' of which he was part, Sheppard's approach does not allow him to challenge the established critical position on Cobbing, which tends to insist upon the open ended and provisional nature of his project.⁷⁵ While this critical position remains entrenched, any kind of evaluation risks the accusation of contradicting or misrepresenting Cobbing's aesthetics. This is something that this thesis seeks to redress. It does so by establishing that performance as something that can take place in the past, between the multiple modes of Cobbing's poems and the contesting impulses of the archive, which are as Rifkin defines it 'at once acts and repositories, institutive and conservative, private and public...'.⁷⁶

⁷³ Sheppard, *When Bad Times*, 215.

⁷⁴ The notion of thick description was conceived by Gilbert Ryle in 1968 and popularised by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). Thick description is concerned with understanding what is involved in doing something. To do this it provides 'a recognisable account of what a person or persons are doing' including 'very detailed and specific description of their actions and interactions.' Andrew Crabtree, Mark Rouncefield and Peter Tolmie, *Doing Design Ethnography*, (London: Springer, 2012), 193.

⁷⁵ Sheppard, *When Bad Times*, 108.

⁷⁶ Rifkin, *Career Moves*, 12.

4) Archival Poetics and Archive-Based Readings

Rather than wanting to provide a history of Cobbing's life as a poet, I have been motivated to return to the earlier contexts of Cobbing's work by the poetry and the self-fashioning aspect of his poetics. In 1988 Bird Yak released an album called *Aberration* which re-presented some of Cobbing's earliest poems, albeit in very altered forms: 'Worm' (1954), 'Make Perhaps This Out Sense Of Can You' (1963) and 'Destruction in Art' (1966). The first of these is explored in Chapter One, while the last two are considered in the second chapter. The re-presentation of these poems suggests that part of Cobbing's practice with Bird Yak was itself a performance of how memory produces instability in the thing that it remembers. In an effort to listen to these performances responsibly and on their own terms, and to respect the context-dependent nature of Cobbing's practice, the methodology that has guided my response to Cobbing's work has been principally archival.

Taking an archival approach to Cobbing's work has revealed how important the archive was to Cobbing. He diligently collected responses to his creative and organizational work and, taken together, these present his identity as an artist and organizer as it developed over time. Cobbing's record reveals how he used his critical reception as source material for his poems – notably in 'Make Perhaps This Out Sense Of Can You' – and to critically reflect on the success of his organisational and creative practice. Although Cobbing's poetry was not necessarily determined by its imagined reception, he often fed the reception that his work did receive back into aspects of the form and content of his poems. This would sometimes alter the appearance of subsequent poems, which in turn altered their reception.

Turning to the archive and Cobbing's earliest poems in order to understand what it meant for Cobbing to return to them himself has led to a deeper appreciation of the reciprocal relation of his life to that of his poems. This has informed the structure of this thesis: largely chronological and divided into five chapters, each presents a different movement in Cobbing's life. Every movement relates to a specific institutional context that Cobbing worked within, and where the relation between Cobbing's creative work and each institutional context is thought of as a performance. Just as the Bird Yak performances

integrated their immediate context into the sound they produced, the historical details presented in each chapter form a necessary component of the interpretive frame established by the poems themselves. This is an alternative to Mottram's theory of performance. The benefit of taking this approach to Cobbing's work is that it becomes easier to see how one development in his aesthetics presages the next, and how a change in his organisational affiliations or institutional circumstance then plays out in his poetics without reducing the meaning of Cobbing's performance to a single institutional engagement. Further, as each poem adjusts the historical constellation around it in a different way, my approach allows for very specific evaluative claims to be made about each of Cobbing's poems, and how they relate to the larger idea of performance under consideration in each chapter.

This approach complicates the role that reminiscence plays in Cobbing's performances. To introduce this discussion I would like to return to the recollection of the Bird Yak performance that begins this Introduction, which was taken from Sheppard's chapter on Cobbing discussed above. The Bird Yak performance he describes survives for us primarily through Sheppard's recollection and his academic publication. Despite his want to document Bird Yak it is notable how he begins by recollecting a specific performance but ends up talking about the more general characteristics of how Bird Yak performed. This implies that for Sheppard to try and recall how each Bird Yak performance differed from the next was either difficult to know or beside the point. Further, there is now no way for us to know how the glasses were arranged in the pub, or the manner in which Metcalfe smashed them, or even if words such as 'dead', which Sheppard uses to describe Metcalfe's guitar, are more appropriate than if he described the guitar as broken or destroyed. What is the valence of the Black and Decker drill or the word 'growled' with regards to Cobbing's poetry as a whole? To this extent the meaning of the performance survives in the memory of those that witnessed it, and in how they choose to represent and communicate that memory in words. However, it was the improvised nature of Cobbing's live performance that helped make memory central to the meaning of the Bird Yak performances, and it has become even more so since his death in 2002. It would appear that there is no text that offers a way back to the moment of a particular performance, and because the live moment is said to be fundamental to

Cobbing's poetics, those who witnessed his performances are instituted as necessary conduits to Cobbing's work. Despite the seemingly anarchic atmosphere that Sheppard describes, the Bird Yak performance therefore places responsibilities on the listener. Those of us who did not see Cobbing perform now have to trust to a large extent what others say about him. Ideas of the poem as a 'score' and notions of 'improvisation' are replaced by the realities of 'trust' and 'responsibility' as the key concepts that define Cobbing's performance practice, which has been irrevocably altered by his death.

If the essence of Cobbing's performances exists in those that remember them, then one of the potential uses of this thesis is as a critical glossary that allows for a deeper understanding of the words that Cobbing's original witnesses used (and continue to use) in their effort to re-present those performances to others. It also suggests that readers might begin to mistrust what Cobbing's first witnesses say about him. This is a necessary corrective: while Cobbing's representations of his own poems with Bird Yak would suggest that an emphasis on memory might introduce instability into his own performances, broadly speaking (and as this Introduction has shown) the opposite has in fact been the case. Certain fixed narratives have emerged amongst the listeners and witnesses of Cobbing's performances and particular words and concepts have been tacitly agreed: 'live', 'improvisation', 'score', 'British Poetry Revival'. Cobbing's performances have become more stable rather than less so because of this. This thesis seeks to redress that tendency by adopting an archival approach to Cobbing's performances which is sensitive to my own position as the first critic to write a thesis dedicated to Cobbing's work who never met or corresponded with him and who never saw him perform live.⁷⁷

5) The Journey of Writers Forum and Chapter-by-Chapter Overview

Over the course of Cobbing's life, the strength of his commitment to a particular institution can in part be measured by where Writers Forum poetry workshops

⁷⁷ Claire Powell, 'Bobbing in the wake: the work of Bob Cobbing' (University Of Wales Swansea, unpublished doctoral thesis, 2002) presents a study of Cobbing's work in the 1960s. Swansea University cannot trace the thesis and I have made numerous attempts to trace the author, all of which have been unsuccessful. Powell was in contact with Cobbing during her research. She sent him sections to read and Cobbing offered corrections. See 'Theses Extracts, by Claire Powell and Mike Johnson', BL Add MS 88909/104.

met. The existence of Writers Forum can be traced back to the formation of the Hendon Poetry Society (18 September 1950) and the Hendon Writers' Group (December 1952) and their merger as Writers Forum in 1958. It is in Hendon and with the institutions of Britain's postwar socio-cultural system of welfare capitalism that my thesis begins. In Chapter One, I consider some of the artworks and poems that Cobbing produced in the 1950s, paying particular attention to 'World In Ruins (Cataclasm)' (1951), 'Dynamic Progress' (1954), and 'Meditation on Worms' (1954). My close readings of these artworks and poems establish an aesthetic grounding for Cobbing's page-based work in the philosophic and art-critical ideas of Herbert Read, and I present this as an alternative to the narratives and contexts that critics like Mottram associated with concrete poetry. I consider the editorial to the first issue of 'AND' (1954), a magazine edited by Cobbing and the poet John Rowan, to examine the relation between the aesthetic and the institutional. The covers of the arts magazine themselves instantiate a divide between the aesthetic content contained inside and the social world in which the magazine exists as an object to be bought and sold. In this investigation into the beginnings of Cobbing's poetic career I assert his identity as an amateur artist, rather than as a poet. This allows productive inquiry into the different institutional formations that existed for artists as opposed to poets in the late 1940s and early 1950s and the impact this had on aesthetic form. Finally, I trace Cobbing's transition into poetry and establish the roots of his pedagogical practice in terms of anarchist traditions of thought.

In the first few months of 1960 Cobbing moved two miles from 32 Brent Street, Hendon to a new home at 29 Lichfield Grove, Finchley. By mid-1960 Writers Forum workshop had affiliated to the newly formed Finchley Society of Arts, with many of the workshop's meetings being held in Finchley's public libraries. It is with this move in mind that Chapter Two begins by charting the reasons why Cobbing left Hendon, giving a close reading of a poster produced by the Hendon Film Society in 1957 to advertise a screening of Sergei Eisenstein's silent film *Strike* (1924). I also give archival readings of the poems and artworks that Cobbing produced in the early 1960s. These include: 'Make Perhaps This Out Sense of Can You' (1963) and 'Headlines' (1964). In doing so I attempt to historicize Cobbing's formal experiments with permutation, thereby redressing the bias towards internationalism in Mottram's critical writing on Cobbing and

cheek's tendency to universalise provisionality. By looking at some of Cobbing's 'typestracts' (defined by Cobbing and Houédard as visuals that may be read) I show how the notion of the score actually develops from a set of very specific set of negations, where an aesthetic transition in Cobbing's creative work from verbal to visual permutation, parallels a transition in his identity, from that of the amateur suburban artist to a participant in London's international counterculture. The chapter concludes with an analysis of Cobbing's 'Six Variations on Typestract One for DIAS' and 'Destruction in Art' (both 1966) in terms of Cobbing's organisational and aesthetic contributions to the Destruction in Art Symposium (September 1966).

In 1965 Cobbing started work at Better Books – becoming its manager in 1966 – and members of Writers Forum began to meet on its premises. During this time Better Books was an important venue for countercultural activity, and the art groups that Cobbing established in Hendon and Finchley enriched the scene that gathered there. In May 1965 Better Books hosted a poetry reading by Allen Ginsberg, a month before he read at the International Poetry Incarnation (June 1965). The International Poetry Incarnation is the focus of Chapter Three, which considers just one of Cobbing's poems: *Sound Poems* (1964/5), better known as an *ABC in Sound*. I do this in order to investigate the kinds of realignments and negotiations that take place between poets, poems, friendship networks and institutions that Rifkin says characterizes a poetic career. In this context, I analyze Cobbing's own claim that until 1964 he regarded himself as an 'amateur in the arts', but that the *ABC in Sound* led him to believe that he could 'become professional', which he did, full time, in 1967.⁷⁸ The International Poetry Incarnation created the environment in which a poet like Cobbing could flourish, instituting the idea of the poetry reading and sound poetry in a national consciousness and thereby facilitating the emergence of Cobbing's identity as a professional English sound poet. However, this professionalisation altered the reception of *Sound Poems* in not wholly positive ways. In these terms the International Poetry Incarnation is a pivot around which Cobbing's career turns, but it was an event at which Cobbing did not perform. In this chapter I show how

⁷⁸ *Bob Cobbing & Writers Forum*, ed. Peter Mayer (Writers Forum, December 1999), 56. This work was first produced in conjunction with the Bob Cobbing and Writers Forum Retrospective Exhibition, Sunderland Arts Centre, November 2nd - November 30, 1974.

performance is structured by the distant relation that exists between *Sound Poems* and the dominant historiography of the International Poetry Incarnation from which Cobbing is excluded.

In July 1967 the lease to Better Books was sold. In the absence of Better Books and with Cobbing's subsequent attempt to establish his own bookshop ending in failure, he became a member of the Poetry Society while teaching a course in sound poetry at the Antiuniversity of London. During this time Writers Forum had no fixed venue. This lack of a fixed, established institutional space in which to work was figured in the tape-based poems that Cobbing produced during the period 1965-1970, which were disseminated around Europe. It is this work that Chapter Four addresses. 'Whisper Piece No. 1: Marvo Movies Natter' (1968), 'Chamber Music' (1968) and 'Whisper Piece No. 4: Whississippi' (1969) are all given particular attention. Here Cobbing's performance works within an international network of sound poets and associated individuals including Ernst Jandl, Franz Mon, Henri Chopin and François Dufrêne, Jeff Keen and Annea Lockwood. Perhaps more surprisingly, the poets and BBC producers George MacBeth and Anthony Thwaite also played an important role in Cobbing's career and performance at this time. This chapter establishes how the institution which grounds Cobbing's performance in the mid to late 1960s is audio technology itself, the physical forms of which include tapes, records, recording studios and radio.

By 1969 Cobbing was beginning to take his work at the Poetry Society more seriously, becoming a member of the General Council from 1970. Once Cobbing had established himself there, Writers Forum workshop meetings were held at the Society's premises at Earls Court. In many respects the final chapter closes the circle of this thesis by examining poems that were made at the Poetry Society while cheek, Upton and others were experimenting with poetic form at the workshops. Particular copies of Cobbing's *Jade-Sound Poems* (1977-78) are examined in order to explore how Cobbing's performance at the Poetry Society brought ideas about the subsidisation of art (the value of the poem) into contact with solidarity (the value of the person), and how this acquired meaning in the acrimonious context of the Poetry Wars. The chapter concludes by explaining how Cobbing's aesthetics changed following the Poetry Wars.

This thesis traces a path through Cobbing's career as a poet and art

organiser, from his bureaucratized organizational tendencies in postwar Hendon to his identity as a countercultural artist in the mid-1960s, through to his performance at the Poetry Society in the mid-1970s. It ends with the eventual anarchic disintegrated noise of Bird Yak. In mapping this trajectory several different performance periods have been identified, and in the following pages I will show that the central themes which overarch these periods are the relation between the amateur and professional artist, the integration of the means of a poem's production as part of the poem's form, and the relation between financial and poetic value. Taken as a whole, this thesis argues for the benefits of figuring performance as something that can occur in the archival past as well as in the embodied present.

Chapter One:
**The Integrative Aesthetic of the Postwar Amateur Suburbanite and the
Radian Roots of an Anarchic Pedagogy**



Figure 1. Bob Cobbing, 'World In Ruins (Cataclasm)' (1951). Monotype. Reproduced in *Lame Limping Mangled Marred and Mutilated: Collected Poems Volume 9* (London: David Barton, 1986), n.p. Reprinted with permission of Jennifer Cobbing.

Bob Cobbing's monotype 'World in Ruins (Cataclasm)' (see Fig. 1.) was made in 1951 but not published until 1986 with the title 'Cataclasm'.¹ The work is structured by the relation between a set of geometric shapes made with a roller and several triangular stencils. Just left of centre, two rough-edged rectangles (made by the roller) converge and form a point. A triangular shape is constructed from the empty space left between them, which directs the eye upwards. This upward gesture is countered by three black triangles (constructed with stencils) positioned in the upper half of the monotype, which gesture down towards the bottom. Interplay along the vertical axis ensues, which mirrors the action of the roller. There is no sharp contrast between the black geometric shapes and the white background of the paper, partly because pressing a monotype is not a precise method of image reproduction and partly because the clarity of the print is determined by the amount of ink applied to the printing screen prior to its pressing. The non-inked white spots are created by Cobbing's decision to apply an insufficient amount of ink and to distribute it unevenly across the screen, while probably applying pressure unevenly during the pressing itself. This is what gives 'World in Ruins (Cataclasm)' its unfinished, unevenly inked look. Rough and irregular white circular spots cover about two thirds of the print. The empty spaces of the monotype remain highly significant to the overall visual effect and yet the whole image appears flat. This is an aesthetic that builds and constructs, deconstructs and collapses space: both aspects foreground its dependence upon the processes, materials and media that were used in its production. This raises the question of what it meant for Cobbing to signal his intervening presence through such an ambiguous and process-dependent aesthetic. Why does 'World in Ruins (Cataclasm)' look the way it does, and why does it matter?

This question is related to the larger purpose of the present chapter, which examines Cobbing's practice in the 1950s both as an individual artist and as a leading member of amateur art groups. It does so in order to establish the aesthetic foundations of Cobbing's creative practice, and explore some of the

¹ Bob Cobbing, *Lame Limping Mangled Marred and Mutilated: Collected Poems Volume 9* (London: David Barton, 1986), endnotes. For original title of 'Cataclasm' see: 'Lists of Art Works', British Library Additional Manuscript 8890941, (The Papers of Bob Cobbing). All subsequent references to this archive have been abbreviated to 'BL Add. MS', followed by the reference number.

ideas in circulation at the time of his first serious foray into arts organising. The concurrent commitment that Cobbing showed to both these activities in this period was an early indication of the uniqueness of his artistic project, which derived from making art where the ‘external’ business of arts organisation becomes a creative element in the ‘internal’ form, and vice versa. The pedagogue and art critic Herbert Read (1893-1968) had a particularly important influence on many of Cobbing’s ideas and practices, particularly his embrace of organicism and a ‘dirty’ aesthetic both of which are manifested in ‘World in Ruins (Cataclasm)’. By tracing Read’s influence on Cobbing’s aesthetics and organisational practices ‘World in Ruins (Cataclasm)’ acquires new meanings and we become able to interpret and understand its formal aspects (noted above) in terms of the political, historical and sociological contexts of the work’s production. The republication of the artwork under a reduced title in 1986, and the consequent reception of that version alone, has had the unintentional effect of obscuring this question through the new connections it established. In reasserting these contexts, this chapter shows how Cobbing’s work as an organiser also fulfils Read’s more pragmatic proposals for the development of arts organisation and education in the postwar period. By examining Cobbing’s activities in the context of postwar welfare capitalism, we can see that he was building audiences for art locally. Rather than passively accepting pre-existing values, he was encouraging amateur artists to develop the tastes of those audiences within state sponsored and locally governed spaces. This simultaneous embrace and redefinition of localism and amateurism is detailed in the penultimate section of the chapter.

1) Cobbing’s Readian Aesthetics

Read’s influence first shows itself in Cobbing’s handwritten and unpublished dissertation *The Purpose of Art* (1949), completed during his teacher training at Bognor Training College before he moved to Hendon to work as a teacher. While Read’s books are not identified as main sources for Cobbing’s study, *The Purpose of Art* includes materials from four of Read’s books of the inter-war period: *The Meaning of Art* (1930), *Art Now* (1933), *Surrealism* (1936) and *Unit One: The Modern Movement in English Architecture, Painting and Sculpture*

(1934).² Using categories such as ‘Form in Painting’, ‘Technique and Medium’ and ‘Subject Matter’, Cobbing illustrated his arguments with reproductions of paintings, some of them included in these books, and occasionally quoted from Read’s arguments about art to offer a survey of a range of different modern artists. These included Michael Ayrton, Edward Burra, Naum Gabo, John Nash, Barbara Hepworth, John Armstrong, John Piper, Ben Nicholson, Antoine Pevsner, Van Gogh and Paul Cézanne. *The Purpose of Art* reflects the pedagogic resources and arguments that were available to someone training to become an art teacher at that time. Although Cobbing does not make an argument for the particular merits of these artists, the range of examples and the tone of his discussions echo the concerns of Read, whose influence on postwar British art and its institutions was of ongoing importance to Cobbing’s performance later in Hendon.

There are several other formative connections between Read (who has been described in a recent reassessment of his work as the ‘principle conduit for the reception of visual modernism in conservative Britain’) and Cobbing’s life as an artist in 1950s Hendon, the local government of which was politically Conservative.³ Read was instrumental in the formation of The Society for Education through Art (formed 1940) and became its president in 1953. In May 1952 Cobbing exhibited paintings that he had made in Hendon at an exhibition of amateur art that the SEA had organised in Manchester. Significantly, this marked the first reception of Cobbing’s work as ‘modernist’.⁴ Further, Read’s *Education Through Art* (1943) and its chief tenet – that every child was a special kind of artist – was a key text for teachers of the visual arts like Cobbing.⁵ Thirdly, both men had a connection to the Festival of Britain (1951). Read participated in an exhibition organized for the Festival by the Council for Industrial Design and wrote a monograph *Contemporary British Art* (1951), which was linked to his role in framing an official British art for the Festival, and Cobbing organised a

² ‘The Purpose of Art: Personal Study by R W Cobbing (Bognor Training College)’, BL Add MS 88909/5. For quotations from *The Meaning of Art, Art Now, Unit One, Surrealism* see 259, 265, 202, 210 respectively.

³ David Goodway, ‘Introduction’, in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, ed. David Goodway (Liverpool University Press, 1998), 1-12 (10).

⁴ Stephen Bone, ‘Amateur Artists: An Exhibition To Show the Value of Painting’, (*Manchester Guardian*, 20 May 1952), ‘Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (1)’ BL Add MS 88909/13.

⁵ Ross, ‘Herbert Read: Art, Education’, 196.

series of poetry readings at Hendon's 'Central Library in connection with the Festival of Britain'.⁶ While Cobbing's work in Hendon reveals a commitment to localism and the idiosyncrasies of English suburban life, Read strongly believed that cultural unity was the basis of a political unity that could only be secured if it focussed 'the diversity and multiplicity of local and individual forces.'⁷ As an articulation of their educative and communitarian ideals, Read and a group of fellow artists founded the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1947. Read was its first president and Cobbing went on to perform there frequently in the 1960s. Notably, this included the first reading of Cobbing's best-known poem, *ABC in Sound* (1965). Lastly, both declared themselves to be anarchists even though Read – described recently by Mark Cheetham as a post-imperial "official mind" – accepted a knighthood in 1953, while Cobbing became Treasurer of the Poetry Society and in the 1980s was granted a Civil List Pension.⁸

I want to ground all these points of comparison (many of which I return to in the final section of this chapter) in Cobbing's aesthetics by reading them in relation to Read's views on contemporary art and his perpetual concern with the dialectic of 'romanticism' and 'classicism'. In this reading, 'World in Ruins (Cataclasm)', which originally appeared in galleries as visual art, emerges as a postwar poem, entangled in a project of social reconstruction. The best way to understand Cobbing's aesthetics and his commitment to localism in the 1950s as a single coherent 'performance' is through Read's mediating position in both.

Cobbing was still using Read's terminology to describe his aesthetics as late as 1973. As he explained in an interview with Eric Mottram, the 'classical' attitude was when the painter had a 'definite idea' and then gradually executed it until a painting was produced, while the 'romantic' attitude was when the painter starts 'splashing paint all over the canvas', pushing it around 'and welcomes the accidents'.⁹ Cobbing's hands-on, physical approach to art was certainly integral

⁶ Andrew Causey, 'Herbert Read and Contemporary Art', in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, ed. David Goodway (Liverpool University Press, 1998), 123-144 (141). For documentation of Festival of Britain readings in Hendon see: Minutes to the general meeting 18 September 1950', 'Hendon Poetry Society', BL Add MS 88909/28, notebook 29.

⁷ Herbert Read, *Contemporary British Art*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1951), 38.

⁸ Mark Cheetham, *Artwriting, Nation, and Cosmopolitanism in Britain: The 'Englishness' of English Art Theory since the Eighteenth Century* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 105. For information about Cobbing's Civil List pension see: 'Financial Matters', BL Add MS 88909/7.

⁹ Bob Cobbing, *Eric Mottram, Composition and Performance In the Work of Bob Cobbing* (London: Writers Forum, 2000), n.p.

to his practice in the 1950s. This is evinced by two untitled, swirling finger paintings made in 1951, the choice of the title 'Ballet' (evoking embodied movement) for two ink drawings made in 1952, and the way that pressure was exerted during the pressing of 'World in Ruins (Cataclasm)' to influence its appearance in unpredictable ways.¹⁰ Cobbing identified Read's definition of the terms 'classical' and 'romantic' with tendencies in his own processes. He used 'classical' and 'romantic' to formulate his position within concrete poetry (a point to which I will return). In some respects, Cobbing's use of Read's terms in the 1970s differed from their manifestation in the artworks he produced in the 1950s. To understand the complexity of the terms 'classical' and 'romantic' it will be useful to trace their development in Read's thought and their impact on Cobbing's art before returning to 'World in Ruins (Cataclasm)' as it was resituated in the ninth volume of Cobbing's collected poems.

Read used the terms 'classical' and 'romantic' frequently in his criticism, and at different times in his life he attributed value to each. In the *Meaning of Art* (1931) the terms implied, rather than stated, a theory for the origins of culture.¹¹ The first appearance of the term 'classical art' is in a passage about the concept of beauty where Read articulates the common view that art in ancient Greece was, like religion, an 'idealisation of nature, and especially of man as the culminating point of the process of nature.'¹² For Read, typical examples of classical art include the 'Apollo Belvedere or the Aphrodite of Melos', which he calls 'perfect or ideal types of humanity, perfectly formed, perfectly proportioned, noble and serene; in one word, beautiful.'¹³ Classicism is a historical phase (others being 'Primitive', 'Oriental', and 'Gothic') but it is also a 'universal' type of art, and a style.¹⁴ Yet it is also a distortion. Read argues: 'Distortion of some kind...is present in a very general and perhaps paradoxical way in all art. Even classical Greek sculpture was distorted in the interests of the ideal.'¹⁵ In giving the example of Greek vases, which are 'cold and lifeless' because their perfection

¹⁰ Cobbing, 'Ballet', *bob jubile*, 5. For a good reproduction of one of Cobbing's Finger Paintings see: Bob Cobbing interviewed by Nicholas Zurbrugg, in 'The Multimedia Text', *Art & Design Profiles* (45), ed. Nicholas Zurbrugg (London: Academy Edition, 1995), 32-37 (32).

¹¹ Causey, 'Herbert Read', *Read Reassessed*, 127.

¹² Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art* (1931; repr. 1982), 21.

¹³ Read, *The Meaning of Art*, 21.

¹⁴ Read, *The Meaning of Art*, 122.

¹⁵ Read, *The Meaning of Art*, 28-29.

conforms to ‘exact geometric laws’, he compares them to Japanese peasant pots, which naturally evolve on the potter’s wheel with deliberately marred shapes representing a felt beauty which is ‘not so regular’.¹⁶ This contextualizes the process-dependent and messy aesthetic of ‘World in Ruins (Cataclasm)’ and the allusion in its title to cataclastic rock, which is formed through the progressive fracturing of existing rock. The title thereby identifies the monotype as being the result of an organic process of reconstruction through an initial phase of destruction.

A passage in *The Meaning of Art* compares the ‘static harmony’ of the Greek vase to the ‘dynamic harmony’ that the Chinese vase achieves. Read writes that the Chinese vase ‘is not only a relation of numbers, but also a living movement. Not a crystal but a flower.’¹⁷ A crystal’s atoms are arranged in an orderly and repeated pattern while a flower’s growth is more unpredictable. This speaks to a distinction between geometrical and organic art that Read thought persisted through art’s history. He argues that Greek art of the classical period was essentially the same as Palaeolithic and Bushman art, which he calls organic. They diverged, he contends, when the Greeks who, not ‘content with the vitality of nature and art’, sought to explain it by formulas, and ‘discovered, or thought they discovered, certain fixed ratios both in nature and art’.¹⁸

The terms of Read’s art criticism helped frame the reception of many artists who abstracted organic forms and processes in their work, including Naum Gabo, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. Read knew these artists personally and through them he influenced a wider circle of artists based at St Ives. ‘World in Ruins (Cataclasm)’ takes its cue from the natural process of cataclasis, and the titles of Cobbing’s other abstract artworks from this period also come from nature: ‘Shore’ (1947), ‘Four Stones’ (1950), ‘Tree-Stump, Hampstead Heath’ (1951), ‘Landscape with Contours’ (1951), ‘Flowering Stone’ (1955), ‘Fossil Stone’ (1955), ‘Excavated Forms’ (1955) ‘Marine Forms’ (1955), ‘Noxious Plant’ (1955), ‘Folded Landscape’ (1955), ‘Seascape’ (1956), and ‘Ice Dance’ (1957).¹⁹ These titles suggest the influence of Read and his discussion of organic art in *The Meaning of Art*, which was an early articulation of his idea of

¹⁶ Read, *The Meaning of Art*, 28.

¹⁷ Read, *The Meaning of Art*, 42.

¹⁸ Read, *The Meaning of Art*, 79.

¹⁹ ‘Lists of Art Works’, BL Add MS 88909/41.

Romanticism. David Thistlewood has described Read's theorising of art, which developed by 'distinct stages, with periodic consolidation, revision and change and no obviously predetermined goal', as being itself 'organic'.²⁰ In order to establish the aesthetic context for Copping's abstractions, and his concern to reveal hidden structures in natural forms I shall address Read's practice and theories of the 'organic' through his ideas on art, while drawing on recent reassessments of Read's work by Andrew Causey, Kevin Davey and Thistlewood.

In the 1930s, dissatisfied with Clive Bell's theory of 'significant form' (an attempt to identify those shared qualities among objects that provoke emotions through aesthetics) and frustrated by the 'overbalance in British taste for Paris', Read pursued an interest in modern German art and the theories of the German aesthetician Wilhelm Worringer.²¹ Read adapted Worringer's 1908 distinction between 'abstraction' and 'empathy', which he knew from the writings of T. E. Hulme.²² Hulme summarised Worringer's definition of 'abstraction' as 'a feeling of separation in the face of outside nature. While naturalistic art is the result of a happy pantheistic relation between man and the outside world, the tendency to abstraction, on the contrary, occurs in races whose attitude to the outside world is the exact contrary of this.'²³ Through this mediated version of Worringer's ideas Read arrived at 'a definition of North European art (applied not only to Germany but to Scandinavians including Munch and to the art of the Low Countries) which seemed applicable to both historic and contemporary art.'²⁴ This was a foundational myth that proposed that the German tradition in art, like the English tradition with which Read thought it shared common origins, was 'fundamentally romantic'. Romanticism, so defined in *The Meaning of Art*, took on 'different aspects in different environments' but was 'universal in its manifestations'. Read's analysis was that North European art was opposed to naturalism, and that the retreat into abstraction (described by Worringer) was countered 'by the

²⁰ David Thistlewood, 'Herbert Read's Organic Aesthetic: [1] 1918-1950', in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, ed. David Goodway (Liverpool University Press, 1998), 215-233 (215).

²¹ Causey, 'Herbert Read', in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, 125.

²² Causey, 'Herbert Read', *Read Reassessed*, 125. Read edited a collected of Hulme's essays, *Speculations* (London, 1924).

²³ T. E. Hulme, *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read (1926; repr. 2010), 85-86.

²⁴ Causey, 'Herbert Read', *Read Reassessed*, 126. Causey's argument and words.

pressure of actuality' that made escape into abstraction impossible. The result as Read saw it was caricature, 'a way of facing reality without resorting to naturalism'. Defining northern European art in terms of 'geography and the accretion of characteristics over history' was one of the stages in Read's identification of Romanticism with the organic.²⁵

These ideas form the basis for Read's claims in *Art Now* (1933) – a book that Cobbing read – which 'attacked eighteenth-century rationalism and the notion of a classical tradition', and which set out an 'alternative vitalist tradition: "Art may flourish in a rank and barbaric manner from an excess of animal vitality; but it withers and dies in the arid excesses of reason".'²⁶ This conception of art still sees the dialectic of romanticism and classicism as opposites that needed to be reconciled, because it is only the 'excesses' of reason that are problematic, not reason itself. In 1934 Read found this reconciliation in the work of Henry Moore. As he understood it, Moore's work responded to natural forms as if they were the partial revelation of a spiritual essence. He also argued that Moore believed that these forms were functional, utilitarian, clumsy and excrescent expressions of this essence, which needed to be stripped away by the artist 'to reveal the forms the spirit would evolve if its aims were disinterested'.²⁷

When Read edited and introduced *Surrealism* (1936) – his contribution to the International Surrealist Exhibition in London – he no longer treated romanticism and classicism as 'opposites to be reconciled', he saw classicism as the 'husk' and saw romanticism as the 'seed' to be preserved at all costs.²⁸ In *Surrealism*, Read boldly declared:

Classicism is the intellectual counterpart of political tyranny. It was so in the ancient world and in the medieval empires; it was renewed to express the dictatorships of the Renaissance and has ever since been the official creed of capitalism. Wherever the blood of martyrs stains the ground, there you will find a Doric column or perhaps a statue of Minerva.²⁹

²⁵ Causey, 'Herbert Read', *Read Reassessed*, 126.

²⁶ Causey, 'Herbert Read', *Read Reassessed*, 126.

²⁷ Causey, 'Herbert Read', *Read Reassessed*, 135.

²⁸ Causey, 'Herbert Read', *Read Reassessed*, 136

²⁹ Herbert Read 'Introduction', in *Surrealism*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), 23.

Locating classicism in society's social and political structures warrants further comment in terms of Read's anti-authoritarian, anti-statist politics, but in the 1940s Read reasserted the view that Moore had achieved a synthesis of classicism and romanticism. Read, as Thistlewood has noted, called this synthesis "organic vitalism": the creative linking of 'the most extreme variants of abstraction [his version of constructivism] and surrealism [his version of surrealism].'³⁰

Noting his fascination with the prospect that surrealist art could engage the collective unconscious, Thistlewood charts a further development in Read's thought. He argues that Read's 'ideas about a *dependency* of art upon nature' were gradually supplanted by 'ideas about an interpenetration – even an identity – of art and nature.'³¹ This identity, formed through an engagement with Jungian theory, was instituted at the ICA. Through a study of the scheduled debates held at the ICA in the 1950s Thistlewood concludes that they 'promoted an organicist *identity* of nature, mind and art', which regarded art making as 'an organic event, unfolding in space and time by stages, each stage "suggesting" to the artist the next "requirement" of the developing image or form.'³² It is this organicist and process-dependent identity that Cobbing practices in his artworks of the 1950s.

Cobbing's artworks of the 1950s are also grounded in his own attempts to describe the aim of art. These were set out in *The Purpose of Art* through a series of hierarchical relations that emphasise the affective aspects of art rather than classical reason. For Cobbing, the way the artist communicates through the 'emotional effects of line, shape and colour', and through the selection, arrangement and even distortion of material leads 'to the conclusion that the form of an artwork is more important than its subject-matter'. However, the painting's form was less important than art's main purpose, which was 'to convey to other people an artist's reaction to some situation, to express or communicate his experience or emotion'. Further, the 'subject-matter, medium and technique, design and form should all co-operate and contribute to the artist's aim—the imparting to others of his feelings and experience.'³³ In these terms the artist's feelings – experienced in response to 'some situation' – were the essential thing

³⁰ Thistlewood, 'Herbert Read's Organic', *Read Reassessed*, 226-7.

³¹ Thistlewood, 'Herbert Read's Organic', *Read Reassessed*, 233.

³² Thistlewood, 'Herbert Read's Organic', *Read Reassessed*, 233.

³³ 'The Purpose of Art: Personal Study by R W Cobbing (Bognor Training College)' BL Add MS 88909/5, 5-6.

that should be communicated through art. This was art's main aim. Yet Cobbing articulated this argument at a time when the titles of many of his artworks suggested an interest in organic form and natural structure, and where the intended effect transmitted by the artwork was far from clear. Therefore the organic processes that were employed in the communicative structure of Cobbing's artworks complicated his idea of art as a vehicle for affective communication between the artist and viewer. This is because his feelings as an artist were inseparable from the organic form of his art and the organic processes through which that art was made. This is the basis for Cobbing's organicist identity as an artist, and a reason for considering his identity as an artist as part of the art itself.³⁴ This is particularly evident in the form and making of his visual artwork 'Dynamic Progress' (1954).

'Dynamic Progress' (see Fig. 2.) was not published until its inclusion in *Lame Limping Mangled Marred and Mutilated* (1986), but like 'World in Ruins (Cataclasm)' it was regularly exhibited as an artwork in Hendon.³⁵ The title recalls Read's description of the Chinese vase as having 'dynamic harmony', while in common parlance 'dynamic' refers to a system characterised by constant change or activity, and to forces that produce motion. 'Dynamic Progress' is actually the third in a sequence of four prints, which take their name from this print. Because the ink would never have been entirely cleared from the printing screen while making the prints, the sequence is best thought of as a series of intermediary presentations of one extended and accumulative creative process.

The changes between stages are observable in relation to the recurrent appearance of a split crescent shape that appears in a different position in each successive print. While the enclosures and monochromatic inversions in the first print resemble those in Hans Arp's 'Configuration, 1936' – an artwork that Read had reproduced in *Surrealism* – each image grows out of the roots of the one that precedes it. In the second print, for example, the stencil used to make the split crescent shape in the centre of the first print would have been rotated a little over 180° to make the image we see towards its top, while in the third print three other

³⁴ 'The Purpose of Art: Personal Study by R W Cobbing (Bognor Training College)' BL Add MS 88909/5, 6.

³⁵ Cobbing, *Lame Limping*, n.p.



Figure 2. Bob Cobbing, 'Dynamic Progress' (1954). Monotype. Reproduced in *Lame Limping Mangled Marred and Mutilated: Collected Poems Volume 9* (London: David Barton, 1986), n.p. Title of sequence takes its name from the third print. Reprinted with permission of Jennifer Cobbing.

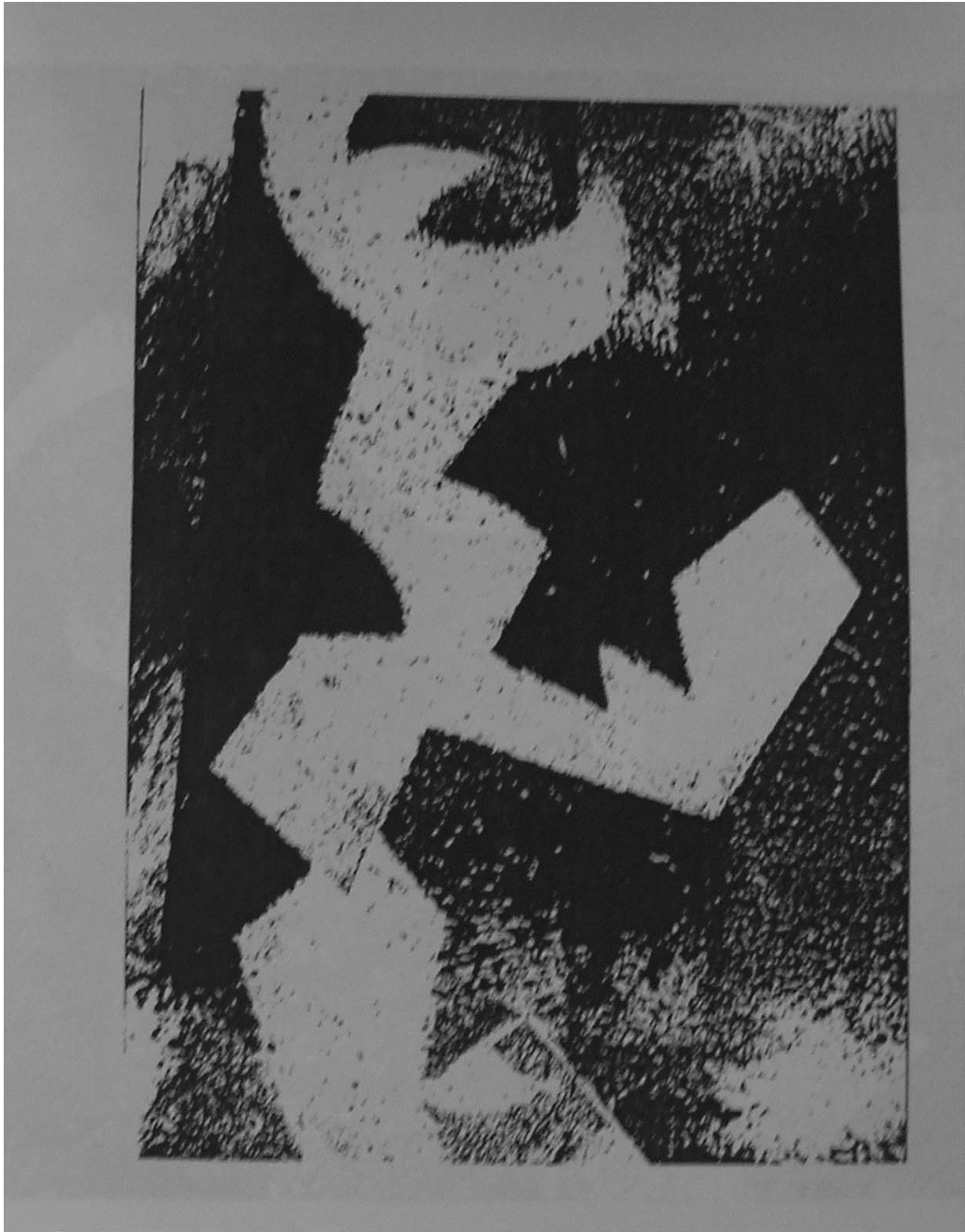


Figure 2. Cobbing, 'Dynamic Progress' (1954).



Figure 2. Cobbing, 'Dynamic Progress' (1954).

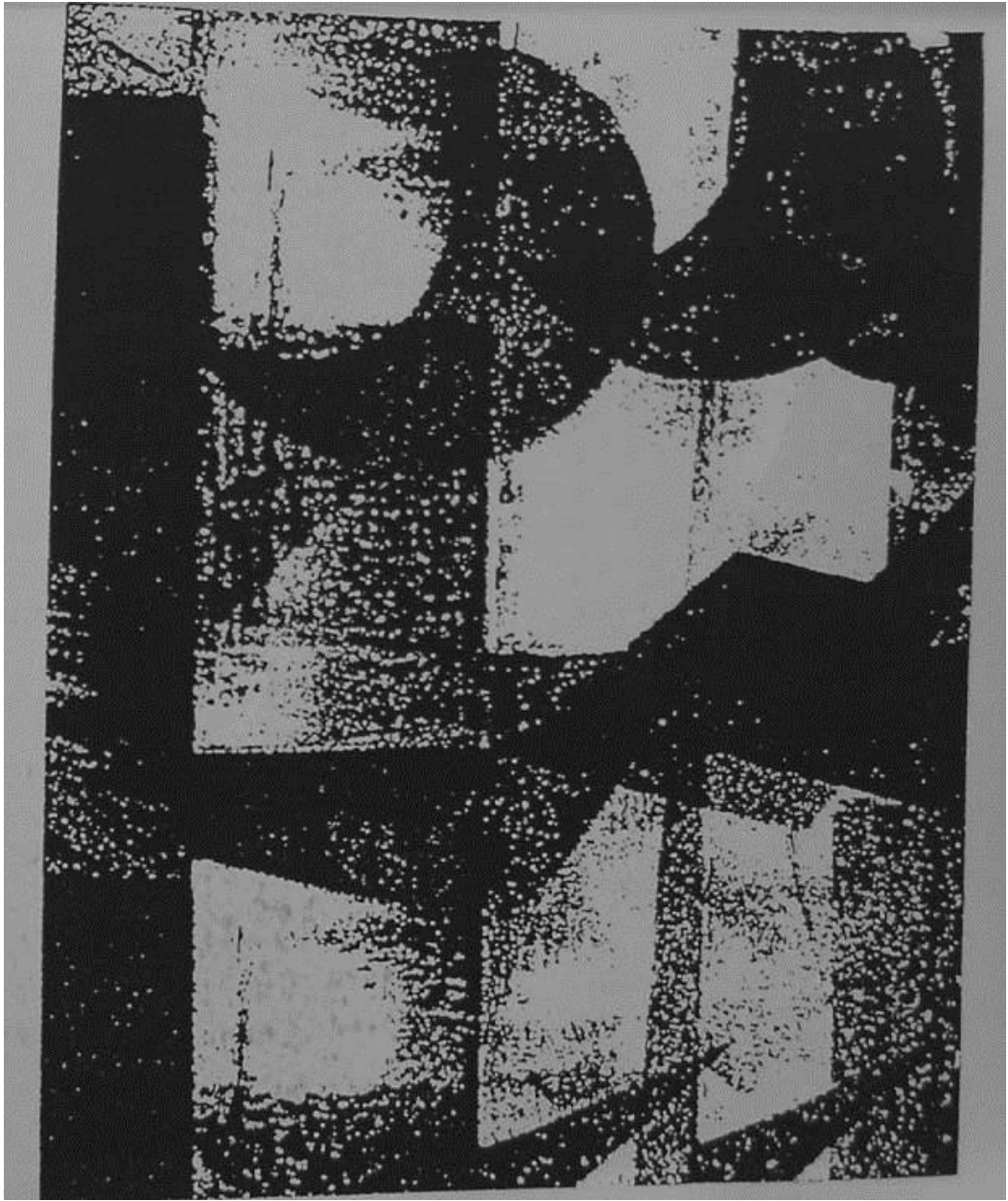


Figure 2. Cobbing, 'Dynamic Progress' (1954).

angular and individuated forms extend in different directions from the central split crescent shape.

In *Surrealism*, Read claimed that ‘physicists affirm that the whole universe is undergoing a process of continuous change [and that] dialectics are ... a logical explanation of how such a change takes place.’³⁶ The conceptual shape of Read’s understanding of the dialectic is given visual form in Cobbing’s use of an ‘offset’ production method in some of the prints.³⁷ This involved placing paper over an inked plate, drawing onto the back of the paper with a pencil, or pressing onto the paper with finger tips to create tonal areas, and then finally removing the paper to reveal the print on the reverse. This process produces the monochromatic inversions we see across the first three prints. ‘Dynamic Progress’ is the first time that Cobbing’s process-dependent aesthetic is seen across multiple prints. This invites a consideration of the spaces between the prints as a site for art, and Cobbing’s identity as a constituent part of the organic process of art making, in terms of the organic identity Read instituted at the ICA. In this respect ‘Dynamic Progress’ is a microcosm of Cobbing’s wider creative practice.

The fourth print in the ‘Dynamic Progress’ sequence shows that Cobbing incorporated organic and classical processes and expressions in a single artwork. It does not follow the pattern established by the previous three; rather it is a distillation of what has come before. Using Read’s terms, it is abstract and geometric rather than organic; classical rather than romantic. It divides longitudinally into thirds: two triangular shapes at the bottom; two square shapes in the middle; and two overlapping crescents at the top. There is also latitudinal division, and a regular rhythmic pulse is suggested as the shapes on the right echo those on the left. The dual aspect of ‘World in Ruins (Cataclasm)’ – which displays a mixture of geometric forms that construct space and organic forms that collapse, fracture, and reform visual space – is also found across ‘Dynamic Progress’. Further, their use also has a specific meaning in the context of postwar British art.

This postwar context is signalled by the first half of the title ‘World in Ruins (Cataclasm)’ which recalls a phrase in Read’s essay ‘This Changing World’ published in the magazine *World Review* (1941):

³⁶ Read, ‘Introduction’, *Surrealism*, 39.

³⁷ See endnotes to Cobbing, *Lame Limping*, n.p.

The individuals in whom the spirit of modernism is embodied still survive, still work, still create [...] When the cloud of war has passed, they will re-emerge, eager to rebuild the shattered world [...] They will say: *our world is in ruins* [...] let us direct your work and we promise you that out of the ruins a better world will emerge.³⁸

World Review was edited by Marcus Brumwell (a close friend of Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson) and owned by Edmund Hulton who was an influential member of the '1941 Committee', which campaigned for a policy of postwar social reconstruction. Whether or not Cobbing read 'This Changing World', he was certainly aware of Nicholson and Hepworth and the British Constructivist Movement to which they belonged. Two paintings by Nicholson, 'White Relief' (1935) and 'Au Chat Botté' (1932), were included in *The Purpose of Art*, and this suggests that Cobbing had read *Ben Nicholson: Paintings, Reliefs, Drawings* (1948), which, introduced by Read, contained the first reproductions of Nicholson's non-figurative work.³⁹ We also know from the materials included in *The Purpose of Art* that Cobbing read *Horizon*, a modernist magazine in which Nicholson's 1941 essay 'Notes on Abstract Art' appeared, and which stated: 'this liberation of form and colour is closely linked with all the other liberations one hears about. I think it ought, perhaps, to come into one of our war aims'.⁴⁰ Nicholson made a significant attempt to shape the discourse about art and what its role might be after the war. The idea that a particular style of art could lead the British postwar effort of social and cultural reconstruction grounds 'World in Ruins (Cataclasm)' in a national ethos that Read had translated into an aesthetics and then instituted through establishing his reputation as an expert commentator on such art. While 'World in Ruins (Cataclasm)' was produced and exhibited in an aesthetic and social context of national reconstruction where Constructivism would, it had been hoped, enable the reformulation of society, these demands

³⁸ Christopher Stephens, 'We Are The Masters Now: Modernism And Reconstruction In Post-War Britain', in *Blast To Freeze: British Art in The 20th Century* (Wolfsburg: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2003), 133-138 (134). (Italics mine).

³⁹ Cobbing, 'The Purpose of Art: Personal Study by R W Cobbing (Bognor Training College)' BL Add MS 88909/5, 135, 199.

⁴⁰ Stephens, 'We Are The Masters Now', in *Blast To Freeze*, 134.

(created by concerns over what the purpose of art was during war) did not remain the sole context for ‘World in Ruins (Cataclasm)’.

2) Why Cobbing’s Concrete Poetry Isn’t Necessarily Dirty

Cobbing continued to frame his practice in Read’s terms of the ‘classical’ and the ‘romantic’ and attempted to incorporate them into emerging discourses around concrete poetry in the 1970s. The dominant narrative of the birth of concrete poetry is that it was an international movement that began in multiple nations at the same time (most notably in Brazil and West Germany) without the poets themselves initially having had any contact with one another. Even as it emerged as a distinctive and influential practice, the aesthetics that ‘concrete poetry’ denoted were being debated. In 1970, bpNichol noted the existence of a division between ‘clean’ and ‘dirty’ concrete.⁴¹ In 1971 Frank Davey defined this distinction in terms of visual impact:

Concrete is usually divided by its devotees into “clean” and “dirty”. In clean concrete, the preferred and dominant type, the visual shape of the work is primary, the linguistic signs secondary. In this view the most effective concrete poems are those with an immediate and arresting visual effect which is made more profound by the linguistic elements used in the poems constituent parts. The weakest are dirty concrete, those with amorphous visual shape and complex and involute arrangements of linguistic elements. In dirty concrete there can be no immediate to the whole, only a cumulative interpretation gained by painstaking labour.⁴²

In a 1973 discussion with Mottram, Cobbing identified himself among the ‘dirty’ concrete poets. As well as responding to contemporary formulations of concrete

⁴¹ Lori Emerson, ‘The Origin Of The Term “Dirty Concrete Poetry” (En Route To Digital D.I.Y.)’, March 2011 <<http://www.netpoetic.com/2011/03/the-origin-of-the-term-dirty-concrete-poetry-en-route-to-digital-d-i-y/>> [accessed 10 July 2012]. Emerson explains ‘the term “dirty concrete” was first used either by the English critic Mike Weaver or the Canadian critic Stephen Scobie’, but she notes that there is no document that proves this definitively. She explains that ‘the first written reference appears in a letter bpNichol wrote to Nicholas Zurbrugg, the editor of *Stereo Headphones* in 1970, in which Nichol claims he learned of the term from Stephen Scobie’, she notes that Scobie informed her that he learned of it from Mike Weaver.

⁴² Frank Davey quoted in Emerson, ‘The Origin Of The Term “Dirty Concrete Poetry” (En Route To Digital D.I.Y.)’.

poetry, Cobbing's explanation draws on Read's distinction between classical and romantic:

B.C. [...] I think there have always been two attitudes. One is that you have a very definite idea of what you are going to do, like the classical idea of painting [...]. Whereas in the other type of painting, you start splashing paint all over the canvas you sort of push it around and welcome the accidents. It is the classical as opposed to the romantic attitude, I think. In concrete there are clean and dirty, and I have always been regarded as dirty.

E.M. I am not sure about that. You were discussing this once before – the fact that you associate the word romantic with messy and dirty, and saying you were a romantic.⁴³

Cobbing did not explain to Mottram that he was using Read's terms. He simply noted that there were two distinct trends in concrete poetry – 'clean' and 'dirty' – and that he had always been regarded as a dirty concrete poet. For him, this was synonymous with a romantic attitude to art though the association clearly baffled Mottram, perhaps because he did not realise the influence of Read on Cobbing in the 1950s.⁴⁴ 'World In Ruins (Cataclasm)' was produced as a visual artwork before the 'clean' and 'dirty' binary in concrete poetry was articulated, but it was published much later and presented then as a visual poem, partly because Cobbing realised that his work from the 1950s resembled 'dirty' concrete poetry. This pragmatic repositioning is characteristic of the way in which Cobbing sought to give his works new meanings by situating them in new contexts.

Cobbing moved away from framing his poetry in terms of Read's organic aesthetics while keeping those terms in play to describe the processes of 'dirty' concrete poetry. In order to consider how and why Cobbing did so, I want to return to 'World in Ruins (Cataclasm)'. The artwork's title (with its evocation of fractures) and the impressionistic, unevenly distributed patches of ink on the surface of the monotype (caused by the pressure Cobbing exerted during the printing) speak to the contemporary practitioner Derek Beaulieu's idea of 'dirty concrete'. In an interview with Lori Emerson, Beaulieu describes it as poetry

⁴³ Mottram interviewing Cobbing, *Composition and Performance*, n.p.

⁴⁴ Mottram interviewing Cobbing, *Composition and Performance*, n.p.

‘which foregrounds the degenerated, the broken and the handmade’. Beaulieu gives the examples of: ‘photocopier degeneration (bpNichol’s *Sharp Facts*), broken letterforms or semantic pieces ([Steve] McCaffery’s “demiplosive suite” and “punctuation poem”) or some of the collage-based or graffiti-based poems of Bob Cobbing.’⁴⁵ Meanwhile in Davey’s terms ‘World in Ruins (Cataclasm)’ can be perceived as a ‘dirty’ concrete poem because it demands painstaking attention to the production process as an aspect of its aesthetic, as my own reading in the introduction to this chapter has shown.

Despite these reasons for thinking about ‘World in Ruins (Cataclasm)’ as a ‘dirty’ concrete poem, Cobbing was not in contact with any concrete poets (clean or dirty) in the 1950s. However, simply stating that Cobbing did not know any concrete poets at the time he produced ‘World in Ruins (Cataclasm)’ does not preclude his later identification as such. The historicization of ‘clean’ concrete poetry as an international invention – with different strands emerging independently – is a semiotic ideal in disguise. This is a historical narrative that is founded upon what Jon Erickson has described as the ‘universal system of communication’ that ‘clean concrete’ poetry tried to bring about through its poems.⁴⁶ Cobbing also figured art as a communicative structure, but unlike ‘clean’ concrete poetry its organic nature obscured the message. This suggests that even though it is possible to think of Cobbing as a ‘dirty’ concrete poet, to assert this as his main identity as Beaulieu does, would be a mistake. It unwittingly legitimizes a ‘clean’ version of concrete poetry’s history, it reinforces ‘clean’ as the dominant term in the binary. Cobbing himself expressed reservations about the narrow historical frame asserted for concrete poetry:

So many people are under the impression that so-called concrete poetry started in 1954 or 1955, that suddenly from nowhere it sprang into being, that you could actually name the person who first coined the word, that Gomringer and the Brazillians started concrete poetry, and that there is nothing before that. This is nonsense because there has been this sort of poetry all the way through history.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Lori Emerson, ‘From Concrete Poetry To The Poetics Of Obsolescence: An Interview with Derek Beaulieu’, June 2011 <<http://loriemerson.net/2011/06/15/dirty-concrete-meets-obsolence/>> [accessed 10 July 2012].

⁴⁶ Jon Erickson, *The Fate of the Object: From Modern Object to Postmodern Sign in Performance, Art, and Poetry* (The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 151.

⁴⁷ Mottram interviewing Cobbing, *Composition and Performance*, n.p.

Despite holding this view, Cobbing seems to have accepted that the binary of ‘clean’ and ‘dirty’ could not be completely dissolved, perhaps because ‘dirty’ concrete did in fact describe the appearance of his work quite well, or because it spoke to his practice in the 1970s of vocally performing wordless visuals like ‘World in Ruins (Cataclasm)’ as if they were texts. By asserting a comparison between ‘clean’ and ‘dirty’ concrete poetry and ‘classical’ and ‘romantic’ art, he did however seek to destabilize the problematic historical account of ‘clean’ concrete poetry’s birth. While Cobbing recycled and gave new meaning to his older texts – in this case reclassifying ‘World in Ruins (Cataclasm)’ as a poem after the advent of concrete poetry – the original meanings and identifications should not be abandoned, for this work was about reconstruction and transformation.

Furthermore, the associations between concrete poetry and the dirty/clean dichotomy obscure another source for Cobbing’s categorisation of himself as ‘dirty’, a radio broadcast from 1941 of a discussion between V. S. Pritchett, Graham Sutherland, Sir Kenneth Clarke and Henry Moore. This broadcast was part of a series called *The Living Image*. It continued an earlier discussion between Clive Bell, Read, and Pritchett entitled ‘What to Look For In a Picture’, which was published in *The Listener* (16 October 1941).⁴⁸ One of the topics of discussion in the subsequent broadcast, which was also transcribed in *The Listener* (13 November 1941), was how painters responded to the damage caused by the war. In this discussion Sutherland argued that it was the ‘force of emotion in the presence of such a subject which determines and moulds the pictorial form that one chooses’, but that the ‘kind of emotion one feels may vary’.⁴⁹ Cobbing excerpted and included Sutherland’s elaboration of this argument in *The Purpose of Art*:

For instance, the forms of ruin produced by a high explosive force, have a character of their own... One day one will feel moved by the purely explosive character... and will wish to get rid of this sensation in a picture. At another time

⁴⁸ Henry Moore, quoted in *Henry Moore: Writings and Conversations*, ed. Alan Wilkinson (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, 2002), 124. *The Listener* was a weekly magazine published by the BBC.

⁴⁹ Moore, *Writings and Conversations*, 124.

the sordidness and the anguish implied by some of the scenes of devastation will cause one to invent forms which are the pictorial essence of sordidness and anguish – dirty-looking forms, tormented forms, forms which take on an almost human aspect, forms, in fact, which are symbols of reality, and tragic reality at that. In either case, the point is, I think that the forms which the artist creates [...] will transcend natural appearances.⁵⁰

The equation of ‘dirty’ form with the sordidness, anguish and debris of war informs our understanding of ‘World In Ruins (Cataclasm)’ as a postwar artwork. It also informs Cobbing’s argument in *The Purpose of Art* that art should be anti-representational, an expression of the artist’s feelings and a vehicle for affective communication. Cobbing included Sutherland’s painting ‘Devastation — East End Street’ (1941) in *The Purpose of Art* in order to provide a visual example of Sutherland’s War aesthetic: it shows exactly what Sutherland meant by ‘dirty’. In comparison to this artwork, ‘World In Ruins (Cataclasm)’, made a decade later in postwar Hendon, is far less representational. Put in Sutherland’s terms we might say that it ‘transcends natural appearances’ to a higher degree. Through the radical exaggeration and abstraction of ‘dirt’, Cobbing’s monotype avoids dignifying war in the way that Sutherland did when he described ruinous forms as ‘tragic’. Cobbing is not interested in making a poignant record of the destructive force of war, unlike the evident pathos of Sutherland’s painting. These differences can be traced back to the fact that Cobbing and Sutherland had a different relation to art’s subsidisation in Britain.

3) Welfare-capitalism and the Subsidization of Art in Postwar Britain

As well as ‘Devastation—East End Street’ (1941) Cobbing included three other wartime paintings by Sutherland in *The Purpose of Art*: ‘Cliff Road’ (1941), ‘Small Boulder’ (1940), and ‘Devastation 1941: City Fallen Lift Shaft’. He also included two wartime paintings by Paul Nash: ‘Sun Flower and Sun’ (1943) and ‘Totes Meer (Dead Sea)’ (1940-1).⁵¹ The War Artists’ Advisory Committee

⁵⁰ Cobbing, ‘The Purpose of Art: Personal Study by R W Cobbing (Bognor Training College)’ BL Add MS 88909/5, 209. Sutherland’s work was exhibited at the International Surrealist Exhibition (11 June – 4 July 1936) at the New Burlington Galleries, London. Read was one of the organisers and gave a lecture during the Exhibition on ‘Art and the Unconscious’.

⁵¹ For reproductions of paintings see Cobbing, ‘The Purpose of Art: Personal Study by R W Cobbing (Bognor Training College)’ BL Add MS 88909/5, ‘Cliff Road’, 67, ‘Devastation—East

(WAAC) of the Ministry of Information administered the War Artist Scheme, which had been established in November 1939 under the Chairmanship of Sir Kenneth Clark, who at that time was the Director of the National Gallery (1933-35). The involvement of artists in the War Artists Scheme reveals their willingness to engage in constructions and imaginations of national identity. By contrast Cobbing's artworks and poems were an engagement with the local identity of postwar suburban Hendon, and yet (as I will show in the next section of this chapter) they too were implicated in a discourse of national identity. In this section I will consider how national institutions were established in the postwar period for the support of the arts, in order to establish the context in which Cobbing worked as a local arts organiser in Hendon. I will also argue that the national dominance of visual arts over poetry alters our understanding of 'World in Ruins (Cataclasm)' as a 'dirty' concrete poem, and helps explain Cobbing's self-identity as a painter in the 1950s.

The critic David Mellor argues that the War Artists Scheme was 'the most formative factor in the development of British Art in the 1940s'. Its mandate from the Government was to produce 'an artistic record of the war in all its aspects'.⁵² However (as the critic Laura Brandon argues) Clark wanted more than a simple photographic record, stating at the time: 'The camera cannot interpret, and a war so epic in its scope by land, sea and air, and so detailed and complex in its mechanism, requires interpreting [by artists] as well as recording.' Even though Brandon notes that Clark's vision produced a 'somewhat sentimental view of Britain at war', artists did interpret Clark's vision in different ways.⁵³ Further, the scheme continued to influence art produced after the war, as the materials Cobbing included in *The Purpose of Art* and his own artworks attest. The effects of the War Artists Scheme thereby exceeded the boundaries of Clarke's vision and the duration of the war itself.

The work of the WAAC was part of a wider trend in governmental support for the arts. For example, the Council for the Encouragement of Music

End Street', 73, 'Small Boulder', 122, 'Devastation 1941', 208, 'Sun Flower', 27, 'Totes Meer', 188. I have identified 'Totes Meer' from Cobbing's description of it as an 'aeroplane grave-yard' as it is no longer in *The Purpose of Art*.

⁵² David Alan Mellor, 'Apocalyptic Visions: British Art in the 1940s and 1950s', in *Blast To Freeze: British Art in The 20th Century* (Wolfsburg: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002), 107-130, (107).

⁵³ Laura Brandon, *Art and War* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 60.

and the Arts (CEMA) was established in 1940. One of its main objectives was ‘the widespread provision of opportunities for hearing good music and the enjoyment of the arts generally for people, who, on account of wartime conditions, have been cut off from these things’.⁵⁴ Rather than seeking to produce a complex record of the war, CEMA (reconstituted as the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1946) was more about meeting civilian needs.⁵⁵ In this respect it was, as Alan Sinfield has argued, part of ‘the post-1945 understanding of culture, the arts and education’, and was ‘formed in the same ideological framework as the other main welfare institutions’. Sinfield states that this fact is proved as they shared the ‘same process of disintegration’ in the 1980s.⁵⁶

Sinfield calls the postwar situation of state-sponsored cultural provision, in which Cobbing made ‘World In Ruins (Cataclasm), ‘welfare-capitalism’.⁵⁷ He defines it as a type of pact: ‘capital produces most of the wealth, but the people are protected against and compensated for its disadvantages by a state-instituted welfare system, and by state intervention in the economy to secure full employment.’⁵⁸ State support for culture in the postwar period (1945-51), argues Sinfield, was the new and significant factor, along with new market conditions established by the mixed economy of welfare-capitalism, in the reorganisation of ‘the status and ideological role of literature and the arts’.⁵⁹

Anna Upchurch’s study of the intellectual origins of the Arts Council of Great Britain, which draws upon Robert Hewison’s *Under Siege: Literary Life in London 1939-45* (1977), argues that prior to the postwar settlement described by Sinfield the ‘two groups of artists most successfully and immediately organised by the government to meet war-time needs were painters and performers.’⁶⁰ She describes the situation in the following terms:

visual artists were ... employed to record the country’s natural and architectural

⁵⁴ Andrew Sinclair, *Arts And Cultures: The History of the 50 Years of the Arts Council of Great Britain* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995), 30.

