

Some thoughts on the photocopier in visual poetry etc

Lawrence Upton

My brief is for “the photocopier in art” but in the form of a short essay; and clearly I must be selective. My title is therefore intended to narrow my field and to tell you what to expect.

Unfortunately, that lands me with the term “visual poetry” which I do not like; but, to keep it short, I propose to side step both giving a term which would satisfactorily define the territory and / or explain my dislike of the term “visual poetry”.

So there is inbuilt imprecision. There’s glory for you, as Humpty Dumpty said.

The term “photocopier” is ambiguous. Digital or analog? As microprocessor technology spreads and infiltrates, the distinction between some photocopying and some digital scanning ceases to exist meaningfully.

A similar problem exists in that debatable and exciting land “e-poetry” where some believe you are not doing it if you do not code it though some (e.g. me) could code it but choose not to unless it is absolutely necessary. And it never is. Not in my practice anyway.

Among the code fundamentalists, there are those who like to code because it challenges us in the way that high-level application processes do not. They think.

It reminds me of those who insist on rhyme in linear poetry on the same grounds.

I prefer a mixture of approaches.

So much for that.

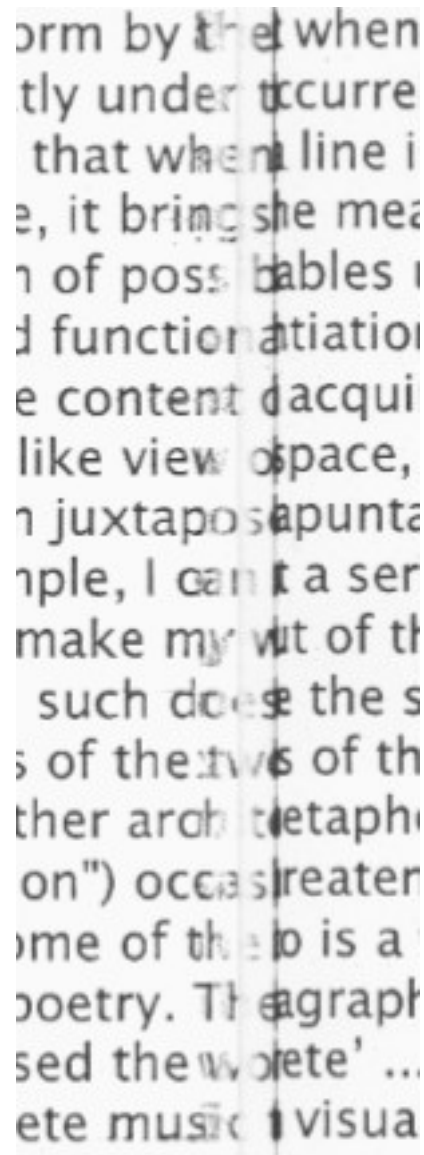
Once copiers began to produce output which wasn’t dark and muddy, I began to be interested in the possibilities they offered, not least in the things that they do which we regard as errors.

My apparently aberrant behaviour at work during the early 1990s led the techs to indulge me as part of their research into what I was doing. They brought me torn sheets, nonsense sheets, miscoloured sheets, the like of all of which they had seen me squirreling out of the waste baskets whether or not they were my print jobs or someone else’s. They might be the products of photocopiers or dot matrix printers or laser printers or ink jet printers.

I did one day explain that I regard marks on paper as potentially readable.

That was met by silence! but they continued to supply me with interesting oddities as part of their informal sociological and anthropological studies.

Here is a recent example from my own photocopy art / poetry:



That's one part of one tall thin image which pairs with another like it to form a poem – or score if you prefer, because it is intended to be sounded – called **Chant Duet**. (There is a so far unpublished set of work made with late Alaric Sumner called **Blancmange** because we did not know what to call it.)

This is opportunistic sequestration, though one might prefer the word serendipity. I did not plan it; but, when a machine began to trash the output sheets, I selected from the result and put it through a photocopier with some care.

(Subsequently, it has been through a scanner, largely for

transmission purposes.)

I do not have a guide for reading texts like these; not even an unwritten ad hoc guide. I do it, trying not to think about the process whilst thinking about the reading as strongly as possible.

I approach the text somewhat tentatively and make the best of it that I can.

What that means or where it leads is complex and could become complicated.

It isn't just a matter of making sounds. One is composing and is looking for... You tell me.

It needs to function as a time-based sound work.

I do not say that it makes semantic sense on the page; but I do not say that it does not make semantic sense.

Semantic meaning isn't on or off but "off on" to quote a poem by Andrew Motion I happened to read recently!

One may infer that it is a piece of print which has met with some kind of accident; but, to concentrate on that, is, to me, like the urge to explain poems in the light of a poet's biography.

Looking at what we do have, there is a text which has a high semantic content but its internal lexical relationships are subject to considerable interference, along with some of the semantic content.

That, too, leaves much out of the account; but a full account would be longer than the text itself.

Meaning is not disabled. It is, if you like, differently meaningful, just as poetry is different in its mode of meaning to instruction manual language, something many choose to forget or do not grasp.

Therefore, one might seek the semantic in it; but perhaps also the disruption itself, that process. I think it would be a misreading to try to filter out the damage if it is perceived as damage. Certainly one must necessarily pay attention to the sound implied by the text, all the text.

