

“Five works” by Lawrence Upton

[Abstract: This is the introduction by the author / image maker to five of his works on the opening of their exhibition among other works. The works had been selected initially by Nico Vassilakis for publication in *Coldfront* magazine and then further selected by Vassilakis and Holly Crawford for the exhibition *The Future is Here Again: VISUAL LANGUAGE*, January 22, 2015 – February 7, 2015] at the A C Institute, New York. Thus, in both cases, the context of the works was somewhat determined by others than myself.

My purpose was to present information that would probably not be available to visitors to the exhibition about the circumstances of making.

I stress my debt to the late Bob Cobbing with whom I had worked extensively, but explain that all 5 pieces were made after his death in 2002. Some were made while I was based in Cornwall and some, after I had returned, in S E UK.

It is implicit that the works are made for sonic performance; but issues arising from that are barely touched on as the emphasis of the exhibition was upon the visual.]

Ladies and gentleman, I'd like to say a few words about my five poems on this exhibition.

I was very pleased with the selection that Nico made. It shows a range of my visual work over the last decade or so. (I have a kind of marker in my memory around autumn 2002 when Bob Cobbing died; and tend, in relation to such artistic work, to measure time up to and from that].

I had always kept a considerable part of my poetic self separate from what I did with Bob, as with any collaborator; but I have also become increasingly inclined towards collaboration in the making of art. A desire to collaborate and the benign influence of Cobbing have guided me.

In 2000, just over two years before Cobbing died, my friend of maybe a quarter century, the artist Alaric Sumner, died suddenly just after we had agreed to intensify our artistic collaboration. To lose two such companions, both of whom had had considerable part in forming my aesthetics, was shaking.

Everything in Nico's selection post-dates that double shaking at the start of the century.

NAMING Sue (sometimes **NAMING for Sue**) is perhaps the earliest. I put it that way (i.e. perhaps) because the poem has been around a long time, taking various forms. It lends itself to that; there is no one right form, though what I have now, what you see, is likely to be what I settle for.

I could take a lot of your time talking about that idea of naming, its origins and implications, but I have done that elsewhere. Let me say now that, often, the series of *naming* works served as a kind of mental lubricant. One could work on a new piece even when one's personal desire to do anything was low or lacking, because it implies straight-forward algorithms. I am not a believer in “inspiration”, thinking that the best way to make poetry is to make poetry.

One could work quite simply just from the method of naming a person, although there is a danger of writing their name decoratively; but its very simplicity as a process can lead to the making of complex visual and audio imagery. **NAMING for Peter Manson** would be such an example. I made that for a collaborative work with John Levack Drever, a text-sound composition, which has been presented in a variety of forms including two short films; and exhibited in USA, UK and Japan.

Preparing to write this talk, I did a search through my computer files and note that I have a number of poems dedicated to women called Sue, arising from various degrees and modes of familiarity.

This poem reflects my great professional respect for Professor Sue Thomas.

In some ways, the methodology of the poem owes a great deal if not to Bob Cobbing directly then to some of what I learned from him. Where Bob might well have worked with dry print, I use the word processor; but the idea is rather similar.

I worked out for myself that a visual poem has to work visually; but that was Bob's position, often stated, as I discovered. (I told him my idea and he replied "yes, of course"!)

However, if it worked visually, then he thought that it would work sonically. I am not entirely sure that I agree with that. "Every mark has its own sound" he said often; and I have long disagreed.

One can surely do something worth hearing with any text but it may involve more divergent improvisation than the image (the text.... the score...) is felt to sanction. I like to stay on good terms with my texts, as the Mad Hatter advised Alice to do with Time.

For me the text must work visually and sonically. I think that Cobbing's did, although some of them are harder than others for non-Bobs to manage: it is with his neo-platonist (as it seems to me) account of his practice that I differ.

It is, however, not easy to give an abstracted account of that. I know it when I see it.

I remember my colleague Benedict Taylor, the violist, pointing to a pile up of musical notes in someone's score, it may have been by Ferneyhough, and saying "Look at that! That's a really silly sound. That'd be really hard to do right. Ha-ha!" (I may have invented the final exclamation) ("silly" here was praise) That's the sort of thing I'm talking about, an excited and exploratory approach extending the possible, extending, that is, what is thought to be possible.

But, to work, a visual does not have to be pretty, or anything like that.