⁵⁵ The current incarnation of CEMA is Arts Council England.

⁵⁶ Alan Sinfield, *Literature Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), 58.

⁵⁷ ‘Notebooks: Enfield Wesley Guild and Enfield Youth House Club’, BL Add MS 88909/2.

‘Teaching Employment: Correspondence and Related Material’, BL Add MS 88909/6.

⁵⁸ Sinfield, *Literature*, 20.

⁵⁹ Sinfield, *Literature*, 53.

⁶⁰ Anna Upchurch, *Maynard Keynes, Vincent Massey, and the Intellectual Origins of the Arts Council of Great Britain* (University of Warwick, unpublished doctoral thesis, 2008), 98.

features ... in a program called 'Recording Britain' run by the American-funded Pilgrim Trust ... and performers were quickly organised into the Entertainments Nation Service Association (ENSA).⁶¹

This shows that the demand for art to 'record' emerged from privately funded as well as nationally subsidised institutions, while Upchurch notes that 'no similar programs to document war-time conditions were organised for writers and poets'.⁶² This was, she argues, because those who were hired were 'expected to write government pamphlets and propaganda, work that many considered stressful and demoralizing.'⁶³

However, Peter Middleton has argued that there was an institutional basis for poetry after World War II. He points out that the 1944 Education Act (proposed by the Conservative politician R. A. Butler) helped create the demand for poetry in postwar Britain. He argues that the Act, promoted with the slogan 'Free Secondary Education For All', 'enfranchised succeeding generations who previously would never have had any higher education', and this helped make 'poetry as a public art' possible. It also resulted in the growing dependence of 'poets, poetry publishers, and the organizers of public readings on public funding.'⁶⁴

While the 1944 Education Act was certainly a formative influence on postwar British poetry, other state-sponsored programmes also sustained this new world of poetry. For example, Cobbing's training as an art teacher (a vocation which would influence his poetry) was enabled by the emergency training scheme for teachers drawn up by the Flemming Committee in 1943.⁶⁵ The 1944 Education Act came into being partly as the result of pressure from Read, who at this time was working inside an arts organisation set up for teachers. Malcolm Ross notes that Read – in his role as Chairman of the Art Teachers' Guild Joint Advisory Panel of External Consultants – was charged in 1940 with developing

⁶¹ Upchurch, *Keynes*, 98.

⁶² Upchurch, *Keynes*, 98.

⁶³ Upchurch, *Keynes*, 98.

⁶⁴ Peter Middleton, 'Institutions of Poetry in Postwar Britain', in *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry*, ed Nigel Alderman and C. D. Blanton (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 243-264, (244).

⁶⁵ 'Teaching Employment Material', BL Add MS 88909/6.

policy and lobbying government in support of the Act.⁶⁶ Legislative measures and the participation of Read in the development and implementation of educational policy together helped create the distinctive culture of welfare capitalism within which Cobbing's early art activities were incubated, and out of which his later identity as a poet emerged.

The fact that 'World In Ruins (Cataclasm)' was produced within a system of welfare-capitalism changes the meaning of the artwork. This is partly because different kinds of institutional support sustained poetry and visual art in the 1950s and to varying degrees. To make a visual artwork in the 1950s asserted a different kind of relation to the fact of state subsidy than did writing a poem. Perceived, and retrospectively applied, relations between styles of concrete poetry and capitalism complicate this situation, and suggest further reasons why it is problematic to think of what was originally a piece of visual art as a 'dirty' concrete poem. In addition to the definitions of 'dirty' concrete detailed in the previous section, Lori Emerson notes that the term was probably put into broader circulation by Canadian poet bill bissett through his poem 'Quebec Bombers' in *Pass th Food Release th Spirit Book* (1973).⁶⁷ She also draws attention to the poem's critical reception in the form of an article by Jack David published in 1977, which came seven years after the first appearance in writing of the distinction between 'clean' and 'dirty' concrete poetry. David noted that the poem began with the phrase 'dirty concrete poet' repeated twice, which then changed to 'the concrete poet is dirty dirty,' 'sum like it clean what dew they ooo'. David went on to argue that bissett's 'comparison presents the clean ordered life of a capitalist system and the dirty chaotic life of the lower classes.'⁶⁸ Jon Erickson reasserts this comparison in his more recent critical work on concrete poetry (introduced in the previous section). Erikson argues that 'Concrete poetry, as defined by Gomringer and Noigandres, in its functionally chaste state of being [i.e. 'clean' concrete poetry], aspires to a mathematical purity of comprehension

⁶⁶ Malcolm Ross, 'Herbert Read: Art, Education, and the Means of Redemption', in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, ed. David Goodway (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998), 196-215 (197).

⁶⁷ Emerson, 'The Origin Of The Term "Dirty Concrete Poetry" (En Route To Digital D.I.Y.)', March 2011 <<http://www.netpoetic.com/2011/03/the-origin-of-the-term-dirty-concrete-poetry-en-route-to-digital-d-i-y/>> [accessed 10 July 2012].

⁶⁸ Jack David, 'Visual Poetry In Canada: Birney, Bisset, And bp', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 2 (1977), 252-267 (262). bissett does not capitalize the initial letters of his name.

... It is as much a measure as it is a message. It is a belief in knowing what one can say, and how to control its reception. Thus it is a personal measure that eventually allies itself with economic power.’⁶⁹ Erikson made this argument in 1995, which shows that the association of ‘dirty’ concrete poetry with working class life and ‘clean’ concrete poetry with life of the bourgeois capitalist has been a mainstay of the discourse of concrete poetry.

In thinking about Cobbing as a ‘dirty’ concrete poet one is at risk of reasserting these associations. To do so precludes productive thought about the idea of welfare capitalism as a socio-political nexus that sought to make the capitalist system serve the needs of the working class by funding and building democratic cultural institutions. Even though welfare capitalism largely failed in its aims, it is at this point of failure that the aesthetic commitments of ‘World in Ruins (Cataclasm)’ and the optimistic political vision of welfare capitalism intersect. ‘World in Ruins (Cataclasm)’ needs to be read with Read’s pervasive influence on postwar British art in mind and the effects this had on Cobbing, partly because Cobbing subscribed to this optimistic vision. In *The Purpose of Art* Cobbing stated that state subsidization of art was preferable to individual patronage as it freed the artist from the yoke of representation and allowed the artist to experiment with form.⁷⁰ In other words, both Cobbing and his visual artwork were situated in a much more complex situation than David’s understanding of bissett’s ‘dirty’ concrete poem allows. The too-rigid binary of ‘dirty’ concrete poetry as working class and ‘clean’ concrete poetry as capitalist cannot properly address the aesthetic implications of the institutionalization of art in postwar Britain. It separates labour from culture by artificially ring-fencing aesthetics – the ‘dirty’ concrete appearance of ‘World in Ruins (Cataclasm)’ – from Cobbing’s real experience of welfare-capitalism, as neither a member of the working class nor a fully signed up member to capitalist society.

4) Cobbing’s Identity as an Arts Organiser in 1950s Hendon

Cobbing’s entry into arts organisation was in the early 1940s and in the immediate post-war period, at the time when welfare-capitalism was instituted.

⁶⁹ Erickson, *The Fate of the Object*, 155.

⁷⁰ Cobbing, ‘The Purpose of Art: Personal Study by R W Cobbing (Bognor Training College)’ BL Add MS 88909/5, 185.

He spent four years (1943-1947) as an unqualified assistant teacher at Swindon High School, and in his last year there he developed close associations with Swindon Arts Centre, which was the first such institution in the country. The Arts Centre was given government approval in 1946, the same year that CEMA was granted a Royal charter and reconstituted as the Arts Council of Great Britain. Broadly speaking, the state's role in supporting both these institutions was part of the same policy agenda. In 1948 Cobbing left Swindon to train as a teacher at Bognor Training College under the emergency training scheme for teachers, which had been drawn up by the Flemming Committee in 1943. These early experiences were formative of his belief in the value of local cultural organisations, amateur art and national educational initiatives. However it was when he took up a position as a teacher at a school in Hendon that his identity as an art organiser really flourished. This section considers Cobbing's art organisational practice in Hendon in relation to four key themes: localism and the Festival of Britain; Cobbing's response to welfare-capitalism in Hendon; the idea of community as the basis for an aesthetics; and education through art. It does so in order to suggest some ways in which Herbert Read influenced Cobbing's work within Hendon's amateur art circles.

Cobbing's work as an amateur was in part enabled by structures associated with Read, such as the Society for Education in Art (SEA), which was initially proposed by Henry Moore, Eric Gill, Read and Alexander Barclay Russell. It was formed in '1940 by the amalgamation of the Art Teacher's Guild and the New Society of Art Teachers'. Read became its president in 1947 and remained in office until his death in 1968. Its name was changed to The Society for Education through Art in 1953. The SEA promoted Read's ideas nationally and abroad, but it also had a direct influence on the development and dissemination of Cobbing's work.⁷¹

In May 1952 it organised an exhibition of 'amateur artists' at the Imperial Institute, and Cobbing exhibited work as part of the Hendon and District Experimental Art Club. In this context, 'amateur' meant artists who had not received formal training and did not necessarily seek to make money from their art. A review by Stephen Bone entitled 'Amateur Artists: An Exhibition to Show

⁷¹ It continues its work today under the aegis of the National Society of Education in Art and Design.

Value of Painting', published in the *Manchester Guardian* (20 May 1952) marks the first documented instance of Cobbing's paintings being described as modernist: 'There is little modernism to be found except in these groups [the university tutorial classes at Manchester, Welwyn, and Hampton] and in the rather sophisticated Hendon Experimental Group.'⁷² Cobbing is described here by a professional journalist as an amateur artist, exhibiting 'rather sophisticated' work at an 'amateur' show organized by a professional organization founded by some of the leading artists and critics of the day. The seriousness with which he took his identity as an amateur artist working both within and beyond local contexts was acknowledged by others.

Cobbing's arts organisational practices represented a growing awareness that 'art' could inhere in the structures through which it was organised, and in art's reception within a community. The basis for this growing awareness was, to a certain extent, enabled by Cobbing's aesthetic position as set out in 1949, that 'subject-matter, medium and technique, design and form all co-operate and contribute to the artist's aim—the imparting to others of his feelings and experience'.⁷³ While this formulation proposed art as a vehicle for the transmission of affect, it also mapped several distinct elements of art's communicative structure. In its most expansive form this structure might conceivably come to include magazines, art organizations, community or even the institutional structures of welfare-capitalism, thereby claiming these

⁷² 'Amateur Artists: An Exhibition to Show Value of Painting' *Manchester Guardian*, 20 May 1952, in 'Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (1)' BL Add MS 88909/13.

⁷³ Cobbing, 'The Purpose of Art: Personal Study by R W Cobbing (Bognor Training College)' BL Add MS 88909/5, 7.

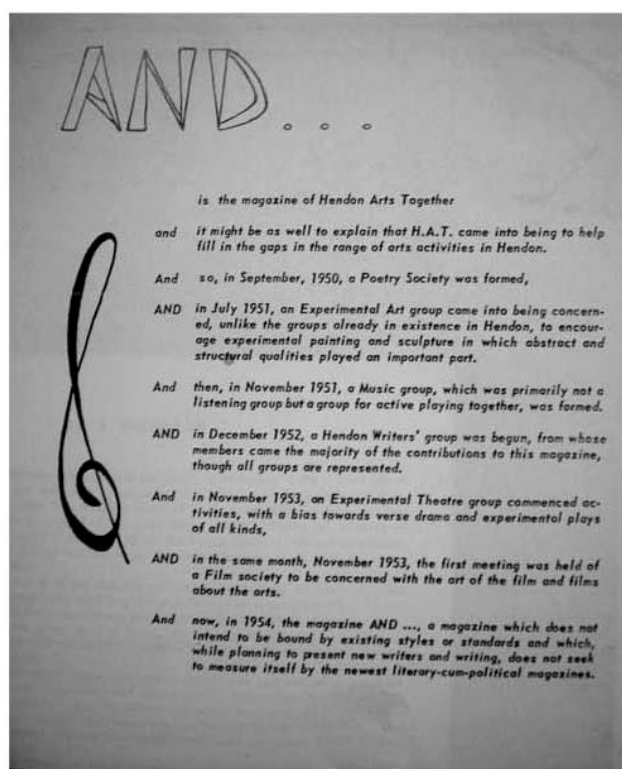
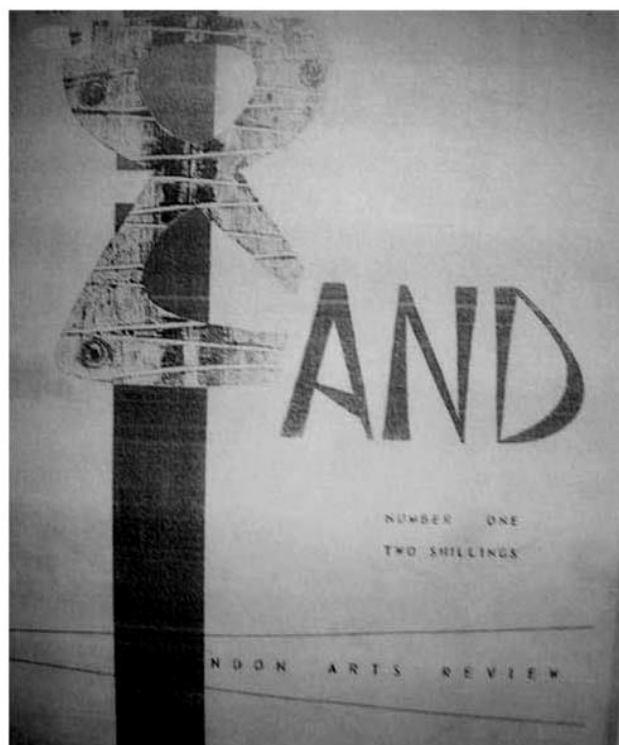


Figure 3. Front cover and editorial from *And: The Magazine of Hendon Arts Together*, 1, ed. Bob Cobbing and John Rowan (1954). Reprinted with permission of Jennifer Cobbing.

structures as part of the art. Cobbing did not articulate his practice in these terms. However, an increased awareness that this was his position is implied by his actions in Hendon.

Cobbing's conception of social organisations as part of an art-making process is visible in the dynamic relation that exists between W. H. Nessler's front cover for the first issue of the magazine *And* (July 1954) and Cobbing's editorial (see Fig. 3.).⁷⁴ *And* was subtitled 'The Magazine of Hendon Arts Together' (HAT), and in eight separate statements, in an unassumingly accumulative manner, the editorial lists the eight constituent parts of HAT up to 1954.⁷⁵

The simple conjunction 'and' is used at the start of every statement in order to record the founding of each organisation and it connects each to the next, while its repeated use echoes the title of the magazine. The ampersand used as the title on the front cover is typographically similar to the number eight, and visually similar to the unfinished treble clef, which is drawn to the left hand side of the eight editorial statements. This design creates interplay between the inside (editorial) and the outside (front cover) of the magazine. Through this interplay the enabling conditions of the magazine become part of the substance of the connections Cobbing sought to make and vice versa. Further, the design reinforces the connections between the activities, organisations and structures of HAT and the creative work of the members published inside, while also suggesting the integration of *And* itself as one of these structures. Here we see one communicative aspect of Cobbing's work in the shape of another: signs as shapes, frames as contents, and just as Cobbing's early visual artworks would later be viewed as poems we also see one type of art organisation in terms of another. Further, the unfinished treble clef works as a metaphor to suggest that Cobbing's eight editorial statements are the scored notes of a performance that remains unfinished, which thereby creates an aural frame for the activities described.

In 1954 the development of HAT was indeed unfinished. Over the course of the decade many more societies were affiliated under HAT: the Hendon

⁷⁴ *AND magazine No. 1*, ed. Bob Cobbing and John Rowan (London: Writers Forum, 1954).

⁷⁵ HAT (formed by Cobbing in May 1952) brought the Hendon Poetry Society (formed on 18 September 1951), the Hendon and District Experimental Art Club (13 July 1951) and the Music Group (in November 1951) together as one organisation (under one hat, as it were). By 1954 HAT also included the Hendon Writers' group (formed in December 1952), the Experimental Theatre Group and the Film Society (both formed in November 1953).

Puppetry Group, the Hendon Experimental Cine and Camera Unit, the Hendon Jazz and Folk Music Society (all formed in 1956) and, through the merger of Hendon Writers' group and the Hendon Poetry Society, Writers' Forum (formed in 1958).⁷⁶ Through these local organisations Cobbing (principally a painter in the 1950s) helped organise activities across a range of arts, and thereby instituted his identity as an important voice in local art. The last group, Writers' Forum, continued to operate for the rest of Cobbing's life, thereby transmitting and transmuting his identity as a local art organiser beyond Hendon and the 1950s. This process is ongoing, as Writers Forum (now written without an apostrophe) has outlived Cobbing.

4.1) The Festival Of Britain and Cobbing's Commitment to Localism

As Cobbing was entering the formative period in his work as an arts organiser, Herbert Read's reputation and the reputation of the artists he had supported from the mid-1930s onwards had already gone through a transition: what was politically and culturally radical in the 1930s had in the context of welfare-capitalism become a majority and institutionalised view in the 1950s. Kevin Davey argues that Read had become 'assimilated to an older cultural settlement', and notes the new international reception of the artists he supported. Whereas Nash, Moore and Hepworth were 'initially ridiculed by the art establishment, in the postwar Venice Bienniales they later came to represent it: Moore in 1948, Hepworth in 1950, and Nicholson in 1954.'⁷⁷ Robin Kinross's argument is that these artists became the 'heroes of the British Council', and he notes that one index of this cultural appropriation was the change in the physical size of their works: 'from small things, constrained by material shortage, towards larger, sometimes monumental pieces'.⁷⁸ Causey makes a similar argument about Read's critical work when he suggests that while the 'impressive series of monographs' on Moore (1944), Nicholson (1948), Nash (1948) and Hepworth (1952) were all

⁷⁶ For information regarding the founding of Writers Forum in 1958 see: BL Add MS 88909/28-29, inside back cover of notebook labelled 26. For documentation of Writers Forum being spelt with an apostrophe see: 'They are the Writers' Forum Now', *Edgware Post*, 4 September 1958, 'Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (2)', Add MS 88909/14.

⁷⁷ Kevin Davey, 'Herbert Read and Englishness', in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, ed. David Goodway (Liverpool University Press, 1998), 270-287 (275).

⁷⁸ Robin Kinross, 'Herbert Read and Design', in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, ed. David Goodway (Liverpool University Press, 1998), 145-163 (153).

published commercially by Lund Humphries, their size and the completeness of their record of the artists' work gave the impression, in the context of the new institutions for promoting British art, that there was 'beginning to be an official modern British art with Read as its leading authority.'⁷⁹ In order to map out the dynamic between Read as an established institutional voice of British art and Cobbing's local and amateur identity, I want to look at their various contributions to the Festival of Britain.

The Festival of Britain was a national exhibition organised in 1951, the same year that Cobbing made *World in Ruins (Cataclasm)*. In the first full-length study of the Festival of Britain, Becky Conekin argues that it 'was an opportunity for Labour to advertise its achievements and to attempt to actualise some of its social democratic goals': it was to be 'an act of national autobiography'. People of every town and village with their 'local events' and 'spontaneous expression of their life and interest' were encouraged to meet the 'challenge' and 'make these traditional events better than ever before, to write the year into their memories'.⁸⁰ Cobbing's enthusiasm for this initiative is evident in Hendon Poetry Society's affiliation to the Hendon Arts Council in 1950, which was established to aid local festivities. Hendon Poetry Society's contribution to the Festival of Britain was to organise a series of poetry readings. Poems were read to music, and eighty-one poets read 145 poems.⁸¹ This was one of Cobbing's contributions to the 'national biography' that the Festival of Britain sought to institute. However, Cobbing records his disappointment about how the Hendon Poetry Society received little support from the Hendon Arts Council when the readings were held. He also notes in the minutes to a Hendon Poetry Society meeting that the 'disgracefully unbusiness like' annual general meeting of the Hendon Arts Council prompted him to withdraw affiliation.⁸² Despite this he remained committed to his work in Hendon.

While Cobbing contributed to the Festival of Britain locally, Read's role was 'in framing an "official" British art for the Festival'.⁸³ Andrew Causey

⁷⁹ Causey, 'Herbert Read and Contemporary Art', *Read Reassessed*, 137.

⁸⁰ Becky Conekin, *The Autobiography Of A Nation: The 1951 Festival of Britain* (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 17.

⁸¹ 'Hendon Poetry Society' BL Add MS 88909/28.

⁸² 'Hendon Poetry Society' BL Add MS 88909/28.

⁸³ Causey, 'Herbert Read', *Read Reassessed*. 141.

situates Read's *Contemporary British Art* (1951) in this context as an example of his official contribution. In this context Read argued that:

The cultural unity we all desire as the basis of political unity will be artificial and insecure unless it is a focus of the diversity and multiplicity of local and individual forces. Unity is not the spiritual counterpart of uniformity and each country will contribute most to the unity we all desire by exploiting its own idiosyncrasies, and by remaining true to the traditions which have become part of its character and destiny... We cannot escape our mental climates, because they are in a literal sense the creation of our prevailing winds and the chemistry of our soils.⁸⁴

Read's notion of 'unity' was not just directed at the English nation, it also addressed the political and cultural unity of Europe, which he argued would not endure unless it focussed 'the diversity and multiplicity of local and individual forces'.⁸⁵ As Davey explains Read made these arguments at a time when the 'process of European integration was no more than embryonic', and when the 'cultural and political influence of the United States' was more pervasive. So, as he understands it, Read was urging the Anglo-British 'to return to their local resources', to their 'soils' and to reject what was being 'thrust upon them by European politics and transatlantic cultural markets.'⁸⁶

If Cobbing's work in the borough of Hendon is seen through this frame it is best understood as an attention to England's suburban and cultural 'idiosyncrasies', a renewal of the nation through a commitment to localism. In these terms it was certainly in dialogue with the organicist view of art upon which Read's understanding of national culture was based. From Cobbing's perspective, Hendon's local 'idiosyncrasies' (its library, its newspapers, its town hall, its schools, and its Mayor) were at the centre of his world. Seen this way the 'World' in 'World in Ruins (Cataclasm)' – an artwork which was displayed at Hampstead's Open-Air Exhibition in the 1950s – is inherently local, translating Read's vision of national culture into a local setting. Cobbing valued local and amateur art as strong cultural and aesthetic arenas in their own right, and not

⁸⁴ Herbert Read, *Contemporary British Art* (London: Penguin Books, 1951), 38.

⁸⁵ Davey, 'Herbert Read', *Read Reassessed*, 283.

⁸⁶ Davey, 'Herbert Read', *Read Reassessed*, 283.

subservient to national or international culture. This was exactly what Read's vision of national culture demanded, and Cobbing's creative and organisational work is an interpretation of this demand. This was a key part of Cobbing's 'performance' in Hendon in the 1950s. Read's idea of national culture calls for micro-cultures, and this is exactly what Cobbing was interested in cultivating.

Cobbing's experiences in this period are reflected in an editorial titled 'I am Lowbrow', published in 1961 by co-editor John Rowan (after Cobbing moved to Finchley and resumed publication of *And*). Writing under the moniker 'Spartacus' Rowan wrote:

For some centuries now the conception of democracy has been growing – and democracy is not only a political and social thing, it is cultural as well. Ordinary people are beginning to think for themselves. Whilst the philosophers, economists, social psychologists and so on have been brooding in the universities, like gardeners in glasshouses nursing exotic plants, the people outside have been making history [...] I am not saying that there can be no professionalism in culture: my point is that all great ideas have their roots in the movement of the common people, and without these roots culture withers and dies.⁸⁷

By 1961 Britain had been governed by three successive Conservative Prime Ministers, so on first reading these comments appear as a reaffirmation of the social democratic goals that the Labour Government sought to actualise through the Festival of Britain. Yet Rowan's use of organic metaphors, especially the claim that 'all great ideas have their *roots* in the movement of the common people', tells us that the version of cultural democracy he advocated did not look to parliament for inspiration. Instead they recollected Read's influence.⁸⁸

The minutes of the first meeting of The Hendon and District Experimental Art Club show that this group also had a resolutely local focus. They state that activities would be orientated towards 'Hendon and districts north, west and east rather than towards London'.⁸⁹ Thinking about the cultural valence of suburbia, John Betjeman's poem 'Middlesex' (1954) took as its subject the county in which Cobbing lived. It drew attention to the 'lost Elysium' of 'rural Middlesex',

⁸⁷ John Rowan, 'I Am A Lowbrow', in *And 2*, ed. Cobbing and Rowan (Hendon Arts Together, 1961), 19-20 (11).

⁸⁸ Causey, 'Herbert Read', *Read Reassessed*, 141. My italics.

⁸⁹ 'Hendon Experimental Art Group: Minutes' BL Add MS 88909/19.

suggesting that its ‘meadowlands’ and ‘elm-trees’ had been replaced by an artificial suburban life constituted by ‘concrete’ train stations, a ‘few surviving hedges’, the ‘sandwich supper and the television screen’.⁹⁰ Cobbing was not interested in such a fixed distinction between the inauthentic and the rural, partly because his organicist aesthetics embraced a more fluid dialectic where constructivist language was integrated into a messier handmade aesthetic.

Given Cobbing’s interest in organicism it is not surprising that the geographical location of Hendon also became central to the identity that he wished to assert as an arts organiser. In an interview given in 2001, a year before he died, Cobbing said:

I’d been teaching in Swindon in Wiltshire and there were some very lively people in Swindon. Swindon had the first ‘arts centre’ in this country, we had music, poetry events and exhibitions. It was a very, very lively place and then I moved to Hendon and got a job teaching at a school there. I found nothing whatsoever of interest going on. It was a dead area.⁹¹

Cobbing insists on the geographic specificity of Hendon. He differentiates between Swindon and Hendon even though an outsider might view them as indistinguishable, as bland instances of suburbias, and therefore as inauthentic. By describing Hendon as a ‘dead area’ he links the life of the ‘area’ to the degree of cultural activity that it sustained, thereby defining its geography in terms of his specific view that art gave a sense of life to the community.

As part of an examination of British suburbia in the context of modernism David Gilbert and Rebecca Preston have argued that while suburban studies ‘challenge the established stereotypes of suburbia and suburban life’, by showing that the ‘conceptual apparatus used to describe the supposedly distinctively urban dimensions of modernity can also be applied to suburban spaces’, the ‘common, perhaps dominant, account of suburbia has emphasised its placelessness.’⁹² This

⁹⁰ John Betjeman, ‘Middlesex’, in *Collected Poems* (London, John Murray 1958) 193.

⁹¹ Bob Cobbing interviewed by W. Mark Sutherland, ‘The Point About Criticism Is That It Is Frequently Wrong’, *UbuWeb Papers* (London, 2010).

<http://www.ubu.com/papers/cobbing_sutherland.html> [accessed 15 September 2012], 1, 2.

⁹² David Gilbert and Rebecca Preston, ‘“Stop being so English”: Suburban Modernity and National Identity in the Twentieth Century’, in *Geographies of British Modernity: Space and Society in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David Gilbert, David Matless, and Brian Short (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 185-203 (188).

is certainly the implication of Betjeman's poem 'Middlesex', where the speaker, sitting on a moving train, travels past so many different places 'Ruislip Gardens', 'Windsmore', 'Brent', 'Wembley' 'Harrow', 'Perivale' and 'Highgate' that he registers none in any great detail.⁹³ Far from wanting Hendon to remain a 'dead' and placeless area Cobbing created a complex local culture, which demands to be understood in a framework that can address the wider issues faced by the twentieth century: the impact of consumerism; the threat of nuclear destruction; and the institutionalisation and nationalisation of culture. These wider themes are important because they shaped Cobbing's art organisational work at a local level.

4.2) Local Figurations of Welfare-Capitalism

Sinfield's theory of 'welfare-capitalism' sets out one particular national context for two of the ways that Cobbing tried to refigure local institutions to support his art activities in Hendon: hire purchase agreements (capitalism) and the Local Government Act 1948 (welfare). By April 1953 the Hendon and District Experimental Art Club had established a lending library to encourage people to have pictures in their homes, and had £1000 worth of pictures for hire.⁹⁴ By 1954 this library was augmented by a system of hire purchase. Central regulation for hire purchase was introduced with the passing of the Hire Purchase Act 1938, which aimed to protect consumers from the unethical practices of finance companies. By the 1950s it was a hot topic in the letters column of the *News Of The World's* advice bureau (the John Hilton Bureau), which – increasingly devoted to consumer concerns – dispensed advice on hire purchase agreements.⁹⁵ However, though hire purchase extended the potential for art ownership to the middle classes, it also risked trivialising art and turning it, as Sinfield has claimed, into a 'vehicle for the culture of utilitarianism and political economy'.⁹⁶ Cobbing used hire purchase to sell his art precisely because it was a purchasing method that was central to middle class suburban living in the 1950s.

The Local Government Act of 1948 on the other hand empowered local authorities to support the arts, and was exactly the kind of state provision that was

⁹³ Betjeman, 'Middlesex', in *John Betjeman's Collected Poems*, 193.

⁹⁴ 'Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (1)', 10 April 1953. BL: Add MS 88909/13.

⁹⁵ Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 203.

⁹⁶ Sinfield, *Literature Politics and Culture*, 28.

meant to compensate for the disadvantages of capitalism, such as the impoverishment caused by the unethical practices of finance companies. Cobbing invoked this Act with some vigour in 1956 to put pressure on the Hendon Borough Council to support the work of the Hendon Arts Council, to which HAT had recently affiliated (see Chapter Two). Both these funding mechanisms were used in a local context where there was little existing art society provision but where there were new funding opportunities for local societies. So, although Cobbing was using the mechanisms of welfare capitalism in an attempt to democratise art practice and ownership, he was also caught in the bind of bureaucratizing the social relations between the artist and the community, and making his art instrumental in the process.

However, Cobbing used these mechanisms while at the same time creating his own structures of dissemination and support. The first issue of *And* cost £40 to produce and the money was raised through the sale of members' paintings at jumble sales and donations from HAT members. At one of these jumble sales Cobbing sold his painting 'Tree-Stump, Hampstead Heath (i)' to raise money for *And*.⁹⁷ This form of fundraising allowed Hendon's local community to endorse Cobbing's organicist aesthetic (by buying his paintings) as well as support the magazine remuneratively.

In this context Hendon and District Experimental Art Club's use of hire purchase agreements to sell their art is best understood as a response to a specifically suburban trend that had been developing since the inter-war years, which has been described by Peter Scott in the following terms:

[...] higher living standards and rising home ownership contributed to the emergence of more 'home-centred' lifestyles, while the growth of suburban private and council estates brought large numbers of [mainly middle class] people into new communities where displays of affluence became particularly important as a means of asserting social status.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ 'Hendon Arts Together Monthly Bulletins' BL Add MS 88909/12. 'Lists of Art Works', BL Add MS 88909/41.

⁹⁸ Peter Scott, 'The Twilight World of Interwar British Hire Purchase', *Past and Present*, 177:1 (2002), 195-225 (205).

The lending library that had been established by Hendon and District Experimental Art Club in April 1953 deliberately tapped into this trend as it encouraged the residents of suburban Hendon to have original pictures in their homes. An article in one of Hendon's local papers reported that one Golders Green family had seven paintings from the lending library and changed 'them frequently to maintain interest of the walls.'⁹⁹ The augmentation of the lending library with a system of hire purchase was a further and particular response to the rise in suburban 'home-centred' living. The first restrictions on hire purchase came in January 1952 and took the form of statutory regulations that specified the minimum down-payment and the maximum period of repayment, at a time when it had become a relatively popular way for consumers and businesses to acquire goods. Hire purchase would have been more familiar to Hendon's residents as a way to buy commodities like cars. Selling art through hire purchase undercut the idealist view of art as being somehow elevated or opposed to the commercial and industrial world.

Lynn Spigel applies Raymond Williams's concept of 'mobile privatisation' – the idea that domesticity in industrial culture had always been linked to fantasies of being somewhere else while in the comfort of one's own home – to the study of postwar suburbia. She argues that this fantasy was nourished by the increased affordability of private communication technologies like the television, and private transportation systems like the family car.¹⁰⁰ The affordability of such items was partly due to the increased use of hire purchase agreements. As Roger Silverstone has argued, private communication technologies helped develop suburbia itself by compensating for residents' loneliness, and their distance from urban centres.¹⁰¹ In these terms, Cobbing's use of hire purchase was an attempt to get art into peoples' homes – alongside private communication technologies like televisions – in order to undercut the idealist view of art and to combat the fantasy of 'mobile privatisation' that structured the 'home-centred' lifestyles of Hendon's suburban residents and suburbia itself. The visual art that Hendon's residents bought from the Hendon

⁹⁹ 'Picture Library'. 'H. H. E', 10 April 1953, 'Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (1)' BL Add MS 88909/13.

¹⁰⁰ Lynn Spigel, 'From Theatre To Space Ship: Metaphors of Suburban Domesticity In Postwar America', in *Visions of Suburbia*, ed. Roger Silverstone (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 217-240 (225).

¹⁰¹ Roger Silverstone, 'Introduction', in *Visions of Suburbia*, 1-25 (10).

and District Experimental Art Club with hire purchase was largely anti-representational and did not provide a window onto another world. To further assert and insist upon the relation between this aesthetic and Hendon's locality Cobbing used Hendon's local papers to bind the identity of HAT to Hendon's sense of itself as a community.

4.3) Building a Sense of Community as the Basis of an Aesthetic

Cobbing cared about his local audience and sought to build it, measure it, reflect upon it, and finally integrate it into his thinking about aesthetics. The Second Annual Report of the Hendon Poetry Society for example noted that the affiliation to HAT had 'meant that instead of audiences of about twenty four [...] poetry readings in Hendon Library [now drew] audiences of about fifty.'¹⁰² On 5 July 1956 the *Hendon Post* published an article that included detailed figures on audience numbers at events organised by groups affiliated to HAT. These figures could only have come from Cobbing, while the title of the article, 'Hendon Arts Together Just Grows, Grows and Grows', registered his commitment to an organicist aesthetic in his organisational work. The article recorded that ten societies were affiliated to HAT in 1956, and noted a rise in membership from 43 in 1952-53 to 155 fully paid up members (plus associate members) in 1955-56. It also noted other increases: in the number of meetings held by all groups (from 54 in 1952-53 to 256 in 1955-56); in a doubling of the number of films that the Hendon Film Society showed in 1955-56 compared to the previous year and without a decrease in average attendance; and in a rise of its membership (from fifty to eighty) in the same period.¹⁰³ The task here is to understand why Cobbing was keeping track of audience numbers, and why he felt the need to inform the local paper of them.

One answer to this question can be found in a passage of Read's *The Meaning of Art*, which states that 'no artist can work well without the sense of an audience.'¹⁰⁴ Read thought that art of the twentieth century was predominantly secular and individualistic. This meant that the question of whether 'great art'

¹⁰² 'Hendon Poetry Society', BL Add MS 88909/28, notebook labelled 27.

¹⁰³ 'Hendon Arts Together Just Grows, Grows and Grows', *Hendon Post*, 'Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (1)' BL Add MS 88909/13.

¹⁰⁴ Read, *The Meaning of Art*, 85.

could exist ‘independently of religion’ depended on a new ‘scale of values.’ Read argued that:

The court of judgement is sooner or later the community. It would seem, therefore, that the artist, to achieve greatness, must in some way appeal to a community feeling. Hitherto the highest form of community-feeling has been religious: it is for those who deny the necessary connection between religion and art to discover some equivalent for community feeling which will, in the long run, ensure an historic continuity for the art that is not religious.¹⁰⁵

Cobbing’s first experiences of the communal function of art were within a religious setting, and this suggests that the quantitative approach that he took to assessing the success of his art organisational activities in Hendon was not just about measuring impact for the sake of proving success. The figures that he documented and disseminated to the community through Hendon’s local papers signalled his belief that cultivating a secular ‘community feeling’ for art in Hendon had an important role to play in grounding the aesthetics that HAT promoted across a range of different arts.

Cobbing also used the local newspapers as part of a creative dialogue: to disseminate his ideas, to receive feedback from the local public, and to engage in debates about the value of poetry and art. In a letter Cobbing sent to the *Hendon Post* (published as an article) he claimed that an exhibition by the Hendon Group of Painters and Sculptors (formally the Hendon and District Experimental Art Club) ‘could not be bettered by any local exhibition in the whole country’. He also noted that this remark ‘shocked a few people’. The militant imagery of the article’s title, ‘Mr. Cobbing Sticks to his Guns’ (28 April 1955), reflects his claim that while ‘the majority of local groups’ in the country were lagging behind developments (‘thirty years behind the academy’), The Hendon Group of Painters and Sculptors ‘were up with the advance guard.’ Cobbing’s great confidence that his amateur and local art groups were making a positive contribution to the community was bolstered by his belief that he had ‘the backing of many well-informed people’, whom he lists in his letter:

¹⁰⁵ Read, *The Meaning of Art*, 84-88.

The chief critic of what was long the only serious art paper [*Arts News and Review*] in the land described our group in 1953 as “one of the liveliest in London.” In 1954, he described us as “one of the most adventurous in the country.” The recognition which our members are getting from The London Group, from a foremost Paris gallery, from The Arts Council and the Contemporary Art Society [...] is some indication of the stature of our members.

Cobbing’s words, directed at the readership of Hendon’s local newspapers, were not an attempt to claim the superiority of his ‘members’ to their local origins. Rather, Cobbing wanted to feed the critical reception he had received from non-local organs back through the frame of the local newspaper.

At this stage in his poetic life Cobbing was an optimist. He believed a counter-aesthetic to realism might be found through combining the force of the media with an increase in the number of attendees at art events. In the newspaper article he argued that the ‘average man never knows what to like until he has been told—by Press, radio, public opinion’, and notes that ‘man ... hears far too often ... that the first quality one should look for in a painting is a striking likeness of something he has seen’. He argued that this emphasis cut ‘man’ off from ‘three-fifths of the total art of the world, past and present’, but that it was ‘possible to overcome this prejudice’. He cites evidence of work in this area, pointing to ‘increasing attendances’ (noting that over 350 people saw the Hendon Art Group’s present show in the first two days) and ‘increasingly favourable comments’. He concludes his letter by describing the *Hendon Post* as a ‘lively and progressive paper’, ‘one of the finest local papers in the country’, and he asks it to ‘say as often’ as it can that ‘Hendon has a very fine *Contemporary art* society’.¹⁰⁶

In a subsequent article in the *Hendon Post* (12 July 1956) Cobbing once again used a quantitative method to assess the success of HAT. He recorded that he thought that the most significant evidence of the progress of HAT could be ‘obtained by comparing the 58 inches of newspaper space given to reporting function of the HAT in their first year with the 624 inches of reports over the past

¹⁰⁶ ‘Mr. Cobbing Sticks to his Guns’, *Hendon Post*, 28 April 1955, ‘Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (1)’ BL Add MS 88909/13.

year'.¹⁰⁷ To Cobbing these numbers provided more evidence of a successful and continuing dialogue with his local community. He was trying to create a congenial culture of open-mindedness to aesthetic experimentation in the suburb where he lived. The figures are thus a document of his aesthetic position.

In *Culture and Society* Raymond Williams argued that the local newspaper was produced for 'a known community on a basis of common interest and common knowledge' and therefore it stood in sharp contrast with most national newspapers, which were produced for a market 'interpreted' by 'mass criteria'. Williams thought that 'the idea of the masses, and the technique of observing certain aspects of mass behaviour – selected aspects of a "public" rather than the balance of an actual community – formed the natural ideology of those who sought to control the new system [of the welfare state] and profit by it.'¹⁰⁸ He argued that the more this kind of exploitation was rejected, the more its ideology could be rejected and the more likely it would be that a new definition of communication might be reached. In these terms Cobbing addressed his work to 'the balance of an actual community' and sought, through the local newspapers, to disseminate his work amongst that community.

Yet Cobbing, in wanting to make his 'performance' in Hendon commensurate with its people and local institutions, did seek to leverage these institutions to the benefit of his art groups. He sought to integrate an idea of 'community-feeling' into his organisational structures as a means of altering and framing his aesthetics. Hendon's Mayor, Alderman Knowles, was invited to open The Hendon and District Experimental Art Club's third exhibition (17-30 April 1952) held in the local Odeon cinema. It was prominently covered by two local papers, and was attended by over 750 people. The Mayor, clearly convinced of the exhibition's value, addressed the visitors: 'It is amazing that while we applaud experiment in almost every walk of life, and especially in science, we hate it in the arts. So long as you are genuinely experimenting in colour, design and form, then we are with you, but the moment you paint merely to seek publicity and notoriety then you will lose our sympathy.'¹⁰⁹ This statement shows that Cobbing

¹⁰⁷ See section headed 'Inches', *Hendon Post*, 12 July 1956, 'Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (1)' BL Add MS 88909/13.

¹⁰⁸ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1990) 312.

¹⁰⁹ 'Dreams or Nightmares? Experimental Art Clubs First Exhibition', *Hendon and Finchley Times*, 25 April 1952, 'Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (1)' BL Add MS 88909/13.

had early success in persuading official representatives in Hendon and as well as local amateur art enthusiasts to support his artistic project in the early 1950s. However, whether Cobbing knew it or not, his project was not only experimenting with ‘colour, design and form’ (as permitted by the Mayor) it was also trying to refigure the institutions of the local community such as the Mayoralty itself.

4.4) Education Through Art

Herbert Read’s central tenet that every child was a special kind of artist had been firmly instituted in British pedagogic culture by the 1950s, primarily through the impact of *Education Through Art* (1943). It was disseminated internationally through UNESCO’s sponsorship of an International Society for Education through Art from 1951.¹¹⁰ His views on the intersection of art and education were formed, as David Goodway has noted, through his work with the British Council, who in 1940 invited him to select drawings by British schoolchildren for exhibitions that toured overseas in wartime.¹¹¹ Read visited schools throughout the country, and this experience convinced him of the ‘significance of the child’s creative activities for the development of consciousness and for the necessary fusion of sensibility and the intellect.’¹¹² This was in fact a rearticulation in a pedagogical context of the dialectic of romantic and classical that was central to his art criticism. It is productive to think about Cobbing’s practice in Hendon as an educational project that worked inside its schools (and outside them through HAT) in order to reinstitute at a local level the pervasive influence that Read’s proposals enjoyed nationally.

While it is important to establish connections between Read’s pedagogic theories and Cobbing’s art practices in Hendon, it is not necessary here to interrogate Read’s complex and contentious theories on this subject in any great detail. Cobbing did not strictly follow Read’s prescriptions. Rather, his influence is part of the background tone which can help orientate us when thinking about a series of creative practices that Cobbing developed in his later work and in contexts that are very distinct from the local, amateur and suburban art scene

¹¹⁰ Ross, ‘Herbert Read’, *Read Reassessed*, 196-8.

¹¹¹ Goodway, ‘The Politics’, *Read Reassessed*, 188.

¹¹² Goodway, ‘The Politics’, *Read Reassessed*, 189.

under discussion here. These practices (revisited elsewhere in this thesis) include: Cobbing's attempt to build non-didactic pedagogical relations with other poets and artists through democratic, creative collaboration; attempts to institute this approach and these relations in actual organisations, one of which was described in 1974 by friend and fellow poet Eric Mottram as typified by, in its offer of 'support without dogma', a belief that any person could be a poet; and a tendency to work across a range of art forms.

One of the things that informed all these practices was Read's contention that *Education Through Art* was an anarchist tract. Read's proposal was that an education in the arts did not simply mean 'art education'; it was an education that embraced 'all modes of self-expression, literary and poetic (verbal) no less than musical or aural'.¹¹³ Read argued that aesthetic education formed an integral approach to reality that educated 'those senses upon which consciousness, and ultimately the intelligence and judgement of the human individual, are based'. He believed that it was only so far as all the senses could be brought into a 'harmonious and habitual relationship' with the external world that an 'integrated personality could be built up'.¹¹⁴ When Read described this position as anarchic he was thinking of Friedrich Schiller's notion of 'aesthetic education'. In *The Paradox of Anarchism* (1941), *Education Through Art* (1943), and *The Education of Free Men* (1944) Read either makes direct reference to Schiller's *Letters Upon the Aesthetical Education of Man* (1795) or articulates the importance of Schiller's ideas to his own in more general terms. Read summarises Schiller's argument thus: 'until man, in his physical and sensuous modes of being, has been accustomed to the laws of beauty, he is not capable of perceiving what is good and true – he is not capable of spiritual liberty.'¹¹⁵ Read understands this as a modern interpretation of Plato's conviction, which (in Read's words) proposed that art must be the 'basis of education because it can operate in childhood, during the sleep of reason; and when reason does come, art will have prepared a path for her, and she will be greeted as a friend whose essential lineaments have for long been familiar.'¹¹⁶ Read believed that an education through art would foster tendencies such as spontaneity,

¹¹³ Herbert Read, *Education Through Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 7.

¹¹⁴ Read, *Education*, 7.

¹¹⁵ Read, *Education*, 284.

¹¹⁶ Read, *Education*, 283.

experimentation and self-governance in the child, which would then lead to a change in practice, which in turn would ‘gradually react upon the whole body of the community’ and lead to new political relations.¹¹⁷ In these terms, an education through art would be a ‘practical apprenticeship for the real political and social freedom to come.’¹¹⁸

The way Cobbing thought about and organised the relations between different art forms echoed Read’s specifications for an education that embraced ‘all modes of self-expression’. Cobbing formed HAT, as he declared in its newsletter in 1953, because ‘It was felt that a closer coming-together would be worthwhile, for the arts are not simply separate entities; they have very close origins and a great deal in common in the type of emotion they call forth and the type of means they use in order to do so. They have, in fact, a fundamental unity.’¹¹⁹ Cobbing had asserted this fundamental unity in *The Purpose of Art*: ‘[a] poem is not a work of art until it is heard’ he wrote, and therefore either had to be read aloud or be privately internalised ‘in the mind’s ear’. Cobbing also suggested that the voiced and insistent ‘rhythmic’ repetition of sound in poetry was the basis for a relation to be made between poetry and music, and he made the distinction between music and poetry as ‘patterns in time’, and painting as a ‘pattern in space’. Sound, rhythm, and pattern underpinned the relations between the arts, and suggested to Cobbing that they were fundamentally unified in their purpose.¹²⁰ In an attempt to respect the individual character of each organisation, and the contribution of each art form made to this ‘fundamental unity’, Cobbing combined decentralised power with collective and pragmatic goals, including the sharing of administration and resources, which led to him having a hand in many of the societies in HAT.¹²¹

Read had identified the school as the primary site where his anarchic vision needed to be instituted if it was to be successful, and in addition to his work as a teacher, Cobbing also took the art of school children seriously. This was exemplified in Hendon when the second exhibition organised by The Hendon and District Experimental Art Club focussed on the paintings of children from

¹¹⁷ Read, *Education*, 303.

¹¹⁸ Read, *Education*, 90.

¹¹⁹ HAT Newsletter (December 1953), ‘Hendon Arts Together Monthly Bulletins’, BL Add MS 88909/12.

¹²⁰ Cobbing, ‘The Purpose of Art’, BL Add MS 88909/5, 288-91.

¹²¹ ‘Hendon Arts Together Monthly Bulletins’ BL: Add MS 88909/12.

Barnfield School, Burnt Oak.¹²² It is also apparent in lines in Cobbing's poem 'Communion' (1959) that state: 'The best work / comes from children between / four and six'.¹²³ Cobbing's principle artistic medium in the 1950s was the monotype, which was ideal for introducing printmaking to children because it 'can be printed with or without a press and good results can be achieved using water-based inks.'¹²⁴

Given the lack of any direct political action on Cobbing's part, the appreciation of Read's influence on his practical local actions in Hendon provides an important context for thinking about Cobbing's otherwise confusing claim in 1973 that sound poetry created anarchists:

Asked what effect sound poetry might have on people. Mr. Cobbing said it might lead people to be "vegetarian in their eating habits and anarchists in their politics. "Vegetarians," he said, "because it is a health-giving activity that opens one's lungs to the fresh air. Anarchists because poetry is ceasing to be didactic and going into something which people can share. It is an anti-authoritarian, anti-state-controlled attitude."

If these comments are read with Cobbing's work in the 1950s in mind the 'fresh air' that fills the audience's lungs recalls the idea of organic art. Cobbing's comments recall Read's assertion in *Surrealism* of a collective notion of romanticism, which he described as the 'seed' that needed to be preserved, and classicism as the authoritarian 'husk' that needed to be shed. Sound poetry, thus defined, is an educative act that transforms and integrates the individual into the collective social body through a communal and performative process. While the idea of a non-didactic pedagogy might seem contradictory, it becomes less so once Read's *Education Through Art* is established as the context out of which it was developed. As Cobbing's later sound poetry practice will attest (see Chapters

¹²² 'The exhibition of children's paintings from Barnfield School, Burnt Oak, was staged... from January 8th to 19th in the Ritz Cinema, Edgware.' 'First Annual Report, June 6 1951', in 'Hendon Experimental Art Group: Minutes', BL Add MS 88909/19.

¹²³ For manuscript version, see 'Notebook of Poems', BL Add MS 88909/46. For published version see: Bob Cobbing, *Cygnets Ring: Collected Poems Volume One* (London: Tapocketa Press, 1977), n.p.

¹²⁴ Bill Chambers, 'Monotype Printmaking', <http://www.billchambers.org/images/artists%20notes/monotype_printmaking.pdf> [accessed 21 February 2011] 1.

Three and Four), Cobbing developed these ideas in ways that Read could not have foreseen.

Read's influence can also be detected in a talk Cobbing gave on the subject of 'The Function of a Poetry Society' (19 February 1952) to the Hendon Poetry Society. Cobbing stressed that the 'function of a Poetry Society was to take poetry to the people', and suggested that 'one glance at the programme of a Poetry Society' was enough to indicate whether the society was 'worthwhile'.¹²⁵ Cobbing gave the following programme as an example of good practice:

Sept 9th	The Place of Poetry in Saxon Society
Sept 23rd	Piers Plowman and the Common Man
Oct 7th	Miracle and Mystery Plays
Oct 21st	Shakespeare's Audience
Nov 4th	Ballads and Folk Songs
Nov 18th	Burns – Poet of the People
Dec 2nd	John Clare and the English Peasant Poets
Dec 16th	Victorian Street Ballads
Dec 30th	The Contemporary Poet and his Audience

Read argued in *Surrealism* that the first tasks of the critic who wanted to rehabilitate Romanticism within the 'restricted field of English Literature' was to pursue a 'fuller acknowledgement of the supreme poetic quality of our ballads and anonymous literature'.¹²⁶ Not only did Cobbing commit to this by including 'Ballads and Folk Songs' in the programme above, he also worked with these forms in his own practice. In the fourth exercise book in which he drafted his *Arts Today* lectures – a series of twenty-four lectures, the first beginning on 3 October 1958 – the back page includes metrical analyses of children's folk songs such as, 'I had a little nut tree, nothing would it bear' and 'sing a song of six pence a pocket full of rye.'¹²⁷ Cobbing was interested in experimenting with these ballads; his pencil marks divide their syllables in different ways giving each a new metre. The second task of the critic, Read argued, was to drive home

¹²⁵ In a notebook headed 'The Enjoyment of Poetry', see: 'Hendon Poetry Society' BL: Add MS 88909/28.

¹²⁶ Read, *Surrealism*, 46.

¹²⁷ 'Hendon Teaching Notes: "The Arts Today" and "Introduction to the Arts"', BL Add MS 88909/25, in exercise book labelled 'no. 4'.

‘the inescapable significance of *Shakespeare*’ and to claim him as an ally of Romanticism, and this critical task also resonates strongly with the programme that Cobbing proposed.

In this section I have situated Cobbing’s modernist artistic programme of revolutionary social change (as informed by Read) in the context of bourgeois, liberalist, postwar suburban Hendon. I have shown that Read’s ideas influenced Cobbing’s practice both directly and indirectly, and have suggested that the problem of Cobbing’s self-definition as an anarchist (given his apparent lack of political activism) can be resolved by investigating his aesthetics in the context of his practical local action as an organiser and pedagogue. While Cobbing never articulated a coherent program for political change in prose, by thinking about art groups in terms of aesthetics and by realising and fostering the contribution that local art organisation could make to art, he kept the idea of art as a conduit for political and social change open and available to others. In this respect his was a practice of survival, and his interest in encouraging art and poetry by and for children can be seen as an effort to ensure the survival of his ideas into the future. Read’s influence on Cobbing was not restricted to ideas about visual art. In fact, at the time Cobbing was considering Read’s claims about the vitality and importance of oral culture described above, he was also first beginning to work as a poet.

5) Cobbing’s Entry into Poetry

The talk ‘The Function of a Poetry Society’ and Cobbing’s organisational work with the Hendon Poetry Society presaged his self-identification as a poet, but it was not until he wrote ‘Meditation on Worms’ (1954) – a poem he later considered to be his ‘first verbal poem of any consequence’ – that he took the first step in a much longer process of transition from being a painter to being a poet.¹²⁸ In this section I will investigate how the ideas that informed Cobbing’s visual art and art organisational practices were given verbal form for the first time, and the adjustments that were made to these ideas in that process of transition.

Poems had a use within the communal and pedagogical environment of the Hendon Poetry Society, which often set monthly subjects on which all

¹²⁸ Paul Dutton, ‘Viewed From His Work Room Floor: A Personal Perspective on Bob Cobbing (1920-2002)’ <<http://www.thing.net/~grist/ld/DTTN-COB.HTM>> [accessed 14 December 2009].

members would write. In 1954 another poem on the subject of worms, written by Hendon Poetry Society member Maurice Langham, was published in the first issue of *And*. This suggests that ‘worms’ was used as a theme around which members collectively organised their individual efforts. This communal context is registered in ‘Meditation on Worms’ where collective life emerges as one of the poem’s themes, thus suggesting that the boundary between poetry’s organisation and its practice was permeable.

‘Meditation on Worms’ was one of two poems that Cobbing wrote in the 1950s where words were arranged in a grid. This was a form that had first been suggested in the final print of ‘Dynamic Progress’ (1954).¹²⁹ Here are the first four lines of the poem:

Rust	Moth	fungus	mildew
Dryrot	canker	maggot	WORM
Wriggle	coil	roll curl	buckle
Twine twirl	twist wind	spiral	WORM

The poem begins with a series of external observations of organic decay – ‘rust’, ‘moth’, ‘fungus’, ‘canker’ – but as the poem progresses these are replaced by a series of words, which in their verb form suggest dynamic motion: ‘wriggle’, ‘coil’, ‘buckle’. Through its repetition, the word ‘worm’ starts to read like an imperative. This contrast is expressed spatially: there is a productive tension between the constraint, fixity and spatial construction implied by the rigidity of a grid, and the freedom, movement and spatial collapse implied by the possibility that a multi-directional reading of the poem could be given.

On hearing Cobbing perform this poem on 11 July 2000 on the occasion of Cobbing’s eightieth birthday, the poet Peter Manson remarked that ‘The word “WORM”, six times repeated, expressed six very different summarising attitudes

¹²⁹ ‘Meditation on Worms’ is better known as ‘Worm’ (often accompanied by ‘WOWROMWRORMM’, see: Cobbing, *Eyearun* (London: Writers Forum, 1966), n.p. For manuscript version, see ‘Notebook of Poems’, BL Add MS 88909/46.

to the animal and human worms of the poem.’¹³⁰ This recognises the poem’s concern for organic processes and the human world of social interaction:

Hunt-fish	ferret	root out	fathom
Unearth	disinter	grub up	WORM
Ingratiate	insinuate	intrude	invade
Permeate	interpenetrate	infiltrate	WORM

‘Hunt fish’, ‘root out’, and ‘Unearth’, reference the rudimentary actions a hunter-gatherer might perform to find food. They imply a revelation gleaned from the earth, a communion with nature, and the idea of something deep being uncovered; ‘fathom’ captures this relation between depth and understanding in a single word. The words ‘ingratiate’, ‘insinuate’ and ‘invade’ are acts of occupation of varying degrees of hostility that suggest human rather than natural agency. In this section of the poem there are six such verbs, all beginning with the letter ‘I’ which negatively associates each word with human subjectivity. This suggests a split between the individual and nature.

The words in the final four lines of the poem suggest that this individualistic stance leads first to societal decay (‘corruption’), then to the decay of the physical body (‘cadaver’), and then to the destruction of the bodily remains (‘ashes’), which is simultaneously understood as a return to a maternal origin (‘mummy’):

Crumbling	mouldering	rotted	blighted
Decayed	corrupted	tainted	WORM
Corpse	carcass	cadaver	carrion

¹³⁰ Peter Manson, ‘Bob Cobbing Solo’ (14 July 2000), <<http://www.petermanson.com/Bobsolo.htm>> [accessed 20 May 2011]. Manson attended Writers Forum in the late 1990s.

Dust earth ashes mummy WORM

‘Meditation on Worms’ presents a foundational myth of art in fifty-five words. The dynamic forces of nature, the human communion with nature, the death of the physical body, and the maternal all successively represent pre- and post-subjective states; a hypothetical wholeness that cannot be recovered or understood, but against which the individual subject’s alienated reality can be seen.

Yet like the dynamic visual interactions present in Cobbing’s visual artworks of the period, the form and layout of ‘Meditation on Worms’ demands activity on the part of the viewer or reader, which then feeds into the meaning of the work. As we read the poem our eyes worm down the page, and they are six times brought up against the word ‘worm’, which unifies all the separate levels of existence represented in the poem. Although the poem is arranged in a grid, the fact that we return each time to the word ‘worm’ suggests a circular structure. Worms, or the ‘long friends’ as Dylan Thomas describes them in his famous postwar poem ‘A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London’ (1946), meet the corpse underground.¹³¹ Like an animalistic version of the cataclasis that motivates the form of ‘World in Ruins (Cataclasm)’ they help in the transformational act of decomposition whereby the finite matter of the human form is recycled. The ‘worm’ represents a mediating force between the inexhaustible completeness of nature and the internal and finite form of the individual. Only the ‘worm’ has access to the ideal harmony of inner and outer, the harmony between the human psyche – the site of emotion and imagination – and the full and fluxing state of nature itself.

In this respect ‘Mediation on Worms’ presents an autonomous aesthetic object, but Cobbing’s main interest in the poem was in the performative possibilities of the grid form itself, which he revived in some of his other poems, notably the ‘R’ section of *ABC In Sound* (see Chapter Three). The idea of the ‘worm’ as representative of the ideal harmony of inner and outer is complicated by Cobbing’s re-presentation of this poem (and many of his other early verbal

¹³¹ Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, ed. Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Phoenix, 2000), 85.

poems) in wildly altered forms. This is because a change in the outer context changes the nature of the poem's inner form. One of these re-presentations was staged in 1988 when 'Worm' was included on Bird Yak's record *Aberration*.¹³² In this version 'Worm' was extended to a performance that lasted over five minutes. Cobbing's action of re-presentation, of his visual art and poetry and of himself in a different context of performance, tells of the creative principles of adaptation, reclamation, integration, and the idea of endurance through mutability. By studying how these ideas emerged from Cobbing's poetry of the 1950s, I have established a fuller sense of the idea of poetry that Cobbing's adherence to these principles proposed, and what was being proposed when he re-performed in this way.

Conclusion

From this account of Cobbing's art practices viewed in the context of Herbert Read's art theories and pedagogy, it is clear that Cobbing's work in the 1950s does not fit easily into interpretive frameworks commonly applied to his later work. An important reason for this is that he did not start to consider himself a poet until he had been producing art, working as an art teacher and running art groups for several years. However, part of the difficulty in returning to a contextual understanding of Cobbing's works is that he himself re-presented his work and gave it different terms of reference. A sustained consideration of why he re-presented his work and with what effects will be presented in the following chapters with reference to further examples of this tendency across Cobbing's career. Another significant point is that even though he thought carefully about Read's ideas, by the time Cobbing was an arts organizer himself, the global, national and local context was very different to the one in which Read had been writing. This meant that Cobbing adapted Read's ideas quite freely, just as he only partially assented to the political uses of the culture he found himself promoting in Hendon.

Cobbing's work in the context of postwar welfare-capitalism was not equivalent to a de facto acceptance of its broken promises and its nationally subsidized institutions which promoted a democratic but ultimately liberalist

¹³² Bird Yak, *Aberration* (Klinker Zoundz, 1988), tracks 5 and 11.

view of art. Rather, this work marked the beginning of his attempt to integrate art's financial, organizational, geographic and class-based structures into art itself. As Schiller outlined in letter eighteen of *Aesthetic Letters* the autonomy of art (what Schiller calls 'pure aesthetic unity') did 'not consist in the *exclusion of certain realities*, but in the *absolute inclusion* of all' realities.¹³³ Cobbing goes beyond Read in the ingenious ways that he began to incorporate 'realities' into his art and poetry in the 1950s, and the way that he established a reciprocal and mutually altering relation to the institutions that grounded his 'performance', without ever being fully co-opted or reduced to the ossified social structures of those institutions. As will be seen in subsequent chapters, when this threatened to happen, or when Cobbing's performance exceeded the institutional structures that grounded it – when these structures were no longer productive for, or enabling of, his poetry – he was not slow to find new structures, which he came to perceive in terms of their aesthetic as well as practical potential. It is in these transitions that Cobbing's poetry lives.

¹³³ Friedrich Schiller, *The Aesthetic Letters, Essays, and The Philosophical Letters of Schiller*, trans. J. Weiss (Boston: Freeman and Bolles, 1845), 85.

Chapter Two: From Finchley to the Destruction in Art Symposium

By the mid 1950s Bob Cobbing had successfully ignited a local art scene. By 1966 the word Hendon had been removed from the name of Hendon Arts Together. The affiliated Hendon and District Experimental Art Club had been renamed Group H, and Cobbing had left the suburbs to work in a Soho bookshop where he met key participants in the counterculture. In this chapter, I will investigate what happened in that decade to alter the direction of Cobbing's gaze, and to refocus the energy of his organising capacities from local work to the transatlantic counterculture. The answer can be found in his own poems. From 1960 he began to work with permutation. At first he used permutation to respond to events in his life, but in the end it determined his artistic direction. This chapter charts the genesis and nature of permutation in Cobbing's work in late 1950s Hendon, through to one of its expressions in the 1960s: his involvement in the Destruction in Art Symposium (a seminal countercultural art event). This narrative not only explores one of Cobbing's key 'performances', it establishes a rationale for why his practice as a whole is best thought of as something that takes place in the past.

Permutation poems have often been associated with the 1960s Underground counterculture, but they are not often understood as the mechanism by which someone becomes countercultural, as they were for Cobbing. The way permutation functioned in his poems is slightly different from what its use has signified in the work of other poets who used it in the 1950s and 1960s. While there is little general agreement between critics as to what the use of permutation means, there is consensus as to what permutation poems look like. In permutation poems a single phrase is taken, sometimes from an external source, and in each subsequent line the words of the phrase are reordered to make new combinations. This form has been associated with 1960s counterculture because of the principles that are said to motivate it, the attitudes that are expressed through its use, and because of the countercultural identity of the practitioners. Well-known permutation poems by Brion Gysin include 'I am that I am' (1959),

‘Junk is No Good Baby’ (1959) and ‘Kick That Habit Man’ (1959).¹ ‘Are Your Children Safe in the Sea?’ (1960), perhaps the best-known permutation poem by Cobbing, was written the same year that ‘I am that I am’ was broadcast on BBC radio.² Dom Sylvester Houédard, a key poet and figure in the counterculture, described it in 1966 as ‘basically trad gysinlike semipermutational’, an assessment that was based on what the poem looked like.³

Gysin’s ‘I am that I am’ permutes the five words of the phrase used in its title over six hundred times. Gysin took the phrase from Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception* (1954), where Huxley recorded his perceptions and experiences after taking ‘four-tenths of a gramme of mescaline’ in order to investigate the causes of schizophrenia, which he believed to be a psychological distress that affected the adrenal glands.⁴ Huxley’s writing advocated the idea that the profound change in consciousness that drugs brought about was an insightful experience – where ‘just looking, just being the divine Not-self of flower, of book, of chair, of flannel’ was ‘enough’ – even though he worried what this totally immersive identification, abstracted, and ultimately disassociative mode of perception meant for ‘human relations’.⁵

Gysin believed that the permutation of the phrase ‘I am that I am’ had allowed him to ‘touch the oracle’, because the phrase looked ‘a bit like the front of a Greek temple’ (once he switched the last two words around) but also because he believed that ascribing to the compositional logic of permutation generated insights that exceeded the perceptive and imaginative powers of the poet.⁶ As all the material of ‘I am that I am’ is drawn entirely from a single phrase, the poem recreates the socially isolated and abstracted conditions of seeing and experience that Huxley describes, yet because the phrase is permuted, often with new punctuation, the relatively closed and tautological assertion of identity that is ‘I am that I am’ is opened up and turned into a question (‘I am that am I’) in several lines of the poem. The effects that drugs had on consciousness

¹ Brion Gysin, *Back In No Time: The Brion Gysin Reader*, ed. Jason Weis (Middle Town CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 80-89.

² Weis, *Back In No Time*, 79.

³ Dom Sylvester Houédard, ‘Introduction’ to *Extra Verse no. 17*, ed. Barry Cole and D. M Black (London: 1966), 11.

⁴ Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*, (London: Penguin, 1954), 13.

⁵ Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, 30.

⁶ Gysin quoted in Weis, *Back In No Time*, 79.

and perception, and the possibility that this might lead to new social relations, was a preoccupation of the counterculture. Gysin's extensive use of permutation translated these concerns into a language practice. Although Cobbing was not as interested in the effects that drugs had on perception, his permutations did explore social relations and were deeply invested in the externalisation of internal states and vice versa, including those modelled by psychoanalysis.

Permutation poems have been associated with the counterculture because they are also seen in terms of the aesthetics of a twentieth century European avant-garde that wanted to disturb the bourgeois way of life. Jason Weis, editor of the Brion Gysin reader, argues that Gysin's use of permutation was 'closely related to the principle of the cut-up, where the intended coherence of a text is interrupted and rearranged', while Emmett Williams – a Fluxus artist, and an anthologist of concrete poetry, who at one point anthologised Cobbing's work – recalled that when he first saw them he believed Gysin's permutation poems were re-workings 'of Tristan Tzara's cut-up method'.⁷ Tzara's method had several distinct stages but it essentially involved cutting out words from a newspaper article, placing them in a hat, and drawing them out at random to make a poem. This compositional logic involved making poems out of non-poetic material, and was designed, in part, to circumvent the constraints of the bourgeois adult mind.

In the late 1960s and 1970s Cobbing's poems appeared in the British magazine *Stereo Headphones*, edited by Nicholas Zurbrugg. In the introduction to a series of interviews with a wide range of poets, artists, and musicians Zurbrugg drew attention to the following argument by American poet Robert Lax:

[...] if we get used to looking at permutations in our poetry, we have a chance of beginning to – not understand, but to get a way of watching the permutations that take place in nature, and in the more microscopic life... And I think in a way, music gets close to the way those things in nature work. But poetry—up to now—has been riding on the fringes of it.⁸

⁷ Weis, *Back In No Time*, 79. 'Emmett Williams' quoted in *Art, Performance, Media: 31 Interviews*, ed. Nicholas Zurbrugg (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 367.

⁸ Zurbrugg, 'Introduction' to *Art, Performance, Media: 31 Interviews*, xv-xvi.

The permuting nature that Lax describes is one without a language intelligible to humans, suggesting that permutation connects the poet with a pre-linguistic state. If this conception of permutation is seen alongside the definition of permutation as a formal development of the cut-up, then it can be aligned with the Dada valorisation of the ‘primitive’, which Tzara understood as the childhood of humanity and opposed to the violent and reified world of adults and their use of language.⁹

Cobbing was familiar with Dada art practices by the late 1950s and the way that they incorporated and collaged objects of consumer culture in their art. Cobbing’s poem ‘Pictures at an Exhibition’ (25 July 1958) was composed using a cut-up technique which he had been developing since 1956. In the poem’s second stanza under the heading ‘Paint is autonomous’ the lines read: ‘Dada impression evocation / Drops on the windscreen of a car / Vertical trickle of paint / A ragged banner no more’ (ll. 7-11). His poem ‘Lies Like Truth’ (3 July, 1960) was built directly from the language used in a ‘Blanco and Whited Sepulchre’ advertiser’s announcement.¹⁰ By November 1961 Cobbing had given public readings of extracts from *Minutes to Go* (1960), a book co-authored by Gysin and William Burroughs, which included permutation and cut-up poems, and he had also read extracts from ‘Exercises in Style’ by poet Raymond Queneau, who was associated with Oulipo, a group that used chance procedures in their compositions and which advocated the creation of new structures and patterns in writing.¹¹

The first line and title of Bob Cobbing’s poem ‘Are your children safe in the sea?’ is a headline from an unidentified article taken from the *Observer* (3 July 1960). The poem was hand written in a notebook on the same day the *Observer* article was published and a few months after Cobbing had moved two miles closer to central London, from 32 Brent Street, Hendon to 29 Lichfield Grove, Finchley (see Fig. 4).¹²

⁹ Mark A. Pegrum, *Challenging Modernity: Dada Between Modern and Postmodern* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), 125.

¹⁰ For manuscript versions of the poems see: ‘Notebook of Poems’, BL Add MS 88909/46. For published versions see: Cobbing, *Cygnets Ring: Collected Poems Volume One* (London: Tapocketa Press, 1977), n.p. It is likely that ‘Blanco and Whited Sepulchre’ was a brand name.

¹¹ ‘Writers Study the Contemporary Poets’, *Finchley Post*, 29 November 1961, ‘Finchley Society of Arts: Press Cuttings’, BL Add MS 88909/32.

¹² ‘Notebook of Poems’ BL Add MS 88909/46.

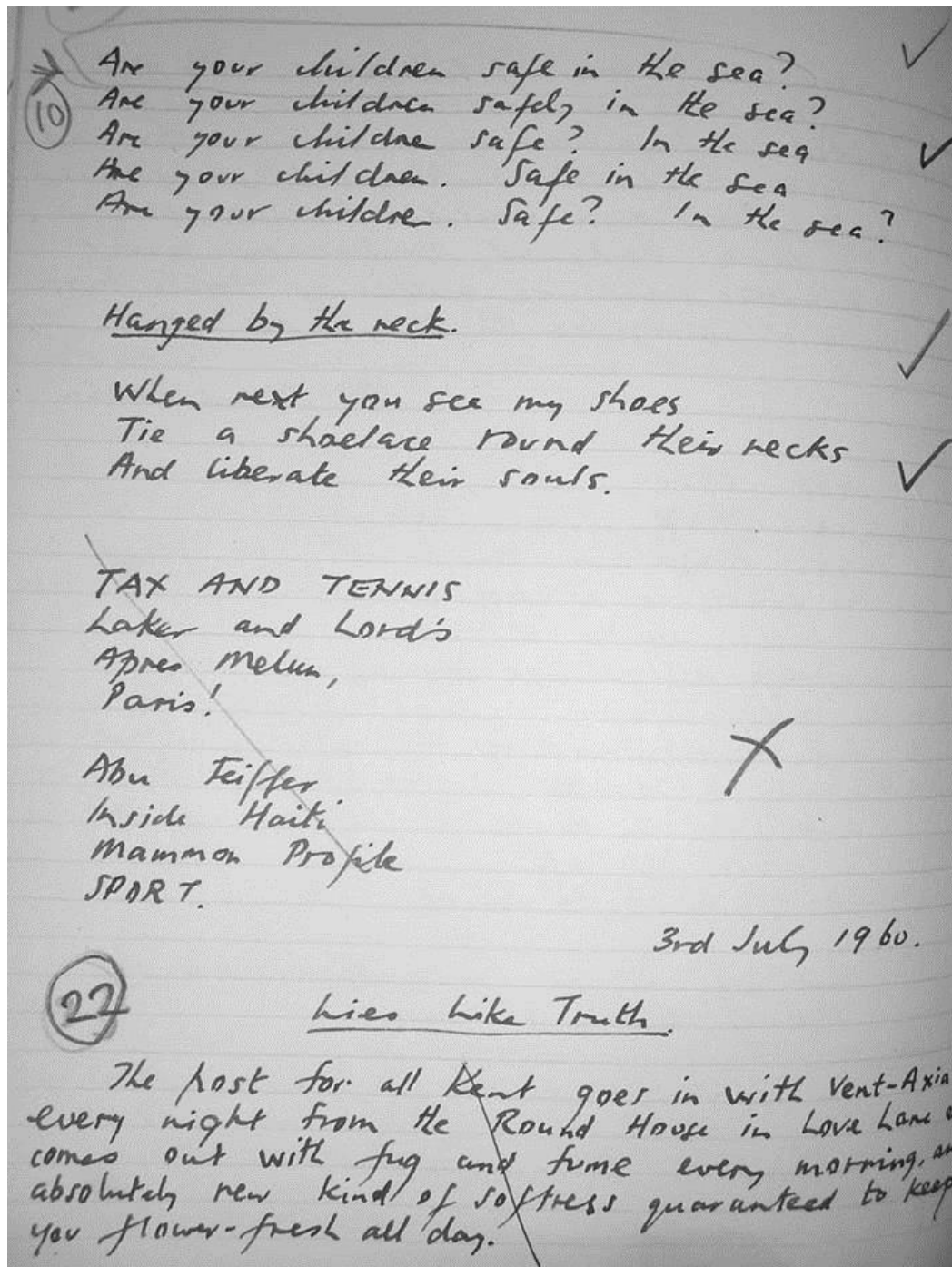


Figure 4. Bob Cobbing, 'Are Your Children Safe In The Sea' (1960), 'Notebook of Poems', British Library Additional Manuscript 88909/46. Reproduced with permission of the British Library and Jennifer Cobbing.

Taking local newspaper headlines as his starting point was a significant practice in Cobbing's permutation poems at this time which enabled him to focus on his local situation.¹³ The distance of Cobbing's move between Hendon and Finchley was very small, but at this point in his career, the smaller the sphere of his influence, the more significant the distances within it, and this is reflected in his use of permutation.

However, 'Are your children safe in the sea?' was not characterised by this local focus. In the first line the speaker assumes a parent's concern, contrasting these familial bonds with the 'sea' as a space of uncertainty and threat. The sea is refigured in the second line of the poem as a refuge: 'Are your children safely in the sea?' the speaker asks, suggesting that life on the land is not at all safe. All life evolved from the sea, and in this respect the 'sea' represents a primitive origin against which the social bond between parent and child is measured, understood and critiqued. In these terms the poem not only looks like a permutation poem, it is also related to the countercultural interest in cultivating childlike states as a means of refiguring human social relations.

While the words themselves are not significantly permuted the punctuation is, and it is this that suggests different vocal inflections for each line. This is what Houédard implied when he called it 'semipermutational', and what he meant when he argued it was 'meant to be heard'. For example, the rise in vocal pitch on the words 'Safe' and 'sea' (l. 5) – suggested by the two question marks that follow these words – can only be appreciated fully if the poem is sounded out. Further, from a parent's perspective the intuitive response to the speaker's opening question would be to check to *see* if the children were safe in the 'sea'. Sounding the poem places emphasis on the word 'sea', which ends each line. This repetition reveals how the poem is structured by the unarticulated homophonic word play between see and sea.

Looking at 'Are your children safe in the sea?' enables us to see Cobbing's belief that poems needed to be heard, just as Houédard did in 1966. It is connected to the fact that it was published in a variety of forms. The first typescript version of the poem was published and disseminated to an audience that was largely local in *AND Magazine No. 3* (3 February, 1963) and under the

¹³ Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture* (1968, 2nd ed. 1970), 148.

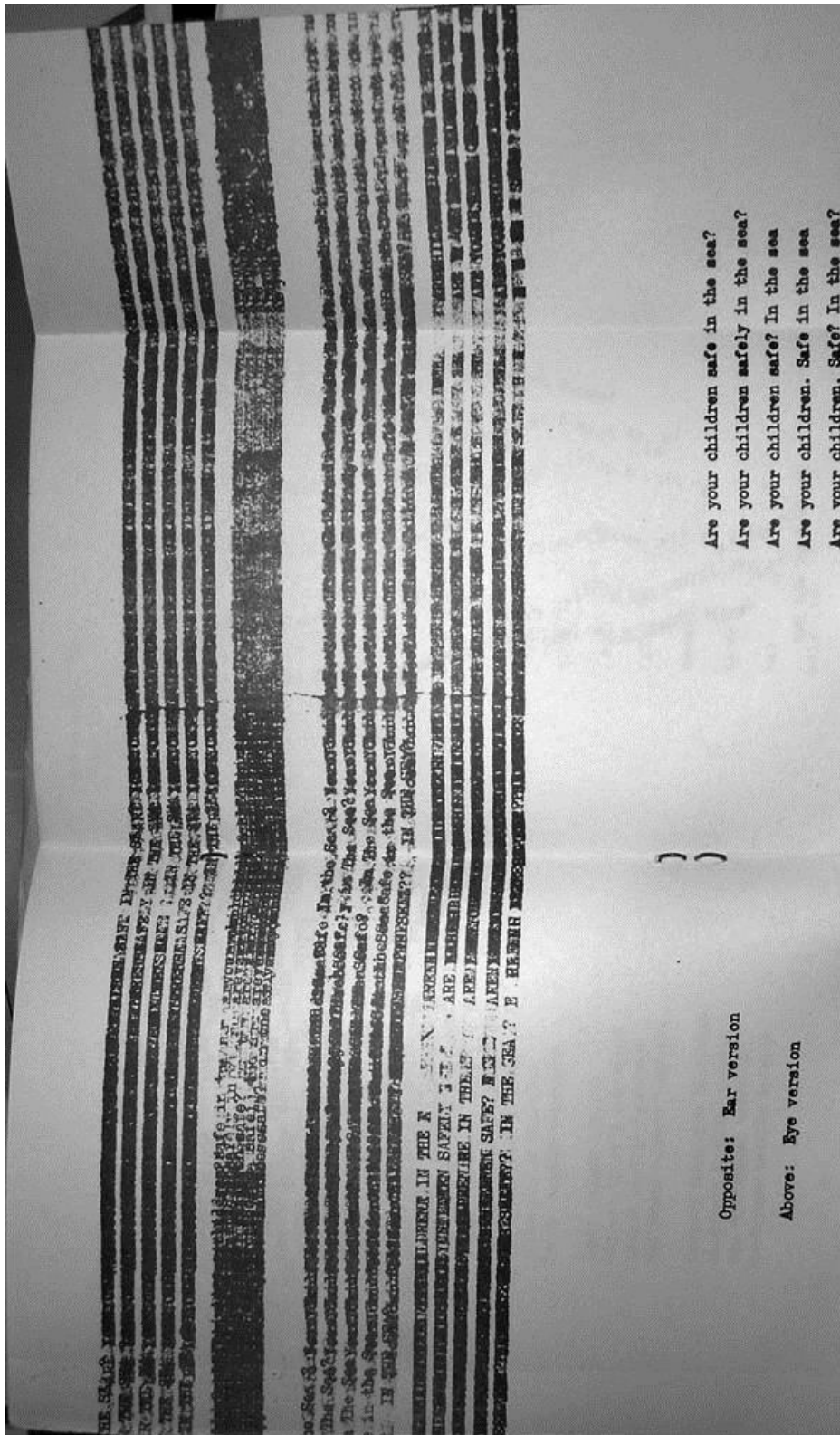


Figure 5. Bob Cobbing, 'Are Your Children Safe In The Sea', in *Extra Verse no. 17*, ed. Barry Cole and D. M Black (London: 1966), 8-9. Reproduced with permission of Jennifer Cobbing.

title ‘a line from the observer’ in Cobbing’s joint publication with John Rowan, *Massacre of the Innocents* (1963). The poem was then published in contexts that had a strong countercultural valence. In the seventeenth issue of the magazine *Extra Verse* (1966), which was dedicated to Cobbing’s work and introduced by Houédard, ink was unevenly applied to the poem’s letters and some were over-inked to the point that their form was almost obscured. Cobbing called this the ‘ear version’ and published it alongside a radical treatment of the same source material, which he called the ‘eye version’ (see Fig. 5).¹⁴ These terms externalised the hidden homophonic pun that had internally structured the poem in its manuscript form. Cobbing had actually started making these ‘eye versions’ of the poem as early as January 1965, but he did not use the term until 1966. Cobbing’s distinction between the ‘eye’ and ‘ear’ version of a poem was related to his definition of the typestract as a ‘visual’ that ‘may be read’.¹⁵ The term ‘typestract’ as a composite of ‘typewriter’ and ‘abstract’ was invented by the poet Edwin Morgan and was used extensively by Houédard. In the mid 1960s Cobbing’s use of the typestract was related to his identity as a sound poet because he performed sounds in response to them. This identity is explored in Chapter Three, but for our current purposes it is important to understand it as something that emerged alongside his association with London’s counterculture, and as a development of his verbal permutations.

Given that Cobbing recorded ‘Are Your Children Safe in the Sea?’ with composer Annea Lockwood (CD track 1) in 1966 – where his voice is heard against a background of feedback and reverb produced with a tape recorder – the manuscript version of the poem might be understood as an embryonic expression of the way that audio technology was integrated in his poems from the mid-1960s onwards. This idea is developed in Chapter Four, but it is relevant to this chapter’s argument to introduce the concept that the permutation poem can be imagined as a mechanism (as a system of parts that operate or interact like those of a machine). Understood in this way, permutation had a key role in moving Cobbing beyond the idea of art as an organic activity, and by extension the idea of local art as an agent in postwar reconstruction. The basis for this mechanistic understanding of permutation is suggested in Weis’s description of it as a ‘more

¹⁴ Cobbing, *Extra Verse*, 8.

¹⁵ Cobbing, *Extra Verse*, 11.

mathematical variation’ of the concept of the cut-up and in Dick Higgins’s argument that permutation partakes more in ‘geometrical thinking’ than in ‘normative, linear reasoning’.¹⁶

Permutation was also a mechanism Cobbing used to respond to the institutional, social and geographic changes of his life. It helped drive his transition from the local and suburban art scene of Hendon to the London-centric international counterculture. In this chapter, I will first examine Cobbing in Hendon and Finchley between 1956 and late 1964. In this period, he became increasingly frustrated by the bureaucratic local arts structures in which he participated and positively figured this frustration in poetic forms. I will then go on to examine his participation in the Destruction In Art Symposium, where visual permutation emerged as an important part of his work alongside European collaboration.

1) Cobbing as a Local-Artist: The Beginning of the End in Hendon

To understand how permutation led to and anticipated Cobbing’s transition from the local and suburban art scene of Hendon to a London-centric but international counterculture, and why Finchley functioned as the site of its operation, we need to look at what Cobbing did in his final years in Hendon. On 31 May 1957 a sub-committee of the Hendon Film Society (which included Cobbing) met to draw up a new film programme. It was hoped that this would drive up membership. Sergei Eisenstein’s ‘Strike’ was one of the films selected.¹⁷ A poster was made to advertise the film, and in many ways it conforms to our expectations as to what an amateur film society poster might look like (see Fig. 6).¹⁸ It is hand printed on paper, and its orderly provision of information in black evenly spaced stencilled letters contrasts with the thick, almost smudged, dark strip of red paint that fills the middle of the poster, and with the appearance of Eisenstein’s name, which – written in capitals and scrawled in black charcoal – sits at a slanted angle towards the bottom of the red strip. One of the most striking aspects of the poster’s

¹⁶ Jason Weis, *Back In No Time*, 79. Dick Higgins, *Pattern Poetry, Guide to an Unknown Literature*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 183.

¹⁷ *Strike* is a film that depicts a strike by the workers of a factory in pre-Revolutionary Russia, and documents their subsequent suppression. Research at Cobbing’s house has revealed that he owned Sergei Eisenstein’s *The Film Sense* (London: Faber and Faber, 1943). For discussion of the film programme see: ‘General Releases Cause a Fall in Membership’, *Hendon Post*, 30 May, 1957, ‘Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (2)’, BL Add MS 88909/14.

¹⁸ ‘Hendon Film Society’, BL: Add MS 88909/18.

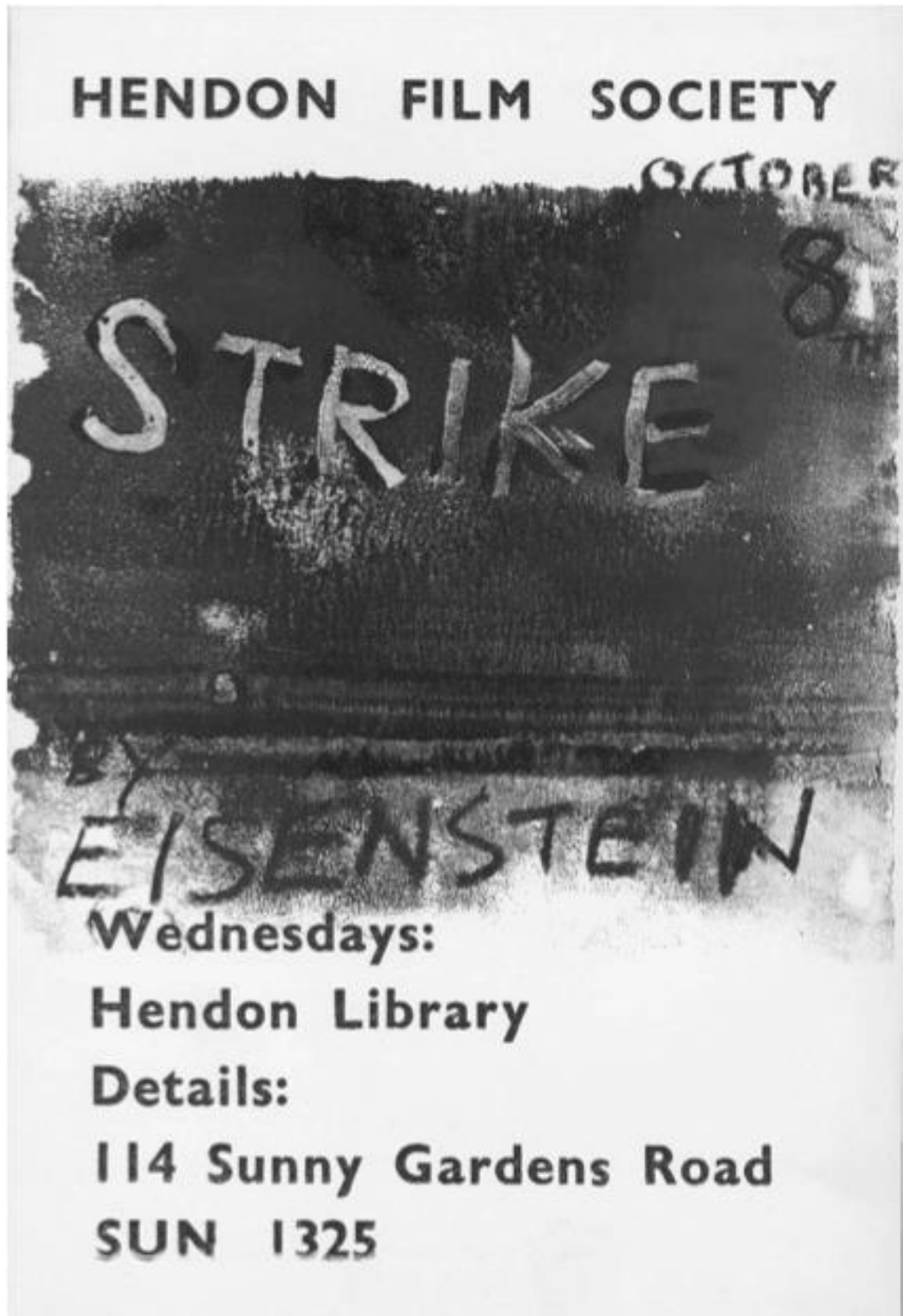


Figure 6. Hendon Film Society poster for *Strike* (Eisenstein), 8 October [1958].

‘Hendon Film Society’ British Library Additional Manuscript 88909/18.

Reproduced with permission of the British Library.

appearance is how the red paint, which with its thick application seems to deface the poster, has been scratched away to make the word ‘strike’. This equates the removal of paint with the withdrawal of labour and anticipates the work Cobbing produced for the Destruction in Art Symposium.

On 2 June 1957, two days after the Hendon Film Society added ‘Strike’ to their programme, a real strike was reported in Hendon’s local papers. The *Hendon Post* ran the headline ‘Hendon Arts Council Try a New Kind of “Strike”!’ with the subheading ‘They Refuse to Collect Fees Until Council Make a Grant’.¹⁹ The reasons behind the strike mark the starting point of Cobbing’s long retreat from local cultural organisations, and so they are carefully charted in what follows.

Cobbing had been elected in June 1956 to the position of secretary of the Hendon Arts Council (HAC), which had been set up in 1951 to aid local festivities of the Festival of Britain (see Chapter One, section four). At a meeting with the Hendon Borough Council on 10 September 1956 Cobbing argued that ‘about £500, much of which would be non-recurring’ would be needed from the Hendon Borough Council in order to buy a ‘central pool of equipment for hire to societies [which] would include items such as stage lighting, curtains, a cinema projector, tape recorder, music stands and exhibition screens’.²⁰ Cobbing wanted HAC to be able to offer financial assistance to societies which could not hope to cover their expenses, and to fund the Hendon Arts Festival scheduled for spring 1957. He argued that the festival – which was to fill local shop windows with art – had wide public support, and that half of the money applied for was to go towards it. In September 1956 the HAC chairman (Mr. J. M. Signy) reported that under Cobbing’s stewardship the HAC had increased its affiliated membership from six societies to thirty-two, a figure that represented around half the art societies in the borough.²¹ Hendon Arts Together also affiliated with the HAC when Cobbing rejoined, having resigned from membership in 1951 (see Chapter One, section four). Despite this widespread public support the Hendon Borough Council refused to grant the HAC the money it applied for. Cobbing and the Hendon Arts Council Executive Committee therefore called on all affiliated

¹⁹ ‘Hendon Arts Council Try a New Kind of “Strike”!’, *Hendon Post*, 2 June 1957, ‘Hendon Arts Council and The Hendon Society (Local Newspaper Reports)’, BL Add MS 88909/16.

²⁰ ‘The Arts Council’, *Hendon and Finchley Times*, 14 September 1956, BL Add MS 88909/16.

²¹ ‘The Arts Council’, *Hendon and Finchley Times*, 14 September 1956, BL: Add MS 88909/16.

organisations to strike: no subscriptions would be accepted from local societies or from associate members for 1957-58; and no activities of any kind would be undertaken.²²

Cobbing felt strike action was necessary because Hendon Borough Council had ‘broken faith with local societies and [had] not carried out its original worthy aims.’²³ Cobbing argued that the ‘Under the local Government act 1948 [...] the [borough] Council had power to spend money in providing or promoting entertainment [and that] it would be entirely a matter for the [Hendon] Arts Council to decide whether it wanted financial assistance or not.’ He noted that in 1950 a one pence rate levied on the local community would produce £8,150, and that it was the Hendon Borough Council’s view at the time that the sums likely to be under consideration would have a negligible effect on the amount of the rate.²⁴ Cobbing believed that the strike would remind the Hendon Borough Council of its own policy and commit it to using taxation to allow the members of the local community to direct the cultural life of the borough. For this reason it was important that the HAC was representative of the majority of the borough’s art societies so that it had a democratic mandate for its actions.

In 1950s Hendon there were seven Labour voters for every nine Conservative voters, but only six Labour councillors to twenty-nine Conservatives, and this imbalance remained in 1956.²⁵ In these terms the June 1957 strike was also about the clash of two opposing value systems (Cobbing’s and that of the local government) both of which claimed to be acting democratically. On 10 January 1957 Hendon Borough Council argued in the *Hendon Post* that art did not need to be encouraged in Hendon ‘where a large number of cultural organisations of all types flourish.’ They argued that ‘some people are of the opinion that saturation point has been reached and that new activities can only succeed at the expense of the old.’²⁶ This imagines a situation where art organisations compete against one another for a finite audience. However, from Cobbing’s perspective – informed by Herbert Read’s ideas of an

²² ‘Hendon Arts Council Try a New Kind of “Strike”!’ *Hendon Post*, 2 May 1957, BL Add MS 88909/16.

²³ ‘Hendon Arts Council Try a New Kind of “Strike”!’ 2 May 1957, BL Add MS 88909/16.

²⁴ ‘Hendon Arts Council Try a New Kind of “Strike”!’ 2 May 1957, BL: Add MS 88909/16.

²⁵ Daniel Weinbren, *Hendon Labour Party 1924-1992: A Brief Introduction to the Microfilm Edition* (Wakefield: Microform Academic Publishers 1998), 8.

²⁶ ‘No Grant, So Arts Festival is Postponed’, *Hendon Post*, 10 January 57, BL Add MS 88909/16.

education through art –every person was a potential artist. He wanted to see artists working more expansively in the social, public and privately owned spaces of Hendon. The strike was a reaction to restrictions that were being placed on his aesthetic (and political) vision.

To expand the presence of art in Hendon, Cobbing used the tactics of revolutionary politics. This is signalled in the choice of ‘Strike’, a film that depicts a strike by the workers of a factory in pre-Revolutionary Russia and their subsequent suppression. Use of such tactics is also inherent in his decision to affiliate Hendon Arts Together to the Hendon Arts Council in the first place, which is best understood as a form of pseudo Trotskyite entryism, something which did not go unnoticed in the local press: ‘Some civic eyebrows were raised when it was discovered that all the chief officers of the new committee came from one group of closely associated organisations.’²⁷ The idea that working from the inside through the appropriation of larger political formations and their structures was the best way to effect the goals of a minority group speaks to Cobbing’s realisation that HAT had to be financed by local government and affiliated to the official local arts council if it was to successfully institute an education through art in Hendon.

As a tactic the strike was a failure. It did not force the Hendon Borough Council to make an increased grant, and it even led to the dissolution of the HAC. On 4 July 1958 the *Hendon and Finchley Times* announced the ‘death’ of the Hendon Arts Council to the local community with the headline ‘Arts Council is Buried’, and the Borough Council went on to form a new and more obedient arts council.²⁸ Yet the failure of the strike and the collapse of the HAC was not just the result of the Hendon Borough Council’s suffocating conservatism; it was also a direct consequence of the incrementally expanding nature of the infiltrating organisation, the Hendon Arts Together.

In these terms the takeover of the Hendon Arts Council and the subsequent strike could be understood as the result of Cobbing’s attempt to forestall the collapse of Hendon Arts Together. The strike was recognition that the organicist aesthetics that had guided his art actions in Hendon for the previous six years had found their limit. It was an externalisation of HAT’s

²⁷ See subheading ‘In’, *Hendon Post*, 9 August 1956, BL Add MS 88909/16.

²⁸ ‘Arts Council is Buried’, *Hendon and Finchley Times*, 4 July 1958, BL Add MS 88909/16.

internal state. In the model Cobbing adopted, societies were all dependent on funding distributed centrally via HAT. Increasing claims on the central funds meant a decrease in available resources for all the groups. This is borne out by the fact that less than two months after the collapse of the HAC, the *Edgware Post* published an article with the headline ‘Committee Suggests Constitution Changes For “Arts Together” Decentralisation and New System Of Affiliation’ (28 August 1958). The article explained that HAT had sponsored eleven societies, and that this had made it ‘virtually impossible for the central body to remain responsible artistically and financially for such a wide range of groups.’ The article also explained that the ‘ill-health, earlier in the year, of both the secretary, Bob Cobbing, and the treasurer, Mitchell Taylor, reinforced the need for decentralisation.’²⁹

Despite the fact that the strike failed to achieve its goals, this particular episode offers some important insights into the mutually dependent relations between the poem, the individual, and the institutional body, relations which were central to Cobbing’s ‘performance’ at the Poetry Society in the 1970s. In these terms the use of strike action as a cultural tactic was an early manifestation of the unionisation of artists that gained fuller expression in the 1970s when Poets Conference was founded (see Chapter Five). Here it helps explain Cobbing’s different stance to localism in the late 1950s and early 1960s. As HAT expanded it became harder to create a meaningful unity from the individual identities of the different groups, and so HAT also became more autocratic and dependent on Cobbing’s physical presence and organisational zeal. After failing to secure funding from the tax payer HAT did not want financial responsibility for groups that had departed from their own ‘experimental aims’, or for groups which no longer maintained a reciprocal relation with the local press and which failed to respond to press criticism.³⁰ The local newspaper was important to Cobbing in his attempt to build a community around his poetry and art, and groups that did not do so deviated from this aesthetic.

²⁹ ‘Committee Suggests Constitution Changes For “Arts Together” Decentralisation and New System Of Affiliation’, *Edgware Post*, 28 August 1958, ‘Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (2)’, BL Add MS 88909/14. HAT had become ‘Arts Together’ by 1961. See: “Arts Together”, *Finchley Post*, 21 April 1961, BL Add MS 88909/14.

³⁰ ‘Experimental Theatre Group In Crisis’, *Hendon Post*, 6 June 1957, BL Add MS 88909/14.

Cobbing had seen HAT through a long period of accumulative artistic expansion. He had then tried and failed to appropriate the financial and political structures of local government through strike tactics to secure that vision. After this, HAT turned inwards and examined its own internal consistency. Following the strike, the Hendon and District Experimental Art Club, which had changed its name to the Hendon Group of Painters and Sculptors in 1954, changed its name again to Group H (December 1957). At the time its members stated that they ‘resented the attitude of Hendon Borough Council towards [their] group and the arts in general’, and that the word Hendon ‘was too local and limiting’.³¹ In Cobbing’s mind ‘Hendon’ was not just a place, it was also an aesthetic disposition, and by 1958 the committee of HAT had begun to see their own organization as ‘something between an arts council and an artistic conscience’.³² The relation that Cobbing and HAT made in Hendon between morality, aesthetics and locality is key to understanding Cobbing’s ‘performance’ in Finchley, which is revisited at the end of Section two below.

While there is not exact parity between Cobbing’s failed attempt at political entryism and his use of permutation there are strong similarities; his, after all, was not a poetics of exactness. The first line of ‘Are Your Children Safe In The Sea?’ was appropriated from a larger structure, the newspaper. The lines of the poem move outwards from this central and initial act of appropriation, and the primary poetic mode becomes self-appropriation: i.e. the rest of the poem carefully explores the internal structure of the first line, and the appropriation happens inside the poem. This produces the distinctive and decentralised form of the poem, where each line microscopically examines and unpacks the structure and the content of the line that precedes it. Decentralisation was also the end result of HAT’s own organic process of growth, and an outcome of its self-scrutiny. This is a fitting description of the internal structure of Cobbing’s verbal permutation poems. The relationship between this self-appropriative and decentralised aspect of permutation and Cobbing’s increased distance from local art comes to the fore in the permutation poems that he produced in Finchley. However, the use of lines from local newspapers where Group H and the other

³¹ ‘Change of Name’, *Hendon and Finchley Times*, 27 December 1957, BL: Add MS 88909/14.

³² ‘Committee Suggests Constitution Changes For “Arts Together”’, *Edgware Post*, 28 August 1958, BL: Add MS 88909/14.

art organisations that Cobbing had founded were being reviewed suggests that Cobbing had not completely left behind either the localism of his Hendon activities or his desire to incorporate a sense of community into his aesthetic project.

2) Verbal Permutation and Obscenity in Finchley

‘Make Perhaps This Out Sense Of Can You’ (1963) permuted the words of a newspaper headline to a review of a Group H show. It developed the self-appropriative element in Cobbing’s practice, as did the other permutations poems he wrote around this time: ‘Re Formation Arena Players’ (7 March 1962); ‘Group H Exhibition Church Farm House’ (21 October 1962); and ‘Headlines’ (2 January 1964).³³ In both the manuscript and published version of ‘Make Perhaps This Out Sense Of Can You’ the name of the newspaper (from which the poem’s title was taken) was included alongside the date of the poem’s composition. This invites a reading of the poem in its original context and of the context through the poem’s permutations. Cobbing, who kept the poem’s source text along with its accompanying article in his archive of newspaper cuttings, preserved some of this context.

The article was published on 16 August 1963. It was a scathing review by ‘J. R.’ of an Arts Together exhibition at the New End art gallery where fifty-three items by seventeen Group H artists had their first Hampstead show. The review recorded that Cobbing exhibited two art works at the exhibition, ‘Mass X specific’ and ‘Substance by I’, which are ungenerously described as ‘a black and grey mass’ and ‘a white and grey mass’. J. R. reports:

the artists have scavenged among their friends and come up with nylon stockings, buttons, a petrol tank, tube tickets, an iron saucepan... all of which have been attached to the canvas by means of paint or plaster. ... Jeff Nuttall [is] a Barnet art Teacher, ... his five exhibits are preoccupied with sex, aided by a bed-end, the stockings and dollops of plaster. At the other end of the scale Gabi Weissman economises with his materials – even paint. His “psychological Portrait – Hawk Food for Trae” consists of red, green, white and orange rings near the bottom of the paper and a large white expanse above. Two wide-open mouths and more

³³ ‘Notebook of Poems’, BL Add MS 88909/46.

circles depict, “The Last Despairing Thoughts of Food.” ... John Rowan appears to be a collector. One of his exhibits is a collection of advertisements for jobs, letters turning down applicants, letters accepting applicants – entitled “Looking for a Job.” ... David Rothman has produced an ashtray, a paper clip holder and a cacophonous celptomania [*sic*]. ... It looks vaguely like a spinning wheel only it is a bicycle wheel. It also has springs and bits of string and is very brightly coloured.³⁴

Photographs of this exhibition support the reviewer’s description, but the appropriation of everyday commodities such as stockings, iron saucepans, bicycle wheels, ashtrays, and written materials, is more interesting than the offhand tone of the review suggests.³⁵ Cobbing explored the significance of this appropriation in ‘Make Perhaps This Out Sense Of Can You’, his reply to the review.

On first reading, the poem is a tightly controlled structure that interrogates the relationships between a set of complicated ideas, among them ideas of human agency; the mysterious essence of the commodity; abstract containers; real containers; human sense perception; human essence; notions of construction, constraint and enablement; ideas of self; and notions of branding and re-branding, i.e. many of the themes that the Group H artists evoked in their artworks.

Make perhaps this out sense of can you
Kilburn Times
Perhaps you can make sense out of this.
This make of can, you— ‘perhaps – sense out.
This can make you “out of sense”, perhaps
Out of this can, you make sense, perhaps.
This can of sense, you –perhaps– make out.
Out of “perhaps”, you can make this sense
Make out this can of sense! (You, perhaps,
Can make sense out of this. Perhaps you

³⁴ ‘Make Perhaps This Out Sense of Can You!’, *Kilburn Times*, 16 August 1963, BL Add MS 88909/14.

³⁵ For photographs see: ‘Further and Further Out’, *Hampstead News*, 9 August 1963 and ‘Group H New End Gallery’, in *Arts Review*, 24, August 1963, BL Add MS 88909/14.

Can.) Make out the “you” of sense, perhaps.
You sense out, perhaps, this make of can.
Out of this can, you make sense, perhaps
Can this sense of you, perhaps, make out?
Can you make sense, perhaps, out of this
Make of can? You sense out, perhaps, this
“You” out of this can. Make sense, perhaps,
Out of this! Make sense, perhaps, you can!
Out of this, you can, perhaps, make sense.

September/December 1963³⁶

In ‘this make of can’ – the first four words of the second permutation – ‘make’ is a synonym for brand, while ‘can’ is a mass-produced product that contains a commodity. Elsewhere in the poem ‘can’ refers to a container for abstract concepts such as ‘sense’, as in the line ‘this can of sense’ (l. 5). In ‘Perhaps you can make sense out of this’ (l. 1) it is an auxiliary verb that implies agency. ‘Sense’ also takes on different meanings in the poem. In ‘You sense out, perhaps, this make of can’ (l. 10) ‘sense’ refers to human perception, while in ‘Can this sense of you, perhaps, make out?’ it references some kind of human remnant or essence. The phrase ‘make out’ is used as a synonym for notions of discernment in ‘This can of sense, you – perhaps— make out’ (l. 5), where ‘sense’ is a synonym for meaning, but most of the time ‘sense’ reads as a straightforward synonym for comprehension, as in ‘Can you make sense, perhaps, out of this’ (l. 13). It is particularly productive to think of ‘make’ in line seven of the poem – ‘Make out this can of sense! (You, perhaps,’ – as a meta-poetical imperative directed at the reader (the ‘You’ of the poem) to make sense out of ‘this can’, where ‘can’ is read as a self-reflexive gesture, referring to the containing form of the poem. The precise natures of the relationships that are explored by this line, and the rest of the poem, are not fully fleshed out within its form. Rather, the permutations are complete when they are read in relation to the reviewer’s critique of the Group H exhibition, for the poem’s seventeen lines correspond to the number of artists that exhibited in Hampstead.

³⁶ ‘Notebook of Poems’, BL Add MS 88909/3, n.p.

The poem points out the play in J. R.'s own words (that he himself is only half aware of) and it shows – via the appropriation and permutation of those words – that no work is finished, not even that of the critics. The review (which by its nature addresses an exhibition that has a finite duration) gains new life by being resituated in the poem. The poem's argument – founded on this principle of resituation – shows that despite themselves Cobbing's critics could be integrated into his poems. Cobbing used permutation to show how the reviewer's disdain partook in the logic of the artworks he criticised. The poem requires the reviewer, even in his hostility, to 'make sense out of' the derangement of texts and visual materials that were on show at the exhibition, and reveals how the art critic himself also appropriates and resituates art. Yet to make this point, and to maintain the reciprocal relation with the local press that had been central to his aesthetics in 1950s Hendon, Cobbing had actively to incorporate the reviewer's hostile reaction to the Group H exhibition, internalising it in and through his poem. This reciprocal relation had been a source of enjoyment in Hendon and part of a genuine two-way exchange with the local papers. In Finchley, and as the coverage that he and his groups received became increasingly negative, this notion of reciprocal exchange was figured as an aspect of poetic form. So while permutation represents a commitment to dialogue, it was also an expression of a growing distance between Cobbing and local art.

That distance is apparent in Cobbing's increasingly combative relation with arts organisations in Finchley. It is also registered in the way that his work in Finchley essentially recycled his approach in Hendon. The process of building up art organisations, getting frustrated with local government, then abandoning parts of the organisation in order to reform it in a new context happens again but much more quickly, and to different effect. Soon after moving to Finchley, Cobbing had helped to establish the Finchley Society of Arts (FSA), acting as its joint secretary. However, he resigned in November 1962. In August 1963 Cobbing founded the FAC and acted as its secretary, as a relaunch and renaming of the FSA which might attract funding from Finchley Borough Council. In a statement to the press Cobbing gave one reason for his resignation from the FSA: 'Though the committee were prepared to let me do 90 per cent of the work of establishing the society. I now have a feeling that the majority of the committee

members are not in sympathy with my approach to the arts.’³⁷ In a letter written to the *Hendon and Finchley Times* (28 December 1962) he gave another reason. Cobbing said he resigned because the FSA did not support the 1T Boys Club, which was a kind of spontaneous backyard sculpture club, based initially out of artist Bill Watkins’s garden in Trinity Lane, East Finchley, but inspired by the teaching of Jeff Nuttall, John Moate and Cobbing himself at Alder School.³⁸

These reasons for resignation should be seen alongside the contradictory account of founder President of the FSA Paul Smyth (sometimes spelt Smythe), who had resigned four months before Cobbing, claiming that a ‘modern group have infiltrated from Hendon and have succeeded in controlling it’.³⁹ Smyth, who died in 1963, remained President of the Finchley Art Society for the last year of his life, which despite its distinct identity and different artistic agenda remained affiliated to the FSA. One marker of the difference between the Finchley Art Society and the Finchley Society of Arts is that the Chairman of the FAS was Margaret Thatcher, Member of Parliament for Finchley, while Spike Milligan was one of the two Vice Presidents of the FSA, until he resigned in January 1962.⁴⁰

At its inception the FSA mirrored Hendon Arts Together in its aims and structure.⁴¹ When it was first formed, an article in the *Finchley Post* (5 August 1960) quoted Cobbing directly: ‘We should be prepared first to do the work ourselves before we can expect assistance. We must try to improve the standards of the district. We must go out to reach the public, and ensure a wider public for anything we intend to do.’ It also reported Cobbing’s view that ‘a Society of Arts should include all the arts, making the scope as wide as possible. He [Cobbing] mentioned Poetry, Literature, Operatics, Photography, Sculpture, Music, Ballet

³⁷ ‘Rift In the Arts’, *Finchley News*, 23 November 1962, ‘Finchley Society of Arts: Press Cuttings’, BL Add MS 88909/32.

³⁸ ‘It Came as No Surprise to Me’, *Hendon and Finchley Times*, 28 December 1962, ‘Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (3)’, BL Add MS 88909/15. For Jeff Nuttall’s discussion of this episode see Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, 148. ‘Finchley Society of Arts, a pretty typical collection of public virgins, divided themselves from their far-out division [Arts Together] over the inclusion of the new youth group in the ranks.’

³⁹ ‘Infiltrators Gave Society Bad Start’, *Finchley Post*, 1 June 1962, ‘Finchley Society of Arts: Press Cuttings’, BL Add MS 88909/32.

⁴⁰ For a report of Spike Milligan’s resignation, see ‘Finchley a Desert and a Wilderness Says Spike Milligan’, *Finchley Times*, 12 January 1962, ‘Finchley Society of Arts: Press Cuttings’, BL Add MS 88909/32.

⁴¹ Hendon Arts Together was known as Arts Together from 1958 onwards.

and Jazz.’⁴² The same article also recorded that Cobbing was a representative of the North West London Arts Council and served on the Arts Committee of the London Council of Social Service. As I will explain, this increased involvement in the structures of local art, coupled to Cobbing’s highly localised permutation poems – which were designed to maintain a reciprocal relationship with a hostile local press – paradoxically created the conceptual distance that Cobbing required in order to break with local art altogether.

This conceptual distance is reflected in Cobbing’s angry and comic poem ‘Headlines’. The poem shows that the organic aesthetic that underpinned Cobbing’s work in Hendon had a limit, and so did the assimilative capacities of his verbal permutations.

Headlines

Charge and Counter-charge in “Finchley Art Show” Storm
Charge and Counter-charge in Finchley Art “Snow Storm”
Charges Countered! Change in Finchley! “Smart Show” Storm
Charge and Counter! Change in Finchley’s Heart. “Show” Storm
Challenge and Counter-challenge in Finchley “Art Show” Storm
Charge-hand Discounts challenge of Finchley’s “Art Show” Storm
Largely discounted challenge of “Art Show” storm
Artichokes, Mustard and Cress, Induce brain storm
Huge charge-hand challenges! “Thin legs but brawn” Storm
Handcuffs Challenges and Arrests in Finchley Art Show Storm
Cuffs, Collars and Shirts Repaired at Finchley’s New Smart Store
Collages, Reliefs & Assemblages in Finchley’s New Art Show
Sticks Relief & Dismay in Finchley Art Show Storm
Change and Decay in ART around I see
“These are not painters! They are simply stunt-mongers!”
“Middle-class are complacent “challenge. “No joy or vitality”
charge and counter-charge in Finchley Art Show Storm.

2nd January 1964

⁴² ‘New Society Has Broad Policy’, *Finchley Post*, 5 August 1960, ‘Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (3)’, BL Add MS 88909/15.

‘Headlines’ was first published in the seventh FAC news bulletin (February 1964), and as its name suggests it permuted a headline from an article published in the *Finchley News* (22 November, 1963).⁴³ Despite its evident humour ‘Headlines’ is a confrontational poem, specifically written for a performance at a meeting of the Finchley Arts Council (February 1964).⁴⁴ The poem shows that Cobbing’s antagonistic but reciprocal dialogue with local art – suggested by the poem’s opening phrase ‘Charge and Counter charge’ – was nearing its end.

Designed for vocal performance, the form of ‘Headlines’ was pushed to its limit by the demands of its content and its context. In the first five lines the word order is largely the same, but individual words are phonetically permuted: ‘show’ becomes ‘snow’, ‘art’ becomes ‘smart’ then ‘heart’, ‘charge’ becomes ‘change’ then ‘challenge’. After these five lines there are sometimes only one or two words in each line that ensure that the poem looks like a permutation poem. The phonetic relation between words gets harder to identify: ‘charge’ (l. 6) becomes ‘largely’ (l. 7), and “Art Show” (l. 7) becomes ‘Artichokes’ (l. 8). On occasion (l. 15 for example) permutation is abandoned all together, and Cobbing includes direct quotes: “These are not painters! They are simply stunt-mongers!”, which is attributed to Barbara Phillipson, Secretary of Finchley Art Society, in the *Finchley News*.⁴⁵ Her comments came after an invitation by the *Finchley News* to respond to confrontational behaviour by Group H who had been invited to speak at a meeting held at Finchley Library in the series Lively Arts, sponsored by the council libraries committee. They made speeches, described by *Finchley News* as an ‘attack’, that condemned the antiquated nature of the paintings by the Finchley Art Society, which at the time were hung in the library as part of their Autumn show.⁴⁶

In his statement as recorded by the *Finchley News*, Cobbing’s attacks had a strong moral bent:

⁴³ ‘Charge and Counter-Charge in Finchley Art Show Storm’, *Finchley News*, 22 November 1963, ‘Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (3)’, BL Add MS 88909/15.

⁴⁴ ‘Finchley Arts Council Bulletin No. 7’, February 1964, ‘Finchley Society of Arts: Constitution and Bulletins’, BL Add MS 88909/31.

⁴⁵ ‘Charge and Counter-Charge in Finchley Art Show Storm’, *Finchley News*, 22 November 1963, ‘Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (3)’, BL Add MS 88909/15.

⁴⁶ ‘Charge and counter-charge in Finchley art show storm’, *Finchley News*, 22 November 63, ‘Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (3)’, BL Add MS 88909/15.

“I believe in the continuing spirit of tradition, not in the restatement of restatements such as disgrace these walls now. Art is a matter of morality, and these are immoral paintings.” Any painting was immoral which was not the incorporation of a genuine struggle; one which at any point might have been lost. “Instead of moral tension, we have here slick second-hand certainties, which have been proved false over and over again.”⁴⁷

Cobbing’s argument against the ‘restatement of restatements’ in art was an argument against cliché. Set against this was the artistic incorporation of ‘a genuine struggle’, which Cobbing thought made painting moral. This is suggestive of an internal conflict that takes place in the artist, but which is then outwardly expressed in the images they create. Cobbing thought the Finchley Art Society paintings were immoral not just because he did not detect internal struggle in their external forms, but also because they were presenting these clichéd images to the local community. Cobbing believed the ‘moral’ paintings by Group H should be the ones hung on the walls of the local library.

The debate over morality in art in Finchley was a complicated one. Group H itself was often attacked on moral grounds. For example, a Mr C. H. Robertson wrote in June 1962, in response to the ‘so-called modern art’ at a previous exhibition at the North Finchley Library by the “H Group”, that there was one picture that struck him not only as ‘bad art, but also as an obscene representation of parts of the human body.’ ‘There is another’, he continued, ‘with a religious title that seems to me frankly sacrilegious and verging on blasphemy.’ He concluded by stating: ‘I understand that this group have had over twenty exhibitions in Hendon. Isn’t it time they were sent packing back?’⁴⁸ This parting remark, and the headline of the article ‘Just put ’em on a 143’, which was the number of the local bus that went between Finchley and Hendon, shows that contrasting definitions of what constituted immorality in art were implicated in arguments as to who had the right to practice art in Finchley, and what it meant to be a local artist. But there was also a surprising national context to these debates about the morality of Cobbing’s artwork. In 1998 Cobbing recalled that

⁴⁷ ‘Charge and counter-charge in Finchley art show storm’, *Finchley News*, 22 November 63, ‘Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (3)’, BL Add MS 88909/15.

⁴⁸ ‘Just put ’em on a 143’, *Finchley Post*, 22 June 1962, ‘Finchley Society of Arts: Press Cuttings’, BL Add MS 88909/32.

when ‘Prime-Minister-to-be Margaret Thatcher, came into the library’ in the early 1960s, at that time local MP for Finchley, she decided that one of his paintings was ‘obscene’, and that when the ‘librarian asked her what was obscene about the painting’, she replied: “It’s all sperm”.⁴⁹

While Thatcher saw sexual obscenity in Cobbing’s art, other kinds of obscenity were attributed to the name Group H. The most extreme instance of this was the association of Group H with the H-Bomb, in a letter that Paul Smyth wrote to the local papers: ‘One member of the group told me that undoubtedly the group had started in Hendon – hence the H Group, but quite recently they decided to call themselves the H Bomb Group – presumably to make a noise.’⁵⁰. The implied accusation here is that Group H were crass enough to equate their cultural impact with nuclear destruction, or would associate themselves with the Bomb just to get attention. Both of these implications misrepresent the Group H position while not being completely wide of the mark.

Cobbing had made a connection between his practice and the Bomb a month later in July 1962 following a reading of Beat poetry within the exhibition that Smyth complained about. At this time Cobbing was also participating in Writers Forum, a more internationally focussed writing workshop he had founded in Hendon (1958), which outlived all of these local formations. The July reading had been organised by Writers Forum, and Group H paintings hung on the walls behind the readers. Cobbing’s contribution was to read poems by Dylan Thomas and play ‘Footnote to Howl’ by Allen Ginsberg on tape. Articles in Finchley’s local papers accused Writers Forum of ‘communism’, ‘obscenity’, and ‘blasphemy’.⁵¹ Cobbing held a public meeting to address these accusations, and he defended the visual art that Group H produced:

[...] the dictionary definition of obscene was: offensive to decency, disgusting, filthy [and that] you could not have anything more offensive to decency [...] than the hydrogen bomb: it is utterly disgusting and filthy. Yet we tolerate it, but cannot

⁴⁹ Bob Cobbing interviewed by Steven Ross Smith, see *Ballet of the Speech Organs: Bob Cobbing on Bob Cobbing* (Toronto: Underwhich Editions, 1998), 6.

⁵⁰ ‘More difficult than A, B, C...’ *Finchley Post*, 22 June 1962, ‘Finchley Society of Arts: Press Cuttings’, BL Add MS 88909/32.

⁵¹ ‘Those Shocking Poems’, *Finchley Post*, 3 February 1961, ‘Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (2)’, BL Add MS 88909/14.

tolerate the showing in a work of art of the human breast. Is there not something wrong with our sense of values? ⁵²

A familiar and self-flattering move in 1960s counterculture was to use the Bomb to declare oneself youthful and utterly innocent by comparison. Writing in *Bomb Culture* in 1968, and commenting on the eventual ineffectuality of the anti-bomb movements, Nuttall was acute on this self-deception. He stated that the ‘eyes’ of the anti-bomb demonstrators no longer looked at the ‘public with defiance and hurt’ but at one another in a ‘slimy masochism of mutual congratulation’, as if to congratulate one another of their own pacifism while all the while the ‘suicide programme’ of the Bomb continued unabated.⁵³ Cobbing was not using the Bomb to reassure himself of his own morality, he used it to morally justify and contextualise the visual aesthetics of Group H. In fact, his description of the Bomb as ‘filthy’ is particularly interesting given that by the late 1960s his own poems were thought of as ‘dirty’ (see Chapter One, section three). Yet despite this moral condemnation of the Bomb, Cobbing’s permutation poems have some provocative resonances with it: both through intense internal pressure produce a large amount from a small amount of initial material. Cobbing himself developed those resonances explicitly. In the next section of this chapter Cobbing’s typeextracts are considered as ‘dirty’ expressions, the result of his attempt to internalise the Bomb’s ‘filthy’ aspects and to redirect its obscene destructive power (and the immoral culture that created it) through art.

The phonetic and verbal permutations of ‘Headlines’ also registered Cobbing’s belief that art had a moral imperative. The aural similarity of ‘Art Show’ and ‘Artichokes’ makes an implicit comparison between the appreciation of a painting and the consumption of food. The embedded phrase in ‘Artichokes’ – art I choke – suggests that Cobbing did not think art should be easily consumed like any commodity, while a further permutation ‘I choke art’ suggests that art should actually be destroyed in the face of its commoditisation (a position that speaks to his later identification with the Destruction in Art Symposium). These two interpretations relate to Cobbing’s explicitly stated belief ‘in the continuing spirit’ of art’s ‘tradition’. In these terms art was something that pre-dated and

⁵² ‘Art Group Hits At Obscenity Charge’, *Finchley Post*, 13 July 1962, ‘Finchley Society of Arts: Press Cuttings’, BL Add MS 88909/32.

⁵³ Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, 52.

was set apart from capitalism. Weighed against this however, as the permutation of ‘Handcuffs Challenges and Arrests in Finchley Art Show Storm’ to ‘Cuffs, Collars and Shirts Repaired at Finchley’s New Smart Store’ suggests, was his view of art as socially determined both by commerce and by government. This permutation relates the prohibitive and censorious power of the law to the conformity of middle class white-collar work, and contrasts the artistic use of public space of the ‘Art Show’, and the ‘Storm’ of controversy and discussion that it caused, to a new ‘Smart Store’ in Finchley, which offered tailoring services to meet the needs of its suburban middle class residents.

In these terms his attack on the FAS in ‘Headlines’ was not a straightforward result of a radicalisation of his views on art. Rather, Cobbing’s dismissal of the FAS paintings was the result of his empathy for the character of Finchley’s community, and his perception that it had been corrupted. He thought of the local newspaper as one of the community’s most important cultural organs (see Chapter One, section four), but in the 1960s he worked in an environment where it was riven by mistrust and suspicion: the *Finchley News* had invited, structured and then disseminated a hostile exchange between Group H and the FAS, a headline in the *Kilburn Times* was openly mocking, and in the columns of the *Finchley Post* Group H was frequently told to go back to Hendon. In this context of mistrust, which was also marked and intersected by the threat of nuclear destruction and the anxiety it caused, Cobbing’s local community was both insecure and alienated from itself, and therefore it had lost the moral right to influence the direction of his art.

This is one explanation for Cobbing’s sudden volte-face on the value of the local art councils. On 7 February 1964 Cobbing performed ‘Headlines’ after the FAC had discussed an article that he had written in his official capacity as a representative of the North West London Arts Councils, which had been first published in the January bulletin of the Standing Committee on the Arts of the London Council of Social Service (LCSS). This is the section of the article that was reprinted in the FAC bulletin before the typescript of ‘Headlines’:

[...] arts councils exist to proliferate the mediocre the trivial and the ghastly. I would go so far as to say that 90% of the items staged by arts councils and their constituent societies in the London area are rubbish; and that 90% of the

worthwhile, enterprising and significant artwork being carried out is quite unconnected with local arts councils and not supported by local authorities. One has to search to discover it all...

This is a measure of the failure of arts councils everywhere, that no one stages locally, and no one wants to, the masterpieces of the past. One reason seems to be that few people in arts councils know the difference between good art and competent rubbish and most have no desire whatsoever to find out.⁵⁴

Cobbing's increased involvement in the organisation of local art had given him a despairing view of its general condition. His role as a representative of the North West London Arts Councils gave him a perspective on local art beyond Finchley, and he did not like what he saw.

The fact that he read 'Headlines' after the above passage was discussed indicates that he was still committed to a dialogue with his local art community, even though the conversation was strident and took the form of a permutation poem. Cobbing's performance staged a challenge to the mainstream, bureaucratic culture in which he was an increasingly frustrated participant. Nonetheless, his commitment to dialogue, his wish to maintain the reciprocal relationship between his aesthetics and his community, was evident in his use of permutation. More significantly, the permutation reveals how Cobbing established the conceptual preconditions for his participation in the counterculture in his poems: a way of standing in opposition to a community that one wants to engage and change, while simultaneously providing a space in which to cultivate a counter-identity.

A response to Cobbing's article by a Dr. Hughes was also printed in the FAC bulletin. It was titled 'The Need for Patience'. It argued that since local arts councils were representative of the 'amateur', one had to be prepared for unimaginative programmes. It argued that the way to improve arts councils was to work from the inside, and he warned against retreating to an 'ivory tower of protest'.⁵⁵ Unlike Cobbing, Hughes's argument patronises the 'amateur' artist. When Cobbing suggested that 'masterpieces of the past' should be staged locally, he was also not referring to the canonical art of his day. In comments made elsewhere he wrote that it was the 'most important duty of an arts council to keep

⁵⁴ 'Finchley Arts Council Bulletin No. 7', February 1964, BL Add MS 88909/31. The LCSS still exists as the London Voluntary Service Council.

⁵⁵ 'Finchley Arts Council Bulletin No. 7', February 1964, BL Add MS 88909/31.

the locality in touch with the main stream of culture'. In the early 1960s he defined the 'main stream' in the form of a list of significant artists, composers and poets that either 'left little impression on most local art societies' or were 'largely ignored' by those societies: Cezanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Jackson Pollock, Paul Klee, Picasso; the 'masterworks' of Webern, Berg, Boulez, Stockhausen; 'the five great poets of this century', Eliot, Pound, Dylan Thomas, Kenneth Patchen, Ginsberg; and the 'master novel' Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.⁵⁶ This playful redefinition of the 'main stream' along broadly modernist lines was legitimate precisely because it emerged from his work inside local art councils. As Cobbing's permutation poems show, his dismissive attitude towards the work of local arts councils, as well as his important re-conceptualisation of the 'main stream', came from his engagement with local art, not his retreat from it, as Hughes contended.

Although the Group H exhibitions were attacked in Finchley, they were received positively in the national magazine *Arts Review*. Barbara Wright (1915 - 2009), a pianist and a translator, wrote several articles for *Arts Review* about the Group H exhibitions.⁵⁷ On 16 June 1962 she wrote about the twenty-fifth Group H exhibition: 'at first sight this show looked so good it was hard to believe, but it was true. It is the best mixed show I can remember. It tends to be a bit literary – three excellent paintings by Bob Cobbing are called *Integration is not enough*, *Disintegration is essential too*, and *That's what life is*.'⁵⁸

While Cobbing's verbal permutation poems responded to the reception that his visual art received, his visual art became more literary and this anticipated his use of visual permutation. Chris Beckett has noted the titles of Cobbing's artworks were taken 'from a one-act play by Eugène Ionesco, *La Leçon* (1951), a translation of which, by Donald Watson, was performed at the Royal Court Theatre, 18 June 1958.'⁵⁹ Cobbing and Rowan had also presented the play on 6

⁵⁶ Item begins: 'It is as if Jackson Pollock and Paul Klee', in 'Hendon and Finchley', Add MS 88909/12-33. See reproduced sheet in Appendix I.

⁵⁷ Wright translated works by Raymond Queneau and Tristan Tzara, at first producing translations for her friends Stefan and Franciszka Themerson, with whom Cobbing also formed close associations.

⁵⁸ Barbara Wright, 'Group H 25th Exhibition', *Arts Review*, 16 June 1962, Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (3), BL Add MS 88909/15.

⁵⁹ Chris Beckett, 'Bob Cobbing, Visual Art Works (1972-73): A Preliminary Survey', in *Electronic British Library Journal* (2012) <<http://www.bl.uk/eblj/2012articles/pdf/ebljarticle72012.pdf>> [accessed 17 September 2012], 9.