This, too, **In the railway truck to Oświęcim**, is another poem early on in the time, 2002+, in which I have felt myself to be some kind of survivor, though its mechanical means of making was quite different.. It refers to a different mode of survival and / or failure to survive. The name Oświęcim is a town in southern Poland, not far from Krakow. It gave its name to the terrible place that the NAZIs called Auschwitz.

I visited Auschwitz in 1973. The person who went there was not the person who came away; I am still in some ways the person who came away.

People were taken there in the NAZI period to be murdered. I tried to show their language, their means of expression by which they communicated love and compassion, cramped and distorted inside the freight wagons, a rehearsal for the gas chambers where they fought for air on the growing mound of fallen choking, everyone choking in the expanding cloud of commercial bleach.

There was a photo at the window of one of the huts showing the land outside in the mid 1930s and as it was ten years later. Before, the land had dipped quite deeply for a considerable distance; after, it was flat as far as one could see: it had been filled with human ash from the crematoria.

This poem too has been through various forms. This version, from 2013, is so different to that of 2003, that I may retain the two. I see the former as somewhat paper-based, conveying an idea. The latter facilitates a slide show, a method of making the poem-score available to be read by the performers and visible to the audience, a method I developed to work with John Levack Drever although I had begun to use something like it with

Cobbing. It is for public expression vocally.

Here I should say that I tend to use, in these circumstances, words like “text” and “score” as interchangeable. I may refer to “graphical notation”. For me, it is less to do with the appropriate category and more to do with the degree of indication rather than direction.

Nunhead dates from a year or so later, and employs a making method that is different still.

I have a number like it and this one was selected as being the most interesting. Beyond the attraction it has for me visually, perhaps what I take note of nowadays is the performance directive I appended, pointing to where I might take my inquiries in the future, not always successfully!

The name is something of a joke. It is the name of a district in inner SE London which may well have been named after an inn called *The Nun's Head*. One of the venues for the performance series *Klinker* was held in Nunhead and there were all sorts of nuns' head jokes circulating, most of them not that funny. For me it was the name of a piece of work I tried out in a(nother) pub in the district in a *Klinker* gig.

And now there is something of a jump.

The work that I have discussed so far had been made originally in my kitchen studio in St Ives in Cornwall. I moved from there in 2006.

In 2008 I joined the staff of the Music Dept at Goldsmiths, University of London, as a research fellow. That project lasted until the spring of 2011 when I became a Visiting Fellow of the University.

Faversham Sequence takes its name from a boat registered in Faversham although the boat's name has been lost. The boat is rotting away just above the beach of the island called The Gugh in Scilly. I don't know how it got there.

Faversham, the place of registration just visible still on the stern of the boat, is a watery town in Kent. At one point, way back, it was an important port; but it has silted up too much to be of significant commercial use now. It's an area that I like to walk.

The images I have used however derive from photographs of the decaying hulk. It has long been my intention to take photographs in Kent; but I have never done so.

I find them highly readable, using methods that initially I acquired by imitation of Cobbing, although I have learned from others too.

I performed **Faversham Sequence** as a member of the duo *The Cooperative Strawberries* (musician Jeff Cloke, laptop & Lawrence Upton, vocals) on 27 May 2014 at *Arch1* in London. A recording is on youtube.

For what it's worth, there is slight use of the computer here. I like to do as much as I can in the camera, having started out with quite elaborate analog but microprocessor-assisted cameras way back; but finally if it is easier or otherwise more satisfactory to process the image with one or other graphics package on my laptop then I do so, taking the best photograph I can but knowing that I can compensate for deficiencies to a considerable extent.

And so, lastly, to **Trellis**. In some ways this is documentary, a set of photographs of a real trellis outside a cafe I sometimes use intensely, though tidied up and regularised with *Photoshop*.

It was first performed 21 October 2013 at St James Hatcham, London by Benedict Taylor (viola) and Lawrence Upton (voice).

This particular work was recently taken as evidence by one who wishes to accuse me of

being... a musician! I have no problem with the charge as long as those musicians with whom I am on good terms do not mind. They do not seem to.

However, for me the accusation is missing the point: that there is no hard and fast division between poetry and music. Now and then they are in the same space.

I have got to where I am by pursuing images of a kind which Cobbing once called (in a book title) song signals; and where I am now, still moving I hope, is no more than the way that two different train companies or two different kinds of train vehicle sometimes share the same stretch of track.

I regard myself as both Cornish and British. Why then should I not be a poet and a musician with one and the same work; and a graphic artist? Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself,

Lawrence Upton

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