May 1961, alongside the programme of poetry readings organised under the aegis of Finchley Society of the Arts as members of the ‘Arena Players’, a group concerned with experimental drama and theatre-in-the-round.⁶⁰ Just under a year later Cobbing used the words of ‘Arena Players’ as the source text for one of his permutation poems, the first four lines of which read: ‘Re formation Arena Players: / Reformation Arena Players / Reform (at Ion) Arena Players. / Reform Are Nap layers.’ (7 March 1962).⁶¹

In this context permutation becomes a way of thinking about the staging of Ionesco’s play in Finchley. In the play, notes Beckett, ‘the Professor’s lesson turns to arithmetic and to the principles of subtraction, using imaginary matches. The Pupil is told: “You have a constant predilection for adding up. But it is also necessary to subtract. Integration alone is not enough. Disintegration is essential, too. That’s what life is. And philosophy. That’s science, progress, civilization”.’⁶² The titles of Cobbing’s artworks recall The Professor’s frustrated remarks to his student, along with the authoritarian ideologies inherent to pedagogical practices. At the end of the play the Professor, having killed his student, puts on a swastika armband.⁶³ This relationship between pedagogy and authoritarianism brings us back, once again, to Herbert Read, while the relationship between integration and disintegration, literariness and visual art, brings us back to Cobbing’s use of permutation.

Read argued, as I noted in the conclusion to the previous chapter, that ‘aesthetic education’ formed an integral approach to reality that educated ‘those senses upon which consciousness, and ultimately the intelligence and judgement of the human individual, are based’. He believed that it was only so far as all the senses could be brought into a ‘harmonious and habitual relationship’ with the external world that an ‘integrated personality could be built up’.⁶⁴ In the mid-1960s Cobbing appended forms of disintegration to Herbert Read’s concept of

⁶⁰ ‘Finchley Society of Arts’, *Finchley Post*, 28 April 1961, ‘Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (2)’, BL Add MS 88909/14.

⁶¹ ‘Reformation Arena Players’, 7 March 1962, ‘Notebook of Poems’, BL Add MS 88909/46.

⁶² Beckett, ‘Bob Cobbing, Visual Art Works’, 9. Cobbing identifies Ionesco as his source in the endnotes to *Lame Limp Mangled Marred and Mutilated: Collected Poems Volume 9*, and in an interview with Steven Ross Smith, see *Ballet of the Speech Organs*, 6.

⁶³ Eugène Ionesco, *The Bald Soprano, and Other Plays* (Grove Press, 1982), 78.

⁶⁴ Read, *Education Through Art*, 7.

education as a form of integration. This, once again, was Cobbing's reaction to the accusation that his artworks were immoral and obscene.

Just before Cobbing left Finchley and broke with its local art scene in late 1964, his thinking about Read's theories of education, integration, art and morality were put to the test.⁶⁵ This occurred while he was working at the Alder School as a French teacher. The controversy was reported in an article titled 'Creating In the Classroom', a review of the Third Annual Conference of the National Association for School Magazines (May 1965) by Edward Lucie-Smith, published in the *Sunday Times*.⁶⁶ The Article noted that *Barnet Poets, an anthology from schools in the New Borough of Barnet* (Arts Together, November 1964), edited by Nuttall and Cobbing, had 'caused a recent stir' because of the language and content of the poems. Lucie-Smith quoted from the 'sad appendix' in the second (revised) edition' of *Barnet Poets* (published by Writers Forum): 'one of the two masters responsible for the project [Cobbing] "found it wiser to move to another school," while the other [Nuttall] "was sacked" because of "the unusually uninhibited style" of the work produced.'⁶⁷ Here is a section of one of the poems that Lucie-Smith drew attention to in the review:

Mummy says if I'm a good boy
Santa Claus will bring me a
 double barrelled shotgun
and I'm gonna shoot my
 pussy. . . .

Whereas 'Are Your Children Safe in the Sea?' implied that the family was a problematic social structure, these lines – actually written by a child – were explicitly violent, sexual and presented a disturbing image of childhood and family life. Lucie-Smith reported that the conference began with a lecture that declared that children wrote poetry as 'an anarchic act'. The poems in *Barnet Poets* are a clear departure from the clichéd image of childhood innocence.

While Cobbing's supposedly 'immoral' art was tolerated in adult exhibition

⁶⁵ Cobbing moved five miles closer to central London, to 262 Randolph Avenue, Maida Vale.

⁶⁶ Edward Lucie-Smith, 'Creating In the Classroom', *Sunday Times*, 23 May 1965, 'Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (3)', BL Add MS 88909/15.

⁶⁷ Lucie-Smith, 'Creating In the Classroom', 23 May 1965, 'Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (3)', BL Add MS 88909/15.

spaces, this anthology was reviled because of the seeming danger it posed to ‘innocent’ children.

3) The Destruction in Art Symposium and Visual Permutation

After the controversy that *Barnet Poets* caused, Cobbing left full-time school teaching altogether, in January 1965 taking up a job working in Better Books, a major countercultural bookshop. This did not mean that the pedagogical aspect of his work was in any way diminished. He soon established Better Books as an unofficial arts centre, taking many of the local art groups that he had helped found in Hendon and Finchley with him. These included Group H and Writers Forum. These groups enriched London’s counterculture, and in 1965, along with Philip Crick and John Collins, Cobbing even reformed The Hendon Film Society at Better Books, the group that had been so central to his imagining a break with local art. In 1961 The Hendon Film Society had been renamed Cinema 61, which was a pun on Amos Vogel’s New York underground Cinema 16, and in 1965 it was renamed Cinema 65. On 13 October 1966, after Cobbing had seen some of Steve Dwoskin’s films at the Notting Hill Film Night, they founded the London Filmmakers’ Co-operative (LFMC), which was the institutional successor of Cinema 65. Better Books functioned as Cinema 65’s headquarters, and for a time as the headquarters for the LFMC.⁶⁸ These interests and groups shaped Cobbing’s involvement in the counterculture.

The thirty-fifth Group H exhibition included the work of British artists who are now well known, including Bruce Lacey (1927-) John Latham (1921-2006) and Barry Flanagan (1941-2009), as well as Cobbing, Nuttall and others. It was held in the basement of Better Books, rather than in the Finchley libraries or Hampstead’s New End Gallery where most of Group H’s previous exhibitions had been held. The exhibition was extensively reviewed and attracted praise from English surrealist painter Conroy Maddox (1912-2005) in *Arts Review* (10 July 1965), from Margaret Richards in the left-wing magazine *Tribune* (23 July 1965), and from the ‘anarchist, artist, and bus conductor’ Arthur Moyses (1914-

⁶⁸ For details on the genesis of the LFMC see: ‘The Pre-History of the London Filmmakers’ Co-op’ on the website *British Artists’ Film & Video Study Collection: Aural History*, <<http://www.studycollection.co.uk/auralhistory/intro.htm>> [accessed 16 August 2012].

2003) who in the weekly Whitechapel-based anarchist newspaper *Freedom* (24 July 1965) wrote:

It sickens and disgusts for there within this grimy cellar is evil personified. Haul it into the light of day and it becomes as nothing. Translate it as has happened so many times into the fashionable whore house galleries of Bond Street and it will only amuse, the tamed revolutionary barking to please the monied mob, but house it in the silence of this dark and empty cellar and these fumbling make-pieces of wire, wadding and clay, become the visible manifestation of the dark side of the soul. Within this darkness is Bruce Lacey's 'War Time Marriage', still copulating in their bridal bath of shit. Nuttall's tatty models spawn into elephantine bacteria no longer amusing, for this is the world in which they breed while [David] Warren's military paintings have the grotesque and marbled beauty of fresh death. Yet by an inversion of values the work of Cobbing's and Themerson are out of place in this witless world. Competent, cold, and of a delicate beauty, they belong to the subworld above the stairs away from this manifesto, not of protest, but of a clinical analysis of your world.⁶⁹

Moyse's argument, which is similar to the argument I make about Cobbing, is that the situation in which the Group H artworks were presented fundamentally changed the meaning of the work. Cobbing was responsible for this change in situation of course, but in noting the difference between Nuttall's use of the abject and Cobbing's more rational aesthetic, he sets out a useful distinction between an art that valued disgust and shock, and Cobbing's work, which, although connected to these values through association, maintained a certain distance. This idea of distance is one of the key features of Cobbing's engagement with the Destruction in Art Symposium.

The Destruction in Art Symposium took place in London throughout September 1966. It was instigated and organised by Gustav Metzger and an honorary organising committee whose members included Cobbing, John Sharkey, Roy Ascott, Wolf Vostell and Dom Sylvester Houédard.⁷⁰ DIAS

⁶⁹ Arthur Moyse, 'Round The Galleries', *Freedom*, 24 July 1967, 'Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (3)', BL Add MS 88909/15.

⁷⁰ Kristine Stiles, 'Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions', in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979*, ed. Paul Schimmel (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 227-329 (247). The full Honorary Committee was Wolf Vostell, Enrico Baj, Mario

attracted nearly one hundred artists and poets (most of whom were the pioneers of Happenings and Concrete Poetry) from fifteen countries in Eastern and Western Europe, the United States, South America, and Japan.⁷¹ Cobbing produced two contributions for DIAS, both of which were displayed in the basement of Better Books in September 1966. One of these was ‘Six Variations on Typestract One for DIAS’, the other was ‘Destruction In Art’ (1966).⁷² Cobbing was also hired as a projectionist by Yoko Ono (who was a participant at DIAS) to show her film, *No. 4* (better known as ‘Bottoms’), and in November 1965 Cobbing helped Metzger install a ‘Window-display at Better Books [of Metzger’s liquid crystal art] to coincide with the re-publication of *Auto-Destructive Art: Metzger at A[rchitectural] A[ssociation]*’.⁷³ In the last line of his manifesto (June 1961) Metzger defined ‘Auto-Destructive’ art as ‘an attack on capitalist values and the drive to nuclear annihilation’, while the last paragraph of the DIAS press release (published 27 April 1966), argued that the art practiced by the DIAS participants enacted a shift away from an art influenced by ‘ideas of destruction’ to an art that systematically incorporated the ‘destruction of materials’ in its practice.⁷⁴

Lawrence Upton (a frequent collaborator with Cobbing from the late 1970s onwards) described Cobbing as an ‘occasional poet’, meaning that he often produced poems for ‘events, changes of season, or invitations to read’.⁷⁵ ‘Destruction In Art’ and ‘Six Variations on Typestract One for DIAS’ responded to the occasion of DIAS, and need to be interpreted in this context. However,

Amaya, Frank Popper, Bob Cobbing, Dom Sylvester Houédard, Ivor Davies, Roy Ascott, Jim Haynes, and (Barry) Miles.

⁷¹ Stiles, ‘Uncorrupted Joy’, *Out of Actions*, 273.

⁷² See endnotes to Cobbing, *Lame Limping Mangled Marred and Mutilated: Collected Poems Volume 9* (London: David Barton, 1986), n.p.

⁷³ Christopher Beckett, ‘From the Bombast of Vachel Lindsay to the Compass of Noise: The Papers of Bob Cobbing at the British Library’, *Electronic British Library Journal*, 9 (2010), ed. Dr Barry Taylor, <<http://www.bl.uk/eblj/2010articles/pdf/ebljarticle92010.pdf>> [accessed, 21 February 2011], 25.

⁷⁴ Press Release for the Destruction In Art Symposium, London, 27 April 1966. See BL, shelfmark X.0425/2.

⁷⁵ Lawrence Upton, ‘Bob Cobbing: and the Book as Medium; Designs for Poetry’, in *Readings Issue 4*, ed. Piers Hugill, Aodán McCardle & Stephen Mooney (2009), <http://www.bbkc.ac.uk/readings/issues/issue4/upton_on_cobbing> [accessed 15 September 2011]. n.p.

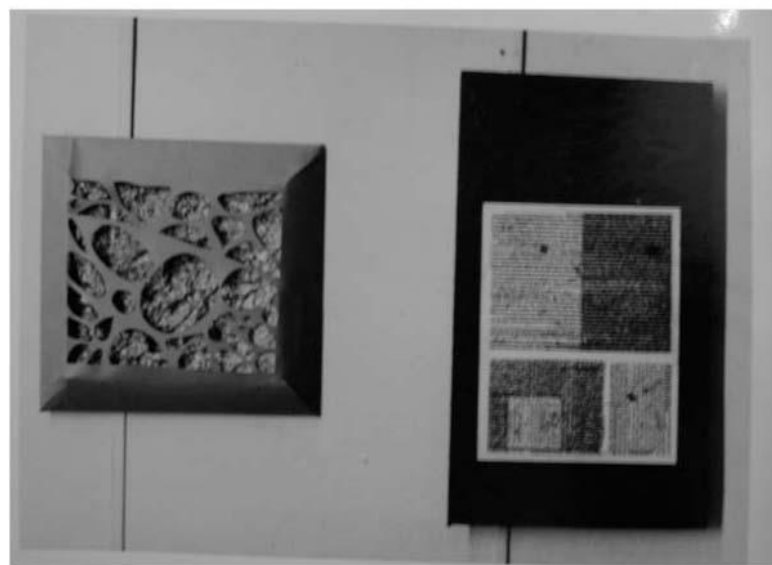
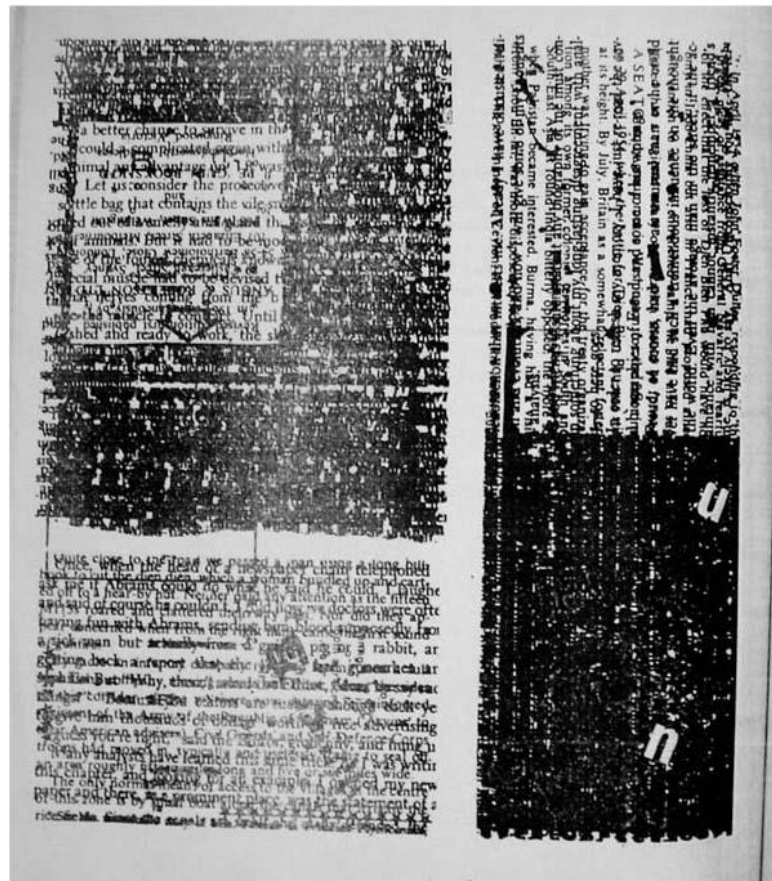


Figure 7. Above, Bob Cobbing, 'Typestract One' (1965). Duplicator print. Reproduced in Bob Cobbing, *Cygnets Ring: Collected Poems Volume One* (London: Tapocketa Press, 1977), n.p. Reprinted with permission of Jennifer Cobbing. Below, Bob Cobbing, 'Typestract One' (1965). Duplicator print. Reproduced from photograph (circa 1966) courtesy of Jennifer Cobbing.

these works were also visual expressions of Cobbing's verbal permutations, and so also invite us to reflect on the occasion of DIAS. 'Six Variations on Typestract One for DIAS' was a response to the countercultural identity of DIAS. To make it, Cobbing appropriated a work called 'Typestract One', which was one of his own works that he made in January 1965 (see Fig. 7).⁷⁶ I have identified two of the texts he used in its composition as *The Incurable Physician: An Autobiography*, by Walter Clement Alvarez (1963), and *The Last Confucian: Vietnam, South-East Asia, and the West* (1964), by Denis Ashton Warner. The latter is a historical biography of Ngo Dinh Diem, the first president of South Vietnam (1955-1963), while the former is a doctor's autobiography, which launches a critique of Freudian psychoanalysis in its final chapter. Comparing psychoanalysis unfavorably with psychiatry it brands Freud's methods unscientific and describes his writings on the Oedipus complex as 'nonsense'.⁷⁷ Phrases of text that remain legible in the typestract include: 'Burma', 'Britain', 'Civil Guards and Self-Defence Corps', 'American Advisors', and 'many analysts have learned the same trick'. While Cobbing's verbal permutations assimilated the views of his local community, this typestract assimilated texts that represented two of the chief concerns of the counterculture: Vietnam and psychiatry.

Members of the counterculture rightly saw the Vietnam War as part of an American imperialist project to impose capitalism, and, as Nuttall recalled in *Bomb Culture*, Vietnam was the 'common element' in the student and non-student revolts of May 1968.⁷⁸ The mediation of the War especially through television was an important aspect of the way it was experienced in Britain. Cobbing's sampling of text from *The Last Confucian* implied that the War's destructive effects could be re-mediated through art, while the use of Alvarez's text, which assimilated a hostile reaction to psychoanalysis, implied that the artist had to internalize these destructive tendencies if they were to be redirected through art. The use of extracts from Warner's book presents an external conflict, while the incorporation of Alvarez's critique signals how the internal landscape

⁷⁶ For date see *Writers Forum Checklist of Publications 1954-1998* (London: Writers Forum, 1998), n.p.

⁷⁷ Walter Clement Alvarez, *The Incurable Physician: An Autobiography* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1963), 264.

⁷⁸ Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, 8.

of the individual was a contested territory. This distinction between the external and the internal is reflected in the fact that Warner's book was a biography while Alvarez's book was an autobiography. The integration of objective and subjective approaches to life writing shows that 'Typestract One' was interested in how the countercultural self was constructed in art.

'Typestract One' was printed landscape in monochrome onto paper and pasted onto a piece of card (8 ½ " x 11 ") using a duplicator.⁷⁹ The new attention this work paid to the visual qualities of the distribution medium, in this case the duplicator, was the visual equivalent to the self-appropriative aspect of Cobbing's early verbal permutations (where each line recycles the content of the one that precedes it). The duplicator was a machine that was vitally important to countercultural identity, and in this respect notions of self-identity were hybridized with the countercultural status of the duplicator. By the 1950s the duplicator, also known as the mimeograph, had been in use for decades, and was the primary technology on which short-run office work, classroom materials, and items like church bulletins and newsletters were printed. Cobbing had used the duplicator in this way, and in their fourth bulletin (November, 1963) the Finchley Arts Council announced that they had acquired 'a sturdy second hand model' which could be 'used by all member societies'.⁸⁰ The critic Reva Wolf documents another use. She argues that in the 1960s mimeograph publications were 'important conduits for the artistic and personal exchanges that occurred within and between literary cliques'.⁸¹ Cobbing was also a participant in these exchanges. Nuttall records that he and Cobbing 'had no idea that the same thing was happening all over the world' when they swung 'the duplicator handle throughout the long Saturday afternoons of 1963'.⁸² While this suggests that they were unwitting participants, by 1966 Cobbing's management of Better Books and the international expansion of Writers Forum had given him a deep appreciation of the duplicator's importance as a means of distributing materials

⁷⁹ 'Bob Cobbing Documentation', in *Bob Cobbing & Writers Forum*, ed. Peter Mayer (Writers Forum, December 1999), 63-82 (63). First produced in conjunction with the Bob Cobbing and Writers Forum Retrospective Exhibition, Sunderland Arts Centre, November 2nd - November 30, 1974.

⁸⁰ 'Finchley Society of Arts: Constitution and Bulletins' BL Add MS 88909/31.

⁸¹ Reva Wolf, *Andy Warhol, Poetry, and Gossip in the 1960s* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 37.

⁸² Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, 161. Also quoted in Robert Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying, British Poetry and its Discontents, 1950-2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 38.

to the artistic communities in which he became a fully aware participant. In 1964 Cobbing had come to the conclusion that Finchley's local community had lost the moral right to influence the direction of his art because it was insecure and alienated from itself, and in these terms, his use of the duplicator as an aesthetic resource was an appropriate response to a countercultural community that he had come to trust.

The actual model of duplicator that Cobbing used to produce 'Typestract One' was a Gestetner. The quirks of this model contributed to the appearance and meaning of the typestract. To print with a duplicator a stencil first had to be prepared either on a typewriter or with a scanner. It had to be placed face down on the duplicator's ink-filled rollers. A blank sheet then had to be drawn between the rotating-roller and the pressure-roller so that the ink, forced through the holes of the stencil, could be pressed onto the printing surface. Lawrence Upton recalls that a Gestetner pumped ink to various points on the stencil horizontally so that the supply of ink to the points of the stencil that were furthest away could often lag behind those that were closer to the automatic pump. Due to this deficiency a Gestetner (as opposed to the Roneo, another popular make of mimeograph that relied on gravity to ink the stencil) offered the user 'some control over the flow' of ink. According to Upton there was a 'built in feed' but a 'hand pump was [also] there for when you needed more' ink.⁸³ Cobbing exaggerated this mechanical fault, which was designed to offer him more control, and used the manual pump to over-ink his prints. This method, which allowed the functions of the machine partially to dictate the appearance of his art, made parts of the typestract unreadable. It created the dark patches of ink that are visible in the top right-hand corner of 'Typestract One'. Given that 'Six Variations on Typestract One' was produced for DIAS, this erasure of text can be imagined as a form of destruction (See Fig. 8).

To make 'Typestract One' Cobbing also fed the paper through the duplicator several times, each time putting different stencils into the duplicator at 90° and 180° rotations. This created the partially legible square and rectangular text blocks that are seen in the final print. Depending on which way up the typestract is held some of the text always appears upside down. To read all the

⁸³ Lawrence Upton, interviewed by Steve Willey via email (September 2010).

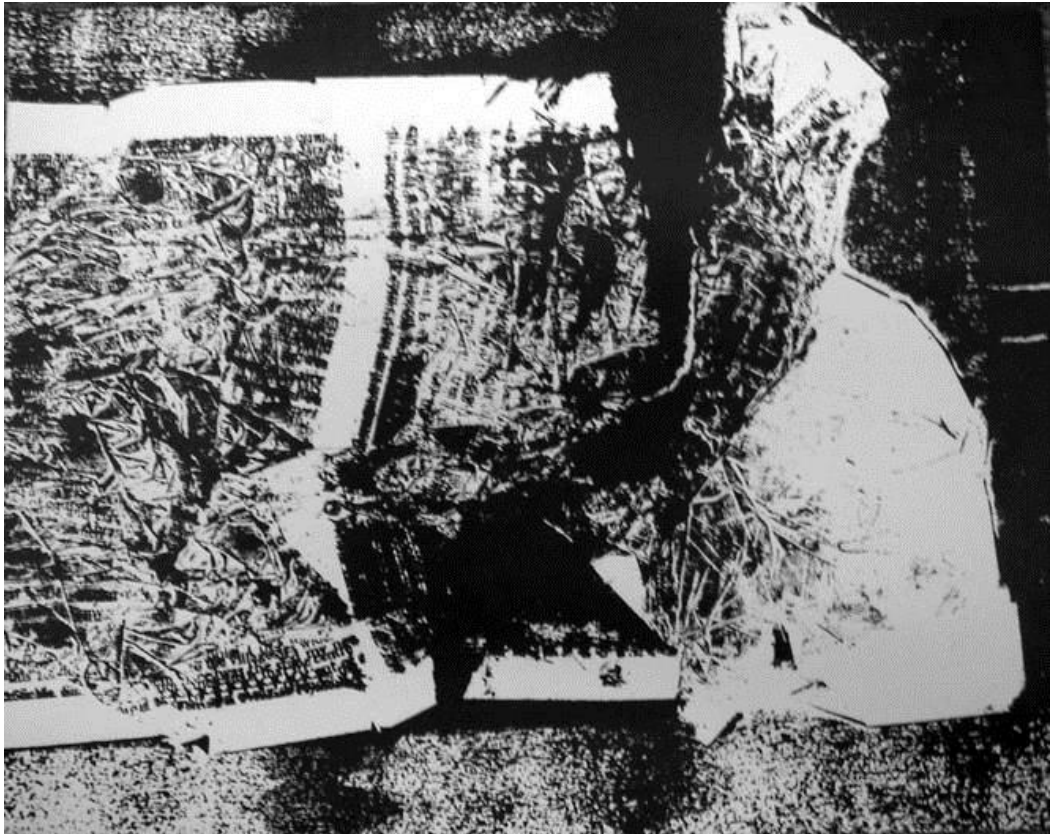


Figure 8. Print from Bob Cobbing, 'Six Variations On Typestract One For D.I.A.S' (1966). Duplicator print. Reproduced in *Lame Limping Mangled Marred and Mutilated: Collected Poems Volume 9* (London: David Barton, 1986), n.p. Reprinted with permission of Jennifer Cobbing.

legible text of 'Typestract One' it has to be rotated. In this respect 'Typestract One' recalls Cobbing's 'Meditation on Worms' (1954). In Chapter One, section five I noted that the words of this poem were arranged in a grid, but that the word 'worm', which ended each alternate line, and which was a symbol of an ideal harmony of the 'inner' site of emotion and the 'outer' state of nature, actually suggested an organic and circular structure. The integration of inner and outer, inflected as it was by the counterculture's values, was an important feature of 'Typestract One', while the source text that is arranged in four quadrilaterals is reminiscent of the word-grid. The circular structure, which was only implied in 'Meditation on Worms', is literalised in 'Typestract One', which has to be physically rotated if it is to be read.

This suggests that the integration of forms of destruction in the making of 'Typestract One' was related to the way that Cobbing developed, and moved beyond, the idea of art as an organic activity. In this respect Cobbing's typestract was in keeping with Houédard and Morgan's theorization of the term. Greg Thomas, who has done some recent and important research in the Morgan Archives at Glasgow University, has unearthed several letters that relate to this transition. The term, as Morgan explained in a letter to Robert Burchfield of the Oxford English Dictionary, 'arose swiftly and spontaneously' in the course of his writing a letter to Houédard. It was a portmanteau of the words 'typewriter' and 'abstract', and was created to describe 'that kind of concrete or visual poem in which the use of a typewriter is an essential component of the effect'.⁸⁴ Houédard's typestracts used the equal spacing of letters produced by the typewriter to create highly ordered, and mathematically precise structures, and the letter to which Morgan refers, sent to Houédard on 14/15 July 1964, concerned a series of typestracts that Houédard had sent him. In giving a close reading of a work, referred to as 'M U G A', Morgan explained that he found it 'very interesting to see the back of the organic being broken in this medium'. Here is the section from Morgan's letter, which explains what he means by this:

[...] when the non-square one in your second letter fell out and I picked it up I said, Ah, a tree, but then your signature made me turn it up the other way and it

⁸⁴ Edwin Morgan to Robert Burchfield, 10 January 1978, in Glasgow University Special Collections, Morgan Archives, Acc. 4848, Box 70.

looked like a stream of donations pouring into a piggybank, or the bottom half of an egg timer in full sift, so that (these interpretations being a wee thing improbable) I am now at a loss and have to ask you whether you did sign it the wrong way up???

Houédard wrote back to Morgan on 26 July 1964: he acknowledged Morgan's creation of the term 'typestract' before explaining that he intended for the work to 'be seen equally from any side'. Rotation was a requirement of the design of 'Typestract One', and Morgan's reading of Houédard's typestracts suggests that, even though Cobbing's appear imprecise and messy in comparison, in responding to the conceptual frame of DIAS, they departed from an organic conception of art in a comparable way.

Cobbing's definition of the typestract was a 'visual' that 'may be read', and in 'Typestract One' the relationship between its visual qualities, the legibility of the written word, and the possibility that those words might be read aloud is central to the work's meaning. In 'Typestract One' too much text in one space results in a 'visual' in the same place. The homophonic word play between 'see' and 'sea', which structured 'Are Your Children Safe in the Sea?' is presented in 'Typestract One' as an impossible choice: to see 'Typestract One' as an image is to be unable to hear the work as a text. As Cobbing's practice evolved he developed various methods to give his visuals aural form, but in the context of DIAS the relationship between the potential audibility of the text and the comparative silence of the image that replaced it, which happened because of an over-application of text, was one of destruction.

Morgan described the shape of Houédard's typestract as an 'egg timer in full sift', which is pertinent given that 'Six Variations of Typestract One for DIAS' and 'Destruction in Art' both incorporated a sense of duration. Cobbing noted that over five hundred different printed variations of the stencil of 'Typestract One' and 'Destruction in Art' were produced, of which, only six of each set were selected for display in the basement of Better Books.⁸⁶ The duplicating process rapidly degraded the stencil, and Upton notes that in order to

⁸⁵ Edward Morgan to Dom Sylvester Houédard, 14/15 July 1964, in Glasgow University Special Collections, Morgan Papers, Acc. 4848, Box 21.

⁸⁶ Cobbing, *Lame Limping*, endnotes, n.p.



Figure 9. Prints from beginning, middle and end of sequence, Bob Cobbing, 'Destruction In Art' (1966). Duplicator prints. Reproduced in *Lame Limping Mangled Marred and Mutilated: Collected Poems Volume 9* (London: David Barton, 1986), n.p. Reprinted with permission of Jennifer Cobbing.

get around this problem one could ‘jump’ the print job ‘along a parallel vector by scanning an output’. This scan produced a non-degraded stencil from which one could then work. He notes that the printing often had to be completed in a single sitting because the ink seemed to rot the stencil if it was left for long enough. The results of the scanning process were often heavily transformative, just as photocopying was in the early days, and the scanner produced ‘unpredictable’ results that became ‘less unpredictable [the more] you got to know’ how it worked.⁸⁷ Cobbing produced the five hundred prints of ‘Destruction in Art’ and ‘Six Variations on Typestract One’ by alternating at various points between the scanner and the duplicator.

For ‘Destruction In Art’ Cobbing ‘took the stencil of the invitation to, and the program of, the Destruction In Art Symposium and gradually destroyed these texts on the duplicator, and printed at each stage’ (see Fig. 9).⁸⁸ For this reason, like Cobbing’s ‘Dynamic Progress’ (1954), each print was a temporal marker in a single creative process. Yet this was no longer an organic process. Rather it registered the fact that the duplicator was increasingly threatened by obsolescence; Cobbing destroyed texts on a machine that would soon cease to be produced. The importance of mimeographic reproduction to the counterculture corresponded to a decline throughout the 1950s and 1960s in the official use of the technology. Xerox introduced Xerographic office photocopying in the 1950s, and in 1966 the *Economist* indexed the decline of the mimeograph by recording that in most American offices executives instructed subordinates to ‘make me a Xerox of this report’ rather than ‘make me a copy of it’.⁸⁹ Although the official change from the mimeograph to electro-photographic copying machines was more gradual in England, it was further threatened by offset printing which became the dominant form of commercial printing in the 1950s (and it remains so to this day). In the context of DIAS, the obsolescence of these commodities is best understood as a variety of destruction upon which capitalism depends.

Built-in-obsolescence (where a product is specifically designed so that it will become obsolete) is one way that capitalists make profit from this dependency. Kristine Stiles, who wrote the first full-length study of DIAS, noted

⁸⁷ Upton interviewed by Willey (2010).

⁸⁸ Cobbing, *Lame Limping*, endnotes, n.p.

⁸⁹ “Xerox, n.”, *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter *OED*) online, <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 15 September 2011].

that Metzger imagined the existence of ‘Auto-Destructive Art monuments that were to be factory assembled and installed in public sites’ as early as 1961. Once installed they would, in Stiles’ words, ‘slowly and completely auto-destruct [...] they would disappear leaving no collectible debris.’⁹⁰ The destruction of the artwork was intended to resist its commoditisation and provide a critique of the art market. In this regard Auto-Destructive Art was unlike built-in-obsolence, but the extent to which the two were analogous was a point of discussion at the ‘Ravensbourne Symposium on Creation Destruction & Chemical Change’, held at the Ravensbourne College of Art and Design (23 May 1960), which involved Houédard and Metzger, and other artists that went on to participate in DIAS.

The symposium was comprised of a demonstration, a talk and a discussion. An edited selection of Houédard’s fourteen-page report on the discussion, that was written up from tapes of the proceedings, was published as ‘The Aesthetics of the Death Wish?’ in 1966, a title that echoed Nuttall’s diagnosis of ‘bomb culture’ in 1968.⁹¹ The discussion was the only part of the proceedings that was not taped so it had to be recreated from memory, and Houédard includes reflections that would have been impossible at the time. For example, he comments on his introduction to Cobbing’s issue of *Extra Verse*, which was not published until 1966. Research at Cobbing’s house has recovered the full and unedited typescript of this report, and it is from this document that I now quote.

During a discussion of the analogous relation between built-in-obsolence and Auto-Destructive art, Houédard remarked that in general any artist who aimed at developing his art was ‘aiming at his work ... becoming obsolete’.⁹² Earlier in the discussion he also noted that if ‘destruction’ was ‘hitting the piano with a hammer’, then ‘Auto-destruction’ was ‘letting the piano play itself out of existence’.⁹³ In both these ways the artist initiates a process where obsolence is built into the artwork from the beginning. In these terms, the five hundred prints that which were made during the process of and

⁹⁰ Kristine Stiles, ‘The Destruction In Art Symposium (DIAS): The Radical Cultural Project of Event-Structured Live Art’ (University of California, Berkeley, unpublished doctoral thesis, 1987), 61.

⁹¹ Dom Sylvester Houédard, ‘The Aesthetics of the Death Wish?’, in *Art and Artists*, vol. 1, No. 5 (August 1966), 48-50.

⁹² Houédard, ‘The Aesthetics of the Death Wish?’, 9.

⁹³ Houédard, ‘The Aesthetics of the Death Wish?’, 7.

constituted Cobbing's typestract 'Destruction in Art', were auto-destructive. Cobbing simply followed a process through to its logical conclusion. In response to the complex relation between obsolescence and artistic intentionality that Houédard's observations and the ideas of Auto-Destruction in art implied, one member of staff at Ravensbourne asked: 'does the poor consumer who buys a work of ADA [Auto-Destructive-Art] to last 10 years, 5 years or 6 months have to buy the artist too [in order] to work it?'.⁹⁴ The staff member was, in a slightly mocking way, referring to the fact that the processes employed in Auto-Destructive Art could be highly technical and require, in the case of Metzger's work, an almost scientific knowledge of how materials and chemicals responded to one another. However his question also suggested that, in the absence of a collectable artwork, one of the things that would make that absence meaningful in artistic terms would be the identification of the creator of that absence as an artist. In other words, if the actual art object could not be bought or identified as art, this did not mean that the artist or the events in which they creatively took part could not be documented and sold as art. In this way, the question subtly undermined some of the slightly naïve arguments that were being made as to the ability of Auto-Destructive art to resist appropriation by the art market. In Houédard's recording of this exchange, the question did not receive an adequate response. First, the staff member was told that one of the things that Auto-Destructive-Art was against was the 'idea of art as currency in the gallery market', and then the final contributor to the discussion declared that the question of 'who is an artist' was an attitude that belonged to the 19th century, and was no longer necessary.

Cobbing's work was less naïve, and artistic identity was a central concern of both of the creative contributions he made for DIAS. In calling an art strike in 1957 Cobbing drew attention to the relation between art and the withdrawal of the artist's labour, and the institutional reality of art. I argued that this was figured aesthetically in the Hendon Film Society poster where paint was scratched away to form the word 'Strike', the name of the film it advertised. This aspect of Cobbing's work was developed in 1966: the withdrawal of the artist's intentions as an aspect of their labour was seen as the key characteristic of Auto-

⁹⁴ Houédard, 'The Aesthetics of the Death Wish?', 9, 11.

Destructive art, while Cobbing's works 'Destruction in Art' and 'Six Variations on Typestract One' drew attention to the institutional realities of DIAS. The texts that he used to make 'Destruction in Art' promoted and helped in the formation of the event that Cobbing had helped to organize. In these terms 'Destruction in Art' permuted a visual manifestation of the labour he expended in creating the DIAS event. Despite the fact that the DIAS artists eschewed the ideas of the art object and the artist, 'Destruction in Art' reflected on the group identity of the DIAS artists, who had come together under its banner. This element of self-reflection in Cobbing's work complicated the idea of destruction in art and created a conceptual distance from DIAS.

This distance is marked by the fact that 'Destruction in Art' and 'Six Variations on Typestract One' did not completely disappear in the way Metzger thought Auto-Destructive art should. When only six out of the five hundred prints were displayed in the basement of Better Books, the temporal gaps between the prints widened. The work was characterised by incompleteness. Many of the other prints have since been lost. 'Destruction in Art' and 'Six Variations on Typestract One' disappeared (albeit only partially) through their dissemination. Further, when the editors of *Extra Verse* dedicated the seventeenth issue of their magazine to Cobbing's poems, and allowed him to design every aspect, he made the covers of the first edition out of 'Typestract One'; the same print that provided the content for 'Six Variations on Typestract One for DIAS'. This was not mentioned in the publication.⁹⁵ Rather than being permuted for its content 'Typestract One' was used as a framing device for his other poems, including the 'ear' and 'eye' versions of 'Are Your Children Safe In the Sea?'. This self-effacing manoeuvre, where 'Typestract One' became a context inside which other poems were presented, can be understood as a metaphor for the way that 'Destruction in Art' and 'Six Variations on Typestract One' partially disappear when viewed as self-contained artworks, but reappear when they are understood as conceptual frames for DIAS. These works permuted the critical precepts of DIAS while incorporating many of the gestures of Auto-Destructive Art. They did so without entirely abandoning the art object. Each image in 'Destruction in Art' was unique because each was subject to the

⁹⁵ *Extra Verse* magazine 17 (1966), ed. Barry Cole and D. M Black.

imperfections that were introduced through the mechanism of reproduction, and in this final respect the prints from the work are best thought of as visual manifestations of the mechanistic function of verbal permutation. In ‘Six Variations on Typestract One’ and ‘Destruction in Art’ the source texts were gradually replaced by images over the course of the five hundred prints.

The Destruction in Art Symposium was important to Cobbing’s practice in a number of ways. It helped him complicate the organicist modes of his practice that he had first developed in Hendon. In providing him with a larger, more complex and internationalist community in which to work, the forms and modes of that practice were enriched. By resituating his typestracts, first in a gallery, then in 1966 as a front cover to a book of his poems, and in 1986 as one of a number of collected poems, the processes of destruction that DIAS artists used in their events occurred in Cobbing’s practice, and continue to occur, across different types of art. This is one of the most important outcomes of Cobbing’s engagement with DIAS. The gradual change from text to image that takes place inside ‘Destruction in Art’ and ‘Six Variations on Typestract One’ demands to be understood in terms of a larger narrative about how change occurs in art, and why it is necessary. I would like to conclude this section by drawing out some elements of this wider discussion.

Like Metzger, Cobbing believed that the threat of nuclear annihilation was very real, and he related it to his work as an artist and poet. The British government ‘had taken the decision to manufacture the hydrogen bomb as early as 1952’, and in May 1957 the first British nuclear weapon was dropped in the Pacific.⁹⁶ When Cobbing produced ‘Destruction in Art’ he was responding to the conceptual and experiential frame of DIAS, but he was also responding to this wider context. Some of Cobbing’s early ideas on the subject were set out when they were reported in a *Finchley Post* article titled ‘Poet opens Art Show: Style Linked with A-Bombs’ (17 March 1961). According to the article, Cobbing believed two ‘revolutions’ had taken place in painting in the twentieth century. First was ‘the cubist revolution that had restored painting to the flat surface, the single plane’, where ‘painting became an object in its own right, not an imitation of something else’. Second was the ‘1945 revolution’, which had ‘embraced

⁹⁶ Stiles, ‘The Destruction In Art Symposium’, 76.

chance, hazard, accident and spontaneity'. According to Cobbing this type of painting lived 'by a miracle, sustained by its own internal force of being', and was linked with the 'dropping of atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.'⁹⁷ Writing in a personal notebook (at around the time these views were reported) he set out the argument more starkly: 'Life changes and is changed by art. Art changes and is changed by life. One of the most significant events in the history of mankind took place in 1945 Nagazaki [*sic*] Hiroshima. Painting: Tachisme, Action Painting, can be dated from the end of that year.'⁹⁸ The *Finchley Post* article reported Cobbing's declaration that the world was 'not an orderly, logical, trustworthy place', and that because 'corruption exists', and because 'chaos is everywhere', it 'must be recognised, lived with, charted, rendered harmless and potentially good'. The implication here is that this was one of the moral and aesthetic functions of art: to provide non-clichéd images of reality that remained responsive to its perpetually altering forms.

Cobbing's arguments stress the reciprocal relation between art and life, and embrace, at least in part, the idea that the physical art object might disappear through being resituated. He rearticulated these ideas about change in art in non-moralistic terms at several points in his life. His comments help explain why he believed artistic change was intrinsically bound to art's 'internal force of being'.⁹⁹ In an interview conducted in 1981 he argued that the writer did not write, and should not write, either for himself or for an audience. Instead, he argued, the 'writer writes for the poem':

once one begins the poem, that poem has an existence in its own right and one is serving the poem, is trying to make it as much like itself as possible, and I think that goes for the actual notation and for the performance.¹⁰⁰

In an earlier statement (1974) Cobbing noted that there were many ways of 'making a poem more like its self', including making visual, sound, spatial, and

⁹⁷ 'Poet opens Art Show: Style Linked with A-Bombs', *Finchley Post*, 17 March 1961, BL Add MS 88909/14.

⁹⁸ 'Hendon Arts Theatre (2)', BL Add MS 88909/23, note book labelled 33.

⁹⁹ 'Poet opens Art Show: Style Linked with A-Bombs', *Finchley Post*, 17 March 1961, BL Add MS 88909/14.

¹⁰⁰ Bob Cobbing, Steven Ross Smith, *Ballet of the Speech Organs*, 6.

even choreographic versions of the poem.¹⁰¹ In other words, to make the poem more ‘like itself’ meant that the poem’s form should perpetually change. This explains why he frequently revisited his poems and adapted their forms, as he did with ‘Are Your Children Safe in The Sea?’ and ‘Typestract One’. Conversely, it also suggests that he understood the ‘self’ of the poem to be contingent and mutable: ‘serving’ the poem meant serving that contingent and mutable ‘self’. This is one explanation for the wide variety of Cobbing’s creative expressions, and the rapid formal developments that are seen across his poems: how the relatively contained, seventeen-line verbal permutation poems of ‘Make Perhaps This Out Sense Of Can You’ and ‘Headlines’, written in 1963 and 1964 respectively, were followed two years later by the much more expansive five-hundred print sequence of ‘Destruction in Art’. It also explains, despite their different appearances, why both these works should be understood as permutations.

To speak of a ‘self’ in this context is to speak of a ‘self’ that is co-existent with an unpredictable and unstable reproductive mechanism. It also seems to imply the emergence of an essence. The poem becomes self-identical when its outer layers are stripped away. Paradoxically, these outer layers are also different versions of the poem that are then disseminated as such, while the poem’s essential life continues to evolve in different contexts. In the 1970s, and as Cobbing’s idea of a ‘choreographic version’ of a poem and his use of words such as ‘notation’ suggests, this meant making his body part of a live performance practice. Despite his insistence that the writer should not write for an audience, in reality as part of his attempt to ‘serve’ the poem in the 1970s he developed an improvised style where he responded with his body to the unpredictable reactions of an audience during live performance (see Chapter Five). But this aspect of his practice was not well developed in 1966, and in the context of DIAS, Cobbing’s attempt to serve a ‘self’ that was co-existent with an unpredictable reproductive mechanism meant making his typestracts more like the flaws in the machine that had been used to produce them. Cobbing used a mechanistic metaphor when he described his belief that the poet was a ‘vehicle’ and not a ‘dictator’.¹⁰² Like the DIAS artists he wanted to ensure that he served the poem, not just his own

¹⁰¹ Cobbing, *Bob Cobbing & Writers Forum*, 59.

¹⁰² Cobbing, *Ballet of the Speech Organs*, 6.

artistic ends . This approach to poetic production meant that he could only retrospectively assess whether this had been successful. Paradoxically, this approach established the poet and the poem's continual exposure to disintegration and transformation as the always-present precondition for a poetic 'self' unity that was to come. Cobbing's death in 2002 arrested the reciprocal relation between the perpetually altering 'self' of his poems and the contingencies of his own life. Works like 'Headlines', 'Make Perhaps This Out Sense Of Can You', 'Six Variations on Typestract One for DIAS' and 'Destruction in Art' are not just records of Cobbing's actions in Finchley and in London's counterculture, they are abstractions, redistributions and permutations of the historical record, and of history itself. Cobbing's death provides a conceptual vantage point from which his 'performance' practice can be reconstructed in the past, and in this respect Cobbing's poems, typestracts and paintings direct our reconstructions.

Conclusion

It is important that Cobbing's artworks are used as one of the primary prisms with which to view his life as an artist. The occasional nature of his art, and his habit of putting himself into, and moving between, different institutions and cultural configurations meant that the reception of his work was often localized and partial in its understanding. The way that Cobbing's work in Hendon and Finchley related to his involvement with DIAS is something that his critical reception in the mid-1960s simply did not address. This chapter has attempted to redress this situation.

In a review of a Group H exhibition (October 1966) held at the large Drian Gallery (5/7 Porchester Place, London), where eighty-seven artworks were on display, Arthur Moyses presented the exhibition as a favourable alternative to DIAS. He argued that whereas 'DIAS deserved to fail for its portentous sterility and the nastiness of its imported gimmicks ... *group h* succeeds within its own parochial frame of reference but history and the Town have passed it by'. He used the 'local' origins of Group H to distinguish the art of the Group from the well-publicised, well-known, and now more comprehensively researched event of DIAS. Moyses actually predicts this state of affairs at the start of his article: 'The International Destruction in Art Symposium has quietly flowed down its

own self-created drain with but hardly a gurgle and all the Town can do is wait for the book of the myth'. (In 1987 something of this sort appeared as Kristine Stiles's thesis *Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS): The Radical Project of Event-Structured Art*.) Moyse saw it as a 'tactical failure' that DIAS did not incorporate and utilise the 'local talent' of 'group h', arguing that if they had been incorporated into the 'monied setup' of DIAS it 'could have put on an act that would have had the Town kicking up its heels for at least a week.'¹⁰³ As both Stiles and I have documented, Better Books was one of the centres where DIAS events took place, Cobbing was on the DIAS Honorary Committee, he was listed in its programme of events, and he also produced artworks for the Symposium. It is ironic but also very fitting that Moyse, in contrasting Group H to DIAS, missed the contributions Cobbing made to both.

In her 2005 article 'The Story of the Destruction in Art Symposium and the "DIAS affect"' published to coincide with the 'Gustav Metzger – Geschichte Geschichte' exhibition at the Generali Foundation in Vienna, Stiles discussed the critical reception of DIAS, and unearthed Paula James's account of a DIAS event where the artist Robin Page created his artwork 'KROW I'. James published her account in the *Daily Mirror* under the title 'Destroyers Stage Their First Event: In the Name of Art He Creates...A Hole':

Mr. Robin Page, who has threatened to start an art form that involves stamping frogs to death, gave a demonstration of his ideas yesterday. Wearing a silver suit, silver-painted helmet and rubber knee-boots, he bored and pickaxed through the concrete floor of Better Books... Chips of concrete flew at the audience. After half an hour Page struck water. Mr. [Bob] Cobbing, the manager, then said: 'This must stop!' Page ... downed his shovel, sat in the hole, and drank a bottle of beer. He said: 'I feel very good. I have no more doubts about anything. It is a beautiful hole. If somebody wants to buy it, the price would be 125 pounds. It's a major work, but I'm open to offers.' Two girls in mini-skirts then paraded with placards protesting against the possible killing of chickens. Page was unrepentant.'¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Arthur Moyse, 'Round The Galleries', *Freedom*, 12 November 1966, Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (3)', BL Add MS 88909/15.

¹⁰⁴ Paula James quoted in Kristine Stiles, 'The Story of the Destruction in Art Symposium and the "DIAS affect"', 2005 <http://duke.edu/web/art/stiles/KristineStilesDIAS_Affect.pdf> [accessed 15 September 2012], n.p.

Given the stage-managed nature of some DIAS events and Cobbing's position on the Honorary Committee it is unclear from this description whether his intervention 'stop!' was the always-intended mechanism through which the art action would cease, an extension of the artwork's meaning, or simply an understandable example of his care for the material of the bookshop which was in the process of being destroyed. The relationship between the artwork (the hole) and its price was part of the meaning of Page's performance, and in this respect Cobbing's role as the bookshop's 'manager', the person who ensured the venue ran at a profit, was central. What is certain however is that Cobbing is depicted as a moderating influence rather than as a fellow artist.

James's account makes no mention of Cobbing's involvement with Group H, just as Moyes appears unaware of Cobbing's involvement in DIAS. In order to demonstrate that Cobbing's 'performance' was a coherent practice, I have presented a study of Cobbing's organisational practices from the mid-1950s in Hendon, via Finchley, to the mid-1960s international counterculture, in terms of Cobbing's use of permutation. Stiles, for her part, describes Cobbing as an 'English sound and visual poet', but this identity was still at an early stage of formation in September 1966, even though it has now become one of the dominant interpretations of Cobbing's identity and practice. In this chapter I have shown how verbal permutation created the conceptual distance between Cobbing and local art, and was one of the mechanisms that created his identity as a visual poet. In the next chapter I explore how Cobbing's physical and conceptual distance from the stage at the Royal Albert Hall, where the poets of the 'International Poetry Incarnation' met in June 1965 to perform, in what is now seen as one of the seminal countercultural poetry readings of the 1960s, was behind his identity as an 'English Sound Poet'.

Chapter Three: *Sound Poems and the International Poetry Incarnation*

This chapter defines Bob Cobbing's *Sound Poems* (1965) as an occasional poem and the International Poetry Incarnation (IPI) in 1965 as the occasion to which the poem responds. These occasions ostensibly have little to do with each other. One key connection is that Cobbing established his reputation as a professional poet in the context of the national interest in sound poetry that the IPI instituted. Furthermore, Cobbing did contribute to the IPI but in ways that are not acknowledged either in its dominant representations that were circulated at the time or in its ongoing representations, which continue to be marshalled by those who organised the event. He did so in slow, distant ways which do not fit the prevailing interpretation of the IPI as immediate and spontaneous. This has implications for our understanding of the development of sound poetry in Britain, particularly as Cobbing's *Sound Poems* is often claimed as an exemplar of the form in English.

Sound Poems is now better known under the title Cobbing later gave it, *ABC in Sound*: both titles are used in this chapter.¹ It was the seventh publication in the 'Writers Forum Poets' series and the twelfth Writers Forum publication overall.² Cobbing wrote the first of its twenty-six sections on 31 May 1964, only four months after he composed his verbal permutation poem 'Headlines', and he completed it six months later on 26 December 1964 just before he left Finchley.³ In the previous chapter I showed how Cobbing's permutation poems adopted a stance towards their institutional setting and the character of the community in which Cobbing worked. *Sound Poems* was no different.

The IPI was a four-hour poetry reading that took place in the Albert Hall on 11 June 1965. An estimated seven thousand people witnessed it, making it

¹ For early documented use of the new title see: 'An ABC In Sound', *Radio Times*, 30 December 1965, 'Notebook of Cuttings (1)', BL Add MS 88909/112. The advert announced the broadcast of *Sound Poems*, 'a production with the BBC Radiophonic Workshop', under the new title of 'An ABC In Sound'. The advert reads 'Since the success of Ernst Jandl's reading at the Albert Hall last June considerable interest has been aroused in attempts to develop an art of pure sound.' In this form the title puns on Ezra Pound, *An ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1934).

² For dates see *Writers Forum Checklist of Publications 1954-1998*, n.p.

³ For manuscript versions of the sections 'A'- 'E' see: 'Notebook of Poems', BL Add MS 88909/46. For a close reading of 'Headlines' see Chapter Two. For dates of *Sound Poems* completion see copyright page to Bob Cobbing, *Third ABC in Sound* (London: Writers Forum, 2000).

one of the most well attended poetry events of the twentieth century.⁴ According to Michael Horovitz (whom Barry Miles identifies as the principal organiser and who has become synonymous with the event) it was organised by a ‘poet’s co-operative’ that included John Esam, Harry Fainlight, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Fernandez, Allen Ginsberg, Paolo Lionni, Dan Richter, Alexander Trocchi, Simon Vinkenoog and Horovitz himself.⁵ Miles, who managed Better Books before Cobbing, provides a list of the event’s readers: Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Lionni, Richter (American); Fainlight, Adrian Mitchell, Pete Brown, Horovitz, Christopher Logue, Spike Hawkins, Tom McGrath, George Macbeth (British); Esam (from New Zealand); Vinkenoog (Dutch); Anselm Hollo (Finnish); and Ernst Jandl (Austrian).⁶ Cobbing’s name does not appear on either list: he did not read at the event, and nor is he credited with its organisation. A postcard that Dom Sylvester Houédard sent Cobbing on 22 February 1966 suggests that Cobbing’s absence from the historical record of the IPI was not completely of his own choosing.⁷

The postcard further shows that as well as influencing Cobbing’s use of the typestract (see Chapter Two, section three), Houédard influenced Cobbing’s career, directing it towards Europe. Houédard’s opening question implies that Cobbing’s decision to focus his attention on a European poetry scene rather than ‘yanqiland’ was a reaction against Miles’s interest in American poetry:

are you still aiming to concentrate on continent & let miles look to yanqiland? –
if so you may like know LA CEDILLE QUI SOURIT (brecht: filliou: staffeldt):
12 rue de may: villefranche-sur-mer: A-M: sell spoerri Williams shiomi &c
‘cadeaux’ &c also APPROCHES n.1 out today: julien blaine: 82 bd de port-
royal: paris-5: /75 (tph-535-95-21) (with ian & self & bann & popper &&&c) –
hope u got back safe – ex-po-66 n’ham was on whole pretty good.⁸

⁴ For estimated audience numbers see: Barry Miles, *London Calling: A Countercultural History of London Since 1945* (London: Atlantic Books, 2010), 147.

⁵ Michael Horovitz, *Children of Albion*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1969), 337.

⁶ Miles, *London Calling*, 146.

⁷ Cobbing recalled that he met Dom Sylvester Houédard at Better Books in 1965. Houédard walked into Better Books and ‘opened a suitcase and brought out all sorts of magazines and books that he had collected which he had come to show me.’ See Bob Cobbing interview with Wolfgang Görtschacher, February 16, 1995, in Wolfgang Görtschacher, *Contemporary Views on The Little Magazine Scene* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 2000), 308.

⁸ Dom Sylvester Houédard to Bob Cobbing, 22 February 1966. Courtesy of Jennifer Pike Cobbing. Cobbing’s participation in European sound poetry is considered in Chapter Four below.

Approches and *La Cedille Qui Sourit* were French poetry magazines, and in his typically compressed and unconventional style Houédard suggested that Cobbing should send work to them. In this respect Cobbing's turn towards Europe was synonymous with his turn towards Houédard. These distribution contexts and the way that they altered the meaning and form of Cobbing's poetry are addressed in Chapter Four of this thesis. This chapter explores how Cobbing's interest in European sound poetry was also brought about by the way that Miles and Horovitz used the IPI to secure and institute their relationship with the American Beats.

Sound Poems (like the IPI) marks a turning point in Cobbing's poetic career. One index of his critical reception in the years that followed the publication of *Sound Poems* and the success of the IPI comes in the form of his claim (made in 1974) that while he regarded himself as an 'amateur in the arts' in 1964, *Sound Poems* led him to believe that he could 'become professional', which he did 'full time in 1967.'⁹ While permutation initiated his long retreat from local cultural organisations and redirected his gaze towards London's counterculture – playing a fundamental role in the shift between his verbal and visual poetry – *Sound Poems* initiated the transition from his status as an amateur to that of the professional poet. It also presaged his long identification with sound poetry. For Cobbing these transitions happened simultaneously, but for the purposes of clarity they have been considered separately here. Instead of looking at Cobbing's sound poetry in terms of his relationship with Houédard and European poetry, I consider it in a British context.

The arc of Cobbing's poetic career is inextricably bound to his emerging identity as a sound poet, which in Britain was inflected by his absence from Miles and Horovitz's accounts of the IPI. This is evident in a review by Meirion Bowen which introduces the subject of sound poetry through the figure of Jandl even though the review is ostensibly about Cobbing.¹⁰ The review was of the 'Festival of Sound', a sound-concrete poetry festival that Cobbing and composer Annea Lockwood organised in August 1968, and a performance that Cobbing

⁹ Bob Cobbing, *Bob Cobbing & Writers Forum* (1974; 2nd ed. 1999), 56.

¹⁰ Bowen, a composer and journalist, who at the time of writing the review had just started in his post of Director of Music at Kingston-upon-Thames University, and had already worked for two years as a BBC Radio Producer (1965-7). He was an artist who had an insider's perspective on the relationship between the artist and the cultural institution (Bowen also wrote for the *Times Educational Supplement* between 1963-71).

and Lockwood gave to the press on its opening day.¹¹ Bowen reviewed the event for the *Times Educational Supplement* on 30 August 1968 at a time when Cobbing already identified himself as a professional poet. Introducing his review, which included a reading of a collaborative rendition of the ‘T’ section of *Sound Poems*, Bowen wrote ‘It was in fact, the success of Ernest Jandl’s reading at the Albert Hall in 1965 that provoked interest in the art of “pure sound”: and now, three years later a Festival of Sound has been mounted, from August 22 to 28, at Cheyne Walk, Chelsea.’¹² This understanding of the Festival of Sound, Cobbing’s practice, and sound poetry in general was communicated to a readership of teachers. Bowen was not alone in lauding Jandl’s performance as one of the successes of the IPI. Horovitz, Alex Lykiard (who introduced the book of the IPI) and the *Guardian* newspaper all argued in different ways and at various times that Jandl’s performance was of central importance to the reception and understanding of sound poetry in Britain. The noisy and unhinged reaction of the Albert Hall audience to Jandl’s voice, which implies that sound poetry was noisy and unhinged, is also often mentioned.

It is hard to overstate the importance of the *ABC in Sound* to those that knew Cobbing and his work well. Take, for example, the *Official Programme of the Book-fair and Readings*, published on 10 November 1996 to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the Association of Little Presses, an organisation that Cobbing had founded.¹³ In a short biographical statement Cobbing is referred to as the ‘Grand-daddy of the world of concrete poetry’, and *Sound Poems* is said to have had ‘such a major impact’, that it had ‘become a point of reference for all subsequent sound poetry written’ in Britain.¹⁴ The first description of Cobbing as a ‘Grand-daddy’ celebrates his important status as a figure, while the second

¹¹ The Festival of Sound was a ‘one-week event in the Pavilions in the Park pilot scheme, which promoted a variety of art activities chosen by ballot, in three demountable polyhedral pavilions erected on a building site at the corner of Oakley Street and Cheyne Walk in Chelsea.’ See *The Times*, 26 August 1968, ‘Notebook of Cuttings (1)’, BL Add MS 88909/112.

¹² Meirion Bowen, ‘Concrete Abstractions’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 30 August 1968, ‘Notebook of Cuttings (1)’, BL Add MS 88909/112.

¹³ ALP was a ‘democratic confederation of publishers’ set up by Bill Griffiths and Cobbing in 1966, in order to ‘provide a support network’, information, contacts, and advice to those setting up and running small presses. Initially it was meant to act as a ‘pressure group’ to ‘extend the availability of grant aid’, and in this respect it is an example of Cobbing’s growing professional status, and testifies to his ability to construct long running poetic institutions that could support his work and the work of others. See: *Celebrating the 30th anniversary of the ‘Association of Little Presses’*, *Official programme of the Book-fair and Readings* (London: Southern Arts, Morells Brewery Ltd, 10 November 1996), 2, 36.

¹⁴ *Celebrating the 30th anniversary of the ‘Association of Little Presses’*, 21.

description celebrates the influence of his poetry. These descriptions place the life of the man and the life of the poem in parallel.

They are further conflated by Peter Finch (a regular attendee of Writers Forum in the 1970s) in his poem ‘an ABC with noise for Bob Cobbing at 75’. The poem, taken from Finch’s sequence *Just Deserts*, was included in the ALP booklet.¹⁵ Written in honor of the *ABC in Sound* and Cobbing’s seventy-fifth birthday, the poem’s form was loosely abecedarian, and it intermixed allusions to Cobbing’s poetics with allusions to his poetry and his life. A poem such as this, placed in a publication that celebrated the existence of an organization that Cobbing had founded only one year after *Sound Poems* was published, is emblematic of the dialogic relationship that existed between his life as a poet, his poetic career, the form of *Sound Poems*, its pedagogic influence on younger poets like Finch, and its effect on the wider practice of sound poetry in Britain.

Although *Sound Poems* was written before the IPI was even conceived and was not performed at the event, the increase in the number of poetry readings that the IPI generated, coupled to the rise in the popularity of and interest in sound poetry specifically, meant that Cobbing got more opportunities to perform. He could start to make a living as a sound poet. The relation between big poetry readings in the Albert Hall (a trend initiated by the IPI) and an increase in poetry readings generally was a phenomenon that was reported in the national press.¹⁶ From this perspective the unprecedented cultural noise that the IPI produced (beginning with the physical noises that the audience made when they heard Jandl’s performance) was the axis around which Cobbing made his transition from an amateur to a professional. By performing as a sound poet, he cemented his reputation as one. This has meant, however, that the *ABC in Sound* has always been seen within the conceptual and historical frame of sound poetry.

Descriptions similar to Bowen’s of Jandl’s performance at the Albert Hall (which helped to popularise sound poetry in Britain) and Cobbing’s *Sound Poems* present two different versions of sound poetry, and this is one of the difficulties to be resolved in presenting any account of Cobbing’s sound poetry.

¹⁵ *Celebrating the 30th anniversary of the ‘Association of Little Presses’*, 8-10.

¹⁶ ‘for the poet there is much more spin-off from his original work and more opportunities to indulge in related activities which help buy the groceries. Poetry readings in the back rooms of pubs or in vast piles like the Albert Hall are part and parcel of the new interest’. See: ‘Prufrock For better and verse’, *Sunday Times*, Business News section, 15 October 1972, ‘Notebook of Cuttings (1)’, BL Add MS 88909/112.

Once one actually reads *Sound Poems*, Bowen's argument in 1968 that the success of Jandl's reading at the Albert Hall provoked an interest in the art of 'pure sound' in Britain is actually incompatible with the retrospective designation of *Sound Poems* in the ALP programme (1996) as 'a point of reference for all subsequent sound poetry that was written' in Britain from the mid 1960s onwards.¹⁷ Three things make them compatible. Firstly, Cobbing's desire to perform, which is explicable in terms of his long-held belief that poems should be heard. Secondly, his desire to make a living from poetry meant that he had to align his practice with the kind of poetry that one could get paid for (in the 1960s this meant sound poetry). This can be understood in terms of his desire to find a sustainable way of being a poet under capitalism, and his consistent practice of making the enabling conditions of art part of the substance of art. Lastly, because the IPI had fundamentally shaped the reception of sound poetry and its practice in Britain, Cobbing had to resituate his poetry as sound poetry if the reciprocal relation between his poems and the ever-changing circumstances of his life (and vice versa) was to be maintained. The importance of this principle to Cobbing was explored in Chapter Two, Section three.

These complex practices of realignment meant that when Cobbing was acclaimed as 'the British sound poet', and as the 'best known of the English sound poets', it is not at all clear what was being communicated.¹⁸ Is sound poetry being defined according to what was instituted in the representations of the IPI or according to what is found in *Sound Poems* itself? *Sound Poems* predates the IPI, but was its reputation in Britain as a significant sound poem established partly as a result of the IPI? From this perspective the IPI is either a silent or a noisy pivot around which Cobbing's reputation in Britain turned. Depending on which way the representations of the IPI are heard, they either represent a deafening silence or a silencing noise that occludes the intricacies of Cobbing's most important poem. In this chapter both of these interpretations are given a hearing, and sometimes simultaneously. This is in keeping with the spirit of *Sound Poems*, which was performed in the lead up to the IPI, as well as

¹⁷ *Celebrating the 30th anniversary of the 'Association of Little Presses'*, 21. Bowen, 'Concrete Abstractions', *Times Educational Supplement*, 30 August 1968, 'Notebook of Cuttings (1)', BL Add MS 88909/112.

¹⁸ 'Bob Cobbing & Henri Chopin', *Mandate*, 4 November 1969 and 'Sounds Peculiar at the Third Eye', *The Scotsman*, 8 May 1978, both in 'Notebook of Cuttings (1)' BL: Add MS 88909/112.

shortly after the event, but not actually on stage at the Albert Hall on 11 June 1965.

There are similarities between how Cobbing approached and treated *Sound Poems* and Peter Middleton's concept of distant reading. Middleton argues that the 'common-sense understanding of close reading [...] conceals a paradox: a specific close reading of a poem is almost always perceived as an approximation to an ideal reading of a poem, although at the same time such an ideal is tacitly admitted to be unattainable.' Middleton argues that 'intrusive problems arise [...] when dealing with [...] texts that innovate with form, publication, performance, reception, and other conditions of textuality, because even scholarly practices of interpretive care and attentive judgment cannot overcome the distance.' He argues that in such readings 'an interpretive deficit becomes glaringly apparent'.¹⁹ To deal with this 'interpretive deficit' Middleton introduces the concept of 'distant reading', and draws attention to various types of 'distance' that might be read. He argues that a distant reading of a poem would 'entail mining what is available of the aggregative textual archive that composes the textual memory of the poem, its showing in magazines, performance, anthologies, its construal in reviews and commentaries and other treatments.' Distant reading does this 'to investigate how the poem's reception enables it to participate in these situations and what realignments are being made.'²⁰

To an extent Cobbing practiced Middleton's concept of 'distant reading' on his own poems. Cobbing sought to realign his poems in order to capitalize upon the notoriety and exposure that sound poetry received after the IPI, even though he was not completely aware, or in control of, how this would alter the meaning of his poems. This is suggested by how he disseminated *Sound Poems* in the 1960s and comments he made to the Canadian sound poet Paul Dutton in the early 1990s, which Dutton recalls:

When it came to this kind of blurring of borders between the arts, Bob could be as practical as he was principled. In the early '90s I phoned him to inquire, in context of an essay I was writing about vocal sound art and its practice in literary

¹⁹ Peter Middleton, *Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 9.

²⁰ Middleton, *Performance*, 23.

and musical contexts, whether he called his soundworks literature or music. His unhesitating reply: “Depends on what they’re paying for.”²¹

Dutton’s distinction between the practical and the principled was for Cobbing a single poetics. Because of the self-awareness of Cobbing’s realignments, my reading of *Sound Poems* is indebted to but reconfigures Middleton’s approach. Rather than reading the realignments necessary for *Sound Poems* to be understood as a sound poem after the IPI, I read the distance that was inscribed in *Sound Poems* against the dominant historiography of the IPI from which it was (and still is) excluded. This allows us to think anew about *Sound Poems* and about the social, cultural, and political values of the IPI.

In the previous chapter I argued that Cobbing’s permutation poems abstracted and reconfigured the art-historical record, and instituted that reconfiguration as the basis of a poetics. I argued that they invited a reading of history through their permutations, which suggested that Cobbing’s wider ‘performance’ practice was something that took place in the past. Here, I develop this reading by viewing the IPI through the prism of *Sound Poems* (and vice versa): this is the ‘performance’ that this chapter explores. The ‘R’ ‘M’ and ‘A’ sections of *Sound Poems* in particular offer a space to reflect critically on some of the central mantras of the International Poetry Incarnation: internationalism, improvisation, spontaneity, the relation between childhood and primitivism, and the politics of community. The ‘B’ section provides a space to think about the function of obscenity and innocence in representations of the IPI, and we can use the ‘O’ section to think about the relationship between the institution and the poet’s career at the IPI. In these terms, and even though the poem was written before the event, *Sound Poems* is best understood as a permutation of the IPI (an event which lives through its representations). The fact that Cobbing did not perform *Sound Poems* at the IPI, and the different version of sound poetry that *sound poems* advances, allows us to see the IPI anew.

The historical constellation of *Sound Poems* and the IPI, which is motivated by the form of the poem itself and its subsequent representations, is a ‘performance’ that establishes a correspondence between the nature of Cobbing’s

²¹ Paul Dutton, ‘Viewed from his Workroom Floor: A Personal Perspective on Bob Cobbing (1920-2002)’, *Light and Dust Anthology of Poetry*, curated by Karl Young <<http://www.thing.net/~grist/ld/DTTN-COB.HTM>> [accessed 8 September 2012].

exclusion from the historical record of the IPI and the way that the event has been represented, characterised, and promoted by the poets that are still closely associated with it. One effect of establishing this correspondence is that a series of contributions that Cobbing made to the event are revealed. Until now, these have been obscured because of the way the IPI has been represented and valorised as spontaneous, pure, international, communal and the way those qualities have been defined by Horovitz and Miles, for whom the event has a fixed place in their identity as countercultural figures.

1) Cobbing's Contributions to the IPI

The questions of who organised the IPI and who took credit for its organisation are inseparable from a consideration of how spontaneity was valued in London's counterculture in the 1960s. In *Bomb Culture*, Nuttall credits Esam and Richter with the event's organisation, and records that the IPI was 'organised and presented in six hectic days'.²² Horovitz's account supports Nuttall's. He argued that, 'the first IPI at [the] Albert Hall was conceived, at a week's notice: to affirm a purely poetic space.'²³ In *London Calling*, written over thirty years later, Miles claims it was organised in 'ten days', and not a week.²⁴ Despite this discrepancy the tone of his account does not contradict that of Nuttall or of Horovitz:

Each day he [Ginsberg] sat in the back room at the wobbly wooden tables [in Miles's house in Fitzrovia, ten minutes walk from Better Books] giving interviews and advice, chatting with people and enjoying the Charing Cross Road scene. One afternoon he [Ginsberg] was surrounded by a group of people including the American poet Dan Richter, who had recently arrived in London from Athens, where he and his wife Jill had run a bookshop and published the literary magazine *Residu*. Also there was Barbara Rubin Ginsberg's "occasional" girlfriend, who seemed to have followed him to London. We were discussing the success of Ginsberg's reading [at Better Books in May 1965] when he told everyone that both Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gregory Corso were due in London: naturally the idea of a reading came up as there had never been a major Beat Generation reading in London before. Better Books was far too small. Barbara in her usual exuberant way, asked: "What's the biggest venue in town?"

²² Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, 182.

²³ Horovitz, *Children of Albion*, 336.

²⁴ Miles, *London Calling*, 144.

to which my wife Sue replied: “The Royal Albert Hall.” [...] Barbara strode to the cash desk, grabbed the phone and within minutes had booked the hall for ten day’s time.²⁵

Miles’ use of the words ‘exuberant’, ‘grabbed’, ‘strode’ and ‘one afternoon’, represent organisation as an activity characterised by quick, responsive, excited, impulsive spontaneity, and an activity defined by decisive movement. However, Miles also presents an idyllic domestic scene of ‘chatting’, mutual acquaintance, coincidence, and relaxed friendship. Horovitz’s claim that the Albert Hall reading was conceived of as some kind of ‘pure poetic space’ is also present, but it is figured here as an idyllic social space: Miles’s ‘back room’ in which poets gathered, and out of which the idea of the Albert Hall reading ‘naturally’ arose.

This mode of representation – where spontaneity, friendship, naturalness, and the American Beats are all valorised – was also present in Miles’s description of the reading Ginsberg gave at Better Books in May 1965, which Cobbing had helped organise.²⁶ Miles argued that the IPI was a direct result of the success of this reading. He recorded that the owner of Better Books, Tony Godwin, had hired him as the manager in early 1965 after the departure of Bill Butler, the previous manager. Miles recalls that Godwin had an arrangement with Ferlinghetti whereby Ferlinghetti would ship boxes of City Lights publications in return for boxes of used Penguins, which, Miles notes, ‘Tony seemed to be able to acquire in enormous numbers’. Miles says that he extended this arrangement by making a similar deal with Ed Saunders (owner of Peace Eye bookshop in New York).²⁷ According to Miles, these book swaps generated friendship and Saunders gave Ginsberg Miles’s name as a contact in the event that Ginsberg ended up in London. Miles’s description of Ginsberg’s arrival valorises casualness using the verb ‘strolled’ to describe Ginsberg’s entrance in Better Books, and the words ‘impromptu’ and ‘no announcement’ to describe his own organisational style, which emphasises its spontaneity.²⁸

These representations actually work against the careful, detailed map that Miles reconstructs, wherein small press and little magazine distribution

²⁵ Miles, *London Calling*, 145.

²⁶ Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, 228.

²⁷ Miles, *London Calling*, 145.

²⁸ Miles, *London Calling*, 145.

intersected with social networks – that were reinforced by the exchange of publications between countercultural bookshops (Better Books, City Lights, and Peace Eye) – and where transatlantic friendships between the American Beat poets and London’s counterculture interacted and were energized by small-scale poetry readings. Further, it allows for little comment on the fact that these readings were held in the same countercultural bookshops that had acted as distribution sites for the publications that had encouraged the transatlantic friendships in the first place. In short, because many of the representations of the IPI valorise spontaneity and immediacy, casualness and emphasise the contribution of American poets to the IPI, other subtler dynamics that were active, but were at a distance from the immediacy of the performances at the actual live event, are occluded.

The texture of the IPI was shaped at a distance by Cobbing’s interest in the work of some of the poets that performed, as well as his willingness to publish their books. It was within this publishing context that Cobbing published *Sound Poems*.²⁹ In July 1963 Writers Forum published *The Limbless Virtuoso*, poems by Keith Musgrove and Nuttall. Cobbing claimed that this marks ‘the real beginning of Writers Forum as a publishing venture’.³⁰ This statement made in 1998 obscures the eight important years of work that led to the formation of Writers Forum in Hendon, the three issues of *AND* magazine, and the book *Poems by Twelve Members of Writers Forum*, which were all been published before 1963. However, Cobbing’s desire to create a new beginning for the press was an attempt to retrospectively resituate and realign its aesthetic, which also responds to a genuine shift in direction that occurred at this time towards an interest in American Beat poetry, and to Nuttall’s involvement in Writers Forum, who as Mottram notes in 1974, ‘became a literary advisor from the beginning of the press’.³¹ Over the next few years, and alongside the publication of those writers that attended Writers Forum events in Finchley regularly, Cobbing published three books that were subsequently read at the IPI: *We Just Wanted To Tell You* (David Ball and Anselm Hollo, October 1963); *The Change* (Ginsberg, November 1963); and *Mai Hart Leib Zapfen Eibe Hold* (Jandl, May, 1965). The

²⁹ Bob Cobbing, *Bob Cobbing & Writers Forum*, 16.

³⁰ See *Writers Forum Checklist of Publications 1954-1998*.

³¹ Bob Cobbing, *Bob Cobbing & Writers Forum* (1974; 2nd edn 1999), 16.

new aesthetic direction that Cobbing set for Writers Forum press in the early 1960s towards Europe and America helped, at least in part, to set the scene for the organization and reception of the IPI.

Cobbing's publishing ethos in the early 1960s has been characterized as responsive, speedy, and reliant on friendship networks. For example, Claire Powell notes that it was Hollo who had originally put Ginsberg in touch with Cobbing: 'Ginsberg had wanted *The Change* published in a hurry and Hollo had assured him that Cobbing could get it out within a few days.'³² Likewise, Jandl's book was specifically put out to celebrate his visit to England.³³ This shows that Cobbing also used the press to respond to particular occasions. Yet even though spontaneity was part of Cobbing's publishing ethos, and although he maintained friendships with poets he published, Cobbing's contribution to the IPI is scarcely commented upon. For example, the third verse of the 'invocation' – the text in the programme of the IPI – is a countercultural litany of its projects: Trocchi's Sigma, and Arnold Wesker's Centre 42; its bookshops Better Books and City Lights; its venues The Roundhouse; and its presses New Departures.³⁴ Cobbing's work with Writers Forum could well have been included in this list but it is not.

Writers Forum readings, like the press, had given space to many poets that would go on to perform at the Albert Hall, such as Brown and Mitchell. They also promoted the work of poets that featured heavily in the event's memorialisation: Ginsberg, Corso, Ferlinghetti, as well as Kurt Schwitters. To some extent, in the early 1960s Writers Forum was a microcosm of the IPI. In 1961 Mitchell read as a guest of Writers Forum. He read his poems 'Nostalgia', 'Suez', and extracts from his novel *Hurry On Down*, while Brown 'who had just come back from reading in Liverpool and Leeds' read his own poems and two poems by Corso.³⁵ A newspaper article notes that in January 1961 John Rowan gave a reading of Ginsberg's *Howl*: 'It was at the climax of Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl" that poet John Rowan's voice suffering from strain, gave out

³² Claire Powell, 'Bobbing In The Wake: The Work Of Bob Cobbing' (University Of Wales Swansea, unpublished doctoral thesis, 2002). No library holds a copy of this thesis. The quote comes from a draft chapter of the thesis, see 'Theses Extracts, by Claire Powell and Mike Johnson', BL Add MS 88909/104, 3.

³³ See *Writers Forum Checklist of Publications 1954-1998*.

³⁴ Quoted in Horovitz, *Children of Albion*, 337-38.

³⁵ 'Writers Study the Contemporary Poets', *Finchley Post*, 8 December 1961, BL Add MS 88909/32.

completely. A tape recording of Ginsberg reading his own poem had to be used instead.³⁶ The idea that Cobbing and Writers Forum contributed to the IPI from a distance is supported by the fact that a tape recorder was used in a live performance. Pragmatically speaking, they used a tape recorder because Ginsberg was not in Finchley, but the recorder was also used to bridge this distance conceptually when it took over from Rowan's voice midway through the reading of the poem. While using a recording of Ginsberg's voice might in other circumstances accentuate the distance, drawing attention to Ginsberg's absence, the way these readings were reported in the local press suggest otherwise: 'Forward with a tape, and the evening concluded with Allen Ginsberg's forceful reading of his own poem'.³⁷ Another report also notes that on the same evening Cobbing read 'five short poems of his own composition' and 'did full justice' to Dan Propper's apocalyptic 'Fable of the Final Hour' and Lawrence Ferlinghetti's 'Impeachment of President Eisenhower'.³⁸ This testifies to Cobbing's own engagement and support of Beat Poetry during what was actually a slow build up to the IPI.

Representations of the reception of Schwitters's work at the IPI (which are discussed in more detail in Section three below) should also be contextualized by noting that Writers Forum disseminated this work at an early stage. At a Writers Forum event in 1961, Hollo read 'Superbirdsong' by Schwitters. This is the first documented occasion when Writers Forum engaged with the poetry of one of the 'second-generation Western sound poets'.³⁹ A local report of Hollo's reading of 'Superbirdsong' claimed that it was the 'high spot of the evening' and described it as 'a poem in pure sound'.⁴⁰ While Bowen believed that the interest of a poetry of 'pure sound' occurred as a result of the IPI, and described Cobbing's reading of the 'T' section of *Sound Poems* in terms of the work that 'Kurt Schwitters was producing way back in the early 1920s', a local reviewer in Finchley uses the same language to address similar work prior to the

³⁶ 'Voice Beats the "Beat" Poet', *Hendon and Finchley Times*, 27 January 1961, BL Add MS 88909/32.

³⁷ 'The "Beat" Comes to Finchley', *Finchley Post*, 27 January 1961, BL Add MS 88909/32.

³⁸ 'The "Beat" Comes to Finchley', *Finchley Post*, 27 January 1961, BL Add MS 88909/32.

³⁹ Steve McCaffery documents the history of western sound poetry in terms of three generations. For McCaffery, Schwitters belongs to the second generation. See Steve McCaffery, 'From Phonic to Sonic: The Emergence of The Audio Poem', in *Sound States* (London: North Carolina Press, 1998), 149.

⁴⁰ 'Writers Forum', *Finchley Post*, 24 March 1961, BL Add MS 88909/32.

IPI.⁴¹ The local reviewer claimed that ‘Superbirdsong’ was ‘completely incomprehensible (since there was no meaning in it to comprehend)’ but also that it ‘made an impact not outdone by any of the more highly organized pieces read during the evening’.⁴² This celebration of ‘impact’ over any attempt to make sense of what was being communicated through sound poetry was the kind of response that was instituted in national culture by the IPI.

It is a scientific fact that sound can never be ‘pure’: it is a wave, or a sequence of waves, that are oscillations of pressure transmitted through a medium. As sound cannot travel in a vacuum, and because it always requires a medium in order to be heard, the quality of sound is affected by the qualities of the medium through which it passes. Representations that claim that sound is ‘pure’ run contrary to the fact that sound is conditioned by the historical context and physical space in which it is heard. The claim that ‘Superbirdsong’ was ‘incomprehensible’ is undercut by the reviewer’s use of the word ‘pure’ to describe the sound of the poem. The word ‘pure’ not only recalls Horowitz’s claim that the IPI intended to establish a ‘pure poetic space’, but it also recalls claims that the IPI provoked interest in the art of ‘pure sound’, and that the poets that read at the IPI were, in comparison to the rest of the world, ‘innocent’. Precisely because purity can be historicised, because it is an interpretation, and because a variety of different contexts were claimed to be ‘pure’, it functions in this circumstance as an ideological construct that prevents differentiated readings of *Sound Poems* and their reception in different contexts. ‘Purity’ and ‘spontaneity’ work together to this end.

Hollo’s performance of ‘Superbirdsong’ as a member of Writers Forum also anticipated the collaborative performance of Schwitters’s poem ‘Fury of Sneezing’ at the IPI by Jandl, Horovitz and Pete Brown. Hollo’s performance also predated the publication of the ‘Fury of Sneezing’ in *Pin* (1962).⁴³ The Writers Forum performance, the IPI performance and this publication reflect a concerted effort by members of London’s counterculture to connect their work to (and to rediscover) the artistic practices of an earlier European avant-garde. The

⁴¹ Bowen, ‘Concrete Abstractions’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 30 August 1968, ‘Notebook of Cuttings (1)’, BL Add MS 88909/112.

⁴² ‘Writers Forum’, *Finchley Post*, 24 March 1961, BL Add MS 88909/32.

⁴³ Kurt Schwitters and Raoul Hausmann, *PIN and the story of PIN* (London: Gaberbocchus Press, 1962), 34.

fact that Houédard, Brown, Cobbing and Jandl performed *Fury of Sneezing* at Arlington Mill, Bibury, Gloucester in June 1966 shows that Cobbing was both aware of, and invested in, these efforts both prior to the IPI and after it.⁴⁴ These details counter Logue's ahistorical claim about the IPI, which emphasizes its purity, saying that it had 'nothing to do with what went before or after'.⁴⁵

The lack of attention given to Cobbing in the accounts of the IPI is also due to the fact that those accounts rely on individual testimony and take the form of personal anecdote, and are therefore not necessarily complete. In Miles's account, Cobbing is only mentioned when Miles details some of the activities that took place at Better Books. He does this in order to contextualise the relationship between the bookshop and Ginsberg's reading: 'Bob Cobbing, who joined the staff just after me, organised screenings of films such as Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947) [...] Ian Hugo's *Bells of Atlantis* (1952) [...] *Dog Star Man* (1964) by Stan Brakhage; and films by Jean Cocteau and other hard to find classics.'⁴⁶ Beyond this single instance there is no further mention of Cobbing in Miles's chapter on the IPI, Cobbing does not appear in Horovitz's account of the event, nor is he mentioned in the various and contrasting recollections and comments on the IPI that are collected in *Days in the Life*.

However, Ernst Jandl portrays Cobbing as a more significant participant in the accounts. Jandl became a close friend of Cobbing's after the IPI, and I have discovered photographs of Cobbing at the IPI which show that he sat in the second row with Jandl to his right and with Ginsberg in front of him (see Fig. 10). This further testifies to Cobbing and Jandl's emerging friendship and Cobbing's presence at the event, which is itself rarely commented upon.⁴⁷ On 30 October 1968, Jandl wrote to Cobbing about his recently published book, *Laut und Luise*. Cobbing had been Jandl's publisher for his previous book, and by this time the two were good friends and wrote to each other frequently. Here is a section of Jandl's letter:

I am happy you like my book, which is supposed to do in Germany (and

⁴⁴ For a photograph of this performance see: Peter Manson, 'Bob Cobbing, 1920-2002' <<http://www.petermanson.com/cobbing.htm>> [accessed 15 September, 2012].

⁴⁵ Christopher Logue quoted in *Days In The Life: Voices from the English Underground 1961-1971*, ed. Jonathon Green (London: Pimlico, 1998) 73.

⁴⁶ Miles, *London Calling*, 144.

⁴⁷ Courtesy of Jennifer Cobbing.

Austria?) what your Writers Forum booklet did for me in England; it will never be the same, though. In “Mai Hart Lieb Zapfen Eibe Hold . . .” there was something like love, from everywhere; everybody; this is different.⁴⁸

Jandl’s choice of words here – ‘love, from everywhere’, ‘everybody’ – used to describe the reception of ‘Mai Hart Lieb Zapfen Eibe Hold’, is similar to how others have represented Jandl’s performance at the Albert Hall, as provoking a community feeling, one even as intense as love. Jandl implies that it was Cobbing’s publication of ‘Mai Hart Lieb Zapfen Eibe Hold’ that refocused that community feeling onto his book, and thereby extended (beyond the physical and temporal bounds of the event) the communitarian quality identified with the IPI. Cobbing’s contribution in this regard is largely ignored, even though it does not contradict the dominant representation of the IPI as communal.

Miles also does not mention Cobbing in his accounts, but Nuttall does recall in *Bomb Culture* that Cobbing was in attendance at Ginsberg’s Better Books reading: ‘we sat, packed tight, rather self-conscious. Bob Cobbing looked triumphant.’⁴⁹ While there were many people that attended Ginsberg’s reading and the IPI that Miles does not mention, his omission of Cobbing is probably deliberate. In a dismissive aside, Miles suggests Cobbing’s manner was out of keeping with the spontaneous joyousness of the counter culture:

Despite dealing with some of the most avant-garde and experimental materials, Bob remained every inch the old-fashioned schoolteacher. At the conclusion of some extraordinary screeching sound poetry or happening at Better Books, he would take the stage clutching a great sheaf of papers, place one foot up on the chair to reveal a hairy calf almost up to his knee, peer at the audience through his glasses, clear his throat and announce: ‘Now, future activities’, as if he was going to give the details of the school trip and open day.⁵⁰

Miles is noting the disparity between the screech and chaos of Cobbing’s performances and Cobbing’s attention to business. He suggests that Cobbing was out-of-place amid the spontaneous chaos of the counterculture. Words like

⁴⁸ Ernst Jandl to Bob Cobbing, 30 October 1968. ‘Letters Received (1960-1969): H-L’ BL Add MS 88909/35/4.

⁴⁹ Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, 228.

⁵⁰ Miles, *London Calling*, 160.



Figure 10. Bob Cobbing at the International Poetry Incarnation (11 June 1965).
Photograph. Reproduced with permission of Jennifer Cobbing.

‘place’ and ‘peer’ convey old-fashioned ponderousness and the whole scene contrasts with Miles’s description of booking the Albert Hall. However, this description is not entirely compatible with the representation of Cobbing provided by Nuttall. When describing the production of his little magazine *My Own Mag: a Super-Absorbent Periodical* – which was an important disseminator of William Burroughs’s work in England – Nuttall wrote: ‘The French teacher at the school where I worked duplicated the first mag for me. He liked it. He said, “Do it again”. He was called Bob Cobbing.’⁵¹ Nuttall’s four short sentences, particularly the phrase “Do it Again” imply impulsiveness, and because Cobbing’s name is not included until the very last sentence, Nuttall conveys the idea that their relationship was led by creative activity, even despite the fact that they were both teachers, which was one of Miles’s preoccupations.

The point is not that the descriptions offered by Nuttall and Jandl, or even the photographs of Cobbing at the event, are the truth and that Miles’s account is false. In fact, as Nuttall’s description shows, Miles’s presentation of Cobbing as ‘the old-fashioned schoolteacher’ was quite astute. Cobbing’s approach to organisation had evolved from his many years working as a local organiser and teacher in Hendon and Finchley. Yet because Cobbing does not correspond to Miles’s idea of a countercultural figure, the contribution that Cobbing’s publishing activities made to the spontaneous nature of the IPI cannot be seen by Miles even though Miles himself wanted to assert the spontaneous nature of the event. Further, as Chapters One and Two of the thesis show, there was not a sharp divide between Cobbing’s arts organisational work and his poetics. If Nuttall’s description is a little idealised, it does at least suggest that Cobbing was not actually opposed to spontaneity, as Miles seems to imply. It is as if Miles accepts that Cobbing was spontaneous, but thinks that he was spontaneous in the wrong kind of way.

The differences in the representations and accounts of Cobbing detailed above show that when one approaches the organisation of events through the prism of personal testimony and friendship alone, it can become restricted to the boundaries established by those friendship groups. Friendship groups conflate their values with their members. In the case of the IPI and its organisation the

⁵¹ Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, 142.

values were spontaneity, purity, and friendship itself. This omits Cobbing, who remained partly outside those friendship groups. This meant that the role of the small presses, the exchange of publications and the confidence building and awareness raising effects of the small-scale poetry reading which took place in London's suburbs have also been occluded. Cobbing made significant contributions to all of these areas prior to, during, as well as after the IPI and the publication of *Sound Poems*. Yet in the terms established by the main representatives of the IPI, Cobbing's contributions remain at a distance. This social and conceptual distance forms the basis upon which a comparative reading of *Sound Poems* and the IPI can be based.

2) A Distant Reading of *Sound Poems*: Representations of Internationalism.

This comparative reading of *Sound Poems* and the IPI can be based on an analysis of the 'R' section of the poem and how the IPI was characterised as international. The 1969 Penguin edition of Horovitz's anthology *Children of Albion*, which contains an extended description of the IPI, has a colour print of William Blake's 'Albion' on its front cover. 'Albion', also known as *Glad Day* (Blake's line engraving of the same image is known as *The Dance of Albion*), is often understood as a visionary symbol of political awakening, internationalism, newness and rebirth. In 1793 Blake added the following lines of poetry to the engraving: 'Albion rose from where he labour'd at the Mill with Slaves: / Giving himself for the Nations he danc'd the dance of Eternal Death'. Samuel Damon and Morris Eaves argue that the image and appended words symbolise 'politically awakened England; the subject is political: England rises spiritually above the Industrial Revolution and works for all nations'.⁵² In his account, Miles categorised poets by nationality in order to assert the international reach of the IPI, but this unintentionally emphasised the differences among them. By putting Blake's 'Albion' on the cover of *Children of Albion*, Horovitz presents the false notion that nationhood was dissolved by the IPI. For Horovitz and others associated with the counter culture – notably Nuttall, who wrote 'crying' to the artist Klaus Lea after the IPI, 'London is in flames [...] the spirit of William Blake walks on the water of Thames' – the figure of Blake, and 'Albion'

⁵² Samuel Foster Damon and Morris Eaves, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 9, 13.

specifically, was felt to be an appropriate expression for what they thought the ‘children of Albion’ had realised.⁵³ Horovitz argued that Ginsberg’s reading at the IPI mapped out a vision of the world that went ‘beyond acknowledged legislators’. He proposed: ‘If underground & overhead can be welded by the poetic state [...] nationalistic states might drop out for real – hallowing *this* world’s space for the “social place for the soul to exist” – every man a special kind of artist – & no call for underground *resistance* any more.’⁵⁴ Rather than representing the dissolution of nations as Horovitz hoped ‘Albion’ actually accentuates the existence of nationhood (Englishness) at the IPI, even an Englishness that gives up its imperial domination in a moment of transcendent self-sacrifice.

The ‘R’ section of *Sound Poems* presents an idea of internationalism through its form. It offers a different conception of poetry and its relation to nationality than is suggested by the representations detailed above, which place emphasis on immediate communion. Horovitz’s claim that the IPI created a situation where there would be no need for ‘underground resistance any more’ was based on false premises. Despite this falsity, Horovitz’s claims continue to dictate interpretations of the IPI and therefore it remains difficult to think about the event as a space of resistance. The ‘R’ section sets out a different conception of spontaneity, temporality, improvisation and restricted community than the one the IPI promoted and upon which Horovitz’s presumptive declaration of the ‘poetic state’ depends. Thus, ‘R’ can help us to think about the IPI as a space of resistance once more.

The interpretation of ‘R’ advanced here is indebted to Robert Sheppard who has solved the puzzle of the poem: each of its twenty-eight words – bar the imperative ‘Repeat’ – are titles of paintings by Robert Rauschenberg, ‘to whom the piece is dedicated’.⁵⁵

Rebus	Interview	Untitled	Bed
Odelisk	Hymnal	Rhyme	Kneepad
Hazard	Factum	Curfew	Kickback
Forge	Trophy	Inlet	Bypass

⁵³ Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, 183.

⁵⁴ Horovitz, *Children of Albion*, 375.

⁵⁵ Robert Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying*, 219.

Broadcast	Pilgrim	Ace	Empire
Barge	Stopgap	Kite	Payload
Bicycle	Tracer	Flush	Repeat

Further to Sheppard's observation, all of Rauschenberg's titles are arranged in chronological order from top left to bottom right. The first artwork is 'Rebus' (1955) while the last is 'Flush' (1964).⁵⁶ The spatial distance between 'Rebus' and 'Flush' registers the temporal gap between 1955 and 1964. As our eyes bridge this distance we move closer to the year in which the 'R' section was itself composed and performed for the first time. The poem has a diachronic and progressive logic, but time is also represented as a static and navigable field.

Rauschenberg's name begins with 'R', and the use of his titles as the source text for the poem is far from arbitrary. The poet and critic cris cheek has noted 'the potential play in assemblages' that can result from sounding of the words in 'R', and this insight is important given that 'assemblage' is a significant concept in the work of Rauschenberg.⁵⁷ From 1953 to 1964 – the time span that corresponds to the one represented in 'R' – Rauschenberg began working on a series of 'combines'. These were described in the introduction to their exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'art moderne, in 2006 as:

hybrid works that associate painting with collage and assemblage of a wide range of objects taken from everyday life, [...] neither paintings nor sculptures, but both at once, [which] invade the viewers' space, demanding their attention, like veritable visual puzzles.⁵⁸

Every word in the 'R' section is a displaced textual and temporal marker that gestures towards Rauschenberg's absent artworks. In 1982 Rauschenberg remarked that all his titles were 'starting points', and the 'R' section of *Sound Poems* is alert to this. It uses Rauschenberg's titles as the starting point for the

⁵⁶ The two titles 'Empire' (1961) and 'Payload' (1962) are, potentially accidentally, misplaced in the poem.

⁵⁷ cris cheek, 'Bob Cobbing', *British Electronic Poetry Centre* (2003) <<http://www.southampton.ac.uk/~bepc/forum/cheek%20on%20Cobbing.pdf>> [accessed 27 June 2012], 7. cheek, however, did not consider the words of the poem as titles of Rauschenberg works.

⁵⁸ 'Introduction' to 'Robert Rauschenberg Combines (1953-1964) 11 October 2006 – 15 January 2007, Gallery 2, Level 6', exhibition details on the website of the Centre Pompidou, see <<http://www.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-Rauschenberg-EN/ENS-rauschenberg-EN.htm>> [accessed 8 September 2012].

various ‘word-combinations’ that can be produced when the poem is read during live performance.

Cobbing included reading instructions for ‘R’ in the endnotes to *Sound Poems*. The entry for ‘R’ reads: ‘A path from Rebus to Repeat using all words moving to an adjacent word in any direction. Read several times / each time a different route. Last time from Repeat to Rebus.’⁵⁹ This reading instruction is in dialogue with Rauschenberg’s conception of the function of the title:

They are there when I begin my work, either I try to be consciously provocative or funny or macabre... The title is like another object in the work. It’s a deliberately solid and complex thought that obliges you to circle about the pieces, since because of them, you have the impression of never being in the right place.⁶⁰

The idea that Rauschenberg used the titles of his artworks to create the feeling of ‘never being in the right place’, makes the act of their displacement and assimilation in *Sound Poems* all the more meaningful. The form of the ‘R’ section is hybridized with Rauschenberg’s work and remains sensitive to its meaning while attempting to extend it.

In a later edition of *Sound Poems*, Cobbing added a postscript to his endnotes that read: “notes were written in 1964, since when a certain freedom of performance has emerged, thus making for flexibility in interpretation.”⁶¹ On this aspect of the poem cheek finds it ‘hardly surprising’ that the early instructions quickly generated this “flexibility” because ‘R’ can be understood by seeing the words and the spaces ‘between’ them as a picture, which has been ‘temporarily fitted into a stabilized diagram for which spatial layout acts as syntax.’⁶² For

⁵⁹ See endnotes to Bob Cobbing, *Sound Poems* (London: Writers Forum, 1965), n.p.

⁶⁰ From ‘When Creation Means Combining, Assembling, Incorporating’, in ‘Interview with Robert Rauschenberg’, by Catherine Millet and Myriam Salomon (December, 1982), quoted in ‘Robert Rauschenberg Combines (1953-1964)’, exhibition details on the website of the Centre Pompidou, see <<http://www.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-Rauschenberg-EN/ENS-rauschenberg-EN.htm>> [accessed 8 September 2012].

⁶¹ Quoted in *Alphabetical and Letter Poems: A Chrestomathy*, ed. Peter Mayer (London: The Menard Press, 1978), 100.

⁶² cris cheek, ‘Bob Cobbing’, *British Electronic Poetry Centre* (2003) <<http://www.southampton.ac.uk/~bepc/forum/cheek%20on%20Cobbing.pdf>> [accessed 27 June 2012], 7. cheek echoes Eric Mottram’s argument, first advanced in ‘A Prosthetics of Poetry The Art Of Bob Cobbing’, *Second Aeon* 16–17 (1973), 105–132 (105). Mottram argues that the ‘urge’ in Cobbing’s early poems ‘is towards stabilized diagram, itemized pieces of information in a spatial layout which is in fact the syntax.’

cheek, the fact that the 'spatial layout' of the poem could be flexibly interpreted undercuts the possibility that a definitive reading could be given. However, this interpretation both privileges and disregards the poem's 'spatial layout', and deemphasizes the highly ordered chronological construction of the form, which is a map of Rauschenberg's creative labours over a nine-year period. Finally, it reduces the poem's efficacy by situating it in a non-locatable and ahistoric moment in time. The phrase 'temporarily fitted', which cheek uses to describe the form of 'R', is nevertheless appropriate because the poem is about temporality.

cheek argued that vocal performance was central to the meaning of 'R'. He suggests that the 'second puzzle' of 'R' was that the 'picture' it presented was part of a larger '*sound poem*'.⁶³ He draws attention to Cobbing's endnote instruction about the poem as a whole, that 'much of the creative work' has to be 'done by the reader' in their vocal sounding of the poem.⁶⁴ Of 'R', cheek argues that 'the fact that none of its words present difficulty', and because Cobbing 'does not specify amplitude, only decisions as to order and duration need be made by a temporary operator of this text to achieve a *performance*.' cheek is noting that one need not be a proficient or knowledgeable performer to 'achieve' a valid performance of Cobbing's 'text', as one is merely an 'operator'. He uses the word 'temporary' to describe the 'operator' of the poem because he believes that according to its design and Cobbing's instructions 'R' can be performed in many different ways, so any reading of the poem was by its nature temporary. Describing the reader as 'temporary' guards against the possibility that there could be a definitive performer, or a definitive sounding of the poem.

The problem here is that cheek's valorization of provisionality makes it difficult to think about what meanings 'R' might actually have. It is as if 'R' had no meaning at all other than its adherence to an abstract provisionality. I would argue that Cobbing's lack of specific direction in terms of how the poem should be performed was designed so that the poem's sound would be predominantly heard through its interaction with the context in which it was sounded. This interpretation does not valorize provisionality or temporariness over other possible meanings, nor does it necessarily ascribe to the idea of a definitive

⁶³ cheek, 'Bob Cobbing', 7.

⁶⁴ Cobbing, *Sound Poems* (1965), endnotes.

meaning, but it does require a locatable context. The historiography of the IPI is one such context. ‘R’ is an important part of *Sound Poems* because it provides a space in which to think about how the highly significant cultural event of the IPI, and the large-scale poetry reading in general, might be reclaimed as a model for future poetic activity outside of the terms that have, through repetition, ossified around it.

To clarify this argument, I want to return to Rauschenberg’s description of the function of the artwork’s title as ‘a deliberately solid and complex thought that obliges you to circle about the pieces’ in order to compare it to the way that Cobbing interpreted and performed ‘R’.⁶⁵ To do this I will compare a recording of *Sound Poems* released on split LP with Jandl’s poems in September 1965 (CD track 2), with a series of performance directions that Cobbing drew onto ‘R’ in preparation for one of his performances (See Fig 11).⁶⁶ The performance that Cobbing recorded for the Writers Forum record adheres to these directions. Attending to these diagrammatic performance directions shows that Rauschenberg’s conception of the title as a ‘solid and complex thought’ that obliged one to ‘circle about’ his pieces corresponds to the way that Cobbing vocally performed and interpreted the word-grid of ‘R’:

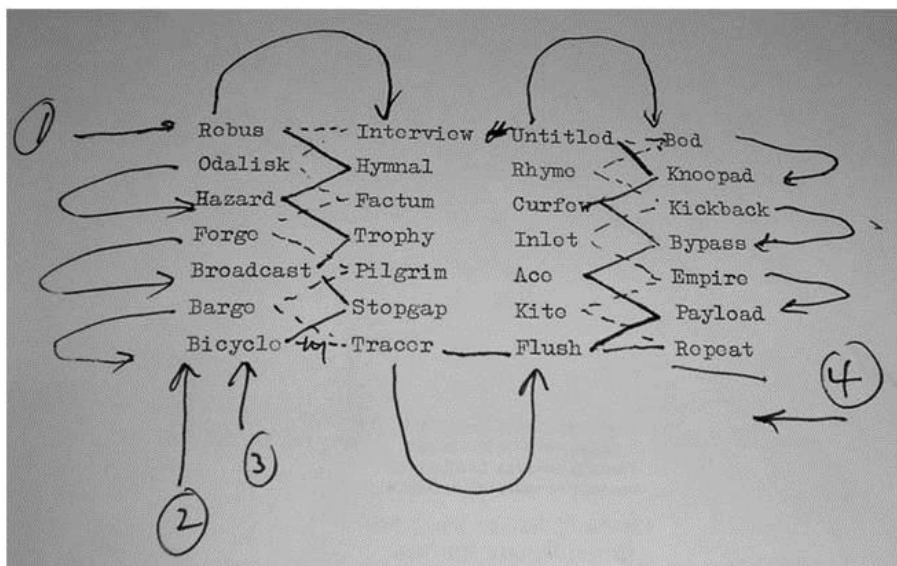


Figure 11. Bob Cobbing annotated copy of ‘R’ *Sound Poems* (London Writers Forum, 1965), n.p. Reprinted with permission of Jennifer Cobbing.

⁶⁵ ‘Interview with Robert Rauschenberg’, quoted in ‘Robert Rauschenberg Combines’, *Centre Pompidou*.

⁶⁶ Courtesy of Jennifer Cobbing.

In this recording, Cobbing reads each of the twenty-eight words of the poem six times. The sixth repetition of the poem is an exact mirror image of the first: the first and last word of the poem is 'rebus'. Here, Cobbing's performance is circular and this is replicated in the hermetic form of the performance diagram: all the arrows point inwards. This diagram makes one aware of the visual connections between the words, and the page space becomes part of the poem. This also creates a sense of circularity, and a sense of the poem/page as a closed system where every word can be defined through its spatial relation to another. This interiority becomes visible when the poem is thought of as a performable object. Performance – by its very nature – places a poem in an active dialogue with outside social contexts and 'R' itself integrates these outside contexts in the form of the titles of Rauschenberg's paintings.

I would now like to compare the absence of 'R's performance from the stage of the IPI with a performance that did happen: Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poem 'I Am Waiting' (1958). In making this comparison it is important to remember that 'R' was part of the IPI too. It was written during Cobbing's time in Finchley and performed in central London in the context of the slow build up to the IPI; a context which has since been overwritten by extreme focus on the main event. In other words, part of the meaning of 'R' and its performance was Cobbing's distance from the stage of the Albert Hall on 11 June 1965. Conversely, part of the meaning of Ferlinghetti's performance was his presence. The following comparison is made on that basis.

Ferlinghetti registered his presence by adapting 'I Am Waiting' specifically for the occasion. He used his reading to address some of the poets sitting in the audience. Here is my transcript of a section of his reading taken from Peter Whitehead's film of the IPI *Wholly Communion*:

Yes, and I am waiting for my case to come up, and I am waiting for Voznesensky to turn on with us and speak love tonight, and I am waiting for Aphrodite to grow live arms at a final disarmament conference, and I am waiting for our iron comrades to attend in a new rebirth of wonder, and I am waiting for Voznesensky to answer, and I am waiting for Neruda to answer, I am perpetually waiting for a rebirth of wonder, why are you so puritanical comrade kicking Allen Ginsberg

out of Czechoslovakia, Americans love travel...⁶⁷

The poem intersperses lines from the original poem such as 'I am waiting for my case to come up' with specific addresses to Voznesensky, Neruda, and Ginsberg. The repetition of the phrase 'I am waiting' persistently gestures towards a future where the deficiencies of the moment in which the poem was read might be dissolved. This utopian and impossible future is set against the contingent realities of the reading space, and the separation of poets enforced by nations. While Ferlinghetti's emendations to his poem include the names of poets that sat in the Albert Hall in 1965, it does not allow those poets agency in the space of the reading.

The exclusory effect of Ferlinghetti's reading is intensified because Neruda and Voznesensky were subject to real exclusions, and were prevented by their governments from reading. According to Miles, Voznesensky sat in the audience but did not read because his minder from the embassy had told him that if he read with the 'reactionary crowd he would never leave Russia again.'⁶⁸ Miles records that 'he had been forbidden even to attend and sat, hunched over, looking glum as, quite unreasonably, both Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti took exception to his refusal to read and berated him from the stage.'⁶⁹ The spontaneity and responsiveness of Ferlinghetti's reading might be read as an attempt to include Voznesensky through evocation, creating in poetry the imagined conditions where Voznesensky could answer him. However, in Miles's recollection of the event this only served to exclude Voznesensky further.

While Ferlinghetti changed his poem specifically for his performance at the IPI, change in 'R' is intrinsic to its being as a poem. Ferlinghetti physically intervened directly within the IPI to force a communion, but it is this very force that constrains Voznesensky: the communion is sought only on Ferlinghetti's terms and, as it is not reciprocal, it is therefore not truly a communion. In contrast, the dialogue that exists between 'R' and Rauschenberg's artworks is dependent on maintaining the distance between them, rather than forcing it shut. 'R' maintained this distance in a way that was both sensitive to that space (their

⁶⁷ Steve Willey, personal transcription of *Wholly Communion (Poetry at the Royal Albert Hall, London, June 11th 1965.)*, by Peter Whitehead (Lorrimer Films, 1966).

⁶⁸ Miles, *London Calling*, 150.

⁶⁹ Miles, *London Calling*, 150.

distance from one another) and to Rauschenberg's different but compatible aesthetic. The performance of 'R' does not reaffirm Cobbing's subject position, and nor does it silence Rauschenberg's voice as Ferlinghetti's performance seems to have silenced Voznesensky. 'R' is therefore different to Ferlinghetti's performance, which called attention to Voznesensky's silencing by the USSR, but did not manage to find a space for Voznesensky's own voice within that performance. 'R' depends on Rauschenberg's voice because the names he chose to give his combines form the substance of the poem.

As a metaphor, 'R' also has a more complex relation to time. When it is performed the chronological order of the words are rearranged. Time becomes a medium in which the performer works. In contrast, Ferlinghetti's intervention in 'I Am Waiting' relied upon the temporal moment of the IPI to be effective. This difference can be defined as the difference between the organizer's approach and the performer's approach to poetry. In 'R', Cobbing establishes a framework in which performance takes place: every new performance of the poem re-imagines and reorders the intersubjective and temporal relation between Rauschenberg's artworks and Cobbing's *Sound Poems* as a whole, while Ferlinghetti's intervention in the IPI (the work of a performer) cannot be repeated or re-imagined. The interiority of 'R' and its homeostatic design is most obvious when it is performed, meaning that the shape of 'R' remains stable and is insisted upon even as it is being reordered. Ferlinghetti's alteration of his poem admits to its insufficiency in the face of the complex social situation of the IPI.

These important differences also characterize the 'M' section of *Sound Poems*. The poem is a two-column list of thirty-five Scottish clan names arranged in alphabetical order from 'McAllister' to 'McTaggart'. Cobbing thought that 'M' should be read in word 'groups of 4 & 3'.⁷⁰ The critic Glyn Pursglove draws attention to the fact that Houédard likened the structural elements of the poem to a swinging door:

the appeal of McALLISTER is partly associative – partly the extreme simplicity of its elements and scaffolding – the alliterative repetition of the unaccented macs and the abecaderian sequence A – thru – T hinge the poem door-like down the

⁷⁰ Cobbing, endnotes to 'M' in, *Sound Poems* (1965), n.p.

left letting its 5 (4 + 3) sections swing horizontally.⁷¹

The established pattern of the alphabet ensures that the first three or four letters of each word remain predictable. Unless one is already familiar with Scottish clan names the subsequent letters of each word cannot be predicted.

McAllister	McLellan
Macalpine	McLennan
Macarthur	MacLeod
Macauley	Macnamara
Macbean	Macnaughton
MacBrayne	MacPherson
MacBryde	McQueen
MacBryde	McSorley
MacCallum	McSweeney
McCarthy	<u>McTaggart</u>
McCleary	
McCormack	
McCulloch	
McElroy	
MacElroy	
MacEwan	
McGhee	
McGill	
[...]	

Houédard's perception of the poem as a door imagines the letter 'M' that runs down the left of each column as a static hinge, and the changing letters on the right hand side of each column as a mobile opening. This is a flamboyant but useful way of thinking about the central tension of the poem. The thirty-five Scottish clan names represent the clan system, the system of social order that was in place in Scotland before the Highland clearances. Rather than nostalgically celebrating this social order in the face of its brutal extinction, the performance of 'M' functions like a wedge that keeps the door open, it allows new contexts to pass through the opening of the poem, which keeps its shape due to its abecedarian hinge.

A playful illustration of this is to be found in Peter Manson's description of Cobbing's performance of 'M' in July 2000: 'Bob kept his eyes on the page until the second last name, when he looked up with raised eyebrows:

⁷¹ Houédard quoted in Glyn Pursiglove, 'Man's Five Senses' in *Approach Magazine*, 3, ed. Philip Hodson and Trevor Pateman (1968), 9-20 (10).

“MacSweeney”.⁷² Manson interpreted Cobbing’s raised eyebrows to indicate his friend Barry MacSweeney, whose first collection of poetry, *The Boy from the Green Cabaret Tells of his Mother*, was published in 1968. Cobbing befriended MacSweeney when they worked at the Poetry Society in the mid-1970s and he published some of his poems.⁷³ Through this coincidence, Cobbing relates the Scottish clan system to the community of poets to whom he was reading. Even though Cobbing’s ‘raised eyebrows’ silently gestured to Barry, the poem itself was not changed or altered for the performance. Rather, the poem had been changed by the context in which it was read.

3) The Innocence of Children: Primitivism and the Politics of Community.

The connection between the ‘international’ orientation and the potential political import of the childlike aspects of sound poetry has been well documented. Dada (the movement with which Schwitters is often associated), sound poetry and the IPI were all invested in the ‘child’ as a figure of utopian political awakening and as a means of exceeding (or at least disrupting) the concept and reality of the state. In this period, poets and cultural commentators rehearsed ancient associations between childhood and primitive states of society. There are several manifestations of the overlap between these themes in the poetry of the IPI and Cobbing, but the connections are not straightforward. However, a comparative reading of *Sound Poems* and the IPI (and the different version of sound poetry that was advanced by each) shows that Cobbing’s *Sound Poems* avoided the imperialist assimilation of westernized versions of other cultures associated with the discourse of primitivism. Such primitivism was celebrated by those who figured the IPI as ‘the gathering of the tribes’ in ways we now see as being problematic.⁷⁴

The cover and title of Horovitz’s anthology *Children of Albion* and his ‘afterwords’ printed there present a highly prescriptive notion of the child. For Horovitz the ‘children’ of his book’s title are the poets, the audience and the idea of an international and politically awakened counterculture combined. The

⁷² Peter Manson, ‘Bob Cobbing Solo’, 14 July 2000 <<http://www.petermanson.com/Bobsolo.htm>> [accessed 20 May 2011]. Manson attended Writers Forum from the late 1990s.

⁷³ Barry MacSweeney, *Far Cliff Babylon* (London: Writers Forum, 1978).

⁷⁴ *Days In The Life*, 70.

collaborative performance of Schwitters's poem 'Fury of Sneezing' performed by Horowitz, Jandl and Brown at the IPI involved the three poets pretending to sneeze which created a cacophony of sound in the Albert Hall and laughter in the audience, presumably because it seemed to them a silly and childish thing to do. Logue recollected that the performance was 'undoubtedly the best thing of the evening', and the 'only international poem in the world'. For Logue, because the sneeze can be understood without recourse to language, it is international. This makes it suitable material for sound poetry. In the mythology of the IPI, primitive soundings and a childlike joke become the exemplary poem and Jandl the exemplary sound poet.⁷⁵

The western alphabet forms the basis for all the words that all English speakers use, and given Cobbing's use of the alphabet as a poetic form and his use of permutation, it might be expected that one of the subject positions that he was trying to advance or construct with *Sound Poems* was that of the not-yet-aculturated 'child', a universal innocent, still caught up in the process of learning.

This comparison is also suggested by the early critical reception and presentation of *Sound Poems*. On 15 January 1966, a BBC broadcast of *Sound Poems* was reviewed in *The Guardian*. In this context the reviewer used the new title of *ABC In Sound* to refer to the poem. The reviewer recorded that George MacBeth – the producer of the broadcast and a performer at the IPI – introduced the recording as 'a huge panorama of primitive cultures', which had been 'made to yield up some of their mysteries'. MacBeth's response to *ABC In Sound* clearly framed the reviewer's reception. It led her to speculate as to whether Cobbing used so many different languages in the poem just to make 'the old point about the Tower of Babel'. The reviewer also questioned whether knowledge of 'African dialects' was actually required to 'enjoy' the poem. She wrote: 'You are expected to know about Japanese music to enjoy Boulez; so now you have to have a smattering of Twi and Ga as well, to enjoy the new poetry?'.⁷⁶ The word 'Babel' and its near-homophone babble recalls the seemingly meaningless confusion of sounds that all babies make before they can

⁷⁵ Logue, quoted in *Days In The Life*, 73.

⁷⁶ Anne Duchene 'Radio and The Art of Pure Sound', *The Guardian*, 15 January 1966, 'Notebook of Cuttings (1)', BL Add MS 88909/112.

talk. It also recalls the cacophony of noise that greeted Jandl's collaborative performance of Schwitters, and Alexis Lykiard's description of the reaction to Jandl's solo reading ('the Hall became almost a Babel') which is found in his introduction to *Wholly Communion* (1965), the printed record of the IPI that accompanied the film of the same name.⁷⁷ As I argued in Chapter Two, some Dada practitioners believed a return to the 'primitive' in art was akin to a childhood of humanity, which was opposed to the reified world of adults. I drew attention to Mark Pegrum's argument that childhood functioned 'as a weapon to be used against the bourgeoisie' in the work of Tristan Tzara. These narratives are refigured in the representations of sound poetry at the IPI, in MacBeth's presentation of *ABC In Sound*, and its reception in *The Guardian*.⁷⁸

The reviewer was more unsettled by MacBeth's introduction of *ABC In Sound* as a 'huge panorama of primitive cultures' than she was convinced by it, but MacBeth's description still coloured her reception of the poem. She stated that she found the poem ambivalent because it contrived 'to make language sound futile [...] while also inclining one to protest that most of these words had been achieved only through aeons of laborious accretion'.⁷⁹ In terms of how the poem was presented by MacBeth, the reviewer is right to be concerned. This presentation of *Sound Poems* was similar to the way that the IPI understood and used Dada when Horovitz, Jandl and Brown collaborated in a reading of Schwitters's work, and in how Jandl's own reading was represented in the press. Yet Dada aimed to eradicate the distinction between art and life, while Logue's description of the performance of 'Fury of Sneezing' understands it in terms of the communal and international values of the IPI. Further, the nihilistic and destructive stratagems that have been identified in Zurich Dada were resolutely against the modern tendency to focus on the kind of utopian future that Horovitz endorsed, having 'developed the sense that all utopian yearnings carry the seeds of totalitarianism because of their desire for closure'.⁸⁰ Just as the IPI interpreted

⁷⁷ Alexis Lykiard, 'Introduction' to companion volume for Whitehead, *Wholly Communion: International Poetry Reading at the Royal Albert Hall, London, June 11, 1965*, (London: Lorrimer Films, December 1965), 6.

⁷⁸ Mark A. Pegrum, *Challenging Modernity: Dada Between Modern and Postmodern* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), 125.

⁷⁹ Duchene 'Radio and The Art of Pure Sound', *Guardian*, 15 January 1966, BL Add MS 88909/112.

⁸⁰ Richard Sheppard, *Modernism—Dada—Postmodernism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 257.

Dada to suit its own ends, MacBeth realigned *Sound Poems* in a similar way for its broadcast on the BBC and attempted to foreclose its permutational form.

To some extent this realignment was not difficult to effect. MacBeth's claim that *Sound Poems* was a 'huge panorama of primitive cultures', which had been 'made to yield up some of their mysteries' echoes responses to the mystic primitivism celebrated at the IPI. However his description of the poem as a 'panorama' reflects his own superficial hearing of the poem which appears to be dazzled by the presence of exotic words and details and does not consider how the formal work of permutation challenges the audience to confront the inadequacy of those first impressions. Those exotic details are indeed present: the 'F' section includes the names of tropical flowering plants, which are common to Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean and Brazil. The 'H' section which begins 'Ha-ra-xeh-u-ka', and which Cobbing describes in his endnotes as 'monotonously rhythmical', might be taken to resemble the rhythms of a tribal dance. The 'K' section repeats the word 'Karnak' five times, a temple and a village in eastern Egypt, which occupies part of the ancient city of Thebes. The 'M' section, as I have already noted, is a list of Scottish clans, while Houédard observed in 1966 that the 'T' section rearranged the '9 basic syllables from a 6-word vedda [*veda*] song'.⁸¹ The 'P' section mentions the Mexican volcano 'popocatapetal', the North American Tribe 'onondaga', and the herb 'opopanax', while the 'W' section includes the word 'walhalla' (i.e. Valhalla, the Norse hall of fame) in the same poem as the word 'allah', the Arabic name for God. The 'X' section includes the words 'xanthi', a city in the north east of Greece, 'Xingu', a river in the north east of Brazil, and 'Xapuri' and 'Xique', which are two towns in Brazil, and lastly, the 'Y' section contains the names of several Japanese cities and traditional Japanese dances.

However, crucially the 'A' section, which provides the introduction to this panorama, is partly about blindness, and this undercuts the idea of the poem as a wide-angled view of a range of primitive cultures and their mysteries. The 'Adventure' promised by the poem's opening word is complicated by its final three French words, 'Aveugle / Aveugle / A l'aveuglette', which insist upon blindness:

⁸¹ Dom Sylvester Houédard, quoted in Bob Cobbing, *Bob Cobbing & Writers Forum* (1974; 2nd edn 1999), 27.

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

'Aveugle' denotes loss of sight and the phrase 'Dire la bonne aventure' translates as 'to tell fortunes' and thereby connotes the fortune teller's insight. The themes of blindness and prophecy occur throughout Western literature, and while 'A' does not create one specific literary context, it may be seen to evoke Tiresias, the blind prophet of Thebes who appears in Euripides's works and is an example of the simultaneous embodiment of blindness and foresight. 'La bonne aventure' is also the title of a traditional French children's ballad, which connects these ideas to representations of the child and their voice.⁸²

The idea of futurity communicated in 'A' is in keeping with the wider concern for temporality shown in the 'R' section, and is explored further in the aural slippage between 'Adventure' /ædvɛntʃər/ and 'Aventure' /avɑ̃tyʁ/. When 'Aventure' is pronounced in French 'Avent' is easily misheard as 'Avant', which is translated in English as the word 'before'. This invites a re-hearing of the word 'Adventure' when it is repeated in the fourth line of the poem. The word 'advent', which denotes the awaited arrival of a coming event, and which makes up the first half of the word 'Adventure', is suggested by 'Aventure', which is its French equivalent. These words – when sounded – await the poem to come, and suggest ways in which it might be seen and heard. The repetition of the word 'Aveugle' at the end of the poem means the word blind is heard twice in French. This equates the hearing of sound in a foreign language with blindness.

'A' works through the permutation across two languages of a set of closely differentiated sounds, which have to be heard at the same time. In these

⁸² For a discussion of Cobbing's early interest in traditional ballads and nursery rhymes see Chapter One, section 4.2.

terms ‘A’ establishes the idea of *Sound Poems* as a toolkit that has to be used, rather than passively received. If *Sound Poems* is to be seen for what it really is then we have to listen actively to its permutations. This means that despite the array of languages and cultural objects that are represented in *Sound Poems* Cobbing’s poem was not a cultural-imperialist assimilation of other cultures. No cultures were made to yield their mysteries, and nor is this suggested by the poem.

As I have noted in the 1960s the IPI was represented as a ‘gathering of the tribes’, and although this was a description that not all participants agreed with, it was related to the discourse around primitivism.⁸³ The critic Simon Rycroft, who has geographically mapped the social context of London’s counterculture, argues that ‘Not only were many clubs, like UFO [opened Christmas 1966] in Tottenham Court Road, physically subterranean but they were also places where people could go for “tribal” experience.’ Rycroft notes how Nuttall connected the new ‘feeling of license granted by the obvious humanitarian attitude of the *raves* themselves’ to the association of ‘protest with festivity’, which Nuttall thought characterized the tone of events such as the IPI, which ‘articulated a shift in the tactics of the whole movement.’⁸⁴ Rycroft also draws attention to Miles’s belief that ‘watching the clientele of the UFO offered an opportunity to track a change in consciousness within underground London, and specifically, the way that separate factions of the Underground were integrated by the tribal multimedia experience [of the raves] promoting an “intuitive understanding”.’⁸⁵ Although Cobbing used the language of primitivism in the late 1960s to explain his practice, *Sound Poems* resists these narratives, which self-consciously connected the idea of the primitive ‘tribal experience’ to a notion of ‘intuitive understanding’. Understanding *Sound Poems* through its sounds, and the notions of communion that they advance, is not an intuitive process.

These distinctions are important because they establish a different politics of community to that advanced in representations of the IPI. At the IPI, Jandl read from *Mai Hart Lieb Zapfen Eibe Hold*, a book which (as I have noted) was

⁸³ Christopher Logue, quoted in *Days In The Life*, 70.

⁸⁴ Simon Rycroft, ‘Mapping The Underground: Geographies Of British and American Counter-Cultures, 1950-1975’ (University Of Nottingham, unpublished doctoral thesis, 1993), 143.

⁸⁵ Miles quoted in, Rycroft, *Mapping The Underground*, 143.

published by Writers Forum.⁸⁶ Lykiard described Jandl's performance as 'one of the most impressive moments', while Miles claimed that Jandl was 'the star of the Albert Hall reading'.⁸⁷ This assessment was not universally shared – for example Nuttall thought Fainlight was 'the real star of the show' – but Jandl's performance made a strong impact on the audience, as Lykiard's description suggests:

[...] The audience successively turned football crowd, Boy Scout rally, and wolf pack ... As his sound-poems rose to a crescendo, a rhythmic furor aided and abetted by the claps and cries of the crowd, so, suddenly, the destruction of words and their conversion to a shouted, half-hysterical series of sounds, seemed sinister – took on a Hitlerian aspect: the Hall became almost a Babel!⁸⁸

The words 'conversion' and 'rhythmic furor', coupled to the phrases 'football crowd', 'Boy Scout rally' and 'wolf pack' suggest that Jandl's performance, and the effect it had on his listeners, created a moment of wild community reminiscent, to Lykiard, of how Hitler had utilized the nostalgia of the 'volk' to build a following. In this context, Lykiard's reference to the biblical Tower of Babel suggests that although Jandl created a communal feeling, he destroyed the possibility that this could be arrived at without his central organizing presence, or in language. In this context the babble evoked by 'Babel' might imply that the idea of sound poetry as an agent for the formation of an alternative community is associated with an image of the child which is regressive, less civilized, and even fascistic. However, ascertaining the precise implications of Lykiard's evocation of Hitler and Babel is impossible because his response to Jandl is deliberately impressionistic and emotional and focused on the audience. Like MacBeth's, it is a superficial response to sound poetry that feels free to ignore the intellectual and formal qualities of the poetry and instead privileges the effects of performance. This approach is insufficient, as the readings of Cobbing's *Sound Poems* above has shown.

Rather than aligning Jandl's performance with Dada, Lykiard's description aligns it with Italian Futurism, which lacked Dada's international

⁸⁶ The title of Jandl's poem was a surface/phonetic translation of Wordsworth's 1802 poem, 'My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold'.

⁸⁷ Miles, *London Calling*, 159.

⁸⁸ Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, 182 and Lykiard, 'Introduction' to *Wholly Communion*, 4.

orientation and eventually succumbed to Mussolini's Fascism. The philosopher of community Jean-Luc Nancy defines Fascism as, amongst other things, 'the grotesque or abject resurgence of an obsession with communion'. He writes that 'it crystallized the motif of its supposed loss and the nostalgia for its images of fusion'.⁸⁹ It is worth stressing here that while Jandl had no sympathy for fascism, and wrote to Cobbing about some 'fools' who had attempted to found the 'Liga gegen entartete Kunst' (League against degenerate art) in Austria, he did associate it with the counterculture: 'It was ridiculous, and yet I think it is symptomatic of what is going on in the "underground". The nazi vandals are still with us, many of them, and quite a few people are poisoned by them.'⁹⁰ Jandl's Austrian nationality may be why his reading was compared to Hitler's oratorical style, suggesting that his nationality may have played a rather bigger part in the IPI than its participants would care to admit. At worst, Lykiard's description suggests that there is a fascistic element in other representations of the IPI, which valorized Jandl's performance in different terms but enjoyed it for similar reasons. These accounts nostalgically related sound poetry to the figure of the child, and to the idea of a primitive communion which both were seen to represent. In these terms, *Sound Poems* presents an important alternative way of thinking about the IPI.

4) The Body in Performance: Innocence and Obscenity

The 'R', 'M', and 'A' sections of *Sound Poems* provide a structure that helps us to reflect critically on the central mantras of the IPI including internationalism, spontaneity, improvisation, childhood, primitivism and community. The 'B' section constructs a space in which to think about the function of obscenity and a value which is often set in opposition to it, that of innocence. The discourse of obscenity was not just a conceptual concern for those involved in the IPI, it was central to their work as poets. For example, the dissemination of poetry at Better Books (the venue that hosted Ginsberg before the IPI) was at least partly reliant on illicit trade with Soho's pornographic bookshops, as is revealed by Miles in an account of the practices he adopted when he became the manager of Better

⁸⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 17.

⁹⁰ Jandl to Cobbing, n.d. (circa December 1966). 'Letters Received (1960-1969): H-L' BL: Add MS 88909/35/4.

Books.⁹¹ Obscenity shaped the counterculture at a structural and a conceptual level. As we have seen, some of Cobbing's own artworks had also been judged 'obscene'. Before looking at Cobbing's response to this situation I want to consider some of Horovitz's reactions to charges of obscenity.

In his afterword to the *Children of Albion*, Horovitz noted that some of the poets that read at the IPI were accused of obscenity by the manager of the Albert Hall and he uses this accusation to exaggerate the innocence and openness of the poets that read. In his description of this conflict he describes the manager's moral stance and his invocation of family values:

The Hall's Manager [...] was trying to ban the men who read then, and at the succeeding year's New Moon Carnival, from ever appearing again – trying, indeed, to forbid *any* poetry reading under Albert's dome – because 'four letter words associated with Lady Chatterley' were spoken: "I don't want that sort of filth here. Would you send your teenage daughter to hear that sort of thing?"⁹²

By understanding the IPI in terms of the social institution of the family, the manager's argument implicitly challenges Horovitz's representation of the event as a rebirth of society. Later in his account, Horovitz decries the manager's 'Victorian Puritanism', which he calls a 'characteristic drag on the new energy for one of the island's best venues', and he states that poets have 'always laid bare their basic nature – unto the utmost extremes of love and hate – the most expressive language that they know', and that 'young people relate this [extreme form of expression] to the facts of life as they live it – not a sexually reactionary Georgian novel'.⁹³

The physical and conceptual metaphor of laying something bare with its Edenic undertones is reinforced in Ginsberg's 'Who Be Kind To', which Horovitz quotes as an example of how poets that practice extreme modes of expression are 'the only gods, the only Lords of Kingdoms of Feeling, Christs of their own living ribs'.⁹⁴ These lines by Ginsberg suggest a return to the body as a place of flesh and feeling, and as the 'only' site of poetic authority. In his

⁹¹ Miles, *London Calling*, 145.

⁹² Horovitz, *Children*, 341.

⁹³ Horovitz, *Children*, 341.

⁹⁴ Horovitz, *Children*, 341.

interpretation of these lines Horovitz imagines a new dawn where ‘nothing that exists can be hidden – nor needs to be’, from the ‘new kind of man’, that he thought would be triggered and released ‘through the new kind of writing impelled by [Ginsberg’s poem] “Howl”.’⁹⁵ In his celebration of the IPI Horovitz also valorises Ginsberg’s idea of a poetry of ‘romantic inspiration’ led by a ‘Hebraic-Melvillean bardic breath’, which was also poetry of ‘open secrecy’ (Ginsberg’s phrase), where imagination could be set loose. Horovitz’s descriptions of Ginsberg’s poetry recall the rays of sun that emanate from behind the nude figure in ‘Albion’ on the cover of the *Children of Albion*: here is a world of constant daylight where nothing can be hidden and does not need to be. In this situation the possibility of ‘obscenity’ disappears absolutely. In these terms, the children of Albion, and the ‘new’ world that they ushered in, were thought of as absolutely and universally innocent.

Towards the end of his response to the manager’s accusation in the *Children of Albion* Horovitz also drew a connection between obscenity and the Bomb. Echoing Cobbing’s own comments in Finchley, he explained that, while there was writing ‘which brands “bomb” the most obscene word, as it represents the most obscene impulse in our civilisation’, this did not mean that the word itself should be banned.⁹⁶ It is not clear who Horovitz believes was trying to ban the word ‘bomb’, but he evidently sees the manager’s desire to ban the poets from the Albert Hall as indicative of the ‘obscene’ age in which he lived. For Horovitz, as it was for Cobbing (see Chapter Two, section two) the real obscenity was the world’s impulse towards nuclear war, and the way that the media was obsessed by it.

The IPI was itself mediated. Beat film scholar Jack Sergent begins his synopsis of ‘Wholly Communion’ – the film of the IPI – with the observation that it ‘opens with images of a statue, behind which fast-moving clouds part to reveal bright sunlight’:

On the soundtrack is an edit of words and phrases about the ‘sun’ taken from various poets’ performances. This cuts to a view of the outside of the Albert Hall,

⁹⁵ Horovitz, *Children*, 341.

⁹⁶ Horovitz, *Children*, 342.

which is accompanied by [...] Ginsberg's incantation.⁹⁷

For Whitehead (the maker of the film) the whole event was characterized by the binary of light and dark, which is evident in his description of the editing process:

[...] on the editing table, while doing it, I noticed that three different poets, the three: Ginsberg, Corso, and Ferlinghetti, all used the almost identical phrase. They each of them say: "sun, sun, sun" three times, and I thought, "Well perfect, start with the light which was outside, the white-stone faces of the poets, pan over then go into that darkness," because the whole aspect and ambiance of the movie is the darkness isn't it? This dome, this womb. I chose to call it Wholly Communion. That was my title, not the name of the event. It was inside the womb, the church, it was this sort of religious experience.⁹⁸

Light is aurally associated with the voices of Ginsberg, Corso, and Ferlinghetti. The opening dialogue, which includes the words 'the sun the sun the sun my visible father making my body visible through my own eyes', reinforces Horovitz's representation of the IPI as a new dawn, where nothing that exists could be hidden, and which reveals the innocence of the human form.

A conceptual nexus for these ideas can be found in the 'B' section of *Sound Poems*, which despite its repetition of the word 'Bombast' is a sparse poem only eight lines long. When it is compared to the expansive lines of Ginsberg's poetry it seems to have very little 'bombast' about it, as the full text of the 'B' section shows:

Bombast bombast
Bomb bomb bomb bast
Bombast
Emphase
Em- em- em- phase
Bombast emphase
Bombast
Phébus

The first three lines of the poem establish the connection between 'bombast' and

⁹⁷ Jack Sergeant, *The Naked Lens: A History of Beat Cinema* (London: Creation, 1997), 129-130.

⁹⁸ Jack Sergeant, 'Wholly Communion' on *The Sticking Place: Film*
<<http://www.thestickingplace.com/film/films/in-the-beginning-was-the-image/articles/wholly-communion/>> [accessed 15 September 2012].

‘bomb’, thereby expressing how the ‘Bomb’ permeated speech in the 1960s; before the word ‘bombast’ can even be completed one has already articulated the word ‘bomb’. The last word of the poem (‘Phébus’) is also translated into English as ‘bombast’: the French phrase ‘parler phébus’ means to speak in an adorned manner. This meaning derives from Phoebus (meaning bright or shining), which is an epithet that was applied to Apollo, the god of the sun, music and poetry. While light is one of the connotations of ‘Phébus’, the English word ‘phase’ can be used to describe the lightness of the moon, according to the shape of its illuminated portion, as is visible to an observer on Earth. When the word ‘phase’ is given its English pronunciation, and then read in quick conjunction with the word ‘bast’ – like the light of the moon that offers only a dim reflection of the sun – the sound of ‘Phébus’ is approximated (phase + bast = Phé + bus). This testifies to the poem’s permuted and circular logic. ‘Bombast’ and ‘Phébus’, which begin and end the poem, but which pass through several phases, are a metaphor for transition and change through repetition: how night follows day. The word ‘phase’ also means ‘stage’ in English and in French. As it is the only word in the poem that makes sense in both languages, when one vocalises it a decision has to be made as to how to pronounce the word. ‘Phase’ can also be used to refer to the life cycle of an organism.⁹⁹ For both these reasons we can think about the word not only as a stage of the poem that one passes through in order to perform it, but also as a physical stage upon which one might perform.

The critic Adam Piette argues that in ‘Who Be Kind To’ the kindness that Ginsberg promotes is ‘flaky and provisional, vulnerable to the charge of naïve pastoralism [...] yet it marks a determination to make space for affirmations [...]’.¹⁰⁰ Cobbing’s poem does not provide a space for affirmations in this way. While ‘B’ ends with the word ‘Phébus’, an image of light that corresponds to Horovitz’s idea of a new dawn, and which denotes the absence of obscenity, this possibility is destabilised because ‘Phébus’ also recalls the French phrase for the English ‘bombast’. The reader is drawn back into the poem’s circular exploration of the relation between speech and obscenity. This provides a space in which the more established socio-cultural and political values of the IPI have been

⁹⁹ “phase, n.2”, *OED*.

¹⁰⁰ Adam Piette, *The Literary Cold War: 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 101.

rethought.

5) Institutions and the Poetic Career.

I would now like to return to Cobbing's claim that until 1964 he regarded himself as an 'amateur in the arts', but that the *ABC in Sound* led him to believe that he could 'become professional', which he did 'full time in 1967'.¹⁰¹ Cobbing's reputation was certainly bolstered by the impact of Jandl's sound poetry at the IPI. This appeared to result in better access to financial resources and organizations willing to pay money for poetry. One of the themes of this chapter has been the enabling role played by institutions in the dissemination of the values associated with the IPI and the ways in which institutions made the event possible. The transatlantic partnership of countercultural bookshops (partly founded on the exchange of obscene publications) and the choice of Albert Hall as a venue are just two examples of the institutional support that the IPI received, and how the event depended on its institutionalisation.

Miles's representation of the organisation of the IPI as being spontaneous is complicated by his own recollection of the pragmatics that were involved in the organisation of the reading, and the division of labour required to make the IPI happen:

John Esam was in charge of the finances and John Hopkins ('Hoppy') took publicity photographs of the poets seated around the statue of Shakespeare on the Albert Memorial across from the Albert Hall. Hoppy was able to get stories about the reading into the *Sunday Times* and other newspapers. Ginsberg was interviewed by the BBC. [...] all 7,000 tickets had sold out.¹⁰²

The 'statue of Shakespeare', the 'BBC', and 'the *Sunday Times*' show how the IPI was neither an affirmation of a purely poetic space nor even a natural or social space. The event engaged and negotiated with institutions that were created precisely to mobilise large numbers of people under the banner of national culture, and it relied on those institutions being well-established to do so.

Questions were raised about the authenticity of the IPI and the degree of

¹⁰¹ Cobbing, *Bob Cobbing & Writers Forum*, 56.

¹⁰² Miles, *London Calling*, 147.

self-awareness among the audience gathered in the poetic social space. For Edward Lucie-Smith, this supposedly collectivising event is neither powerful nor truly communal because it was a mere reflection of the audience's narcissistic desire to be participants in a momentous historical moment. Horovitz included in *Children of Albion* Lucie-Smith's criticism of the enthusiastic applause that greeted Mitchell's 'To Whom it May Concern':

There was a triumph, which one might have wished otherwise, Adrian Mitchell, already well known for his political verses and for his powers as a reader of them, declaimed a clever but more than slightly smug poem about Viet Nam, and was rewarded with the biggest ovation of the evening. Yet, there was an awareness this was applause without catharsis, that the spectators were applauding the echo of their own sentiments, and willing themselves to be moved without truly being so – the stock response at work.¹⁰³

Horovitz – anxious to control how the response to the poetry at the event was represented – counters:

Inevitably, considering its size, it was something like a football or music crowd, largely made up of unpretentious connoisseurs, who knew, almost 'to a man', Mitchell had scored: a goal – a complete knock-out. They could divine from the very title ('To Whom It May Concern') what the reviewer is too obstinately obtuse to do – that here was a poem for everybody: its focal point of concern, resistance to the most lethal oppression going on. It is Mitchell who adopts a conscionably critical attitude to reality – reality understood as what we *all* know – to be fact. Unanimous participation in such a poem is the concrete emblem of our common experience – so often, pent-up, abused in public – being openly shared.¹⁰⁴

Both Lucie-Smith and Horovitz identify the size of the audience and the unanimity of its response as remarkable aspects of the IPI. But this is viewed with suspicion by Lucie-Smith, who detected only 'the stock response at work', while Horovitz stressed that 'here was a poem for everybody', the 'unanimous participation', and described it as a 'concrete emblem' of 'common

¹⁰³ Lucie-Smith, quoted in Horovitz, *Children*, 355.

¹⁰⁴ Horovitz, *Children*, 335-56.

experience'.¹⁰⁵ Horovitz celebrates mass participation and intuitive understanding of poetry and suggests that it is only in spontaneously organised mass gatherings that poetry can be appreciated in new ways.

It was not only conservative cultural commentators who expressed reservations about the type of communion in poetry that the IPI encouraged. In 1966 the Northumbrian poet Basil Bunting claimed to hear the institutionalised nature of the IPI in the sound of the voices that read at the event:

All the arts are plagued by charlatans seeking money, or fame, or just an excuse to idle. [...] Since poetry reading became popular, they have found a new field, and it is not easy for the outsider to distinguish the fraud from the poet. But it is a little less difficult when poetry is read aloud. Claptrap soon bores. Threadbare work soon sounds thin and broken backed. [...] There were mountebanks at the famous Albert Hall meeting, as well as a poet or two, but the worst, most insidious charlatans fill chairs and fellowships at universities, write for the weeklies or work for the BBC or the British Council or some other asylum for obsequious idlers. In the Eighteenth Century it was the Church. If these men had to read aloud in public, their empty lines, without resonance, would soon give them away.¹⁰⁶

The 'O' section of *Sound Poems* anticipated Bunting's equation between poetry and the sound of the voice, the institution and the idea of a genuine (as opposed to a fake) communion. 'O' has thirty-three lines each of three or four letters long, and each begins with the letter 'O'. Many of the letters in each line are well known acronyms for British institutions: 'OBE' (Order of the British Empire), 'OED' (Oxford English Dictionary), 'OS' (Ordnance Survey) and 'OTC' (Officer Training Corp). The first line of the poem is the letter 'O', and like 'M', this letter runs down the length of the poem's left-hand side and serves as a fixed hinge for the other letters of the poem which change from line to line. Yet the door metaphor Houédard used to describe the 'M' section of *Sound Poems* is not appropriate for thinking about 'O'. Here the repetitive, dramatic and poetic

¹⁰⁵ Horovitz, *Children*, 335-356.

¹⁰⁶ Basil Bunting quoted in *Strong Words: Modern Poets On Modern Poetry*, ed. W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), 82. In the 1970s Bunting was President of the Poetry Society when Cobbing served as its Treasurer.

declaration 'O' mimics the shape of an open mouth in mid-articulation. The mouth is a resonator for the human voice and in 'O' – which celebrates the ability of the mouth to make various letter sounds – the voice is inseparable from the idea of the poem as a resonator for the creation and permutation of institutional formations.

Bunting believed that the 'fraud' could be distinguished from the genuine 'poet' by the quality of sound that they produced when they read aloud. Poetry which did not 'deal in sound' (a phrase Bunting uses in his essay 'Poetry, Like Music') was one indication of the poet who was seeking to use the new resource of the poetry reading for money alone. 'O' – which does 'deal in sound' – is structured by acronyms of institutions which, in their arrangement in the poem, are experienced mainly as sound. In this way the concept of the institution is fully integrated into every aspect of 'O' as a poem, which differs from the attitude to the IPI on the part of its organisers in significant ways. Miles's representation of the organisation of the IPI obscured the institutional support that he and the event received. Horovitz was committed to guarding interpretation of the IPI because he used it as a static object upon which to build his career. By contrast, Cobbing is not nostalgic about events and institutions. Rather, his career depends on moving beyond particular groups either by reconfiguring them or moving away from them.

This can help us to think about the role institutions played in the history of the IPI and its associated poetic formations. Bunting enthusiastically attacks poets who seem to be interested only in the pragmatic and remunerative benefits that these institutions brought to poetry in Britain. The redemptive possibility he offers is that there is some kind of true sound that the poet can make which would set them apart from menial institutional concerns. In contrast, the 'O' section of *Sound Poems* seems alert to the fact that the institutionality of poetry fundamentally affects and inflects the poet's articulations from the off.

In *Career Moves*, Libbie Rifkin characterizes the Berkeley Poetry Conference (1965) as an event that is identified with the beginning of the

academic co-opting of the avant-garde in America.¹⁰⁷ While the IPI did not seek to draw poetry into the academy, it certainly brought poetry to mass attention. It was an emblem for what poetry and communal life could be like when the mass media was harnessed to local and counter cultural organizations. It profoundly affected the understanding of sound poetry, the poetry reading, and the role of the poet in Britain for years to come. While it did not offer a permanent institutional space for poetry, its effects are ongoing.

Conclusion

In the 1960s, performance, sound poetry, and the practice of poetry readings were shaped by the expectations created at the IPI and through its representations. Two key instances of this are the habit of responding impressionistically to sound and the discourse of primitivism: these two are connected by the idea of panoramas of viewpoints. These patterns which were established at the IPI affected the reception of *Sound Poems* in the mid-1960s, as can be seen from George MacBeth's presentation of the work and newspaper reviews. The IPI shaped responses to sound poetry beyond Cobbing's work alone. It established the poetry reading in British national culture as an accepted way of experiencing poetry, while it raised the public profile of sound poetry specifically, which enabled Cobbing to flourish.¹⁰⁸ This account of the IPI shows how counter cultural events were bound up in and sustained by mainstream arts and media, and how the live event of the IPI initiated Cobbing's turn from amateur to professional poet in Britain.

The comparative reading of *Sound Poems* and the IPI set out in this chapter explores two related paradoxes in Cobbing's reception as a sound poet in Britain. Firstly, while the IPI established the context in which Cobbing

¹⁰⁷ Libbie Rifkin, *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde* (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 14. There is another biographical connection: Rifkin's analysis is anticipated in Mottram's correspondence with Duncan about performance and the Berkeley poetry conference, see: Eric Mottram to Robert Duncan, 23 January 1974, in *The Unruly Garden: Robert Duncan and Eric Mottram, Letters and Essays*, ed. Amy Evans and Shamoan Zamir (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 122. As I established in the introduction to this thesis, Mottram's thinking on performance was influenced by Cobbing's practice.

¹⁰⁸ Cobbing's 'success' in this period can be seen in the increased number of poetry readings he gave in a greater variety of spaces, the payments he now received for performing at schools, universities, international festivals, and the number and reach of his print publications, See 'Letters Received 1960-1969' BL Add MS 88909/35.

established himself as ‘the British sound poet’, this context also meant that he was left out of the discourse that surrounded (and still surrounds) the event. Secondly, while the IPI established the context in which *Sound Poems* became ‘a point of reference for all subsequent sound poetry written’ in Britain, one of the long-term effects of the IPI has been to obscure the poetics of the poem. My reading of *Sound Poems* and of Cobbing’s contributions to the IPI has tried to resolve these paradoxes.

Cobbing was not in opposition to the IPI itself, but against the circumscribed terms of its interpretation which were used as a frame through which to understand poetry afterwards, as Horovitz’s afterword to *Children of Albion* attests. Cobbing had a different approach to the themes and practices of poetry and had been developing them for several years before the IPI. For example, the idea of community is approached with greater sensitivity to its complexity and more respect for the object it seeks communion with; his conception of how institutions and poetry are integrated is more self-aware; the connection between innocence and obscenity is less naïve; and it could even be argued that the ground for the reception of Jandl, Ginsberg, and Hollo was partially laid by Writers Forum publications of their work prior to the actual event of the IPI. Considering the IPI in relation to Cobbing reminds us that it was a slowly-evolving event which took place after four years of experimentation and discovery within Britain and enables us to consider it in relation to the smaller-scale local art practices out of which it emerged.

Though I have focussed here on contrasts between Cobbing’s poem and the IPI, it is also important to recognise the continuities between *Sound Poems* and Cobbing’s earlier work. Even though he used the IPI to cement his reputation as a sound poet, and used the popularity of sound poetry established by the IPI to strengthen his public position, it should not be viewed simply as an opportunistic move. It enabled him to build on the concepts and practices of his earlier performance. For example, his entry into the wider countercultural discourse of primitivism was informed by his engagement with Herbert Read’s ideas of organic art in the 1950s; the grid form of *Rebus* is analogous to that of *Worms* and *Typestract 1*, and his ongoing commitment to working out ideas of community through form. Even the strategy of responding to the opportunities opened up by the IPI to become a sound poet has a precedent. Cobbing had

already formed the habit of aligning his voice with that of someone else (often the voice of the community in which he worked) and was aware of the advantages and problems of this approach. His later work with tape-recorders and other audio technologies, which layered voices on top of one another, and altered his own voice, shows that this was an integrated part of his poetic practice. Cobbing's work realigns itself towards institutions that will enable it at every stage, but there's also a line of development that retains particular aesthetic commitments of practice: so his embrace of sound poetry is partly a pragmatic move but is also one which enables his aesthetic development.

'Television was the central medium' of culture in 1960s Britain, as the critic Stuart Laing describes it, and it was central to the success and notoriety of the IPI.¹⁰⁹ By contrast, BBC radio, not television, presented *Sound Poems* to a mass British audience. This difference in medium for institutional support is registered in the fact that the dominant representations of the IPI stress the physical presence of the poets, the interventions that they made and their onstage appearance, while *Sound Poems* is characterised by its aural qualities, and the disembodiment and separation created by radio. Cobbing's relationship to the institution which enabled his work was always integrated into his poetry at an aesthetic level. Therefore a significant change in the nature of his relationship with supporting institutions – such as the difference between being an amateur poet and a professional – demanded a shift in poetic form. National radio was an institution that facilitated Cobbing's move to becoming a professional poet and Cobbing duly responded to the conceptual possibilities of the medium in his performances.

As a result of the activity at and later representations of the IPI, Cobbing decided to orient his work as a sound poet towards Europe rather than the US poetry world feted by Horovitz and Miles. This move was enabled by BBC recordings of Cobbing's sound poetry which were disseminated around Europe. Cobbing's engagement with Europe, the use of audio technologies to effect this, and the process and consequences of reinscribing the distance created by his

¹⁰⁹ Stuart Laing, 'The Politics of Culture: Institutional Change', in, *Cultural Revolution?: The Challenge of the Arts In The 1960s*, ed. Bart Moore-Gilbert and John Seed (New York: Routledge, 1992), 55-74 (57).

estrangement from Anglo-American poetry into his performance are the focus of the next chapter.

In this regard it is worth pointing out that the features of *Sound Poems* discussed in this chapter make it particularly suited to radio, a medium that makes extensive use of sampling, and where each programme is subjected to a schedule which is not necessarily of the programme maker's choosing. This is because the elevation of single letters to the status of one poem out of twenty-six invites the hiving-off of sections of the poem, so that the relation between the individual letter and the whole alphabet (the main body of the poem) either becomes metonymic or autonomous. This was one of the formal features of *Sound Poems* that allowed parts of the poem to enter new contexts, thereby establishing further distance between it and the IPI.

Chapter Four: Listening to The Institution of Audio Technology 1965-1970

In this chapter I will examine tape-based poems produced by Bob Cobbing in the period 1965-1970 and their associated visual scores in the context of European sound poetry. His exclusion from the IPI encouraged him to disseminate his poems to distant places via European radio broadcasts and records and this was part of a process of recuperation for Cobbing. One consequence of this was that, by the early-1970s, Cobbing had become internationally known as an important sound poet. His international reputation initially developed through his distribution on audio technology rather than print, and this relates to the fact that he came to work out an aural version of his practice of his visual permutations (discussed in Chapter Two) in sound. Cobbing was both informed by and distinguished from European sound poetry. By focussing on the collaborative nature of his use of audio technology, the relation of his poetry on the page to its audio technological setting, and the actual aural quality of his sound poems, this chapter will show that audio technologies and a pan-European sound poetry movement shaped Cobbing's performance, particularly in the period from 1965 to 1970.

Cobbing's international reputation developed from 1965 partly as a result of a performance of *Sound Poems* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in January 1965, five months before the IPI.¹ This was part of a regular series of readings organised by Eric Mottram and Bill Butler and resulted in a BBC recording of *Sound Poems* that was broadcast on 7 January 1966. Anthony Thwaite and George MacBeth facilitated the BBC recording.² MacBeth arranged for Cobbing to use the BBC's electronic music studio (the Radiophonic Workshop) to record a version of *Sound Poems* that was given electronic treatment. MacBeth later circulated the recording in Europe. Shortly after the IPI, Cobbing also performed *Sound Poems* at Better Books alongside Ernst Jandl,

¹ For documentation of this reading, see Eric Mottram, 'A Prosthetics of Poetry: The Art Of Bob Cobbing', in *Second Aeon* 16-17 (1973), 105-132 (105) and Bob Cobbing, interviewed by Nicholas Zurbrugg, in 'The Multimedia Text', 33.

² For details of Anthony Thwaite's involvement with the BBC Third Programme, see Anthony Thwaite interviewed by Sarah O'Reilly, track nine of *National Life Stories: Authors' Lives* (BL Sound Archive, catalogue number C1276); Desmond Briscoe, *The BBC Radiophonic Workshop: The First 25 Years* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1983), 115.

who performed poems from *Sprechgedichte*.³ This reading was recorded as a split LP and was distributed to key figures in European sound poetry. Both these live performances of *Sound Poems* enabled the development of Cobbing's European reputation as a sound poet. This is a key aspect of Cobbing's move from being an amateur, local artist to an international, professional one.

European electronic music practitioners were interested in the use of electronic techniques as music in its own right. Two distinct trends were developed by Pierre Schaeffer (as *musique concrète*) and Karlheinz Stockhausen (as *elektronisch Musik*), in Paris and Cologne respectively. The BBC Radiophonic Workshop took a third path of using electronic sound for its 'rich vocabulary of stereotyped associations' which could be drawn upon to illustrate dramatic situations and represent dramatic moods on radio.⁴ In the late 1950s and early 1960s Cobbing would have been most familiar with this use of electronic sound. The BBC's decision to set up the Radiophonic Workshop, which was to shape Cobbing's aesthetics as well as his reputation, can in part be traced back to the BBC's interest in Beckett and his plays. Beckett's first English-language radio play premiered on January 17, 1957, on the Third Programme, and it 'brought the potential for tape effects in drama to the attention of the wider public'.⁵ It is likely that this important broadcast also brought the potential of tape effects to the attention of Cobbing, who was later broadcast by Macbeth on the Third Programme himself.⁶

The national role Beckett's radio plays had in the development of the Radiophonic Workshop corresponds to the historical development of Cobbing's own poems at a regional level. Throughout 1961, and alongside the programme of poetry readings organised under the aegis of Finchley Society of the Arts, Cobbing and Rowan were members of the 'Arena Players', a group concerned with experimental drama and theatre-in-the-round. On 6 April 1961 they presented two plays: Cobbing directed Eugene Ionesco's *The Lesson* and John Rowan (Cobbing's co-editor and close creative ally in this period) played Krapp

³ Bob Cobbing and Ernst Jandl, *Sound Poems and Sprechgedichte* (London: Writers Forum Record No. 1, September 1965).

⁴ Louis Niebur, *Special Sound: The Creation And Legacy Of The BBC Radiophonic Workshop* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

⁵ Niebur, *Special Sound*, 17.

⁶ Bob Cobbing was broadcast on the BBC Third Programme, 7 January 1966.

in Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*.⁷ The significance of the Ionesco play to Cobbing's visual permutations was discussed in Chapter Two. Here, I will focus on what Beckett's play reveals about the development of Cobbing's sound poetry.

One of the significant dramatic features of *Krapp's Last Tape* is that Krapp is onstage listening to earlier, electronically mediated versions of himself and interacts with those voices in a live setting. Katherine Hayles argues that *Krapp's Last Tape*:

is structured by the binary opposition between the presence of Krapp onstage and the mechanical reproduction through the tape recorder of his voice in earlier times ... complex patterns of replication and difference are set up between the two voices, resulting in sounds and movements that echo between them in almost musical fashion.⁸

Krapp remains physically and temporally present, but his past and physically distant selves continually interrupt and direct his responses on stage, while his present self-reflections frame how we hear those distant voices. The tape recorder is the audio technology that foregrounds this reciprocal dialogue between presence and absence, distance and immediacy. The dramatic interplay between the 'live' and the 'recorded' is one of the things that further distinguishes Cobbing's sound poetry from live performances at the IPI that valorised physical presence and spontaneity.

Moreover, Cobbing's tendency to shape and enter into dialogue retrospectively with his own biography, as we saw in Chapter One's discussion of the re-presentation of 'World in Ruins (Cataclasm)', echoes the way that Krapp converses with his own recorded voice from earlier times: the 'self' heard across time becomes the context of the performance. Cobbing conceived of the poem's 'self' as being coexistent with, and incorporative of, the mechanisms and contexts that supported it (be it an art gallery, a bookshop, a duplicator, or a tape recorder). In Cobbing's visual practice the process of reproducing from a

⁷ 'Finchley Society of Arts', *Finchley Post*, 28 April 1961, 'Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (2)', BL Add MS 88909/14.

⁸ Katherine Hayles, 'Voices Out Of Bodies, Bodies Out of Voices: Audiotape and the Production of Subjectivity', in *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*, ed. Adelaide Morris (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 74-97 (81).

stereotype visually registers the ongoing process of the image's changing appearance over time. Cobbing had factored the 'support' (the factors and contexts that enabled his art) into his poems from the very outset. In the case of his sound poetry, audio technology was that support. The effect of this was that it allowed him to hear his own sound poetry as it was mediated by audio technology and distributed geographically to distant places. Just as Krapp's experience of hearing of his voice in previous times inflected his speech in the present, and just as his past voices were retrospectively altered by his representation of them, Cobbing's sound poetry was similarly inflected by mediation and distance, and this affects how it should now be heard.

1. The European Contexts of Cobbing's Sound Poetry from 1965

Despite the fact that audio technology is a medium associated with distance, it can also function as a means of asserting immediacy and presence:

Wirelessness immediately meant great distances, thus all the references to the expanses of the oceans, to crowds, to other lands, and to the otherness of the unexplored globe. This globalness was finally determined, however, within the framework of where the technology was footed politically and historically. Yet, this newfound and newly populated space was not acoustic; the distance between replicated objects was a vacuum that collapsed space to an ideal of instantaneous transmission and reception, a communication without mediation. Sound existed at either end(s), but in between there was nothing but silence, reduced to the trajectory of a signal.⁹

Cobbing's use of audio-technologies such as the radio to reflect, refigure and recuperate his distance from the IPI, which led to the development of his reputation abroad, risked indulging myths of unmediated, instantaneous and ideal communication that the IPI and its representations fostered. However, rather than taking up the opportunities to use audio technology to 'collapse space to an ideal of instantaneous transmission', Cobbing maintained the properties of distance in his thinking about audio technology. One of the ways in which he did this was to rely on a distribution network of friends and fellow-poets including Ernst Jandl

⁹ Douglas Khan and Gregory Whitehead, *Wireless Imagination: Sound Radio and the Avant-Garde*, (Cambridge Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1992), 21.

and George MacBeth to disseminate his work on record and radio in his absence. This was a practical measure, but, as I will show in the next section of this chapter, it contributed to the ways in which ideas of distance and community were figured in Cobbing's sound poems.

Cobbing did not visit mainland Europe in the mid-1960s. Instead, he relied on letters to keep himself informed about the spread of his work in Europe. For Cobbing therefore, the ideal of instantaneous transmission was qualified by the realities of bureaucratic and practical tasks of sending records, arranging for the broadcast of pre-recorded performances and receiving feedback, all of which came to him through letters. This meant that his sound poetry was mediated through his correspondents, and the 'ideal of instantaneous transmission and reception' seceded to the time taken for letters to be written, delivered and read. Moreover, Cobbing's understanding of audio technology was shaped by older communication technologies, and this, as I will show, is registered in the audio qualities of his sound poetry.

One of Cobbing's most important contacts in Europe was Jandl, who acted as Cobbing's transceiver and receiver. This relationship developed as a result of their joint reading at Better Books and Cobbing's publication of *Mai Hart Lieb Zapfen Eibe Hold* (11 May 1965) with Writers Forum. Jandl often corresponded with Cobbing to ask how his book was selling and how his reputation in Britain was developing following his reading at the IPI.¹⁰ In turn, Jandl reported back on Cobbing's international reception and advised him as to what different European poets required of him. In the process Cobbing's reputation was amplified. Here is an excerpt from Jandl's letter to Cobbing, sent on 9 December 1965:

George MacBeth and his wife were in Vienna the other day, and we had a very pleasant time together. I heard your tape, which is marvellous. What a pity I shall not be able to hear it broadcast. This tape should really be made into a record. Can this be done, or would the BBC not agree to it? And it should be done and sold by a proper record company who can cover the international market.¹¹

¹⁰ For letters regarding the IPI and Jandl's reception including his reflections on that reception see Jandl to Bob Cobbing, 9 December 1965, 5 February 1966, and 30 April 1966, 'Letters Received (1960-1969): H-L', BL Add MS 88909/35/4.

¹¹ Ernst Jandl to Bob Cobbing, 9 December 1965, 'Letters Received (1960-1969): H-L', BL Add MS 88909/35/4.

Jandl assures Cobbing that MacBeth's dissemination of the version of the *ABC in Sound* that had been treated by the BBC's Radiophonic workshop record was enthusiastically received. Jandl evidently cared about the distribution of Cobbing's poems, and he thought that it should be available to an international audience, which he thought of as a market. Jandl encouraged Cobbing to pursue professional means of disseminating his sound poetry, telling Cobbing that the tape needed to be distributed by a 'proper record company'.

This contrasts with Jandl's attitude towards the distribution of his own and Cobbing's poems on the Writers Forum LP. Jandl wrote to Cobbing on 23 November 1965 to say that he was 'very pleased to hear the success of the ICA exhibition and of our record. Over 50 gone – that's marvellous'.¹² Jandl's pleasure in the relatively small number of fifty records sold seems due to the fact that it was half the total number of records pressed. Although there is little evidence to suggest that a countercultural exchange network existed for tapes comparable to the extensive networks that existed for the exchange of little mimeographed magazines, Jandl's pleasure in the relatively small number of '50' was accompanied by an informed sense of where complimentary copies of the record should be sent. The names and addresses Jandl includes are as follows:

Dr. Reinhard Döhl (Stuttgart, West Germany); Heinz Gappmayr (Innsbruck, Austria); Dr. Raoul Hausmann (Etienne, France); Edward Lucie-Smith (London, England); Franz Mon (Frankfurt, West Germany); Helmut Heissenbüttel (Stuttgart, West Germany); Professor Leonard Foster (Cambridge, England); Robert Creeley (New Mexico, U.S.A.); Gerhard Rhüm (Berlin, Germany); Prof Alfred Kolleritsch (Graz, Austria); John Cage (New York, U.S.A.); and Decio Pignatari (São Paulo, Brazil).¹³

The distribution of the record to seven different countries represents Jandl's attempt to both register and create the record's international appeal, while the Eurocentric bias of the list reflects the limits of Jandl's own social network. Jandl notes that the only person on the list who did not know him personally was John

¹² Jandl to Cobbing, 23 November 1965, 'Letters Received (1960-1969): H-L', BL Add MS 88909/35/4.

¹³ Jandl to Cobbing, 27 January 1966, 'Letters Received (1960-1969): H-L', BL: Add MS 88909/35/4.

Cage. It is notable that the list not only includes practicing sound poets but that it also includes academics, as well as poets who were known for their journalism (Lucie-Smith, for example). This suggests that Jandl thought there was a need for the record to be known by non-poets, and that he thought that some of sound poetry's support structures (universities and newspapers) as well as his connection to them needed to be acknowledged, appreciated, and fostered. This targeted distribution of the record to media and cultural figures contributed to Cobbing being taken seriously as a professional sound poet in Europe. One example of this is provided in a letter dated 1 August 1966, where Jandl tells Cobbing that he had seen Franz Mon in Frankfurt, that he had sent him a record 'some time ago', that Mon liked Cobbing's *Sound Poems* 'very much' and that he wanted to broadcast them on Berlin radio 'unaltered by radiophonic or other means'.¹⁴ Mon duly broadcast the 'P' and 'M' section of the *ABC in Sound* in November 1966.¹⁵

The record, the tape, and the radio also facilitate the aural initiation of community via a person's voice despite that person's absence. In a letter from Paris, the sound poet and artist Lilly Greenham commented on the active presence of these qualities in her experience of Cobbing's work:

In July this year I heard a record of yours at Dr. Elizabeth Mathew's place and so I decided to write to you, but your address I [...] already had a few months back, as it was given to me by ANNE LOCKWOOD, who heard me recite some phonetic and rhythmical poems at a small theatre in Paris one night in the spring, and she knew me from the *Bitzos* record (this was a great response to me!) This record is no more available, sold out!¹⁶

Greenham hears Cobbing before she writes to him, and Lockwood (one of Cobbing's closest collaborators in the mid-to-late 1960s) listens to Greenham via the *Bitzos* record before she sees her: both spend time with each other in the presence of Cobbing's disembodied voice. The use of audio technology to

¹⁴ Jandl to Cobbing, 1 August 1966, 'Letters Received (1960-1969): H-L', BL Add MS 88909/35/4.

¹⁵ For list of broadcasts, including that by Franz Mon, see inside cover of 'Notebook of Cuttings (1)', BL, Add MS 88909/112.

¹⁶ Lilly Greenham to Cobbing, 22 October 1967, 'Letters Received (1960-1969): E-G', BL Add MS 88909/35/3.

initiate a community of interacting voices becomes a feature of Cobbing's poems from 1965 onwards as I discuss below. The way that audio technology shaped the reception of his work also alters the substance of his poems. Notably, this letter presents an image of an all-female network of sound poets, artists, and academics. Subsequently, Cobbing's sound poetry used women's names as scores for performance, and included significant collaborations with women such as Paula Claire, Annea Lockwood and Susanne Feingold.

Jandl persistently alerts Cobbing to the idealism inherent in ideas of instantaneous transmission and reception. On 30 October 1968 Jandl wrote to congratulate Cobbing on his 'fulcrum collection, the Swedish record, [and] the OU record to be', and then exclaims:

Everything you write makes me feel like dropping in at 262 Randolph Avenue [Cobbing's home address] which doesn't seem far away at all. What a damned nuisance these 'actual' distances are.¹⁷

Jandl's observation of the 'actual distance' that separated him from Cobbing is a recurrent theme of their correspondence. In a letter sent earlier in the year (19 May 1968) Jandl affectionately wrote – agreeing with Cobbing's sentiment expressed in a previous letter – that although it is 'nice to meet in anthologies and magazines, as we do quite frequently', that 'it won't be too long until we see each other in person again.'¹⁸ This human contact was important to the development of Cobbing's poems from the mid-1960s into the early 1970s, but for Cobbing friendships and collaborations were also shaped by the machinery of their transmission. On 30 January 1967 Jandl wrote in response to a query from Cobbing that 'I cannot say that I do feel the need for more contact with electronic machines', implying that Cobbing did.¹⁹ Cobbing's efforts to maintain his friendships over distances ran parallel to, and intersected with, his use of audio technology.

¹⁷ Jandl to Cobbing, 30 October 1968, 'Letters Received (1960-1969): H-L', BL Add MS 88909/35/4. *OU*, *Cinquième Saison*, shortened in 1970 to *OU*, was a magazine established by Henri Chopin in 1963 and continued and extended the work of the review *Cinquième Saison* (1957-1963), which was started by Raymond Style and then edited by Chopin from issue three onwards.

¹⁸ Jandl to Cobbing, 19 May 1968, 'Letters Received (1960-1969): H-L', BL Add MS 88909/35/4.

¹⁹ Jandl to Cobbing, 30 January 1967, 'Letters Received (1960-1969): H-L', BL Add MS 88909/35/4.

2. *Whisper Piece No. 1: Marvo Movies Natter and Distance*

In 1968, Cobbing wrote to Jandl with this important statement about the audio technological development of his work:

I am not writing now. My work is basically on tape now and is becoming more abstract. Klowkukulan “words drowned in sound”, Stip-step whispered words + sounds, scarcely audible. Khrajrej is some of my old poems overlaid by a complex weave of contrasting sound – intentionally rather jarring. Table Talk is a “conversation” in completely abstract sound. Soleil a rather uncanny repetition of a single word. Chamber Music “made in Sweden” uses words for vowel sounds and musical effects alone. My work, in other words, is moving nearer to that of Chopin and Dufrêne – though still quite distinct I hope, and part of my personal expression. I am going to France on July 26th to work with Dufrêne for a few days. Henri Chopin has left France to settle in England. That makes Two of us here. Together we can do great things. ... More opportunities to hear the variety which exists are needed in all countries.²⁰

In the descriptions of his tape poems, the names of which are given above, Cobbing draws attention to how each is a mixture of word and sound. The descriptors ‘drowned’, ‘whispered’, ‘scarcely’, ‘weave’, ‘conversation’, ‘abstract’ and ‘uncanny’ give a sense of the range of relations between word and sound in his poetry, and the forms of relation that recording allowed. Cobbing never abandoned the word even when his poetry was on tape. This both registers how his sound poetry was mediated through his correspondents and distances his work from that of Henri Chopin and Francois Dufrêne to whom he believed his work had moved nearer, and whom he visited in July 1968. Cobbing’s tape poems are intermittent presentations of an ongoing process of listening to which he had committed himself. He sounded out the potential of audio technology to provide an institutional ground and conceptual frame for his poems, while also exploring the institutional sites in which European sound poetry was being

²⁰ Jandl to Cobbing 30 October 1968, ‘Letters Received (1960-1969): H-L’, BL Add MS 88909/35/4.

Jandl is quoting back to Cobbing the statement Cobbing had sent him on 16 July 1968. Jandl had translated it into German and sent it to ‘Dr. H. Backer in Linz (Upper Austria)’ who was starting a new magazine. Issue two contained an article on concrete poetry in Britain to which Cobbing’s statements contributed.

formed and contested. In this regard, the four poems that constitute Cobbing's Whisper Pieces are central: 'Marvo Movies Natter' (1968), 'Spontaneous Appealinaire Contemprate Apollinaire' (1968), 'Voitex' (1969) and 'Whississippi' (1969). I shall address the first and last of these in this chapter.

In a note that Cobbing sent to Henri Chopin on 9 November 2000 (on the invitation of Nicholas Zurbrugg, who was compiling an anthology of OU magazine) he describes his memories of the way that *Marvo Movies Natter* (1968) was made: 'We each chose a passage to read, from Jack Kerouac's "Old Angel Midnight", from the daily newspaper, from a scientific article, and read simultaneously – words tending towards abstract sound.'²¹ For the recording, these sources were read by three different speakers: Annea Lockwood, Cobbing and Jeff Keen (CD track 3). The whispered words are almost completely unintelligible, because all three whisper simultaneously and so obstruct what one another say. While words form the basis for the sounds that we hear, the predominant aural effect is of the whisper. The whisper is used in many cultures to signal secrecy and confidentiality; but in *Marvo Movies Natter* we cannot hear what the speakers whisper and so we are denied their intimacy. *Marvo Movies Natter* presents a sound where distance is synonymous with the layered vocalisations of the words that are used to produce it.

The layered vocalisations of *Marvo Movies Natter* are best thought of as voiceovers. Jeff Keen was a filmmaker, and the poem was made and used as a sound track to his film of the same name. This is not the only reason for hearing the whispers of the poem in these terms. Helen Macallan and Andre Plain in their chapter on 'Filmic Voices' note that in the analogue era of film 'the "stage whisper" – which was delivered to the audience rather than the diegetic characters – was a necessary convention.'²² It 'had to be loud enough to survive the extra noise that the various stages of processing on analogue [film] tape added, while still appearing to be a whisper', but in the cleaner digital age, 'actors can dispense with the time-honored theatrical tradition of projecting the voice' and 'whisper as they would in everyday life and the recording will be

²¹ Bob Cobbing to Henri Chopin, 9 November 2000, in in 'OU – Cinquième Saison' book insert included with, *OU Sound Poetry An Anthology* (Algha Marghen: OU, 2002), 54.

²² Helen Macallan and Andrew Plain, 'Filmic Voices' in, *Voice: Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media*, ed. Norie Neumark, Ross Gibson, Theo van Leeuwen, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 243-267 (256).

audible.’²³ The actor’s whisper reduces the distancing effects of mediation, and the actor performs as if they were sitting right next to you. However, the space the whisper creates is dependent upon the context in which it is heard. The digital whisper masks the viewer’s physical remove from the actor, preserving the intimacy that the whisper promises. In his analogue recordings Cobbing registers the distance that film attempts to eclipse.

Cobbing’s collaborative sound practice relates to his use of an analogue audio-technological medium, rather than the digital audio-visual medium of the film. The whispered voiceovers of *Marvo Movies Natter* enhance and become indistinguishable from the hissing noise of analogue tape. Whispering damages the vocal chords, and in this respect it is an audible form of destruction. Cobbing’s use of the whisper to destroy the audibility of the words that were used to make the tape poem recalls his contributions to the Destruction in Art Symposium, for which he exaggerated the duplicator’s deficiencies to destroy text. In his *Destruction In Art* prints, text gradually changed into image through its repetitive duplication. In Chapter Two I noted how this feature was related to Cobbing’s belief that poems had an ‘internal force of being’, which recurrent versions sought to express and release.²⁴ Cobbing believed that change in his art was related to his practice of making many different versions of the same poem, and was the result of ‘serving the poem...trying to make it as much like itself as possible’.²⁵ *Marvo Movies Natter* appeared in contexts other than as the soundtrack to Keen’s film and these contexts altered (and continue to alter) how the tape-poem is heard. The tape-poem’s appearance in multiple contexts and in quick succession signals Cobbing’s interest in dissemination as a form of expression, as well as his interest in formal variation as a means of ‘serving the poem’. In this case a change in the poem’s context is conceived of as a formal change.

One important context was its publication on the record accompanying *Revue OU 34-35* (1969), an audio-visual publication edited by Chopin. Here is the track listing in full:

²³ Macallan, Plain, ‘Filmic Voices’ in, *Voice*, 257.

²⁴ ‘Poet opens Art Show: Style Linked with A-Bombs’, *Finchley Post*, 17 March 1961, in ‘Hendon Arts Together: Press Cuttings (2)’, BL Add MS 88909/14.

²⁵ Bob Cobbing interviewed by Steven Ross Smith, in *Ballet of the Speech Organs*, 6.

01. Francois Dufrene "Haut-Satur" (June 1967) [02'58"]
02. (December 1967) [08'42"]
03. (November 1968) [01'23"]
04. Bob Cobbing "Marvo Movie Natter" (1968) [04'10"]
(Voices Cobbing, Lockwood and Keen)
05. Bob Cobbing "Spontaneous Appelinaire Contemprate Apollinaire" (1968)
[03'09"]
(Voices Cobbing and Dufrene)
06. Henri Chopin "Mes Bronches" (1968) [05'48"].²⁶

On this record, Cobbing can be heard in the company of Francois Dufrene and Henri Chopin: his poems are literally situated between theirs, validating Cobbing's 16 July 1968 statement which claimed his work was 'moving nearer to that of Chopin and Dufrene'. But the record invites the listener to consider Cobbing's poems in the context of two distinct practices of sound poetry. Have Cobbing's poems moved nearer to the poems of both Chopin and Dufrene, or were his poems situated uncomfortably between their two practices? This is one of the questions that Cobbing's 16 July 1968 statement masks, and I will answer it by listening to *Marvo Movies Natter* in the context of recent and contemporaneous theorisations of their practices.

Sound poet and theorist Steve McCaffery has argued that Dufrene's tape-poems are 'posited a priori within bodily performance as physical expenditure', and that for this reason 'his poetry appears to be incontrovertibly predicated on a biological paradigm and thus, unavoidably entangled in a metaphysics of presence.'²⁷ As McCaffery understands it, Dufrene enters 'the microparticulars of morphology so as to investigate the full expressive range of prenotive elements' – the 'new letters' that Dufrene speaks of – and his 'special achievement is to have renounced successfully the aura of the semantic and pushed the limits of the poetic centripetally', into his own body.²⁸ Dufrene's dependency on his own voice, as it emerged from the centre of his body (from his 'gut') was something that he was conscious of:

[...] by temperamental choice, I insist on the attempt, even while keeping away from the manipulations of the composer (yet without denying myself such

²⁶ *Revue OU* 34-35, ed. Henri Chopin (1969) reissued on *OU Sound Poetry An Anthology* (Algha Marghen; OU, 2002).

²⁷ Steve McCaffery, 'From Phonic to Sonic: The Emergence of the Audio-Poem', in Morris (ed.), *Sound States*, 149-169 (155-156).

²⁸ McCaffery, 'From Phonic to Sonic', in *Sound States*, 155.

resources as “re-recording”) to keep on singing as far as the gut-feeling of being human.’²⁹

The idea of a centripetal movement in the practice of sound poetry (of sound emerging from the centre of a poet’s body and being pulled back to it sonically and emotionally, as related to a decision to limit the electronic manipulation of that sound) is explored to different effect in *Marvo Movies Natter*, which was recorded in mono for *OU* 34-35 (1969). Cobbing had previously recorded five poems using two-track recording, so his decision to make a monophonic recording rather than to work in stereo was a conscious choice. It is comparable to Dufrière’s rejection of certain possibilities of electronic vocal manipulation. There are two main varieties of stereo recording: ordinary stereo recording and multitrack recording. In the first of these ‘two signals are recorded onto tape simultaneously, representing the left and right channels. These can then be played back as a finished recording. Multitrack recording allows several tracks to be recorded independently, a process known as overdubbing. The multitrack tape is then “mixed down” to stereo.’³⁰ Monophonic recording represents a deliberate refusal of the simulation of three-dimensional space, which in stereo recording is aurally simulated along a horizontal plane, the imaginary line that joins one ear to the other. Whereas Dufrière argues that his sounds emerge from the centre of his body, the sound of *Marvo Movies Natter* is all about refusing to put the listener in the ‘centre’ of the auditory space. When McCaffery argues that Dufrière’s tape-poems are unavoidably entangled in a ‘metaphysics of presence’, it is at least in part because he believes them to be limited by the ‘idiosyncratic athleticisms of [Dufrière’s] individual body’.³¹ In McCaffery’s words, Dufrière’s poems institute ‘performative demands’ that mark a ‘perverse resurgence’ of that type of ‘Romanticism that linked lyric extremity to power’.³² By contrast, ‘presence’ in *Marvo Movies Natter* excludes rather than dominates; it is all about

²⁹ Francois Dufrière, statement from ‘Pragmatic of Crirythme (1)’ (1965), in ‘OU – Cinquième Saison’ book insert included with *OU Sound Poetry An Anthology* (Algha Marghen, Henri Chopin: OU, 2002), 46-47, (47)

³⁰ *The Yamaha Guide to Sound Systems For Worship*, ed. Jon F. Eiche (California: Yamaha, 1990), 114.

³¹ McCaffery, ‘From Phonic to Sonic’, in *Sound States*, 156.

³² McCaffery, ‘From Phonic to Sonic’, in *Sound States*, 156.

establishing a dynamic relation with the listener, because the listening experience is one of being persistently invited to hear something that, in the end, one can't.

Dufrêne described his own practice thus:

Certainly, Isou in 1948, in his introduction to a *New Poetry and a New Music* raised the question of the interpretation of the phonetic poem but it was not possible to respond satisfactorily, chained as he was to the alphabet and, what's more, to his "new letters". These letters, it's true, by their very non-sense, did help to open my path. (I believe this path honestly could be called ULTRA-LETTRIST but a better understanding, thanks to the works in progress of Jean-Louis BRAU, the dadaist sources too quickly reduced to the Ursonata of Schwitters, prevent me from making lettrism today anything more than a biographic reference). Thus, these new letters – aspiration, exhalation, tongue clicks, farts, spit sounds, kisses, whistles, etc. – Isou misunderstood the flagrant diversity of the sounds that one of these letters alone could receive, and careless of the parameters (duration, pitch, level, intensity, time, timbre...) deprived them all of effect. In fact, his "invention" (the poems) remained pretty much as theoretical as with Apollinaire who wrote [...] 'La Victoire'.³³

The sound of *Marvo Movies Natter* differs from the practice that Dufrêne describes because rather than hearing sound at a pre-semantic stage, which emphasises the idea of the authentic and the primal, we hear sounds that are made by overlays of pre-formed words. The whispers of the poem may aurally resemble the sounds of Dufrêne's 'new letters' such as 'aspiration' and 'exhalation', because whispering is a particularly breathy way of speaking, but they stress the idea of the voice as a carrier of sound, rather than the predenotive possibilities of the voice. This also sets up a different relationship with an implied listener. Dufrêne's 'spit sounds', 'farts', and 'tongue clicks' are the sounds of an unpleasant embodied intimacy, whereas the whispering in *Marvo Movies Natter* plays with the very idea of intimacy as different voices become dominant at different times in the recording and promise to become comprehensible. It is about being too far away from the voice, being invited in, then the invitation being withdrawn.

³³ Francois Dufrêne, 'Estetica', in *OU Sound Poetry An Anthology*, 46-47.

In sound poetry the mouth is understood as a metonym for the body, and knowing what happens in, and to, the mouth (the vocal chords, the epiglottis, the larynx, the lips and the oral cavity) when producing a whisper is important to understanding the difference between *Marvo Movies Natter* and Dufrière's conceptualisation of sound poetry. Rather than multiplying the number of sounds that the mouth can make (as Dufrière attempts to do in his poetry), whispering restricts the variety of sounds the mouth can produce. A whisper requires more physical constriction of the glottal opening than is needed to produce a breath. But *Marvo Movies Natter* also exploits and exaggerates the already restrictive and voiceless quality of speech to give voice to the way that the letter, the phoneme, and the word are culturally constructed. The phonetician John Laver, in giving the example of the whispered pronunciation of the word 'sit', notes that technically speaking 'sounds that are normally voiceless [as in sounds without pitch] such as the (s) and (t) of *sit*, remain voiceless, and it is only the sounds that would normally be voiced, such as the pronunciations of the vowels, that become whispered.'³⁴ Moreover, while the discussion thus far has focussed on how sound is embodied in the work of Dufrière and (to a smaller extent) Cobbing, it is important to note that the structural paradigm in Cobbing's tape-poems is not purely biological; it is also social, technological and cultural. Cobbing's sound poetry sounds out the social and technological conditions that make his practice possible, whereas Dufrière's poems believe these conditions can be challenged through the power of his voice.

For Henri Chopin, the refusal of electronic manipulation of sound (such as the artificial production of echo and reverb) in Dufrière's poems is connected to Dufrière's commitment to an unviable narrative of French sound poetry's development. This was a source of conflict between the two poets, and between Chopin and Cobbing. In his statement 'Il Faut Bien Rire un Peu' ('You've Got to Laugh a Little') published in *OU* 42/43/44 (1973) – written specifically to counter Dufrière's article published in the review *Opus* No. 40/41 (1973) – Chopin wrote:

³⁴ John Laver, *Principles of Phonetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 191.

From a strictly poetic, literary point of view, it is useful to point out that the sources of sound-poetry [*poésie sonore*] were called poetry, since the authors were poets, although I am incapable of defining exactly what that means.

The term ‘poetry’ is often inadequate and it has clearly become so since the use of electronically filtered vocal energy.

So there can no longer be any question of remaining ‘historico-poetical’, quoting from Scheerbart to Isou and Altagor (I did that myself twelve years ago and I now realise how arbitrary it was, and twelve years later Dufrière ought to have realised this, too) as all that simply indicates the end of ‘written’ poetry, without offering any future.³⁵

Dufrière’s insistence on the primacy of his own voice was in conflict with what McCaffery has termed the ‘irrevocable marriage to a technological determinism’ expressed in Chopin’s work. Chopin believed that poetry – or ‘electronically filtered vocal energy’ as he called it – made on and with a tape recorder ‘guaranteed a radically non-aesthetic grounding for his electroacoustic poetry’ (McCaffery’s words). Dufrière’s ‘research does not make me alter what I noted in *OU* No. 33 in 1967’, wrote Chopin, “‘they (Dufrière, Wolman and Brau) have freed themselves of the letter, a principle of lettrist diction, which in my opinion is the conclusion of phonetic poetry’”.³⁶ To mark this, Chopin used the term *poésie sonore* to refer to his own practice, and *poésie phonétique* to refer to the practice of Dufrière, and other poets who had not made the full transition to the tape recorder and electronically manipulated sound and situated their practice in the tradition of lettrism.³⁷

One of the compositional techniques used by Chopin in his practice of *poésie sonore* was the insertion of small microphones into his mouth and on his throat. This was an attempt to reject (in McCaffery’s words) the ‘several sonic limitations imposed upon the human mouth’ by the ‘phoneme’ and the

³⁵ Henri Chopin, ‘Il Faut Bien Rire un Peu’, in *OU* 42/43/44 (1973), separate insert to *OU Sound Poetry An Anthology*, 9-10.

³⁶ Chopin, ‘Il Faut Bien Rire un Peu’, *OU* 42/43/44, 12.

³⁷ For Chopin’s specific explanation of these terms for Cobbing, see *Concerning Concrete Poetry*, ed. Bob Cobbing and Peter Mayer (London: Writers Forum, 1978), 56.

‘syllable’.³⁸ McCaffery draws attention to the following argument that Chopin made about the mouth: it “is a discerning resonator, capable of offering several sounds simultaneously as long as these sounds are not restricted by the letter, the phoneme, or by a precise or specific word.”³⁹ By over-layering live and pre-recorded electronic manipulations of vocal sounds presented in live performance and on record, Chopin leads us to question ‘the cultural constructedness of the phoneme and syllable themselves, leading us to interrogate their status as linguistically positive phenomenon’, writes McCaffery. To this extent *Marvo Movies Natter* shares the concerns of Chopin’s practice even though it does not share its means: it makes no use of electronic manipulation, and restricts the resonating qualities of the mouth to a whisper.

When *Marvo Movies Natter* is heard in the company of Chopin and Duf re on the record *OU* No. 34/35 (1969), it takes a position in these heated debates about electronic manipulation. While many of Cobbing’s other tape-poems do electronically manipulate sound in a live setting (as was Chopin’s practice), his understanding of sound poetry’s history was distinct from Chopin’s. Cobbing was interested in both the practices of *po sie sonore* and *po sie phon tique*, and committed to the word and to the paper on which that word was written. Visual versions of the poem followed the recording of *Marvo Movies Natter*, one as insert to *OU* 34-35, and at least three different versions in Writers Forum publications *Octo* (1969), *Why Shiva Has Ten Arms* (1969) and *Kwatz* (1970). Indeed, *Marvo Movies Natter* was the first time Cobbing recorded first and ‘visualised’ later, though there were many precedents for this in his previous work. These include a poem discussed in Chapter Two, *Are Your Children Safe in the Sea* (where the homophonic pun on ‘sea’/‘see’ was later given visual expression in the ‘ear’ and ‘eye’ versions of the poem) and a new visualization of the ‘T’ section of *ABC in Sound*, produced in 1966 by filmmaker Steve Dwoskin, who after hearing a vocal performance by Cobbing at Better Books suggested a new form for the poem that Cobbing then adopted.

An important culmination of these arguments was Chopin’s critique of the production methods and materials used by concrete poets published in an issue of the British magazine *Stereo Headphones*, which was specifically

³⁸ McCaffery, ‘From Phonic to Sonic’, *Sound States*, 162.

³⁹ Chopin quoted, in McCaffery, ‘From Phonic to Sonic’, *Sound States*, 162.

dedicated to concrete poetry, and which introduced these debates to a specifically English-speaking audience:

1968 was the year when man really appeared. Man who is the street, HIS PROPERTY, for he alone makes it, now is a kind which has neither been “seen” nor “heard” since the 16th Century. It is formed by the “physical word” (and its mimes, its games, its theatres, and its steps...) and of song, and of the word, alone.

The word that is simply movement. Yes, 1968 saw this. And for all these reasons, I was, and am opposed to concrete poetry, which makes nothing concrete, because it is not active. It has never been in the streets, it has never known how to fight to save man’s conquests: the street which belongs to us, to carry the word elsewhere than the printing press.

Once again, as I did nine years ago, I call for an objective poetry – poetry that is the street, and projects itself at man, and also sound poetry which turns the word into movement, on the condition – I must add – that this word is a fragment of life.

Instead, now, of being subtle with words, this pious intellectualism concrete poetry must only possess one aim – to express man, this incommensurable being. In this respect, sound poetry has succeeded but visual poetry has not, and now it must seize its opportunity. So, concrete poets – those of you who are concrete – must be AB-SO-LU-TE animators and agitators!

Get rid of all those bits of paper, whole, torn, folded, or not. It is man’s body that is poetry, and the streets.⁴⁰

In this statement *poésie sonore* was the proper expression of the ever-changing conditions of the populated Parisian street caught in the midst of the riots and protests of May 1968. The street, understood as a mode of production that predates as well as supplants the cultural effects of the printing press which had been institutionalised by the sixteenth century, is thought of as the new ‘physical word’, while sound poetry gives the word movement. For Chopin, when *poésie sonore* made use of this word it became indivisible from the individual body and from the crowd. It is the multidirectional movement of the riotous protest that

⁴⁰ Henri Chopin, ‘Concrete Poetry?’, in *Stereo Headphones* ed. Nicholas Zurbrugg, 1:2 (1970), n.p.

grants this contradictory position coherence. Chopin not only argues that *poésie sonore* asserts the presence of the poet; he also argues that it asserts the presence of the present; as if the present could be present to itself AB-SO-LU-TE-LY. The avant-garde belief that a new era wiping away the old had arrived is expressed in terms of *poésie sonore*.

Mes Bronches (1968), the sixth and last track that Chopin presents on *OU 34-35* (1969) (CD track 4), follows *Marvo Movies Natter* and Cobbing's collaborative piece with Dufrière *Spontaneous Appealinair Contemprate Apollinaire* (also made in 1968). It was a recuperative response to the sheer humiliation and physical pain of being subjected to tear gas during May 1968, and is productively thought of as a companion piece to Chopin's imperative 'Get rid of all those bits of paper', which Cobbing resolutely refused to do.

Exposed to tear gas on the rue Gay-Lussac in May 1968. My eyes itched, my skin made me fragile, my breath was out of order. With Jean we could see burning cars provoked by the police rather than by students who only had their muscles and their paving stones, and this combat was not powerful enough to leap over the fires nourished by the "armada" of the CRS. I recorded between two barricades while coughing my lungs, as a prelude to that plurality (bronchial tubes, gas, out-of-breath, respiration, fatigue, and tears) which became a major audio poem for me in the name of Plurality 1. 1. 1. 1. ... I cut it [the tape of *Mes Bronches*] at the speed of 38 [cm per second] to be listened to at 9.5 [cm per second] the side of abyssal depths gave itself up to practice, and I think that this fixation should be useful to medical examination of air swelling in the body. First trial at working at the end of 1968, it's thanks to the gas that I knew how to show it. Eh! Eh!⁴¹

When *Mes Bronches* is played at a quarter of the speed at which it was recorded, we hear it with a lowering of the pitch (equivalent to two octaves). Played at this speed the recording's context, as described by Chopin, is not audible in the way one might expect. *Mes Bronches* sees Chopin turn to sound as a way of listening in more detail to, and reframing the duration of, a very specific event in May 1968. In this respect it is a documentary piece. Chopin does not harness space

⁴¹ Henri Chopin, 'Mes Bronches', in *OU 42/43/44* (1973), in 'OU – Cinquième Saison', book insert included with *OU Sound Poetry An Anthology*, 21.

and time, treating them as the ‘manipulable factors of audiophony’, in order to present the emergence of the ‘granular structure of language’ as McCaffery has suggested of this aspect of Chopin’s practice.⁴² Rather, Chopin manipulates the sound of the gas gathering in his lungs and in his throat in order to make the time of his embodied experience audible and to present it with better resolution. Recording at a tape speed of 38 cm of tape per second meant that it was possible for Chopin to record higher frequency signals, which risk being lost if recorded at lower speeds (due to a decreased resolution, which is measured in centimetres of tape per second). The lower pitch of the playback sound creates a disturbing but fascinating low drone, but it also has a practical function: it allows those pitches to be amplified during performance. Historians of revolutionary politics and popular culture often cite ‘1968’ as a fixed point in time and as a failure: *Mes Bronches* asks us to consider it as lived in duration. Registering this experience aurally on audio technology means that Chopin can continually re-present it in, and to, the present as an aspect of his living voice, and potentially at different speeds.

Since Chopin’s body becomes material in the making of *Mes Bronches*, his imperative ‘Get rid of all those bits of paper’ does not actually present a distinction between the materiality of text and its dematerialisation in sound. Rather, it was an attempt to distinguish between what he took to be print’s timeless and static qualities, and the temporal qualities of his sound poetry, and its internalisation of movement. Cobbing’s interest in ‘making the poem more like itself’, and his commitment to the principle of reproduction-as-creation, gave him a different perspective to Chopin regarding the viability of the printed word. His poems were always subject to change; a sense of movement was written into them from the beginning, and different versions and permutations were created in the process. These sometimes manifested as, and manifested in, print. Although Cobbing never fully dematerialised his poems (in order to re-materialise them within his own body and as an expression of the ‘streets’) as Chopin did, the excessive, varied and fragmentary materialisation of his poems within different contexts meant that his practice as a whole moved towards dematerialisation.

⁴² McCaffery, ‘From Phonic to Sonic’, *Sound States*, 157.

In a letter to Cobbing, the poet Asa Benveniste suggested that while Cobbing did visualise his tape-poems he also questioned the viability of print with regards to the social function of the poet:

Still like the idea of talking on little press production, but I like better your comment on “the inadequacies of print”. There is a doubt, as you know, growing and growing in my mind that print today is inadequate and that the small presses should be the first to recognise the fact and move on into a field of expression which would better suit the conglomeration of activities we’re really operating in these days.⁴³

Benveniste wrote this before Chopin had published his critique of concrete poetry in *Stereo Headphones*. One important activity in the ‘conglomeration’ to which Benveniste alluded was Cobbing’s work with film and filmmakers. While the dissemination of *Marvo Movies Natter* on the *OU* record meant that the concepts associated with the filmic-whisper inflected how the whispers of the tape-poem are heard, Cobbing’s collaboration with Keen, his work as a projectionist, his social ties to London’s independent filmmakers, and his enthusiasm for the hand-drawn film soundtracks of Norman McLaren (the Scottish-born Canadian animator and filmmaker) offered him a different perspective on sound poetry to that of Chopin and Dufrêne.

Cobbing declared ‘when I make marks on paper I am writing in sound’.⁴⁴ His response to his experience of listening to and seeing his tape-poem projected over the images of *Marvo Movies* was analogous to the ways in which he worked back into his sound poetry the conceptual and physical qualities of the audio technology on which it was produced and disseminated. Keen said of the process of editing *Marvo Movies* that: ‘Cutting the film to a very fast rhythm reduces it in a way to a very basic cinema, almost emphasises the nature of projection itself.’⁴⁵ The sound of Cobbing’s tape-poem is fused with the complex temporal disposition of Keen’s film by the mechanism of the projector and the ‘ruthless’

⁴³ Asa Benveniste to Bob Cobbing, 9 August 1968, ‘Letters Received (1960-1969): A-B’, BL Add MS 88909/35/1. These comments are made with regard to a talk Benveniste was due to give at a forthcoming Small Press Conference in Birmingham.

⁴⁴ Cobbing interviewed by Smith, in *Ballet of the Speech Organs*, 4.

⁴⁵ Steve Willey, personal transcription of ‘Jeff Keen Interview’, *Gazwrx: The Films of Jeff Keen* (British Film Institute: 2008), disc 3.

way in which it ‘tears away at films ... sort of eating its way into the future or the present’.⁴⁶ The materiality of film and the process of making physical marks on film to create sounds that accompany the still images of the film’s frames, which Keen cut, collaged and drew upon, meant that Cobbing’s tape-poem never completely dematerialises into sound. For Cobbing, the distinction between the apparent timelessness of the still image and written mark and the temporal malleability of sound is inverted, allowing him to perceive the still image and print as motion in sound.

Collective endeavor, engagement and reception are part of the fabric of film, and this influenced Cobbing’s visual poetry and tape-poems. It provided him with insight into how printed images – when perceived at the right speed, in the context of other still images, and in a context of collective production and reception – can acquire the historical and conceptual properties of movement. This also meant that group vocal performance, such as the micro-community of whisperers that made *Marvo Movies Natter*, was also figured as a technology. In this respect *Mes Bronches* and *Marvo Movies Natter* are structured by a similar logic. At the conclusion of the epilogue to *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin argues that gas warfare abolishes the aura in a new way: gas, as a technological weapon of war, penetrates the human body through the biological necessity of breath, just as film – itself penetrated by the technology of the camera – penetrates us by requisitioning our optical attention.⁴⁷ The distancing strategies that are audible in *Marvo Movies Natter* suggest that even though it provides an aural context in which the visual images of Keen’s film are presented, it does not seek to replicate the immersive environment of film or the programmed social responsiveness that film can bring about. Rather, Cobbing’s use of different methods and degrees of visual scoring, and his use of the whisper as one of the physiological and universally accessible technologies of the voice, suggests that the conceptual force of his tape-poems can be used and reproduced even if one does not have access to mass produced audio-technologies like the tape recorder. This contrasts with the relative inaccessibility

⁴⁶ Willey transcription of ‘Jeff Keen Interview’, *Gazwrx: The Films of Jeff Keen* (British Film Institute: 2008), disc 3.

⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art In the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (1969; repr. 1999), 211-35 (235).

and invisibility of the magnetized score of *Mes Bronches*, which remains locked inside the storage device of the tape.

After May 1968 Chopin left Paris and moved to live in Ingatestone, Essex. In 1973, and in a statement which brought together his thinking on some current attempts by national states to ‘bind any free spirits’ with Francis Picabia’s 2 July 1921 statement on the failure of the Russian revolution, Chopin set out a new strategy for the practice of sound poetry and its dissemination:

... We form a value that cannot be captured as nobody can make a succession of letters that can become sounds, as nobody can use the score of a poem if he is not its creator. What an example it is to make the strength of sound something that cannot be salvaged by the recuperators who grant themselves ‘titles’, quotations, fragments of culture, ‘as Valery says’ to appear fine and knowledgeable. We can avoid being used, at last! Even if we are broadcast without being informed of it, we are an incoercible means of propagating our poetry.⁴⁸

In this statement Chopin sets himself and his poems up as an ‘example’ to be followed, and so in dogmatic and chastising fashion claims the moral high ground for his poems, and from those that retreated from their revolutionary aims after May 1968. His position assumes the worst of at least some of his prospective audience – ‘the recuperators’ – while at the same time it seeks to limit the possible uses of (and dialogues that can be had in relation to) his poems. These words present an impossible choice to an implied reader, either to remain silent in the face of his work, or to try and engage with it and risk aligning one’s self with the ‘recuperators’ and the suppressors of the Parisian revolutionaries.

Despite these problems with Chopin’s absolutist position, the appearance of *Mes Bronches* after *Marvo Movies Natter* on the *OU* record (which places Cobbing’s poem in a context of poetic responses to the tumultuous events of May 1968) meant that Cobbing’s practice of returning both to the word and to the material of the paper on which it was printed became associated with questions about the civic and political function of poets and their use of audio technology. With respect to Cobbing and his tape-poems, and by way of formulating some

⁴⁸ Chopin, ‘Il Faut Bien Rire un Peu’, *OU* 42/43/44, 15.

answers to the questions that are raised by *Mes Bronches*, I will now introduce Cobbing's practice of conceptualising people in terms of audio technology in his poem *Chamber Music* (1966-8).

3) *Chamber Music* and People as Echo Chambers

Chamber Music was privately circulated in a run of fifty copies on 25 December 1966. In 1967, it was typeset by Hansjörg Mayer and published in poster form as a 'score for six or twelve voices or for electronic treatment in homage to James Joyce', and recorded at the Swedish Radio studios in 1968 as a nine-minute sound poem with the voice of Susanne Feingold.⁴⁹ Reading across these three different versions, we can see how they reconfigure one another and how the visual and sonic elements of the poem function together to produce poetry of multiple modalities. This dynamic forms the basis for Cobbing's conceptualisation of people as the audio-technological equivalent of the echo chamber.

The form of *Chamber Music* (1966) resembles a series of snowflakes, a shape suggested by the date of the poem's publication and distribution on Christmas Day. Its twelve equally-sized but uniquely spaced twenty-eight word-clusters suggest a calendar. The allusion to Joyce was not added until 1967. Without this reference point the words of the poem's opening section recall the sounds, sights, and games of the schoolyard:

downfallen		shouting		loudlaughter
		flowery		
ring-round				impound
rounders		louder		resound
	down	brown	clouds	
ringaround	sound		round	wraparound
	loud		crown	
	becloud	drown	low-cloud	
	around	sounding		kow-tow
resounding		rounded		
		cloudy		beclouded ⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Bob Cobbing, *Chamber Music*, Hansjörg Mayer edition, in *Futura* 19 (Stuttgart, 1967).

⁵⁰ Cobbing, *Chamber Music* (London: Bob Cobbing, 1966), UCL Special Collections, Poetry Store [Boxes] WRI: COB.

In 1974 Cobbing noted that the syllabic count of the words increases towards the outside of the shape: ‘the visual element separates one-syllable words (in the centre of the stanza) from two-syllable words (the diagonal and vertical spokes) and three-syllable words (the horizontal spokes and corner words)’.⁵¹ In light of these comments, the poem’s incremental pattern suggests the image of a spinning bicycle wheel, inaugurating a centrifugal movement away from the poem’s empty central chamber. In *Chamber Music* (1966) the words in each cluster are phonologically grouped. All the words in the cluster cited above contain the diphthong /au/, ‘flowery’, ‘resound’, ‘crown’, ‘drown’ and ‘becloud’, while subsequent sections are grouped around: uə, ʌ, ɒ, ɪ, aɪ, i:, e, eɪ, æ, u:, and ou.⁵² This distilled phonological coherence is productively understood as a form of ‘music’ issuing out from each section’s central ‘chamber’; the enclosed white space of the paper being conceptualized as the origin of the poem’s sound, and the temporal quality of the form suggested by its analogous relation to the calendar.

The title of the poem itself denotes a specific historico-cultural musical environment, and this invites associations between poetry and music. Chamber music is the name for ‘classical European instrumental ensemble music for two to approximately twelve performers with no more than one player to a part’, and the instructions that Cobbing issued with the 1967 version of the poem respect these conventions.⁵³ However, the phonological coherence of each word-cluster is analogous to a drone, a form of ‘primitive polyphony’, which is encountered ‘as soon as one looks beyond Western music [and] sees a profusion of instruments designed especially to produce drones’.⁵⁴ The serial syllabic expansion also suggests a poetic alternative to Schoenberg’s twelve-tone music.

The paratext to *Chamber Music* (1967) declares that the poem paid ‘homage to James Joyce’, while *Chamber Music* (1968) specifies the volume of

⁵¹ Cobbing, *Bob Cobbing & Writers Forum*, 33.

⁵² Cobbing first experimented with phonological coherence in ‘A Daze of all my Days’ (January 1956). Sixty-four percent of the words in the poem contain the vowel sound /eɪ/. In ‘Are Your Children Safe In the Sea?’ (1960) the /i:/ sound was repeated five times, see ‘Notebook of Poems’, BL Add MS 88909/46.

⁵³ John Baron, *Chamber Music* (New York: Routledge, 2002), xv.

⁵⁴ Robert Erickson, *Sound Structure in Music* (London, Los Angeles Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 103. ‘Drone implies ambience, the development and elaboration of polyphony and harmonic root progression has given us opportunity to create music of unsurpassed beauty and complexity, but at the expense of restricting and constructing rhythm and timbre.’ 104.

poems that Joyce published in 1907 as its source. This information was also disseminated to the Swedish press. Cobbing was in Sweden because he had been invited to an annual Swedish Text-sound festival organized by Fylkingen, which Lawrence Upton described in 1973 as an ‘organisation fostering and furthering artistic experimentation ... a meeting-point for many radical Swedish artists and scientists’ which ‘worked for the establishment of an electronic music studio in Stockholm and for the creation of technically satisfactory performance possibilities for the presentation of electronic music.’⁵⁵ *Chamber Music* (1968) was produced at Fylkingen and disseminated on the record *Text-sound compositions 1: a Stockholm festival 1968*, whose cover showed an image of a computer terminal superimposed on an image of a nuclear submarine. The difficulties faced by poetry in responding to the forms of destructiveness, violence and bureaucracy represented in this image speaks to the title of the article ‘Dying Poetry Survives on Tape’, which was published in *Svenska Dagbladet* (*The Swedish Daily Paper*) on 24 April 1968 to promote *Chamber Music* (1968) to a Swedish audience:

‘Poetry is not about death, dying only.’ The name of the man who pronounced these words is Bob Cobbing, born 1920 in Middlesex, Enfield, England. He has made an audiotape that is based on a score consisting of single words, selected from James Joyce’s lyric “Chamber Music” from 1907.⁵⁶

While Chopin believed that both phonetic and word-based poetry had reached a dead-end, Cobbing conceived of all forms of poetry as ‘dying’. This suggests poetry as an expression of perpetual and evolving decay, a duration where there is no reason to actually arrive at death. The headline – ‘Dying Poetry Survives on Tape’ – reinforces the conclusion to Chapter One of this thesis, that Cobbing’s poetry is a mechanism of survival. Although Cobbing established reciprocal and mutually altering relations to institutions, neither he nor his poems were ever

⁵⁵ Lawrence Upton, *A Poetry Playing: Some Text-Sound Compositions Made at Fylkingen in Stockholm* (London, Good Elf Publications, 1973), n.p.

⁵⁶ ‘Poesi är om inte död så dö ende.’ ‘Mannen som uttalar orden heter Bob Cobbing, född 1920 i Enfield Middlesex, England. Han har gjort ett ljudband som bygger på ett partitur bestående av enstaka ord utvalda ur James Joyces lyriska “Chamber Music” från 1907.’ See Ulla-Britt Edberg, ‘Döende Poesi Överleve på Ljudband’, *Svenska Dagbladet* (24 April 1968) ‘Notebook of Cuttings (1)’, BL Add MS 88909/112.

fully co-opted or reduced to their ossified social structures. If that threatened to happen, he and his work survived by finding new institutions to explore for their aesthetic, conceptual and practical potential. In these terms the headline further suggests that audio technology was the institution in which Cobbing's poetry survived in the mid-to-late 1960s. The three versions of *Chamber Music* show that, as Cobbing's poetry became increasingly enmeshed in the institutions of audio technology, the idea of Joyce as a context in which *Chamber Music* should be heard became increasingly important.

Joyce's *Chamber Music* (1907) consists of a suite of 36 lyrical poems that reflect the sentiments and moods of a youthful poet who experiences the rise and fall of an idealised love.⁵⁷ Vicki Mahaffey notes how 'the stability and smallness of the structure' of *Chamber Music* (1907), 'together with the fact that they [the poems] are all sung by the same voice, allow Joyce to explore, not the landscapes of Dublin, but a miniaturized interior chamber, which almost imperceptibly transforms itself into an image of the grave' (stanza xxx): 'We were grave lovers. Love is past / That had his sweet hours many a one'.⁵⁸ As Mahaffey points out the 'chamber' in *Chamber Music* (1907) is variously figured as a 'book', a 'room' (v), the woman's 'heart' (vi), the sky's 'pale blue cup' (vii), 'sunny woodland' (viii), a 'hollow' (x), and the 'woman's chamber' (xiii): 'And come into her little garden / And sing at her window'. The central empty 'chamber' in Cobbing's *Chamber Music* (1966) most strongly corresponds to the figuration of 'chamber' in the conclusion to Joyce's sequence proper (stanzas xxxiv and xxxv) which, as Mahaffey observes, are the first poems in which a multitude of 'voices', not just a single voice, begin to proliferate.⁵⁹

Sleep now, O sleep now,
 O you unquiet heart!
 A voice crying "Sleep now"
 Is heard in my heart.

The voice of the winter

⁵⁷ Nicholas Fagnoli and Michael Patrick Gillespie, *Critical Companion to James Joyce: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2006), 21.

⁵⁸ Vicki Mahaffey, 'Joyce's Shorter Works', in *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce*, ed. Derek Attridge, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 172-196 (183).

⁵⁹ Mahaffey, 'Joyce's Shorter Works', 181, 182.

Is heard at the door.
O sleep, for the winter
Is crying "Sleep no more."⁶⁰

The first line sets up an echo that recurs across the two stanzas, reflecting the dramatic situation of the poem's multiple voices. An echo is a reflection of sound that arrives at a listener after a direct sound, the time delay being the distance between the sound source and the reflective surface divided by the speed at which the sound travels. In 'Sleep now, O sleep now' the first half of the line is echoed in the second. The letter 'O' in the middle of the line, which separates the sound origin from its echo, sets the distance between these reflections. Rather than being situated inside the line this 'O' is moved to the beginning of the second line; the distance between the echo and its reflection becomes the starting point for a new set of sounds. As Mahaffey has noted, the drama of the poem unfolds when 'the voice within the lover's heart [which is actually the interior echo of the lover's exteriorized voice] clashes with the voice of the winter outside his chamber'. One voice cries "Sleep now", while the other forbids further sleep. In sonic terms the speaker's positive declaration 'O sleep' is inverted and echoed back in the last line as 'Sleep no'; the 'O' is sounded in the injunction 'no'.⁶¹ Just as there is not an easy equivalence between interiority, exteriority, silence and sound in *Chamber Music* (1966), the same isomorphic interactions are semantically figured in Joyce's poem. What the speaker hears in his heart is also 'heard at the door'. The door to the bedchamber separates interior from exterior space. In this respect it creates the echo-identity of the winter's voice, which finally convinces the speaker to obey the 'unquiet' instructions of his heart, which he had attempted to deny eight lines previous.

Mahaffey observes that at the end of the poem (xxxv), just before the speaker hears "an army charging upon the land" (xxxvi), the "music along the river" mentioned in stanza one, has been displaced by "noise" and a "choiring by a monotone":⁶²

All day I hear the noise of waters

⁶⁰ James Joyce, *Chamber Music* (1907; repr. 1980).

⁶¹ 'Sleep no' is also an echo of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

⁶² Mahaffey, 'Joyce's Shorter Works', 182.

Making moan,
Sad as the sea-bird is when, going
Forth alone,
He hears the winds cry to the water's
Monotone.

Here nature – rather than the speaker's heart, mouth or bedchamber – is transformed into a resonator. Its final and despairing watery moan corresponds to the phonologically coherent but dispersed drones of the word-clusters in Cobbing's visual settings of *Chamber Music* (1966). Cobbing takes the emotional dynamics of the individual lover in Joyce's poem as the semantic basis for his poem's visual form. Mahaffey calls Joyce's *Chamber Music* a 'seduction piece' because she thinks that there is a danger in music that can seduce us through its univocality and its simplicity. She writes that 'it has the power to evoke a flood of nostalgia'.⁶³ In *Chamber Music* (1966), Cobbing is interested in Joyce's *Chamber Music* (1907) at the point when this nostalgia, and the idealised communion of love, starts to break down in the face of its own bleak, wintry failure, and when the multiple voices populating the poem displace nostalgia's singular, seductive voice.

These aspects of Cobbing's engagement with *Chamber Music* (1907) come to the fore in *Chamber Music* (1967), where the twelve word-clusters are set out on one single poster (See Fig. 12). In this extended visual form the droning voices expand from their twelve-tone chambers and spread out as if to meet one another. In semantic terms they touch one another at their extremities. This was an aspect of the poem that was concealed in the codex form of *Chamber Music* (1966). For example in the tenth word-cluster presented in *Chamber Music* (1966) – which coheres around /æ/ – the word 'wraparound', which is on the far left-hand side, also appears on the far right-hand side of the first word-cluster. Similarly, in the sixth word-cluster, the word 'popliners' is placed on the far right hand side of the shape, but it also appears in the fourth word-cluster on the far right hand side, as one of the words that coheres around

⁶³ Mahaffey, 'Joyce's Shorter Works', 183.

the sound /b/. As these word-clusters are visualised on a single sheet of paper, we can see with more ease how the different voices (or drones) share certain words and sounds with one another at the limits of their respective shapes. The voices spiral out from their respective tone-centres and the ‘spokes’ of the poem almost join up and touch.

The desire to touch is met in sound in *Chamber Music* (1968), where Cobbing and Feingold read from different sections of the poem simultaneously (CD track 5). In this version the core sounds of the different sections of the poem literally start to merge with one another. Feingold and Cobbing co-create, recreate and reorder *Chamber Music* (1967). Feingold’s voice occasionally obstructs and replies to Cobbing’s and vice versa. Feingold remediates Cobbing’s reordering of Joyce’s poem, which in turn echoes Joyce’s own practice of creating texts (such as *Finnegans Wake*, which Cobbing appreciated as a ‘master novel’) that invite further co-creation by their readers.⁶⁴ In the case of Joyce’s *Chamber Music* (1907), co-creation in sound is one of the poem’s themes. It has been set to music many times, and Cobbing’s collaborative version with Feingold echoes this practice. Cobbing would have seen real echo chambers in his visit to the BBC Radiophonic studio for the recording of *ABC in Sound*. *Chamber Music* (1968) requires people to function as echo chambers to each other and to the source text. On this basis Cobbing can be understood as a poet of community rather than as a poet of origins.

Like Cobbing’s tendency to deliberately intervene in his own biography, his tape-poems are best understood as echoes that both eclipse, and retrospectively produce, their origin. This practice of revision, which hybridised the human with the audio technological, informs Cobbing’s historicisation of both concrete poetry and sound poetry. This distinguishes his practice from that of Chopin: revision and hybridization provided Cobbing with the conceptual grounds for rehearing the ‘primitive’ origins of both concrete and sound poetry. To examine this aspect of his practice I would like to finish this section by

⁶⁴ ‘*Finnegans Wake* responds superbly to group readings. Each member of the group contributes his or her particular insights, which in turn trigger others, in a process which creates a growing network of meanings and patterns.’ Derek Attridge, ‘Reading Joyce’, in *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-28 (10). For Cobbing’s description of *Finnegans Wake* as a ‘master novel’, see reproduced sheet in Appendix one.

looking at some remarks Cobbing made on the subject of sound and concrete poetry – which he tellingly compressed to ‘concrete sound poetry’ – in 1970:

Two lines of development in concrete sound poetry seem to be complementary. One, the attempt to come to terms with scientific and technological development in order to enable man to continue to be at home in his world, the humanization of the machine, the marrying of human warmth to the coldness of much electronically generated sound. The other, the return of the primitive, to incantation and ritual, to the coming together again of music and poetry, the amalgamation with movement and dance, the growth of the voice to its full physical powers again as part of the body, the body as language.⁶⁵

It may seem surprising that Cobbing used the language of primitivism here. George MacBeth’s presentation of the *ABC in Sound* on BBC radio in the mid-1960s as ‘a huge panorama of primitive cultures’ had helped create the habit of British audiences responding to sound-poetry impressionistically.⁶⁶ MacBeth’s comments obscured the complexities of Cobbing’s poetry by aligning it to the values of ‘primitivism’ and tribalism expressed in the poetry at the IPI (see Chapter Three). In order for his sound poetry to be re-heard, Cobbing sought retrospectively to establish audio technology as a key part of his earlier reception.

This aspect of Cobbing’s practice corresponded to international efforts to re-conceptualise the ‘primitive’ in the later 1960s. In 1969, Jerome Rothenberg compiled a book of spiritual writings and poetry titled *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania*. For Rothenberg the ‘primitive’ was a question of technology as well as inspiration, and in his introduction to his book he writes that ‘we may as well take it as axiomatic... that where poetry is concerned, “primitive” means complex.’⁶⁷ Cobbing continued to use words like primitive and phrases like pure sound in his statements on poetry in the late 1960s – partly because they continued to be used by those around him – however his use of these terms offered covert redefinitions of them along the lines suggested by Rothenberg.

⁶⁵ Bob Cobbing, quoted in Cobbing and Mayer (eds), *Concerning Concrete Poetry*, 44.

⁶⁶ George Macbeth quoted by Anne Duchene, ‘Radio and The Art of Pure Sound’, *Guardian* 15 January 1966, ‘Notebook of Cuttings (1)’, BL Add MS 88909/112.

⁶⁷ Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania* (1968: 2nd edn. 1985), xxvi.

Cobbing's 'Chronology of Visual Poetry' (like the *ABC in Sound*) provides a toolkit for the reconstruction of the history of visual-concrete poetry itself using some of the re-conceptualizations of the primitive advanced by Rothenberg and others. Cobbing's chronology begins at 1700 BC by citing the 'Phaistos disc spiral inscription'. Its next entry dates from 'pre-1000 BC': the 'Babylonian acrostic ("Saggil-kinam-ubbib")', and it ends in 1978 (the date of the chronology's publication) with the 'Eleventh Festival, Sound & Syntax, Glasgow, London'.⁶⁸ At the time Stephen Bann, an anthologist and literary critic who specialised in concrete poetry, and with whom Cobbing occasionally clashed, used the image of the echo chamber dismissively to describe Cobbing's historicisation of 'a "concrete poetry" whose "pre-echoes resound through the halls of history... a gargantuan cross-cultural miscellany... from the history of Western and indeed Oriental culture".⁶⁹ This evokes the way in which Cobbing's tape-poems created a 'performance' that took place in the past, even as they directed his practice in the future. Amusingly, Cobbing recuperated this criticism by reprinting it several pages before the chronology in his Writers Forum publication *Concerning Concrete Poetry* (1978).

More recently, the critic Jed Rasula, indebted to Jerome Rothenberg's definition of poets as 'technicians of the sacred', offers a contemporary reformulation of the primitive. Rasula argues that Rothenberg's 'directive stipulates mythology as a medium in which the primitive apparition camouflages complex technological specifications'.⁷⁰ In his article 'Poetry's Voice Over' he explains that his topic 'is ostensibly poetic inspiration' but that he has 'sought to estrange the familiar preconception that haunts the topic – the premise of an autonomous speaking subject – by substituting a different term: the voice-over.' He writes: 'Certain traditionally authorizing primal scenes of poetic empowerment' suggest the substitution. By "voice-over" Rasula means the 'mode of production that authorizes... sounds of autonomous subjectivity'. He also uses

⁶⁸ Cobbing said this was a 'much augmented version of the chronological section of Houédard's accompanying essay to the catalogue of the London ICA's 1965 exhibition *Between Poetry and Painting*'. See Bob Cobbing and Peter Mayer, 'Chronology of Visual Poetry', in *Concerning Concrete Poetry*, 63-70.

⁶⁹ Stephen Bann, quoted in 'Some Myths on Concrete Poetry', in *Concerning Concrete Poetry*, 61.

⁷⁰ Jed Rasula, 'Poetry's Voice Over', in *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*, ed. Adelaide Morris (Chapel Hill; London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 274-317 (287).

it to emphasise what he sees as the ‘technological incentive’ of poetry: ‘*Techne* not only precedes but *precodes* the subject, anchoring it in subjectivity by its appeal to natural force and primacy.’⁷¹

The idea of pre-coding the subject bears on Cobbing’s wider poetic and specifically on his audio-technological practice, while the myth of Echo and Narcissus – one of the ‘authorizing primal scenes of poetic empowerment’ that Rasula deals with – informs my reading of *Chamber Music*, as does Amy Lawrence’s formulation of the myth. For her, the power dynamic between Echo and Narcissus is figured as a relationship between sound and image: “Echo fades away, unable to contact Narcissus once he ceases to speak, sound’s absence is established as a precondition for the image’s irresistible allure.”⁷² By contrast, *Chamber Music* conceives of Echo and Narcissus *together*. The soundings that the clashing voices of Cobbing and Feingold give of the poem’s visual form rewrite it as an image; they help to embed the idea of sound (conceived in the poem as a pre-echo) in the white and static space of the page, which is at the centre of each word-cluster in both the 1966 and 1967 versions. In the myth of Echo and Narcissus, pure sound (sound without the muddying presence of Echo) is the silence of Narcissus’s immersive fascination with his own image. *Chamber Music* gestures to a dynamic relation where the absence of the image is the presence of sound; and where the presence of sound rewrites the image. The echo of Cobbing and Feingold’s voice on record imprints itself onto the various visual versions of the poem and continues to destabilize their forms.

4) *Whisper Piece No. 4: Whississippi and the Copy-Contact-Contagion.*

Cobbing’s practice of combining the human with the audio-technological in his practice initiated his eventual abandoning of audio-technological devices, but this did not mean that he stopped thinking about his poetry and his wider performance practice in audio-technological terms. I would like to think about the final poem in Cobbing’s *Whisper Piece* series *Whississippi* (1969) (CD track 6) in terms of his own articulation of these developments. Here, the following statement by Cobbing is key:

⁷¹ Rasula, ‘Poetry’s Voice Over’, 276, 275.

⁷² Amy Lawrence, quoted in Rasula, ‘Poetry’s Voice Over’, 310 (footnote 2).

The invention of the tape-recorder has given the poet back his voice ... by listening to their voices on the tape-recorder, with its ability to amplify, slow down and speed up voice vibrations, poets have been able to analyse and then immensely improve their vocal resources. Where the tape-recorder leads the human voice can follow.⁷³

Both Steve McCaffery and Richard Kostelanetz cite this to point out that Cobbing's poems 'underline the paradoxical potential of tape'. McCaffery claims that Cobbing's anticipations are significant, 'for by avoiding a negative stance toward technology, he is able to envision a positive feedback to a human, nontechnological ground, a recuperation back into acoustic performance.'⁷⁴

I would like to complicate McCaffery's use of the words 'positive' and 'recuperation' to describe Cobbing's approach to audio technology, and the explanation McCaffery gives for Cobbing's retreat from using such devices in his poetry, by reading it against Cobbing's own description of how *Whisper Piece No. 4: Whississippi* (1969) was made:

The Swedish girl, Kerstin Lundberg, who joined me in recording the vocal material from which the piece was made, exclaimed next day: "As I came along to the studio, the birds were doing our piece". We aspire to bird-song, at once liquid and gas. We are aided in our search by sophisticated instruments, the tape-recorder. Our human voices extend the range of the tape-recorder's abilities by their demands upon it. Conversely, the tape-recorder's treatment of the voice teaches the human new tricks of rhythms and tone, power and subtlety.⁷⁵

For Cobbing the reciprocal relation between the human voice and the tape recorder was not 'positive'. It was a relationship between two kinds of lack. Our voices make 'demands' on something that the tape recorder lacks, and in turn the tape recorder makes us aware of what our voices lack ordinarily.

Elsewhere Cobbing describes his collaboration with Lundberg in the Swedish Radio studios (where the work was recorded) as a 'duologue', where 'poetry becomes communication between two (or more) people'. This process,

⁷³ Cobbing, quoted in McCaffery, 'From Phonic to Sonic', 157.

⁷⁴ McCaffery, 'From Phonic to Sonic', 157, 158.

⁷⁵ Bob Cobbing, quoted in 'Sound Poetry For a New Age', in *Mandate* (November 1969), 'Notebook of Cuttings (1)' BL: Add MS 88909/112.

notes Cobbing, is ‘nowhere... better heard than in ... “Whississippi”.’ It is this ‘duologue’ – which Cobbing also describes as ‘the act of gradually finding out more about each other; and about ourselves’ – that made Lundberg hear the space outside the studio differently.⁷⁶ Their collaborative relationship was a context for the production of art, but it was also a work of art in itself. For Lundberg this dynamic fed back and altered the wider context in which they worked. The natural sound of bird song was experienced in terms of audio technology, but ‘the birds’ also increased the number of the poem’s collaborative voices. According to Lundberg’s recollection it was not just the aural content of *Whississippi* that was echoed in birdsong: the idea of collaboration as a context for art was also reproduced, for the birdsong re-contextualized her experience of *Whississippi*. This dynamic has been captured in Rasula’s description of the ‘phonographic complex of copy-contact-contagion’:

The phonographic copy, unlike writing, registers a bodily index like the fingerprint, and this point of contact suggests a corresponding possibility of contagion – the sound of a cough emanating from either a recording or a telephone receiver had people worrying about germs.⁷⁷

Rather than fixing on this mimetic power for its capacity to induce panic, Cobbing used it in his collaborations as a pedagogical device. He sought to introduce instability into the mimetic process so that its contagious effects altered both the artwork and the direction of his collaborator’s practice in ways that neither producer could determine. Cobbing’s pedagogy is an alternative to Chopin’s absolutism. For this reason, the political content of Cobbing’s practice – which he rarely emphasised as directly as Chopin did – can be found in his ethics of collaboration, which was co-operative and mutually creative without being dictatorial.

In *Whississippi* (June 1969) he published ‘everything that was committed to paper in the preparation of [the] tape-poem’ (See Fig. 13).⁷⁸ The markings he made on the poems that constitute *Whisper Piece* (6 March 1969), documented

⁷⁶ Cobbing, *Bob Cobbing & Writers Forum*, 56.

⁷⁷ Rasula, ‘Poetry’s Voice Over’, 297

⁷⁸ Cobbing, *Bob Cobbing & Writers Forum*, 67 (entry 47).

how they were then ‘developed’ into the tape-poem (April 1969).⁷⁹ Here is the complex written matrix that Cobbing produced in the studio in the preparation for the recording of *Whisper Piece No. 4: Whississippi*, taken from a section on the second page:

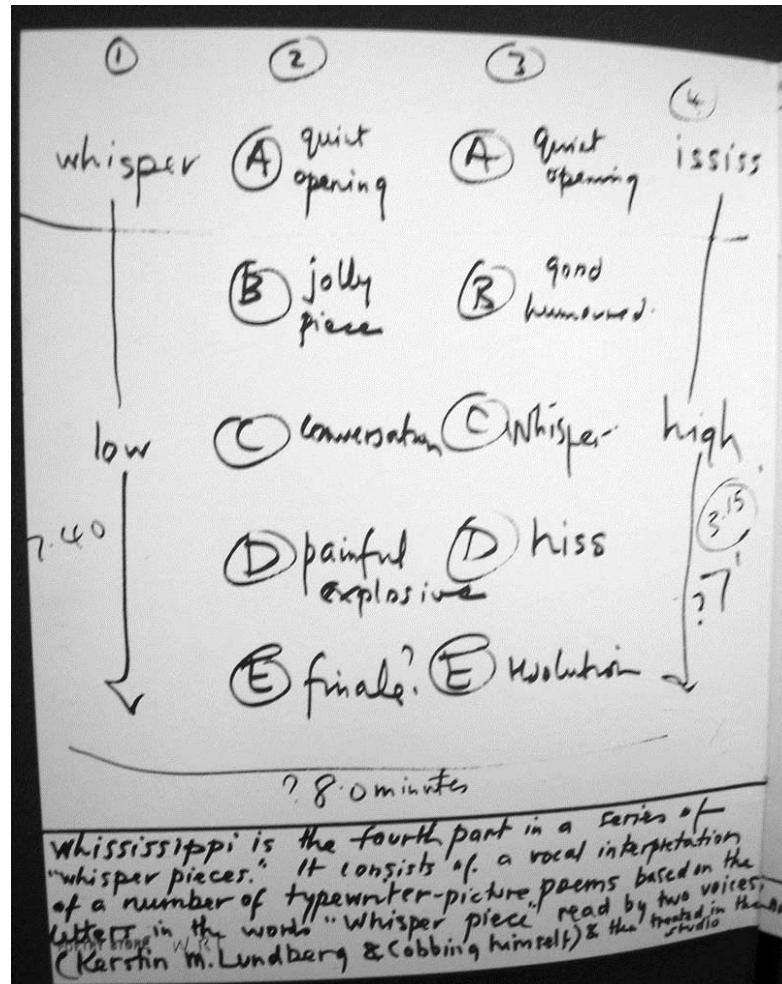


Figure 13. Bob Cobbing, *Whississippi* (London: Writers Forum, 1969), 2. Reproduced with permission of Jennifer Cobbing.

The complex process of empathetic exchange is integrated into an exploration of the audio-technological medium. Numbers ‘(1)’ to ‘(4)’ represent the four separate tracks that Cobbing recorded, and letters ‘(A)’ to ‘(E)’ correspond to the five cards that constituted the score. The arrows labelled with the words ‘high’ and ‘low’ correspond to relative changes in pitch over time, while the numbers on the far left and right and at the bottom of the diagram correspond to points in the

⁷⁹ Cobbing, *Bob Cobbing & Writers Forum*, 67.

track's duration. The words 'quiet' and 'hiss' denote audio qualities they wanted to create and exaggerate, while the words 'painful', 'jolly' and 'good humoured' indicate emotional states that Cobbing and Lundberg explored as part of their 'conversation'.⁸⁰ Empathy is the capacity to temporarily experience another's emotion as if it were your own. While one might expect it to be associated with intimacy or proximity, in Cobbing's practice it is best thought of as form of distance. Empathy cannot replicate exactly the emotions of the other person, and in these terms it is a mechanism that produces an unstable or 'dirty' copy. The seemingly impressionistic directions are actually spurs for specific emotional identifications that simultaneously permit a high degree of sonic interpretation.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the use of audio technology in the development of Cobbing's practice in the 1970s, demonstrating that it was central to the expression of several key ideas: collaboration, instability, movement and distance. The European dissemination of Cobbing's poetry through audio technology, and the audio-technological 'distance' that was incorporated into his sound poems, established a new conceptual framework, social milieu, and set of organisational affiliations for his work as a poet. Cobbing used audio technology as part of a collaborative practice that initiated new dialogues between poets, filmmakers, academics and journalists. Cobbing's poems also created connections between modernist literary practices, mid-twentieth century developments in audio technology, and the uses to which these were put by some of the main practitioners of sound poetry. Like Chopin, who used audio technology to respond to political events, Cobbing explored its potential to help poets and poetry survive in a capitalist world. This was a development of his archival practices, discussed in Chapter Two in the context of the Destruction in Art Symposium, into an audio-technological dimension.

As the significance of his audio-technological engagements increased, Cobbing's turn to Europe became more than an indication of his separation from Anglo-American Beat poetry, and of the misrecognition that his poetry received as a result of the conceptualisation of sound promoted in representations of the

⁸⁰ Bob Cobbing, *Whississippi* (London: Writers Forum Pamphlet, 2 July 1969), 2.

IPI. This new significance was registered in Britain through a series of twenty-six (predominantly national) radio broadcasts between 1965-1973, which either featured samples of Cobbing's own tape-poems or saw him explain the ideas of European sound poetry to a British audience. This use of the radio as a pedagogical tool to reach and then to teach a British audience about European sound poetry, coupled to the rewiring of his voice to this same audience, was an attempt to create his reputation as a poet of national importance on new grounds.

Despite the importance of audio technology to Cobbing's poetry in this period he was to gradually abandon the use of audio technology from the mid-1970s onwards. There are several good reasons for this, and all of them speak to doubts over the continued suitability of audio technology to serve as an institution for Cobbing's poetry. Firstly, as the ability of audio technology to make an exact and stable copy increases, it becomes harder to see how an idea of change might be introduced through the process of duplication. In this situation the reciprocal relationship between the form of Cobbing's poems and the equipment on which they were produced, which was central to his visual permutations in the mid-1960s, was compromised. Secondly, while Cobbing's practice was defined by the way he worked imaginatively within constraints, one of the differences between *Whississippi* and *Marvo Movies Natter* was that it had become much harder for him to sustain a reciprocal relationship to audio technology. For example, writing in *The Guardian* (5 May 1970) Raymond Gardner noted that:

Cobbing has heard the piece ["Whississippi] in its full four-track stereophonic glory only twice, in Sweden, where it was recorded. The equipment to record and play back such compositions does not exist in Britain outside the BBC's radiophonic workshop, and they are apparently too busy churning out tracks for "Z Cars".⁸¹

Hearing his own voice inflected back by the audio technological was an essential part of Cobbing's practice and was the precondition of how the 'phonographic complex of copy-contact-contagion' functioned in his work.⁸² This dynamic was the technology that he was really interested in. In the case of *Whississippi*, which

⁸¹ Raymond Gardner, 'Beyond the Word' *Guardian* (5 May 1970) Notebook of Cuttings (1) BL: Add MS 88909/112.

⁸² Rasula, 'Poetry's Voice Over', in *Sound States*, 297.

was one of the most technologically complex sound pieces that he produced, he could not adhere to this practice in Britain. Cobbing does not comment on these limitations and difficulties in his November 1969 *Mandate* statement, but an awareness of them is perhaps communicated through his commitment to printing the whole production process of *Whississippi*. In making an equation between empathy and the mimetic faculties of audio technology, and presenting this relation in print, Cobbing maintained the conceptual qualities of his tape-poems, but formulated a strategy for removing himself from his dependence upon the audio-technological and its place in a larger capitalist machine.

Part of this strategy can be seen in the way that audio technology was used in his live performances as an aspect of his collaborative practice. In a British context, this can be seen in the founding in 1972 of abAna, a trio formed of Cobbing, percussionist Paul Burwell and guitarist David Toop. Burwell notes that Cobbing ‘had a reel-to-reel tape recorder [that] he took around on a little luggage trolley’ in order to play out his sonic work:

These were themselves subjected to tape manipulations such as editing, splicing, layering, cut and paste, speed changes, slowing down and speeding up, in order to bring out sounds and frequencies latent in the words. He [Cobbing] explained that he was frustrated with playing tapes at live readings, and had been learning to reproduce these sounds, with sub and high frequencies, rumbles and so on, with his own voice.⁸³

While Toop recalls that the aim of abAna was to ‘interpret Cobbing’s visual poems through improvisation, as if they were graphic scores’, this chapter has established that the transition Toop and Burwell describe also worked the other way round: Cobbing’s tape-poems formulated the visual image as sound.⁸⁴ In his work with abAna, Cobbing not only vocally reproduced the sounds that he had made with his ‘tape manipulations’, he re-established his poetic practice on conceptual grounds that were allied to the audio-technological contexts in which

⁸³ Paul Burwell, ‘Contributors Notes on CD companion’ to *Leonardo Music Journal 11: Not Necessarily “English Music”: Britain’s Second Golden Age* (2001), n.p.

⁸⁴ ‘At times abAna expanded into a sextet, with the addition of pianist Christopher Small (now music theorist), saxophonist Herman Hauge and vocalist Lynn Cornetta.’ See David Toop, ‘Sound Body, The Ghost of a Program’, in *Leonardo Music Journal 15: The Word: Voice, Language and Technology* (2005), 28-35 (34-35). Burwell also notes that poets Peter Finch, Paula Claire, Lilly Greenham, Lawrence Upton and Bill Griffiths occasionally joined them.

those sounds had first been made.

These developments, coupled to the conceptualisation of architectural space in audio-technological terms that was advanced by Cobbing's tape poems, anticipated and facilitated his official role at the National Poetry Centre, which was launched at the Poetry Society in the early 1970s. With an invisible tape recorder lodged in his throat Cobbing sounded out the institution of the Poetry Society in terms of its ability to function as an institutional ground for his poetic practice. As the next chapter explains, this positioned Cobbing on an institutional fault line that marked and fused the practice of modernist and non-modernist poetry in Britain. Responding to this new institution required an increased attention to the role of the individual and institutional body and to the way that poetry was funded, extending his experiments with audio technology from the 1970s into the sometimes prohibitive spaces of official verse culture.

Chapter Five: The Body of the Poetry Society as a Resonator 1968 – 1977

This chapter considers Cobbing's actions at the Poetry Society in the 1970s and the poems he made during this period as two aspects of a single performance. The sequence of positions he held within the Poetry Society during his eight-year membership of the organisation both structured and formed the subject of his poems in this period. Cobbing had been a member of the Poetry Society since the summer of 1968, an Executive member of the General Council from 1970 and its Treasurer from 1973 until 13 November 1976, when he resigned. Four months later he took part in a mass resignation of members from the General Council, thereby leaving the Poetry Society and the National Poetry Centre altogether.¹ Working at the Poetry Society allowed Cobbing to find new collaborators. These not only altered his own poems but also affected the functions and activities of the institution. Through these collaborations Cobbing extended the influence of the institution beyond its physical site at 21 Earls Court Square. Examples of this are numerous. Allen Fisher notes that 'a whole group of London Poets started to understand small press [publishing]' through Cobbing's work there: 'Bob had moved some equipment into the society...to make it open for anyone to use.'² It was thanks to Cobbing that Fisher himself became a member of the Poetry Society's General Council and its events co-ordinator. The integration of other people into the Poetry Society was part of Cobbing's pedagogy, and the consequences of this demand a reconsideration of the habit of calling an institution a 'body' in the instance of the Poetry Society.

Peter Barry's important work in producing the first history of what he calls the 'Poetry Wars' depicts the Poetry Society as an institution riven by political and social factionalism. Recent critical attention by the critic Brian M. Reed to Cobbing's *Jade-Sound Poems* (1976-7) – an important poem that Cobbing produced and performed at the Poetry Society in the 1970s – suggests that its poetic form necessitates an improvised, one-off and at times wordless

¹ The National Poetry Centre had been established at the Poetry Society in February 1971 as a result of lobbying by Poets Conference. The mass resignation occurred on 26 March 1977. See Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2006), 17.

² Allen Fisher interviewed by Sarah O'Reilly (28 - 29 August, 19 September, 3 October 2008), track eleven of *National Life Stories: Authors' Lives*. BL Sound Archive catalogue number C1276.

performance. Cobbing's organisational work at the Poetry Society is presented as pure machination, while *Jade-Sound Poems* is presented as pure abstraction. There is, therefore, a problem with trying to understand Cobbing's institutional activities at the Poetry Society and the poetry he produced there as a single performance or body of work given that in the prevailing critical narratives, these two aspects of Cobbing's work as a poet were operating on different tracks.

This chapter explains how these two strands can be understood as a single body of work if the National Poetry Centre at the Poetry Society, its members and the audience it reached and attracted are thought of in terms of technologies of performance: as receivers, transmitters and resonators of Cobbing's performances. In fact, they can be considered as personal versions of the devices that he used in his collaborations in the 1960s. I explore this argument in two ways. I consider Cobbing's work with Paula Claire and Konkrete Canticle (a sound poetry group that they formed in the early 1970s) as a performance that was enabled by his work inside the Poetry Society because its European performances ran parallel to Cobbing's organisational work at the Poetry Society. Before that, I offer a close reading of *Jade-Sound Poems* in the context of the conflict that Barry has outlined. This reading uses Barry's terms and narrative but suggests ways in which *Jade-Sound Poems* establishes a concept of the body in sound that exceeds the factionalist atmosphere into which Cobbing himself was drawn. To introduce this topic further I will now explore Barry's argument and Reed's analysis of *Jade-Sound Poems* in more detail. In doing so I intend to show that Reed's approach to Cobbing's poetry is insufficient with respect to Cobbing's actions and that Barry's account of Cobbing's motives in joining the Poetry Society is insufficient with respect to Cobbing's poetry.

1) The Poetry Wars and *Jade-Sound Poems*: Machination and Abstraction

In *Poetry Wars* Barry describes how a small group of 'radical' or 'experimental' poets 'took over' the Poetry Society, which he describes as 'one of the most conservative of British cultural institutions'.³ As Barry acknowledges, though he claims to tell the 'full story' of these events for the first time, he actually focuses on one major aspect of that story, namely 'the editing and publication of *Poetry*

³ Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 1.

Review.’ Thus Eric Mottram (editor of *Poetry Review*, 1971-77) emerges as a central figure, even though he was hardly involved in the day-to-day running of the Poetry Society. In terms of what did actually occur there on a daily basis, Barry notes, ‘the key figure was Bob Cobbing’. Barry regrets that Cobbing’s papers were not available to him while writing *Poetry Wars*, for they would form ‘a principle resource for the history of that strand of [late twentieth-century] British experimental writing’.⁴ This tradition, to Barry, is represented by Cobbing as well as poets such as Upton, Fisher, cris cheek, Barry MacSweeney, Lee Harwood, Stuart Montgomery, Jeff Nuttall and Bill Griffiths, all of whom served on the Poetry Society’s General Council at one point or another.⁵ There is nothing factually inaccurate about the content of this account, for there *was* a personally acrimonious and increasingly vicious divide between two groups of poets at the Poetry Society during the 1970s. However, Cobbing’s decision to become a member of the Poetry Society was driven by the logic of a poetics, which was not concerned with being oppositional.

An organic metaphor for, and a modelling of, the ‘take over’ of the Poetry Society which cuts across such oppositions as ‘radical’ and ‘conservative’ can be found in Cobbing’s poetry of the 1970s. Cobbing’s poem *E colony* (May 1973) engages with the principles of organic growth in a literal way (see Fig. 14). It is formed from two sheets of A3 paper that are joined and folded sideways to form eight pages of a concertina book. The only letter in the poem is ‘e’, and on the first fold there are four separate ‘e’ clusters. As each fold of the book expands, these clusters, which sometimes resemble a large inverted ‘e’, also expand. As the concertina unfolds they join together, like bacteria spreading in a host the ‘e’ colony grows and it gradually takes over the entire page. If we understand the form of the poem as an organic metaphor for the takeover of the Poetry Society, *E colony* presents a recapitulation of Cobbing’s actions and aesthetic organicist practice in 1950s Hendon when he took over the Hendon Arts Council (see Chapter Two, section one).⁶ Dynamic, mimetic works like *E colony* suggest that Cobbing’s action of entering the Poetry Society in the first

⁴ Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 4.

⁵ Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 211-13.

⁶ Bob Cobbing, *E colony* (London: Writers Forum, 1973).

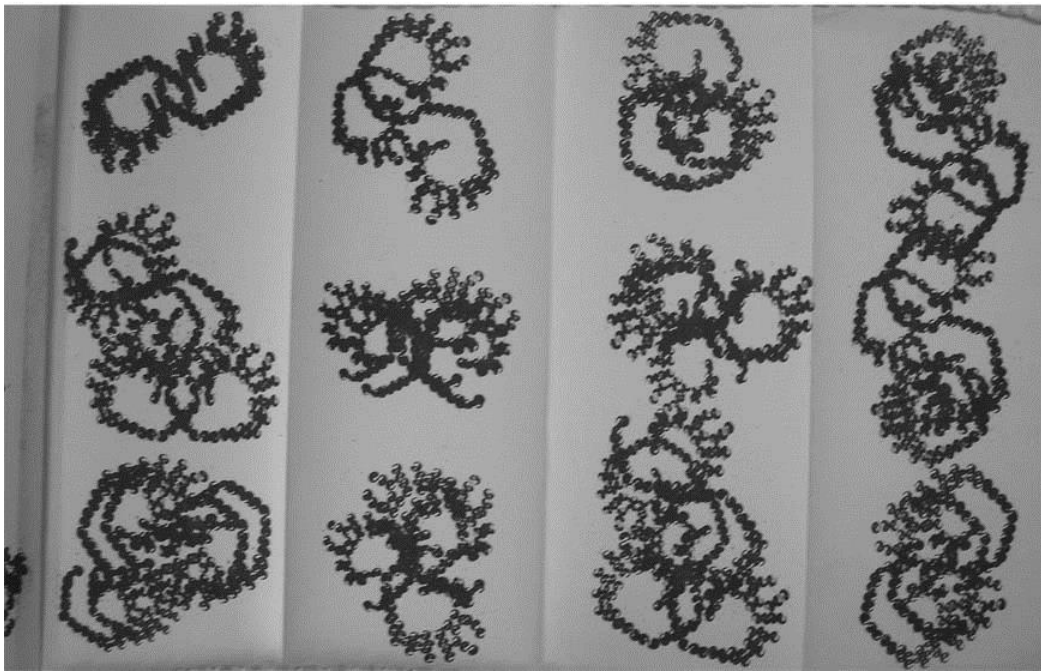
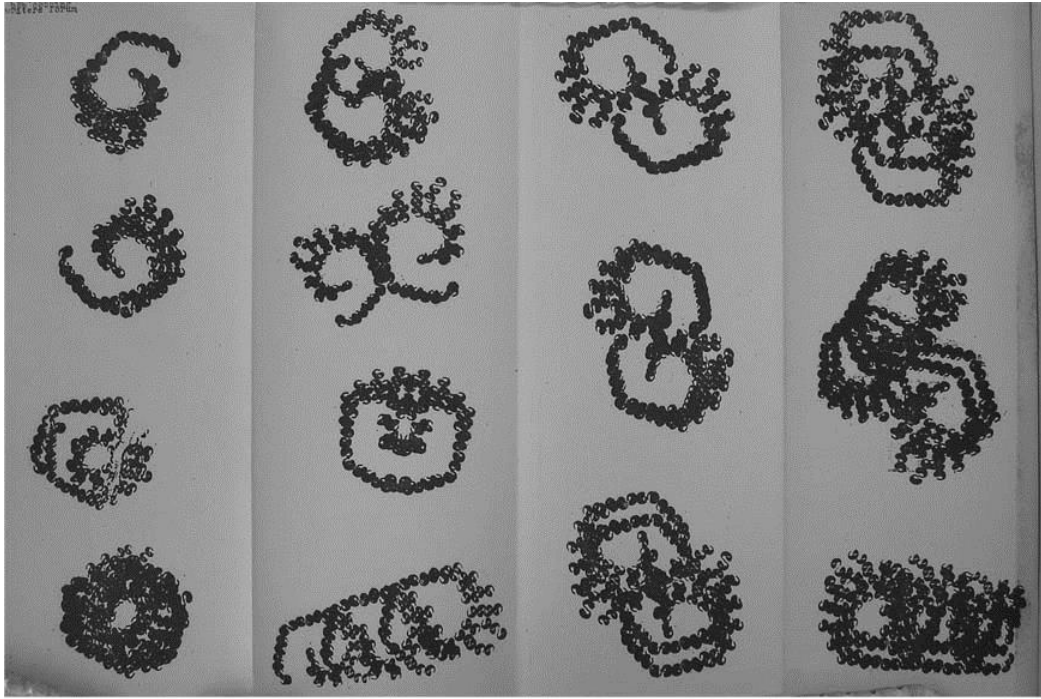


Figure 14. Bob Cobbing, *E colony* (London Writers Forum, 1973). Reprinted with permission of Jennifer Cobbing.

place was less factional than has been reported. It was more about finding a place for poetry to live; one of Cobbing's primary, lasting commitments.

Yet paradoxically, and almost because of these commitments, Cobbing did become quickly and deeply embroiled in the factional atmosphere of the Poetry Society. In Barry's identification of several sub-groups that formed during the Poetry wars – the 'conservative-conservatives', 'radical-conservatives', 'radical-radicals', and the 'conservative-radicals' – Cobbing is defined as a 'radical-radical'.⁷ This designation is largely on account of his position towards the Witt report, which was commissioned by the Arts Council of Great Britain in order to establish the source of discord at the Poetry Society and to assess if its subsidy was being used appropriately. Cobbing and other 'radical-radicals' interpreted the Witt report as a non-democratic attempt by the Arts Council of Great Britain to control the aesthetic direction of the Poetry Society, the General Council of which they believed had a democratic mandate from the membership to act in any way they pleased. In Barry's version, the 'radical-radicals' are defined as such because they could not countenance this control and staged a mass walk out in March 1977.⁸ While this definition is correct in its own terms, it is important to note that the actions of the 'radical-radicals' were consistent with Cobbing's previous actions in Hendon and Finchley. For Cobbing, this action was part of a personal history of working within state-sponsored bureaucratic art institutions to the point at which they could not live up to his own anarcho-democratic principles and then resisting them.

It is also important to note that in the fraught debates at the Poetry Society (which centred on the relationship between subsidy and autonomy) Cobbing's position as a 'radical-radical' ran parallel to radical developments in his own poetry. The increasingly radical direction Cobbing's work was taking is indicated by *Songsignals* (1971). This work contains visual poems created from sources as various as theatre announcements, a salt sack and a booklet on printing. Cobbing noted that he was 'attracted by the visual qualities but also by the sound possibilities' of these sources, which he called 'texts'.⁹ As I discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, one of Cobbing's habits in this period was to

⁷ Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 8, 90.

⁸ Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 96.

⁹ Bob Cobbing, *Songsignals* (Cardiff: Second Aeon, 1971), n.p.

vocally improvise a reading (or a sounding) in live performance – sometimes with musicians who would improvise with him – all responding to the ‘texts’ as scores.

This was a further development of Cobbing’s practice of making poems where the external context becomes a creative element in the poem’s internal form. In a live, improvised performance the form of the poem is located in the space where that performance happens. Even a piece which has been improvised several times is unique in every performance. This means a significant part of the poem’s meaning resides in a context that cannot be recalled in quite the same terms as it was first presented. While this is true of any performance, it is especially true of Cobbing’s because he made this instability a central feature of his work and reintegrated its conceptual structure back into the ‘texts’ he used in performance. This confirms the central claim of this thesis, that the space of performance is integral to the performance’s form. Yet recent criticism on Cobbing’s poetry has tended to over-emphasise the improvised and provisional nature of Cobbing’s ‘texts’, understanding them purely as signals for future performances. This has been to the detriment of an understanding of the spaces in which Cobbing performed, towards which Cobbing’s ‘texts’ also signal.

This tendency characterises Reed’s analysis of *Jade-Sound Poems* (see Fig. 15), which is the only sustained analysis of the poem to date. While his reading is perceptive, it illustrates some of the problems of reading Cobbing’s poems outside their formative contexts. Reed interprets the first character of the eight on the first page as an exclamation mark, and he wonders how it should be sounded. ‘One might proceed’, he writes, ‘by analogy with Spanish, but this punctuation mark is right-side up.’¹⁰ He speculates, ‘Does it perhaps indicate a clicking sound, as it would in a southern African name such as N!xau (the star of the film *The Gods Must Be Crazy* [1980])?’ He then describes the penultimate character as ‘a mysterious nonletter’, and questions whether ‘it looks like the Greek lambda’ or whether it is instead ‘an upside-down V’. His rationale for the latter interpretation is that:

¹⁰ Brian M. Reed, ‘Visual Experiment and Oral Performance’, in *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 270-286 (280).

It visually echoes an earlier *V* – a *V* toward which the eye is drawn by an identical *V*-shape, above and to the right, that makes up half a *W*. The letter *Y*, too, which appears beneath and to the left, contains another *V*.

He argues that once ‘one starts seeing *V*’s and *A*’s it is hard to stop thinking about reflections – or perhaps rotations.’ He then uses these themes to read the poem in more detail:

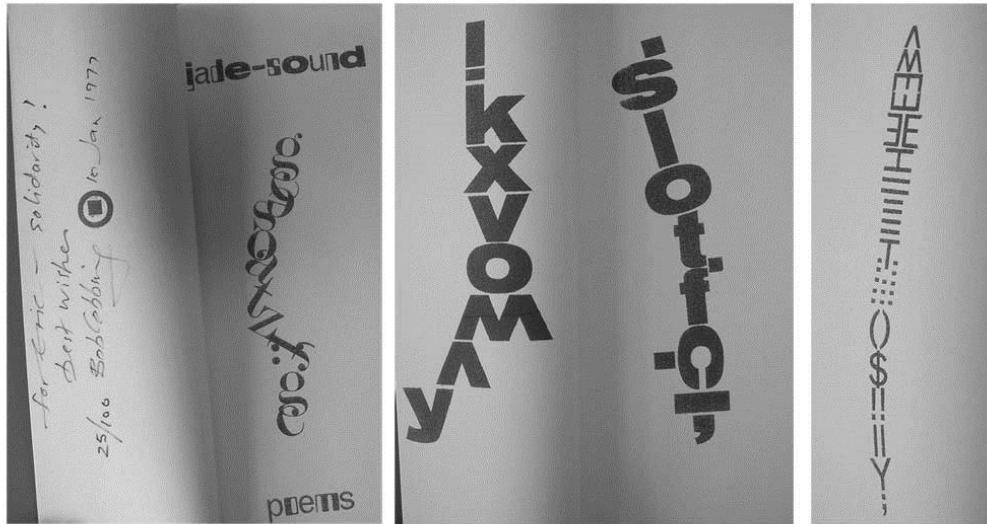
The *O* in the centre looks suspiciously like a pivot around which the other letters might spin. (That might, after all, explain how the exclamation point ended up at the top of the page instead of at the bottom.) The longer one stares, the more the letters seem to flip and move. One even begins to see words that simply are not there: wow, vow, wok, and the Latin *vox*, meaning “voice”.

For Reed, because the text is so ‘peculiar’ any attempt to sound the poem makes the reader ‘free to invent rules or intuitively improvise moment to moment’. Reed notes this means that ‘no two people are likely to perform *Jade-Sound Poems* in remotely similar ways’. Therefore all readers ‘undergo an intense experience of the poetry as material, tangible artifact, a set of unusual marks on a page.’¹¹ For Reed this experience is catalysed by the ‘writing’s obdurate resistance to transmediation’: the way in which the poem impedes the verbal performance of its visual appearance means that – ‘paradoxically’ – any reading is permitted because ‘the transition between sight and sound’ is eased.¹² One of the risks of this approach is that the poem starts to mean everything and nothing. Reed comes very close to saying that everyone understands and agrees upon the rather nullifying fact that they can see the page in front of them. The problems with this argument are symptomatic of the problems that Cobbing’s poem explores. Contrary to Reed, it is my view that the experience of recognising all the ‘marks’ in *Jade-Sound Poems* as a poem (and Cobbing’s assertion that all those ‘marks’ constituted a poem) is not meaningless.

I want to build on Reed’s argument by placing *Jade-Sound Poems* back into the ecology of the Poetry Society, for the meaninglessness attributed to it by Reed’s permissive critical strategy is false; the poem does have a meaning which

¹¹ Reed, ‘Visual Experiment and Oral Performance’, in *The Sound of Poetry*, 280.

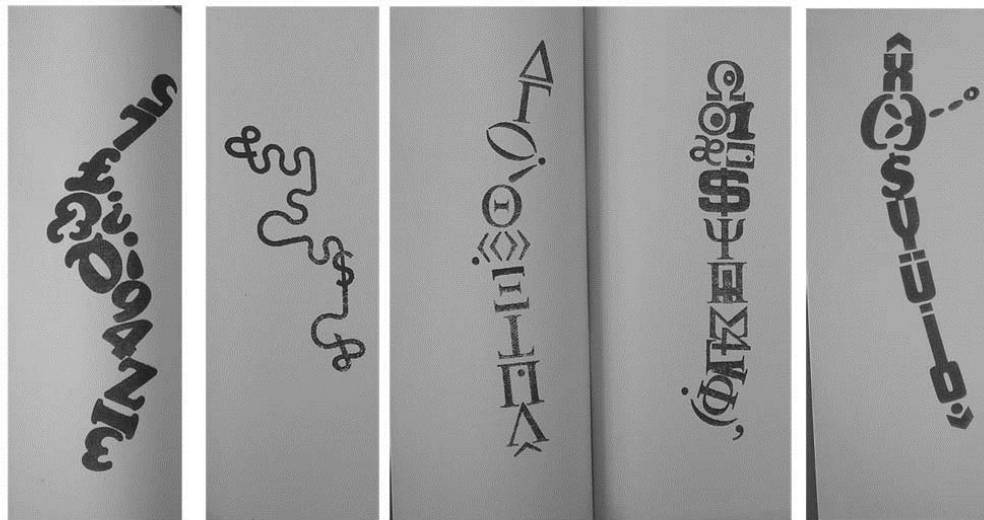
¹² Reed, ‘Visual Experiment and Oral Performance’, in *The Sound of Poetry*, 280.



Inscription and title page.

Page one and two.

Page three.



Page seven.

Page ten.

Page eleven and twelve.

Page nineteen.

Figure 15. Bob Cobbing, *Jade-Sound Poems* (London: Writers Forum, 1976-7). Title page and inscription from *Jade-Sound Poems*, Kings College, London College Archives, MOTTRAM: 5/45/52-124 1963-1994. Other pages from *Jade-Sound Poems*, The Paula Claire Archive of Sound and Visual Poetry Oxford: section COBBING, Bob (1920 - 2002). Reproduced with permission of Jennifer Cobbing.

can be found but only if it is read in context. This will attribute meaning to the poem's central dynamic. That dynamic incorporates many particular characters which can be read in so many different ways that the specificity of the poem's own construction is rendered nearly meaningless through its abstraction into a more general sensory experience of seeing and sounding.

2) Solidarity and the Subsidised Body: Inside the Poetry Society

Jade-Sound Poems was first published by Writers Forum in an edition of one hundred. Attending to the inscriptions that Cobbing wrote in different copies of *Jade-Sound Poems* and reading them in the context of the conflicts at the Poetry Society redresses some of the problems of Reed's interpretation. Eric Mottram's copy of the poem bears the inscription 'For Eric - Solidarity! / best wishes / 25/100 Bob Cobbing 10 Jan 1977', while Paula Claire's copy has an inscription that appears to be less particular to the circumstances of its writing: '11/100 Bob Cobbing 25-28 December 1976 / for Paul & Paula / Christmas & New year Greetings'.¹³ In each copy the inscription and the poem face one another. The inscriptions are written across the length of the inside front cover rather than across the book's width, so they visually echo the vertical string-like columns of the poems that run down the length of each page, one of which is printed on the book's title page. The book's paper is green, the colour of the 'Jade' in the poem's title. In these ways the material of the book, its inscriptions, title and the form of the poem contained inside are in dialogue.

The meaning of these relations depends on whether Claire or Mottram's copy is taken as the poem. The two different inscriptions mark separate occasions of production and imply different kinds of personal association, which then can be used as interpretive frames. For the moment, I want to consider Mottram's copy of *Jade-Sound Poems* in isolation in order to show how attending to the specificity of this single copy shapes the poem's meaning in its entirety. In this regard, it is vital to think about what Cobbing meant when he used the word 'solidarity' and how his inscription of this word in Mottram's

¹³ *Jade-Sound Poems*, copy in Kings College, London Archives, MOTTRAM: 5/45/52-124 1963-1994 and *Jade-Sound Poems*, copy in The Paula Claire Archive of Sound and Visual Poetry, Oxford: section COBBING, Bob (1920 - 2002).

copy of *Jade-Sound Poems* speaks to the other aspects of the poem that have been mapped by Reed.

The date of Cobbing's inscription to Mottram – '10 January 1977' – situates the poem in a chronology of events that took place at the Poetry Society. An important moment for understanding the relation between 'solidarity' and the form of *Jade-Sound Poems* was the Poetry Society's Annual General Meeting held in June 1976, at which it was announced that Sir John Witt, Vice-Chairman of the Arts Council of Great Britain, was to chair an investigation into the Poetry Society's affairs.¹⁴ The Arts Council gave the Witt Panel six terms of reference. The first concerned the 'nature and quality of the society's activities', how 'competently' these activities were being carried out, and which of them were 'proper objects of Arts Council subsidy'.¹⁵ The following five were all related to the underlying fact that public money was being used to fund the Poetry Society's activities, and the concern that this caused about what the 'proper' use of that subsidy was.¹⁶ The report was approved by the Arts Council on 27 October 1976, and on 13 November a meeting was called at the Poetry Society to formulate a response to the report.¹⁷ At this meeting Cobbing, Nuttall and Upton (the Society's Treasurer, Chair and Deputy Chair respectively) put forward a resolution rejecting the findings of the report outright. When their resolution was rejected, all three of them resigned. Without using the specific word, the Witt report itself called for solidarity, it demanded that the "internal strife" in the General Council come to an end, and made this one of the conditions of the Poetry Society's continued subsidisation.¹⁸ It also attempted to set in place ways in which the Arts Council could monitor how the money was being spent by the Poetry Society and its General Council.

Cobbing produced Mottram's copy of *Jade-Sound Poems* less than two months after his resignation as Treasurer, around ten weeks before the mass resignation of the 'radical' members of the Poetry Society's General Council on 26 March 1977. This chronology invites us to consider several meanings of the word 'solidarity'. It can be read as a rallying call designed to forge togetherness

¹⁴ Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 73.

¹⁵ Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 73.

¹⁶ Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 73.

¹⁷ Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 86.

¹⁸ Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 87.

and increase resolve between Cobbing (the recently departed Treasurer) and Mottram (the soon-to-depart editor of *Poetry Review*) amid the series of tough meetings and events that took place around the book's publication. Equally it could be read as a statement of intent, a shorthand means of letting Mottram know that he intended to support Mottram's imminent loss of the editorship in some way, perhaps by taking part in the mass resignation from the Poetry Society in March 1977.¹⁹ Alternatively 'solidarity' might be understood as an expression of defeat shared with a friend and collaborator, written with a sad tone of realisation that their positions at the Poetry Society were becoming untenable. In these terms, the 'jade' in *Jade-Sound Poems* is a play on words connoting a certain jadedness, for as Barry observes by December 1976 'the combined strength of the anti-radicals would ensure that no business which advanced the radical cause was likely to be passed'.²⁰ Or perhaps, as Robert Sheppard has suggested, 'solidarity' should be read as intentionally ironical, for despite the mass walkout in March 1977 the 'radical' position was far from unified.²¹

Sheppard's interpretation is sensitive to the fact that debates about the politics of subsidisation directly affected the solidarity among the poets. As a letter from Lee Harwood to Mottram on 9 April 1977 makes clear, one of the most divisive aspects in the concluding stages of the Poetry Wars were the different positions that 'radicals' adopted on the issue of subsidy. Should they reject the Arts Council, 'its report, and its money' or 'accept the cash and some of their report but ... insist on negotiation & changes'?²² Harwood informed Mottram that 'Jeff, Bob [Cobbing], etc wanted a total rejection', while he, 'Roy Fisher, Barry MacSweeney, Elaine [Randell], Roger Guedalla, Ken Smith & some others favoured negotiating, that is fighting from within.'²³

In order to illustrate how Cobbing figured these debates aesthetically, *Jade-Sound Poems* needs to be read in light of these disagreements, starting with the poem's title. The hyphenated words '*Jade-Sound*' imply that the origin of the

¹⁹ Cobbing would have known that this was imminent at the time of the inscription: 'Finch's appointment as Mottram's successor had been announced in the Chair's report at the June 1976 AGM'. Mottram believed that he had lost the editorship of *Poetry Review* through deceit. See Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 93.

²⁰ *Poetry Wars*, 92.

²¹ Robert Sheppard to Steve Willey, 14 September 2011, in private correspondence.

²² Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 94.

²³ MacSweeney soon changed his position stating in a letter to Mottram 'I've done too much compromising and my skull won't take any more' (22 March 1977). Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 96.

poem's sound and the medium through which that 'sound' passes is 'jade'. Reed never explored this possibility, partly because this was not what interested him about the poem but also because his reading of the poem implies that every performance is unique and infinitely variable, which in turn implies that he or an abstract multitude of unnamed others are the origin(s) of the poem's sound. Yet if '*Jade-Sound*' is read as an extended metaphor for the '*Poems*' that follow, this need not be the case.

'Jade' is composed of fine-grained, highly intergrown, interlocking crystals and due to this microcrystalline structure it is the toughest gemstone.²⁴ Given the fact that Cobbing was an inveterate punster, whose puns often reflected the occasion of the poem's production, we can note the connection between Cobbing's expression of 'solidarity' in Mottram's copy of *Jade-Sound Poems*, and the fact of jade's solidity. We should take seriously the idea that the poem's 'Sound' emanates from a structure as solid as 'Jade', for the idea of jade as a site of enduring sonic resonance is not a new one. In ancient China, sets of ringing-stones were made from jade. These instruments, when recovered, 'provide a certain means of knowing ancient scales' as the imperishable quality of the material means that the instruments remain in tune.²⁵ As a space of sonic resonance, 'Jade' is suggested as an alternative to the human subject who could give voice to the poem by sounding it, but who would also be vulnerable to the restricted social relations that existed at the Poetry Society.

While it is impossible to attempt to articulate the precise and changing status of jade in Chinese culture here, it is important to note that historians have claimed for it a meta-relation with respect to value. The cultural historian Ming Yu observes that 'Chinese jade ware is more than the essence of art, or a witness to Chinese history; it represents emotional bonds linking all Chinese people', while historian Steve Holmes draws attention to the Chinese proverb that suggests that 'gold has a value' but that 'jade is invaluable'.²⁶ In these terms, the

²⁴ 'Jade, (Jadite, Nephrite)', on website of the *Department of Geological Sciences, University of Texas Austin*, <http://www.geo.utexas.edu/courses/347k/redesign/gem_notes/jade/jade_main.htm> [accessed 15 September 2011].

²⁵ Joseph Needham and Ling Wang, *Science and Civilisation in China: Volume 4, Physics and Physical*, Part 3: 'Civil Engineering and Nautics' (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 156.

²⁶ Ming Yu, *Chinese Jade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 136.

poem's title helps establish the idea of the poem as an embodiment of a relation between an irrefutable kind of solidarity and a form of universal value that is expressed in the enduring and true sound of jade. The inscription of 'solidarity' in Mottram's copy of the poem and the fact that the poem was printed at the Print Shop on the Poetry Society's premises invites a hearing of the poem in this context. On this basis, the metaphor of the poem's title also presents an alternative to the fixed value relation that subsidy enshrines and the conflicts that occurred at the Poetry Society; conflicts which took place within terms established by that fixed value relation.

The content of the poem sustains but also disrupts this reading. Though most crystalline structures present an orderly, completely predictable and repeating pattern that extends in all three spatial dimensions, the string-shaped poems of *Jade-Sound Poems* do not. The Chinese character for jade (pronounced *yu*) – a picture of three pieces of jade bound together (玉) – echoes some of the vertical character-strings in *Jade-Sound Poems*, but these character-strings are neither exactly regular, predictable, or repeated across the whole book. They are awkward, jagged and unusual structures. In terms of the metaphorical implications of jade the content of the poem evokes the metamorphic processes which form jade's crystalline structure and recalls the aesthetic commitments of Cobbing's earliest artworks. This invites us to think about the content of the poem as an organic space of fracture and abrasive contact. Yet the indeterminate peculiarity of the poem's characters, the intense and unusual environment of the poem, is not as arbitrary as Reed's interpretation of the poem suggested.

Characters that are used in different systems of measurement and numeration (including systems for the assignation of value) occur throughout the poem. These include the signs for the US dollar and the British pound. The dollar sign is included as one of the characters that makes up the text on pages three, ten, twelve, and nineteen, while the British pound sign is included as one of the characters on page seven. Less obvious are the use of characters from the Greek alphabet, which have a numeric value in the system of Greek numerals and are associated with measurement. These occur with greatest frequency on pages

eleven and twelve of the poem.²⁷ Further, several of the pages also include numerals from the western numeric system: ‘6’, ‘7’, ‘4’, ‘1’, all occur on page five, and ‘5’, ‘7’, ‘9’ and ‘4’ all appear on page seven. When taken together, these value-characters reveal a poem full of different ways of assigning value and conducting measurement.

None of these particular systems or value-characters becomes the single means by which the poem’s aesthetic value can be considered. This is because the rest of the poem is made up of ampersands, letters from the Roman alphabet, and a wide range of punctuation marks and letters that have diacritical marks above them. These characters are arranged in such a way that each value-character is fitted into the larger appearance of the poem. For example, if all the characters are seen as geometrical shapes, they start to echo one another: the curved ‘S’-shape of the dollar sign ‘\$’ on page four is echoed in the set of closed brackets above ‘()’ while the vertical line which intersects the ‘S’ of the dollar sign is suggested by the two exclamation marks that are placed below ‘!!’ and by the two letter ‘i’s’ below these exclamation marks.

Here the rotation of characters does not only function to allow multiple readings of the poem (as Reed argued); it is also used to minimise the particularity of the value-characters. These are integrated into the wider form of each separate poem through rotation. An example of this use of rotation can be seen on page eleven. Here the ‘tau’ character has been rotated through 180° so that the horizontal bar of the ‘T’ mirrors and faces the horizontal henge of the ‘II’ (the pi character). Another example of this is to be found on page twelve where the vertical line through the dollar sign is lined up with the vertical line through the psi symbol. This visually and symbolically links (but also contrasts) a numeric value used in ancient Greece and a system of monetary value used in contemporary America. The effect of these rotations is still, as Reed’s interpretation recognised, to reduce the particularity of the poem’s characters to a more general acknowledgment of the poem as visual material. However, the different and contesting ways of establishing value that permeate the poem’s

²⁷ From the top of page eleven are the symbols: delta (value of 4), gamma (value of 3), theta (value of 9), xi (value of 60), tau (value of 300), pi (value of 80), and lambda (value of 30). On page twelve are the symbols: omega (value of 800), psi (value of 700), sigma (value of 200), gamma (value of 3), and phi (value of 500,000).

form, content, title and paratext – and so constitute the poem’s visual material – make their abstraction meaningful.

The quality of sound is always altered by the medium and situation in which it is heard. When the poem is sounded it too is, therefore, altered by its surroundings. The quality of sound becomes associated with ideas of value. As Lawrence Upton recalls, Cobbing gave a solo performance of *Jade-Sound Poems* at a Writers Forum workshop and a collective performance of the poem with abAna while he was working at the Poetry Society during the 1970s.²⁸ The radical notion of value that is associated with sounding *Jade-Sound Poems* is complicated by the identification of that sound with the physical and conceptual structures of the Poetry Society. Understood in these terms, the relation made in the reading of the poem between the performer’s particular interpretation of the poem and the poem’s abstraction in sound (which is also an abstraction of their interpretation) is the relation between *Jade-Sound Poems* and its political and social situation.

Based on the performer’s moment-by-moment reactions to the value-characters in the poem, *Jade-Sound Poems* requires each performer to sense him- or herself making arbitrary judgements about which sounds to employ. The poem is instantly and utterly dependent on the audience to hear those sounds as poetry and to value them as such. This means that *Jade-Sound Poems* is not a private, individualistic poem about the permissive possibilities of spontaneous one-off performance. Rather, it is a poem about the artist-audience relation which the Poetry Society mediates.

The Poetry Society mediates the poem in complex ways: the idea of *Jade-Sound Poems* being sounded out at the Poetry Society (and thereby sounding the Poetry Society out) in fact presents a contradiction. While the poem demands a form of value beyond any factional identification, it does so in a situation where exactly that kind of absolute commitment to a particular aesthetic value created discord. This contradiction is actually borne of two interrelated factors: the fact that the Poetry Society was functioning as the National Poetry Centre in this period and received state subsidy to fulfill this role, and from deep-rooted and unresolved arguments in the history of modernism and non-modernism.

²⁸ Lawrence Upton to Steve Willey, 1 September 2012, in private correspondence.

3) Solidarity and the Subsidised Body: Modernism and Non-Modernism

The idea that the poetry wars of the 1970s were a continuation of a dispute between the modernists and the non-modernists is suggested in the introduction of Barry's account. Although he finally settles on the terms 'radical' and 'conservative' to describe two opposing sides, he also notes that he finds the binary of neo-conservatives vs. neo-modernists 'quite a useful way of formulating the grounds of the conflict'. This is because the 'former group continued the "project" of the Edwardian and 1950s anti-modernists, while the latter continued that of the 1920s modernists.'²⁹ The division that these distinctions imply is belied by the historically contested nature of the terms and their subsequent evolution. To draw out some of this context, I want to look at a review published in *Poetry Review* (1969) by Edward Lucie-Smith about the Poetry Society's Gala Poetry Exhibition of 1969, which expands upon his comments about the International Poetry Incarnation discussed in Chapter Three. This exhibition was held at London's Royal Festival Hall and was organised by Cobbing (also the curator) who by 1969 had been a member of the Poetry Society for just over a year. Lucie-Smith wrote:

I think, indeed, that one of the main virtues of this exhibition (apart from its thoroughness) is that it forces a confrontation between the poetic tradition in England and the modernist idea. I have never seen it so clearly demonstrated before that when English critics talk of 'modern poetry', they generally mean something totally different, in style, in assumptions, and in aesthetic atmosphere, from what the critic means when he uses the phrase 'modern art'. The degree to which the great bulk of English poetry written in the twentieth century has remained untouched by the basic concepts of modernism (simultaneity, dislocation, abstraction) is irrefutably shown. The poetry exhibition at the Festival Hall thus marks something of a turning point – one which is perhaps as important as the turning point which came in 1965 with the Albert Hall poetry recital, which revealed that poetry could still be a popular art.³⁰

In this short excerpt 'England' appears once and 'English' twice. If the Royal patronage of the Festival Hall and the Albert Hall is also taken into account, then

²⁹ Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 7.

³⁰ Edward Lucie-Smith, 'Poetry on Show', in *Poetry Review*, 9:1 (1969), 59-60 (60).

one of the significant aspects of Lucie-Smith's review is that he understood the exhibition in terms of national identity and England's cultural institutions. This was linked to his understanding of 'modern English poetry' and its 'tradition'. He believed Cobbing's exhibition had turned towards this tradition in order to rewrite it. Despite Lucie-Smith's connections to 'The Group' his assessment of the Exhibition is much more ambiguous than this connection to a 'conservative' poetry workshop might suggest.³¹

This ambiguity is productively understood in light of recent critical work by Peter Howarth, which traces common ground between modernists and non-modernists.³² One of the things they share, argues Howarth, is 'a common set of problems to do with issues of autonomy and engagement bequeathed them by the Romantic poets'.³³ The ways in which these problems were manifested during the Poetry Wars of the early twentieth century is represented in part by T. S. Eliot's views on Georgian poetry being commercially successful but artistically bankrupt. In Eliot's opinion, it pandered to the "General Reading Public".³⁴ Howarth notes that one reason this position was attacked by non-modernists in the 1950s was that the 'egalitarian climate of post-war Britain...did not see popularity with the ordinary reader as a hindrance'. Howarth writes:

the rise of the Movement poets provided artist justification for a reassessment of modernist values – but, ironically, using exactly the same principles of self-defining integrity reapplied to the borders of the public, rather than the borders of the individual talent.

The Movement poets defined these 'borders' in nationalist terms so that modernism became 'not a triumph over Georgian sentimental nostalgia, but "an aberration", whose foreign "culture mongering" has lost poetry its audience.'³⁵ Howarth continues to point out that the arrival of non-modernist verse was linked

³¹ For a period in the 1960s, Lucie-Smith organised a poetry workshop called The Group. After collapsing, this organisation was reconstituted as Poets' Workshop in the 1970s at the Poetry Society; the radicals then ousted it from the premises in 1975. Lucie-Smith's connection to The Group was one reason he is thought to be a non-modernist although his comments here and elsewhere complicate this designation.

³² Peter Howarth, *British Poetry In The Age of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 5.

³³ Howarth, *British Poetry*, 7.

³⁴ Howarth, *British Poetry*, 10.

³⁵ Howarth, *British Poetry*, 11.

to the simultaneous discovery by the non-modernists of an English poetic tradition to support it, which meant that ‘it was doing exactly what Eliot insisted all “really new” poetry did: alter our perception of the “relations, proportions, values of each work of art towards the whole”, so that the past can be seen to have always already contained the genesis of the present.’³⁶

This is what Lucie-Smith implied the Poetry Society’s Gala Poetry Exhibition of 1969 might do, by forcing ‘a confrontation between the poetic tradition in England and the modernist idea’. However, the fact that Lucie-Smith framed this confrontation in nationalist terms suggests that he was actually approaching the issue through a non-modernist frame, even while celebrating the exhibition’s successful presentation of modernism and lamenting its lack of impact in England. Further, the apparently casual comparison he makes between the success of Cobbing’s curatorial work and the way that the IPI reasserted poetry’s popular appeal echoes the position of the non-modernists in the 1950s, even while recognising the importance of the IPI. The reason for the ambiguity of Lucie-Smith’s position derives from his mistaken belief that the modernism promoted at the Poetry Society’s Gala Poetry Exhibition remained outside the English tradition. He did not celebrate the event as an alternative to that tradition. Rather, he desired a synthesis.

Absent from Lucie-Smith’s account is the role that subsidy and the institutional delivery mechanisms thereof played in the postwar environment, particularly in bringing audiences into contact with poets. Larkin argued that the non-modernists were the ‘native tradition’ which ran from ‘Wordsworth and Clare through Hardy, Thomas and Owen to himself, a line whose English form has to have a more natural, popular relation to the public than an imported, subsidised one’ (Howarth’s words).³⁷ But this line of attack becomes less convincing in a period when the national subsidisation of the arts was one of the chief mechanisms used to fund, disseminate and promote poetic activity in Britain and when the relationship between poets and their audiences was constructed with national money.

In this situation, Larkin’s defence of the non-modernist native tradition could be wholly compatible with the existence of national subsidies if the right

³⁶ Howarth, *British Poetry*, 11.

³⁷ Howarth, *British Poetry*, 11.

kind of poets received subsidy. This is because there is no reason to believe that subsidy necessarily includes or even prefers a modernist or traditional poetic. In other words, the increase in the national subsidisation of the arts under welfare-capitalism via the mechanism of arts institutions (see Chapter One, section three) had altered the terms of the modernist/non-modernist debate in ways that Lucie-Smith did not recognise in his review.

The creation of the National Poetry Centre at the Poetry Society in 1971 and the Art Council's expectation that it should represent all kinds of poetry across the nation meant that the 'borders of the public' of which Howarth speaks had moved inside the institution. Cobbing's own situation inside the Poetry Society meant that far from needing to 'force' a confrontation between the poetic tradition in England and the modernist idea as Lucie-Smith suggested, he was in a context that the modernists and non-modernists shared. This was literally the case at the Poetry Society in the 1970s where 'radicals' and 'conservatives' competed for the rights to the space, but it was also true in terms of the developing history of the debate between modernists and non-modernists as mapped by Howarth.

There was an attempt to bring the confrontation staged by the Festival Hall Exhibition in 1969 into the Poetry Society itself in the form of a debate between Cobbing and Lucie-Smith entitled 'British Modernism, Fact or Fiction?', to be held at the Poetry Society on 14 June 1971.³⁸ Though the debate never actually took place, the fact that the Poetry Society contained such disagreements within its form shapes the meaning of *Jade-Sound Poems*.

Subsidy is usually seen as a method of protecting the poet from exterior market forces, securing the poet's autonomy and their freedom to write in any form they choose. The 'text' that Cobbing chose to make in this situation presents a space of disagreement where any interpretation of the poem is possible, while it simultaneously asserts the contradictory notion of an absolute value. *Jade-Sound Poems* requires everyone (modernist and non-modernist) to realise that this is what they themselves were doing all along at the Poetry Society in the 1970s: trying to make poetry out of their personal perception of value. The argument of *Jade-Sound Poems* is twofold: firstly, that one has to

³⁸ Cobbing in Mayer (ed.), *Bob Cobbing And Writers Forum*, n.p.

poeticise the conventions that are solidified into money (against what the free-marketeers like Larkin would say), but secondly, that no poetry can work if it is insulated by subsidy (or anything else) against the audience on whom poetry's being depends, who provide the environment for the poem. Thus Cobbing's reconceptualisation of poetic form as an aural and embodied performance recognised subsidy as part of the fabric of form itself.

The particularity of Cobbing's position was that he demanded subsidy but also wanted a poetry that was more audience-dependent than anyone else's. In this context, the phrase 'Jade-Sound' is the sound of a true value, where sound is value's tuning fork. Cobbing's machinations on behalf of the modernists (against the syntax-based, discursive and sometimes confessional poems of the non-modernists) are really on behalf of sound as poetry's real standard value – something that everyone can agree upon. However, because everyone makes a different kind of sound even though they have equal recourse to it, this practice of poetry produced a complex and heterogeneous form of solidarity.

4) Bodies Beyond the Poetry Society: Poets Conference

The idea that Cobbing's poems present a space to think about what solidarity means within an institutional framework that has been provided by subsidy is suggested by his work with Poets Conference, which he established in 1970 with George MacBeth, Adrian Henri, Jeni Couzyn, and Asa Bennveniste. From its inception, Poets Conference lobbied in support of the idea that the National Poetry Centre should be established at the Poetry Society.³⁹ Cobbing's belief that there should be a National Poetry Centre was strengthened by his several failed attempts to establish arts centres in London, which had been a concern of his since the early 1960s. The paperback section of Better Books at 4 New Compton Street, which Cobbing had managed since 1966 and where he met Jeff Keen and Annea Lockwood (who worked with him on his sound poems), was one of the centres that collapsed in the late 1960s. The Antiuniversity of London, which opened on 12 February 1968 on Rivington Street, and where Cobbing and Lockwood convened a course in sound poetry, was another.⁴⁰ Cobbing's work at

³⁹ Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 18.

⁴⁰ Antiuniversity of London Prospectus, in 'The Antiuniversity of London', BL Add MS 88909/107.

the Poetry Society and with Poets Conference was a response to the collapse of these centres, and a renewed attempt to create an actual place where practitioners of different art forms could meet. More than being a centre for the arts, the Antiuniversity of London was a dialogic artwork where attempts to formulate revolutionary demands through experimental pedagogical practices were made. This dual commitment to dialogue and to action is reflected in the debates that took place during the formation of Poets Conference.

In his article 'A Profitable Line', published in the *Sunday Times* on 12 July 1970, the poet and journalist Philip Oakes listed some of the early demands and resolutions that were unanimously passed by the eighty poets that Cobbing had convened to discuss the 'conditions and fees' offered to poets in an attempt to 'co-ordinate' poetic activity at a time when there was 'an explosion of readings, festivals and tours arranged by all manner of hands'.⁴¹ Their resolutions demanded: 'the Arts Council ... make an annual grant of £400,000 to poetry, instead of the current estimates of £12,000'; that a National Poetry Secretariat be established 'which would be a clearing house of information and a booking agency capable of arranging reading and poetry tours in Britain and abroad'; and that 'funds and premises' should be 'found to help poets and their growing public ... get together.'⁴² These early aims of Poets Conference demonstrated a belief that poets would find an audience through live performance and that the value of this should be recognised by the state in the form of an increased grant.

However, the massive amount of money demanded by Poets Conference opens up a series of questions about the nature of the organisation itself: was Poets Conference deliberately trying to be provocative? Or were there sums to justify such an enormous expenditure? The answer is ambiguous: Poets Conference had a clear sense of where they wanted the money to be spent, but such demands reflected Cobbing's contradictory desire for a subsidised but utterly audience-dependent art. Increasing the money that Poets Conference had at their disposal would lessen the degree of separation between the poets and their audiences.

⁴¹ Philip Oakes 'A Profitable Line', in *Sunday Times* (12 July 1970), 'Notebook of Cuttings', BL Add MS 88909/112.

⁴² Oakes 'A Profitable Line'.

These contradictions were registered in debates over what Poets Conference should be called. According to Oakes, it was the poet George Macbeth who demanded that the assembled company should form a ‘Poet’s Union’, but that when the poets ‘balked [...] at the word union’ it was left to Cobbing to diplomatically put forward the title Poets Conference.⁴³ The unease that some of Cobbing’s contemporaries felt about the word ‘union’ reveals their deeper discomfort about aligning the writing of poetry with struggles in other labour markets. Cobbing experienced no such unease, and two years later (as I noted in the Introduction to this thesis) he took part in a benefit reading for striking miners with Mottram. However, Cobbing’s suggestion of the name ‘conference’ also signals his commitment to poetry as a form of dialogue as well as action.

Cobbing believed that ‘the point of Conference was that it would act as an “all-seeing eye”, spotting what needed to be done, and “trying to ensure that the necessary machinery” was created’.⁴⁴ Here the institutional mechanisms of Poets Conference are figured as a body, an ‘all-seeing eye’. Cobbing wanted to make membership of Poets Conference “non-exclusive”. He stated: “We [Conference] can’t legislate against the maniacs”.⁴⁵ A union inclusive of maniacs would presumably make it harder to find points on which all members could agree. This suggests an idea of solidarity in excess of the practical demands Poets Conference actually made. Both Poets Conference and *Jade-Sound Poems* motivate belief in a type of universal solidarity, while bringing about the conditions that make such solidarity impossible. To this extent, Cobbing’s poems and organisational work in and around the Poetry Society can also be thought of as part of a poetics of social disagreement.

In the mid 1970s, the actions of Poets Conference were increasingly ill-received by the Arts Council, as a letter sent by Cobbing (as Convener of Poets Conference) to Charles Osborne (Literature Director of the Arts Council) on 5 January 1975 attests. Cobbing made various complaints, all of which concerned the lack of support shown by the Arts Council towards poetry. He included with his letter a copy of the ‘Statement by Poets Conference’, sometimes called ‘The

⁴³ Oakes ‘A Profitable Line’.

⁴⁴ Oakes ‘A Profitable Line’.

⁴⁵ Oakes ‘A Profitable Line’.

State of Poetry: A Preliminary Report'. As Barry notes this document was sent to the press on 5 January 1975. It was reported widely, and here is a section of that letter:

In the corridors of the Arts Council, he [Osborne] has been heard to say "I will snuff out The Poetry Society within a year". The *Times* reported him as describing The Poetry Society's National Poetry Centre as "that rag-bag down in Earls Court". He later took the trouble to phone the Society to say, "I have been wrongly reported". I did not say "That rag bag down in Earls Court", I said "Those rat-bags down in Earls Court".⁴⁶

This bitter anecdote was the occasion for Cobbing's *Bob Cobs Rag Bag Mark One* (August 1977), a poem Cobbing published two years after these comments were made, but only four months after the mass resignation of the 'radical' members of the Poetry Society's General Council (26 March 1977). The publication took the form of an envelope that contained fifteen loose-leaf poems. Each envelope stated: '15 items – not necessarily the same in every packet'.⁴⁷ The version of *Bob Cobs Rag Bag Mark One* held at the British Library includes duplicated pages from *Jade-Sound Poems* among sheets from other poems that Cobbing produced between 1975 and 1977 including *Furst Fruts Uv 1977* (Cobbing and Upton, January 1977), and *Title of the Work* (Cobbing, January 1977).

The form of *Bob Cobs Rag Bag Mark One* is similar to that of *Jade-Sound Poems*, pages from which it contains. The relations between the various poems that constitute its content are indeterminate, firstly because they are loose leaves and can be rearranged and secondly because each selection (as in a performance of *Jade-Sound Poems*) is potentially unique. These indeterminate relations are contained inside a form that alludes to the social antagonism that existed at the Poetry Society. Cobbing took Osborne's disparaging and 'conservative' remarks as an opportunity to re-present *Jade-Sound Poems* after the fact of the Poetry Wars. One of the more serious remarks Osborne made in his letter to Cobbing was that he would not be responding to any of the details of the Poets Conference statement because 'its object presumably was not really to

⁴⁶ Quoted in Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 43.

⁴⁷ Bob Cobbing, *Bob Cobs Rag Bag Mark One* (London: Writers Form, 1977).

make any contribution to the continuing debate on methods of subsidy.’⁴⁸ The representation of *Jade-Sound Poems* inside *Bob Cobs Rag Bag Mark One* suggests that as well as being a celebration and a declaration of recalcitrance, the contribution to the debate about the methods of subsidy is to be found within Cobbing’s poems, as well as in the actions and statements of Poets Conference and at the Poetry Society.

5) Bodies Beyond The Poetry Society: Konkrete Canticle

In order to explore one further manifestation of *Jade-Sound Poems* we must return to Paula Claire’s copy of *Jade-Sound Poems* and to Cobbing’s inscription: ‘11/100 Bob Cobbing 25-28 December 1976 / for Paul & Paula / Christmas & New year Greetings’.⁴⁹ Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that this inscription appeared to be less particular to the circumstances of its writing than that in Mottram’s copy of the book. But this is not necessarily the case. The inscription is actually very personal: it presents the poem more as a gift than a call to action and recollects Claire’s family life with her husband Paul. This inscription needs to be understood in the context of Cobbing’s practice in the 1970s of making poems out of names: something of which Claire had personal experience. On 21 February 1971, Cobbing made one such poem called *for paul and paula*, which he sent to Claire to celebrate her engagement. The title of the poem is actually part of Cobbing’s inscription, the rest of which reads ‘congratulations and all happiness Love Bob.’⁵⁰ The word ‘and’ is written upside down so that the ‘d’ resembles the ‘p’ in Paula and Paul, which echoes the content of the poem which consists solely of the letters found in their names. These are permuted, overprinted and rearranged into similar looking character-strings to the ones presented in *Jade-Sound Poems*. Cobbing was recalling the title of one poem in the inscription to another.

Cobbing’s friendship with Claire was permuted through their collaborative sound practice. In 1971 Claire, Cobbing and the composer and political activist Michael Chant formed the sound poetry group Konkrete

⁴⁸ Osborne to Cobbing, 4 February 1975. This letter was printed in the Poets Conference Newsletter, and this quotation appears in Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 48.

⁴⁹ *Jade-Sound Poems*, copy in The Paula Claire Archive of Sound and Visual Poetry, Oxford: section COBBING, Bob (1920 - 2002).

⁵⁰ Bob Cobbing, *for paul and paula*, copy in The Paula Claire Archive of Sound and Visual Poetry, Oxford: section COBBING, Bob (1920 - 2002).

Canticle. Cobbing performed with this group throughout his time at the Poetry Society, and it can be productively understood as a counterpoint to his work inside the institution. Under the influence of Cobbing, the Poetry Society (the site of the National Poetry Centre) became a space of international exchange. In addition to his practice in the 1960s of travelling to European sound poetry festivals, Cobbing now used the Poetry Society to introduce an English audience to these festivals. Claire recalls how ‘Bob arranged International Sound Poetry Festivals there [at the Poetry Society] from 1972-77’ which allowed her to meet his contacts in ‘France, Germany, Sweden and Canada’.⁵¹ This led, as Claire notes, to ‘invitations to perform with Cobbing at similar events abroad’: ‘Berlin Festival (1977); Toronto (1978); Munster, (1979); New York (1980); and Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbuttel (1981).’⁵²

The functional role of Cobbing’s presence in bringing European sound poetry to the Poetry Society – which enabled Claire’s poetic career – was paralleled by the increased importance of embodiment in Cobbing’s own performances (set out in the conclusion to Chapter Four) as well as in his highly physical performances with *Konkrete Canticle*. These two strands of Cobbing’s practice are brought together in recent recollections by the poet Adrian Clarke. He ‘first saw Bob perform at Better Books in the 1960s with Ernst Jandl’ (on 31 May 1965), but did not start working closely with Cobbing until ‘ten years later’, when he ‘caught up’ with him at the Poetry Society.⁵³ Clarke recalls that during the Better Books performance Cobbing had ‘a rather stiff hieratic quality’, and that he ‘enjoyed Ernst Jandl far more’ because Jandl was ‘staggering’. But later, at the Poetry Society, ‘everything had changed’ and Cobbing had become ‘far more unbuttoned, and a very exciting performer.’⁵⁴

In Clarke’s description of Cobbing’s performances, movement functions as a precondition for the enjoyment and persuasive force of Cobbing’s physical presence. The change in the degree of physical movement that Clarke notes is associated with the time gap that existed between his two encounters with

⁵¹ Paula Claire, ‘My Life in Poetry – 3’, in *The Paula Claire Archive of Sound and Visual Poetry* <http://paulaclaire.com/paula_claire_biog_3.html> [accessed 1 June 2012].

⁵² Paula Claire, ‘My Life in Poetry – 3’.

⁵³ Adrian Clarke interviewed by Steve Willey, in *The Sound of Writers Forum* (London: Opened, March 2010) <<http://vimeo.com/10203751>> [accessed 7 September 2012].

⁵⁴ Adrian Clarke interviewed by Steve Willey, in *The Sound of Writers Forum*.

Cobbing, during which time Cobbing was exploring the audio technological contexts of European sound poetry. Cobbing's tape poems and the work of his filmic and sound poet collaborators interrogated its effects and meanings. Temporal succession – and the closely associated concept of duration – were not ancillary to the causes of Cobbing's poetic development: they were an essential part of it. As Cobbing recoiled from the discipline of the body required to make a recording (the need to stay in close proximity to a microphone is one example) he moved away from the audio manipulation of sound and discovered the importance of embodiment. However, he maintained the idea that all sound was to some extent a pre-recorded echo. The fact that Cobbing continued to experiment with permutation in his performances with *Konkrete Canticle*, specifically permuting the names of people he met, is suggestive of this. It is also important to recall that Cobbing registered ideas of movement in the visual companion pieces to his own audio poems in numerous ways (see, for example, the close reading of *Chamber Music* in Chapter Four section three). It is therefore productive to see the increase in bodily movement that Clarke recalls in Cobbing's live performance practice as a physical manifestation of the conceptual development of Cobbing's poetics, which had been gained from years of work with audio technology and the concomitant discovery of its limitations.

While the collaborative practice of *Konkrete Canticle* developed in an international context, Claire and Cobbing first met at the York Weekend School, which was an educational outreach event that was organised by the Poetry Society (26-28 September 1969). Bill Griffiths – a poet first published in *Poetry Review*, a participant in the Writers Forum workshops and the first manager of the Print Shop (1975-6) – became a member of *Konkrete Canticle* in 1977. This shows that the boundary between *Konkrete Canticle* and the institutional body of the Poetry Society was permeable. Claire recalls that this 'new' *Konkrete Canticle*, which included Griffiths, performed for the first time on 18 September 1977 at a performance in the 'great hall of the Akademie der Künste to celebrate the DADA aspects of contemporary sound-poetry' as part of the 27th Berlin Festival.⁵⁵ Their presentation included Cobbing's *Alphabet of Fishes* (1967) *Jade-Sound Poems* (1976-7), her own work *Stonetones* (1973-4), and Griffiths's

⁵⁵ Paula Claire, 'Bill Griffiths: A Severe Case of Hypergraphia', in *The Salt Companion to Bill Griffiths*, ed. Will Rowe (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2007), 37-51 (40).

Forming Four Dock Poems (1974).⁵⁶ Claire recalls that they performed their work simultaneously, which was their ‘usual custom in a short programme.’⁵⁷

Jade-Sound Poems was thus re-presented once more, this time outside the Poetry Society and in the form of a collaborative performance. *Konkrete Canticle* allowed Cobbing to transmit *Jade-Sound Poems* beyond the body of the Poetry Society, while keeping a semblance of its embodied form. That *Konkrete Canticle* continued to perform well into the 1990s is just one example of how collaboration played an important role in sustaining Cobbing’s practice once the resources of the Poetry Society were no longer available. In fact, we can read Claire’s poem *Meiosis*, begun in December 1977 (published in April 1978), as a metaphor for this process.

Meiosis ensures genetic diversity in sexually reproducing populations through the random recombination of male and female chromosomes into a genetically unique combination. This in turn creates resistance to selection pressures by making it less likely that a population will respond to those pressures in the same way, because under natural selection the environment determines what variations prosper.⁵⁸ In terms of a narrative of organic growth and as a poem, *Meiosis* links ideas of organisation to the organism. This poem was published just over a year after Cobbing and the ‘radical’ poets had left the Poetry Society. It forges connections between ideas of unpredictability, improvisation and spontaneity in order to map a survival strategy for poetry. Just as meiosis is viewed through the lens of a microscope, Claire’s poem can be used as a lens through which the developmental course of Cobbing’s poetry in the 1970s can be seen. *Meiosis* reproduces a form that might be found in any biology textbook, and is therefore a highly literal form of mimesis, but in doing so it proposes a poetic model where a resistance to environmental pressures, via recourse to the strategies of variation and adaptation, has an important role.

Clarke’s own career as a poet was influenced by Cobbing’s pedagogical performance at the Poetry Society both at the time and subsequently. This suggests that one of the ways Cobbing’s poetry lived after the Poetry Wars was through the work of the poets he met there. Clarke’s first poems were published

⁵⁶ Claire, ‘Bill Griffiths: A Severe Case of Hypergraphia’, 40.

⁵⁷ Paula Claire to Steve Willey, 29 September 2011, in private correspondence.

⁵⁸ Paula Claire, *Meiosis* (London: Writers Forum, 1977).

in the Poetry Society's journal *Poetry Review*.⁵⁹ He co-edited *And* magazine with Cobbing from 1994 onwards and ran Writers Forum with Lawrence Upton after Cobbing's death. He has become a guardian of Cobbing's legacy, and his recollections demonstrate how the idea of the body – an important facet of live performance – was instituted in the memories of those poets who witnessed his practice at the Poetry Society. It also suggests that memory (like meiosis) can function to reproduce Cobbing's performances anew, altered and in different contexts.

Thinking about the events that followed the Poetry Wars as a form of meiosis offers a new perspective on Cobbing's performance at the Poetry Society, which has survived in part in the way that his poems, poetics, and his approach to organisation have been subjected to variation and adaptation by the poets that he collaborated with, and by the way that his performances have been remembered. It is not a coincidence that the process of organic growth via spontaneity and adaptability to the audience and to the performance moment advocated by *Meiosis* also characterise a performance by *Konkrete Canticle* recalled by the poet Scott Thurston, who relates his experience of seeing the group for the first time in the mid 1990s:

The second reading I ever went to was *Konkrete Canticle* performing at the Festival Hall, Bob with Bill Griffiths and Paula Claire, which was an extraordinary experience that stayed with me. They were coming around the audience with the texts that they were performing and just putting it in front of you, not for longer than a few seconds but the invitation was to join in. The extraordinary experience of that performance for me was that what came out of my mouth was something else, it wasn't me somehow. It was me plus the situation and the environment that I was in, and it was quite a revelation really. I remember my legs going completely, sort of to jelly, I think there was an interval and I just remembered the whole physical sensation had really stirred something in me very profoundly. I can't think of if anything has quite got me in that way ever since, or if it has it almost gets referred back to that moment.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Barry, *Poetry Wars*, 34.

⁶⁰ Scott Thurston interviewed by Steve Willey, in *The Sound of Writers Forum* (London: Opened, March 2010) <<http://vimeo.com/10203751>> [accessed 7 September 2012].

The experience of becoming suddenly aware of one's own situation that Thurston describes presents a personalised account of the kind of performance that Cobbing tried to institute in the 1970s by working at the Poetry Society. Circulating around institutions including the Royal Festival Hall and London's pubs and by freely moving between different collaborative performance groups like *Konkrete Canticle* and *Bird Yak*, Cobbing went on to present an alternative to top-down institutions like the Poetry Society. Many accounts of Cobbing privilege this body-centred, spontaneous aesthetic as Cobbing's lasting legacy and assume it was always there. In fact, it developed over time and this thesis has shown the numerous twists and turns that led Cobbing to it.

Conclusion

This chapter has given a series of close readings of the different manifestations of *Jade-Sound Poems* in circumstances relating to the Poetry Society. After establishing the Poetry Society as a context to the poem, I examined the particularity of a single copy sent to Eric Mottram at a time of crisis and considered how those circumstances alter our understanding of the poem's internal form. In this reading, I argued that the increased emphasis on live embodied improvisation in Cobbing's practice is best thought of as an internalisation of the polarised nature of the poetry wars. I also suggested that Cobbing's collaborative and improvisational practices – which appear to both constitute and elide their own context – registered Cobbing's position as a 'radical-radical' in the Poetry Wars, and were an expression of that context. I then considered two ways in which the poem lived within and beyond the Poetry Society through Cobbing's organizational and collaborative activities. Further, the present chapter has also developed a strand of Barry's argument in *Poetry Wars* by presenting new information about Cobbing's work at the Poetry Society and by suggesting ways in which Cobbing's papers can shed light on larger debates, such as the relation between poets and cultural institutions.

I have used this material to argue that the presence of Cobbing's friends was inscribed into poetic form and the performance thereof. If the Poetry Society provided the social ground upon which Cobbing met fellow poets who were incorporated in various ways into his poetic projects, then these poets might be understood as aspects of Cobbing's poetry. Cobbing's poetry is the poetry of

multiple persons. *Jade-Sound Poems* wrestles with the contradictions and difficulties generated by such a dynamic. Precisely because Cobbing refused to employ many of the powerful stylistic and generic conventions that poems sometimes use to represent experience, the presence of those multiple persons is not always evident. Archival investigation allows us to recover the ways that this poem acted as a space in which to think about the effects of subsidy on form. It also reintroduces Cobbing's collaborators as participants in the making of that form.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, Cobbing's idea of poetry encompassed interventions in social life and types of bureaucratic work that would not normally be considered poetry at all. His work with Poets Conference is one example of this. Any reading of Cobbing's poems that fails to consider this aspect of his practice will always be incomplete. Through the poems investigated in this chapter, we can look afresh at the work that was done by Cobbing and his associates at the Poetry Society within but also outside the restrictive binaries of 'radical' and 'conservative'. Treating and performing poetry as an institution might be understood as a highly compromising act, but it was also a generous *poetic* act. It became a personal sacrifice that benefited other poets, but which was also, at least temporarily, personally limiting for Cobbing.

Conclusion:

Writers Forum or Writers Forearm? The Legacy of Cobbing

At the time it was an assault on everything. I remember, I don't know whether it was some kind of paranoia or something on my part, but I was sitting on the chair here, Bob was directly opposite me kind of over there, and every time I looked up [...] his eyes were fixed on me. You know, he is a fairly small but stocky, by that point old man, looking at me with this face of glee whilst making this terrifying sound. I didn't know what to think, I mean I thought it was great, but certainly I went away from that first workshop I went to... it made me rethink a lot of things. You know what I mean?¹

In 2010, I interviewed the poet Sean Bonney about Writers Forum. The way in which Bonney recalled his experience of meeting Cobbing for the first time at a Writers Forum poetry workshop (in the late 1990s) was intensely personal but strangely inarticulate. I had hoped that by interviewing Bonney I might gain some insight into Cobbing's life as a poet in terms of his pedagogy, poetics, legacy and the meaning of his performances. However, the rhetorical question with which Bonney ended the interview left almost all of my own questions unanswered. Yet in saying this, Bonney was echoing several other poets I spoke to – including Paula Claire, Maggie O'Sullivan, Peter Manson and Scott Thurston – who, despite the diversity of their own poetic practices and their deep understanding of Cobbing's work, all recalled feeling a similarly powerful but equally vague transformation when encountering Cobbing in performance for the first time. The process of writing this thesis has brought me closer to understanding what it meant for Cobbing to induce the same response in such a variety of poets and has helped me formulate an answer to Bonney's rhetorical question: 'You know what I mean?'

In attempting to establish what Cobbing's performances do 'mean', this thesis has identified the spaces and institutions in which he performed in the first half of his career and shown how they were central to his aesthetic commitments. The thesis began by locating Cobbing's work in postwar 1950s Hendon, which formed his identity as a pedagogue, amateur artist and the integrative stance he

¹ Sean Bonney, in *The Sound of Writers Forum*.

adopted towards community. I identified Herbert Read's ideas about art and education, organicism, romanticism and empathy as key influences on Cobbing's organic, process-based, constructive, and messy aesthetic and as an alternative to his designation as a 'dirty' concrete poet. I also explored Cobbing's idea of the artwork as a vehicle for affective communication. Using Cobbing's archive, I traced changes in the titles of artworks and poems and provided several sustained close readings, which placed Cobbing's aesthetic in larger narratives of postwar social reconstruction. I also evaluated the role that reception (particularly the local press) played in his organisational work. The chapter sought to emphasize the ambitiousness of Cobbing's project by taking his ten-year commitment to the locale of Hendon seriously, situating it in the national context of welfare-capitalism, the growth of suburbia and the Festival of Britain. I demonstrated that this was the context in which Cobbing first formulated his ideas about the functions of a poetry society. This was something which remained a central concern of his through to the late 1970s. Given that the contested and often bitter story of the Poetry Society in the period of his membership is still being assessed, this information about his work in Hendon is crucial to any understanding of his later commitments.

The first chapter of my thesis historicized the affective, interpersonal nature of Cobbing's late performance practice which is evident in Bonney's recollection of the 'glee' he perceived in Cobbing's face and in the 'terrifying' sounds he heard Cobbing make. The physical appearance of Bonney's book *Baudelaire in English* (2008) – with its over-inked lines of typewritten text, collaged sections and fragmentary letter formations – suggests that one of the places where Bonney rethought 'a lot of things' subsequent to his experience of Cobbing's performance was in his own poetry. Further, establishing the historical and philosophical ground for Cobbing's pedagogical performance practice in postwar Hendon allows for a reading of Bonney's work (and that of many other poets influenced by Cobbing's performances) in a new intellectual and historical context. In the case of Bonney, the comparison to Cobbing's aesthetic commitments suggests itself as being particularly productive given that the poetry of both men engages with ideas of English anarchism, albeit in very different ways. In this respect this thesis has helped politicize Cobbing's poetics

while bringing to light new traditions that poets like Bonney draw on in their use of aesthetic strategies that have been learnt, at least in part, from Cobbing.

Chapter Two of this thesis showed that Cobbing's aesthetics were also linked to changes in his own social and political disposition. In Cobbing's transition from the local art scene in Finchley to his role as organiser and participant in the Destruction in Art Symposium, ideas of distance and permutation entered his poems. I showed that Cobbing's idea of a poetry that exists through its multiple versions was formed in this context alongside the idea of poetry as an ontological project. At the same time, and partly as a result of these aesthetic shifts, Cobbing adopted a countercultural stance on many of the issues of the day, such as the threat posed to society by the atomic bomb and the commercialization of art. Thus, even when Cobbing's poems and artworks appear in their most abstract configurations, they still have a practical and identifiable political dimension.

These relations between the aesthetic qualities of permutation, conceptual ideas of distance and Cobbing's real break from local art were explored in more detail in Chapter Three. Here I took seriously Cobbing's claim that his long poem *ABC in Sound* convinced him that he could become a professional poet. I explained that the International Poetry Incarnation established the social conditions in Britain that aided his successful transition away from amateur art and helped him to assert his identity as a sound poet. I also established how Cobbing's organisational work in Finchley helped make the International Poetry Incarnation possible, and I argued that the success of the International Poetry Incarnation obscured the aesthetic and conceptual qualities of Cobbing's poetry. By using the ideas of distance and permutation that pervade Cobbing's *ABC in Sound* I showed how it was possible to question the political commitments that have long been associated with the International Poetry Incarnation. In this I had two aims: to establish how the absence of Cobbing's body could be central to the meaning of his performance, and to show how Cobbing's poetry can be used to rethink seminal performance events of the past.

In these ways the first three chapters of this thesis demonstrated that a fuller understanding of the meaning of Cobbing's performances is to be gained through detailed knowledge of Cobbing as a person. Cobbing's commitment to a community of artists and the ways in which this framed his aesthetic action were

shown in a new context in Chapter Four. Here I argued that Cobbing's creative work within the institutions of audio technology in the late 1960s demonstrated that 'sound' was not just an aural quality for Cobbing, it was also part of what it meant for him to be a poet in the world. This is indicated in the variety of ways that sound entered his performance at this time: through his correspondents, through his collaborators, his interest in experimental film, his work at Better Books, the course he convened at the Antiuniversity of London and through the interrogation of the audio technological medium itself. The key conceptual move for Cobbing in this period developed from the redefinition of nature, the organic and his collaborators in terms of audio technologies. Cobbing started to think of all sound as a form of re-sounding. The habit of locating and creating new contexts which he could make sounds in (and thus sound out) became a key aspect of his performances which provided a context in which art could happen as well as artistic content.

In Chapter Five I identified the National Poetry Centre, established at the Poetry Society in the early 1970s, as one such context, and I demonstrated how Cobbing instituted his ideas of performance there. I showed that he used the members of the National Poetry Centre and the audiences it attracted as personal versions of the technologies – the duplicator and the tape-recorder – that he used in the 1960s. By reading Cobbing's poem *Jade-Sound Poems* in the context of the Poetry Society, and in relation to specific versions of the poem sent to Eric Mottram and Paula Claire, I showed that the poem required every performer to make arbitrary judgments about which sounds to make during their performance. I also argued that the poem was instantly and utterly dependent on the audience to hear those sounds as poetry and to value them as such. Therefore, I suggested, Cobbing's performance at the Poetry Society belies any straightforward identification as modernist or non-modernist, 'radical' or 'conservative'. This chapter offered an alternative framework for understanding the 'Poetry Wars' to that presented by Peter Barry and showed that Cobbing's machinations on behalf of the modernists were really on behalf of sound as poetry's true standard value. Cobbing thought this was something everyone could sign up to because everyone had recourse to it in his or her own body. I showed that in the wake of the mass resignation of the 'radicals' Cobbing's performance practice – premised on organic growth, spontaneity, and adaptability to the audience and

performance moment – set out an alternative to top-down institutions like the Poetry Society, and that *Konkrete Canticle* and latterly *Bird Yak* became expressions of this alternative.

One of the implications of this argument is that the allusions to amateur art in Sheppard's recollection of the *Bird Yak* performance (set out in the Introduction to the thesis) can now be heard with greater clarity. In the context of Thatcherism, the denigration of the institutions of the welfare state and the loss of the Poetry Society, *Bird Yak* re-presented Cobbing's original commitments to amateur and organic art established in the context of welfare-capitalism in terms of a do-it-yourself amateur punk aesthetic. In this respect, Cobbing's soundings with *Bird Yak* in pubs echoed his earliest commitments, and responded to the loss of the Poetry Society as a space. In his talk to the Hendon Poetry Society on the 'Function of a Poetry Society' (19 February 1952) Cobbing had expressed approval for 'Poetry in Pubs'.² This initiative (reported in the BBC in-house journal *The Listener* in 1939) saw poets and actors recite the work of poets that ranged from Edmund Spenser to T. S. Eliot in pubs across London.³ As pubs are arguably metonymic of local community in England's national imagination and because individual patrons might think warmly of their 'local', Cobbing's performances with *Bird Yak* sound a return to work in a local art context. Yet the institutional aesthetic of *Bird Yak* remains ambiguous, for pubs are not a single institution but rather businesses that compete against one another for trade. It is by attending to such details that the full complexity of Cobbing's institutional aesthetics can be appreciated.

While *Bird Yak* provided one alternative to hierarchical institutions like the Poetry Society, the continuation of Writers Forum beyond the Poetry Society offered another. This is suggested by Bonney's reminiscences of his first experience of seeing and hearing Cobbing at Writers Forum, which Bonney understood as a challenge to his understanding of what poetry could be. While this thesis has argued that the unique aspect of Cobbing's performances came from making the external business of arts organisation a creative element in the

² Bob Cobbing, 'The Function of a Poetry Society' (19 February 1952), in a notebook titled 'The Enjoyment of Poetry', in 'Hendon Poetry Society', BL, Add MS 88909/28.

³ Jane Dowson, 'Poetry and *The Listener*: the Myth of the 'Middlebrow'', *Working Papers on the Web*, 6 (2003) <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/thirties/thirties%20dowson.html>> [accessed 28 June 2012].

internal form, in Bonney's recollection the 'external' is only fleetingly registered: 'and every time I looked up [...] his eyes were fixed on me'. Here, Cobbing's fixed gaze (felt as temporally extended by Bonney, but without any physical trace) induced, dramatized and integrated Bonney's external act of observation and made it an active and internal part of the performance. The integration of Bonney into Cobbing's sound art is reflected in Bonney's own subsequent self-reflection: 'it made me rethink a lot of things'. Just as Cobbing sounded out the Poetry Society for its potential as a site for poetry, so he did the same to Bonney thirty years later. Cobbing sounds Bonney out from the inside out. This provides one explanation for the wide variety of poetry that is written by poets that claim Cobbing and Writers Forum influenced their poetry directly: as every poet makes a different sound the poetry practiced by the 'school of Cobbing' is various in its forms and approaches.⁴

Founded in 1958, Writers Forum was the organisational mechanism that enabled this variety. It was the one structure that facilitated Cobbing's engagement with an array of different poets across his life. Before he died, Cobbing asked Lawrence Upton and Adrian Clarke to keep Writers Forum going for as long as they could. Writers Forum still exists today, but at present its identity, role and nature is being contested by the poets that claim to constitute it. At the time of writing, there are two versions of Writers Forum in London. That Writers Forum has replicated itself in this way seems to accord with Cobbing's own practice of producing copies to introduce variation into his art, and yet the situation is in fact more complicated.

The split can be dated to 6 September 2010 when the poets Antony John, James Harvey, Jamie Sutcliff, Jeff Hilson, Johan DeWitt, Linus Slug, Matt Martin, Nat Raha, Sean Bonney, Stephen Mooney, Steve Fowler and Wayne Clements wrote to Lawrence Upton, the convener of Writers Forum, stating their intent to set up an 'alternate workshop'.⁵ Although both sides would dispute my

⁴ Charles Bernstein quoted in Adrian Clarke, 'Time In The School of Cobbing', *Pores*, 3, ed. Will Rowe (London: Contemporary Poetics Research Centre, n.d.)
<<http://www.pores.bbk.ac.uk/3/clarke.html>> [accessed 16 September 2012].

⁵ Since the split Lawrence Upton has been maintaining a blog which documents the many, ongoing developments of Writers Forum. For the letter sent to Upton by 'New Series' members see: 'Correspondence Received', 11 November 2010, in *Writers Forum Information*, <<http://www.wfuk.org.uk/blog/?p=353>> [accessed 16 September 2012]. For his full response to the split see 'Theft of WF's Reputation', *Writers Forum Information*.

interpretation of these events, and while the events are themselves still unfolding, the split occurred along the line that separates the institutional from the aesthetic, the very line that (this thesis argues) Cobbing's work transgressed.

While there are many facets to the dispute, one of the questions that has emerged is the extent to which Writers Forum is democratic. In their letter to Upton, the founders of the new Writers Forum – which has now come to be known as 'Writers Forum (New Series)' – state the problem with Upton's stewardship as they see it: 'New poets are not being attracted to the workshop and more established poets are not being retained because of the way the workshop is currently organised. The danger is that if this situation persists, the workshop will simply ossify.'⁶ Superficially, these reasons appear to accord with Cobbing's own practice of abandoning institutions once they became limiting to his poetry, in other words once they began to silence his voice. However, in this letter to Upton, the position of the signers in relation to Cobbing becomes more ambiguous:

We want a vibrant workshop that encourages work that pushes the boundaries of writing – an aspiration we know you [Upton] share. However, we also recognise that there is no democratic mechanism in place by which our majority view can be expressed and acted upon. As a result, in the meantime, we are in the process of starting our own alternate workshop focused on innovative and experimental writing, in which the best traditions of Writers Forum can be carried on, and the workshop open to new members, and the collective impetus of all its members.⁷

In private correspondence Upton argued that any claims about Writers Forum's democratic ethos were 'always external to Bob and WF' and stated that 'Writers Forum was something Bob owned de facto and to which the pretenders had no rights'.⁸ In his public response to the letter Upton both reaffirmed and complicated this view: 'Writers Forum continues in its egalitarian way, but without democratic mechanisms, as it always has.'⁹ Upton also claimed that the 'New Series' mistook the nature of Writers Forum by writing about it as if it

⁶ 'Correspondence Received', 11 November 2010, *Writers Forum Information*.

⁷ 'Correspondence Received', 11 November 2010, *Writers Forum Information*.

⁸ Lawrence Upton to Steve Willey, 25 March 2011, in private correspondence.

⁹ 'The Theft of Writers Forum's Name', *Writers Forum Information*.

were a membership organisation.¹⁰ When assessed in the terms of my thesis, both Upton's position and that of his challengers have merit. Upton is right to assert that Writers Forum never had the kind of democratic mechanisms that are demanded by 'Writers Forum (New Series)', but the Hendon Poetry Society, one of its institutional antecedents, did. Further, his claim that the idea of democracy was always external to the Forum is incorrect. Paula Claire, for example, who made an important contribution to the vibrancy of the Workshop in the early 1970s, insists upon the democratic ethos of Writers Forum.¹¹ The origins of Writers Forum as part of a wider communitarian but also anarchic pedagogical project that Cobbing instigated in Hendon also belie Upton's assertion that Cobbing owned the Forum. Writers Forum was created as one art group amongst many precisely so that other organisations and forms of art could influence it.

Yet Upton's claims are not completely groundless. At various times Cobbing did use the reputation and productivity of Writers Forum in applications to acquire funding from organizations such as the Arts Council of Great Britain, and because he was in a position to do this he did to some extent own the Forum.¹² The reasons for the complexity of the situation of Cobbing's legacy is best thought of in the following terms: when Writers Forum (New Series) accused Upton of having allowed Writers Forum to ossify, and when Upton accused the 'New Series' of damaging Writers Forum by wanting to trade off its reputation and bureaucratize its egalitarian spirit, both parties implicitly acknowledged the inseparability of Writers Forum's institutional form from the aesthetic commitments associated with it.

The difficulty is this: neither party fully appreciates how the institutional and the aesthetic were dynamically related in Cobbing's lifelong performance as a poet. Part of the source of the current conflict is that Cobbing is no longer present to embody the complex and contradictory principles of Writers Forum, which was provisional and anarchic in its communal formations but also consistently aligned with his view of poetry and with his own existence as a poet. The tag line to Upton's Writers Forum blog 'ambition for the poetry, not the poet' – a jibe at what Upton takes to be the self-interest of the poets of New

¹⁰ 'The Theft of Writers Forum's Name', *Writers Forum Information*.

¹¹ Paula Claire interviewed by Steve Willey, in *The Sound of Writers Forum*.

¹² For evidence of Cobbing using Writers Forum in this way see: 'Project Support Application', submitted to Greater London Arts (1988), 'Applications for Funding', BL Add MS 88909/86.

Series – forgets that Cobbing conceived of his performance as part of a career. The ambitions of the poet, the desire to secure subsidy, to make money from poetry and to find new spaces in which to read (even if that means taking them over) were, to Cobbing, inseparable from what his poetry meant. In the absence of Cobbing’s body, and with new poets attending Writers Forum who never actually saw Cobbing perform, the dynamics of Cobbing’s performance have been externalized, and as such they have become open to contestation. Upton claims that the New Series have ‘hijacked Cobbing’s name and memory’, but one could equally claim that the New Series are trying to remember Cobbing differently. Yet given that one of Upton’s complaints is that some of the poets that now use the name Writers Forum never attended the Workshop, perhaps the situation is best framed in these terms: in forgetting Cobbing, in mistrusting the way he has been remembered, the poets of New Series have been able to renew his project.

One indication of how Writers Forum might develop now that different versions of it do exist is suggested by the title of the first publication issued by the New Series, *Writers Forearm* (2011). The wordplay captures the principles of mutation, permutation and adaptation that were so central to Cobbing’s performances. By ensuring that the institutional form of Writers Forum continues to be subject to this kind of mutation, and that mutation does not remain something that only happens in poems, the more embittered aspects of recent disputes over who owns the name ‘Writers Forum’ might see an end. Upton’s Writers Forum is not better or worse – or more or less like Cobbing’s Writers Forum – than is the Writers Forum of New Series. In many respects, the variety of poetic voices that Writers Forum cultivated and the different versions of the Forum that now exist are the lasting legacy of Cobbing’s practice.¹³ Indeed, Cobbing’s lifelong performance continues to develop meaning in relation to them. Writers Forum was Cobbing’s best poem; it shows that the nature of his legacy is still being contested and formulated, and that it is very much alive.

¹³ The legacy of Cobbing’s project was further enriched when Richard Barrett founded ‘Writers Forum Workshop (North)’ in Manchester in 2011. For information on this version of Writers Forum, see ‘Writers Forum Workshop North’, *Manchester Digital Laboratory* <<http://madlab.org.uk/content/tag/writers-forum-workshop-north/>> [accessed 15 September 2012].

Appendix I

It is as if ~~not only~~ JACKSON POLLOCK and PAUL KLEE and PICASSO had never existed AND even people like CEZANNE or GAUGUIN or VAN GOGH seem to have left ^{little} ~~no~~ impression on most local art societies.

- The position is the same in the fields of music ^{& Webern} ~~the~~ music, even nationally we are 50 years behind the times ^{at least within the West} and locally even more so. How often does one hear the masterworks of WEBERN or BERS, BIZUZZ or STOCKHAUSEN.

In literature, the work of the five great poets of this century is still largely ignored. ELIOT POUND THOMAS ^{Dylan} PATCHEN ^{Kenneth} GINSBERG ^{Allen}

And as for the master novel - Joyce's FINNEGAN'S WAKE - what attention is being paid to that?

IT IS THE ^{MOST IMPORTANT} DUTY OF AN ARTS ^{VALUE} COUNCIL TO KEEP THE LOCALITY IN TOUCH WITH THE MAIN STREAM OF CULTURE - This is a duty we owe

IGNORED
by
POETS
as well as
by
AUDIENCE

Bob Cobbing's description of *Finnegan's Wake* as a 'master novel' and his views on local art societies circa 1963, untitled item in 'Hendon and Finchley', British Library Additional Manuscript 88909/12-33. Reproduced with permission of the British Library.

Bibliography

The bibliography consists of five parts:

- I. Manuscripts
- II. Interviews, recordings and sound files
- III. Bob Cobbing and Writers Forum publications
- IV. Other printed material
 - i. Newspapers and periodicals
 - ii. Books, articles and theses
- V. Electronic resources

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