Enough of that.

I learned some of my approaches to the photocopier from a Mr Bob Cobbing, late of Canonbury, North London. Other influences, some of them themselves produced by the influence of Cobbing, also affected me.

In the early 1990s, I threw away some hundreds of images which I had made between the early 1970s and then, because they were

too imitative of Cobbing. When I made them, I didn't realise that I was imitating him; and many other images I had made through that period are quite unlike his. Nevertheless, that was a clearing which I needed to make; and, shortly after I triaged my studio, it so happened that he and I began a series called **Domestic Ambient Noise** which, over more than 1800 pages, relied predominantly on the photocopier as medium and method.

The photocopier had been Cobbing's primary tool for making and printing for around 10 years. Prior to that, his main tool, not exclusively, had been the ink duplicator. One interesting exception is a series of photocopied publications which followed Cobbing and P C Fencott as they toured North America, performing.

Cobbing's skills with the photocopier were great; and I am pleased to say that Richard Tipping has captured his method on camera as he developed an image. That is included in a film to be distributed on DVD by *Writers Forum*. An announcement will be made on the website at wfuk.org.uk in due course.

I never had my own photocopier. Sometimes I have been able to make limited use of a work machine. For some months, in the late 1990s, I gave an accountant I.T. consultancy in exchange for access to and use of his photocopier. That's how the poem later my book **Easy Kill** came to exist.

When I was working solo, I used what machines I had access to; and to some extent that shaped my output; and sometimes Bob let me use his copier if I really needed that method.

In some of our work together, you may see images which started as computer printer output and then, later, emerged from a photocopier, perhaps having changed human maker on the way.

Generally, one works with what one has; and I spent what money I had on computers. So that, when I made work without using the photocopier, I did not see it as diverging from an artistic course. For me it is no different to having a range of brushes or pencils in the studio.

But there are other considerations.

Emphasis on the sonic and the verbal may distract one from critical consideration of the paper materials one uses.

Generally, the copier paper one finds on sale is dire. It doesn't feel right. It doesn't look good.

Cobbing's *Writers Forum* repeatedly showed what could be achieved by appropriate design; but it had some limitations.

Generally, those considerations did not concern me then. I merely

wanted to see an image reproduced. Nevertheless, I have found that concentration on the image can lead one into dissatisfaction with bog standard paper; just as I am sometimes unhappy with the widespread assumption that there is no qualitative difference between a text on a screen and a text on a page.

Coloured paper can be useful; and Cobbing made good use of that.

But let's diverge a moment. The prevalence of the book may distract us.

I have seen people quite astounded by what they have seen at the exhibition **Some variations on a theme of Bob** which I curated at *Space Studios* March – May 2011, where Bob had worked outside of the book.

This points to matters to which I have given a lot of time in my collaborations with Guy Begbie, where we have sought to extend the notion of the codex into three dimensional structures which are also scores, some of them partly semantic.



The image above is of **engine / house** now touring Scotland, during its development. We put our images on to the pages (which are also enclosing and barrier walls and, latterly, stairs) using photocopiers; but the pages are often far from standard photocopier papers. Sometimes the most interesting results are technically errors resulting from this “misuse”.

The imagery originates in hand-writing and word-processing; but

also in digital photographs. There is nothing particular about the digital here: it is just that it is cheaper and easier. I have a traditional SLR but cannot afford to use it.

Sometimes the images are manipulated by computer prior to printing; and in our latest work, **Namely**, which is nearing completion at the time of writing, for exhibition in USA in late May, we use enlargement to produce what one might call visual rhyme – and a footprint 2.15 m. x 75 cm.!

In this case, as with my work with Cobbing, there are many issues arising from the practice of collaboration; but there is no space here to consider them.

I could complicate it, too, by remarking that **Namely** is a cousin of **Namely for Peter Manson**, which is a set of sound works and a quick time movie which I have made with John Drever using a selection of visual texts I made to honour Peter on his 40th birthday.

I gave those images to Guy with permission to him to alter them in any way that he wished; and, then, when he had made considerable progress, I joined in. Sometimes I hardly recognise the material for a while. It's an architectural form of cut up, perhaps.

Using three dimensional structures, and I mean something more than the height of a stack of bound pages, enables us to make and explore generated space within the text(s) with windows and other cut outs to see through; and complex structures which open up, but not as completely or as simply as a conventional book. One has to move oneself rather than the elements of the structure. Point of view is multiple. There is no way through. One is looking into and, mentally, within.

Guy and I are expending much time on these aspects of our work, not least because we have an exhibition to feed in Bristol in the autumn of 2011. But we are, at the same time, giving thought to the sonic implications of what we are constructing.

I have begun to experiment with pre-recorded movie images; and I sound-sang a sound track to William English's film **Still** in 2009; so there is a strong possibility of approaching **Namely** and other (photocopy) poems that way. To make the performance portable, a video might be produced. (John Drever and I have learned by making our first few text-sound compositions 8 channel from the start, meaning that they cannot be presented in many venues!)

But Guy and I have been, we like to believe, thinking laterally; and some of our as yet incomplete and unpublished products include

sound works constructed from the noise of the photocopier trying to do our bidding as we make our constructions.

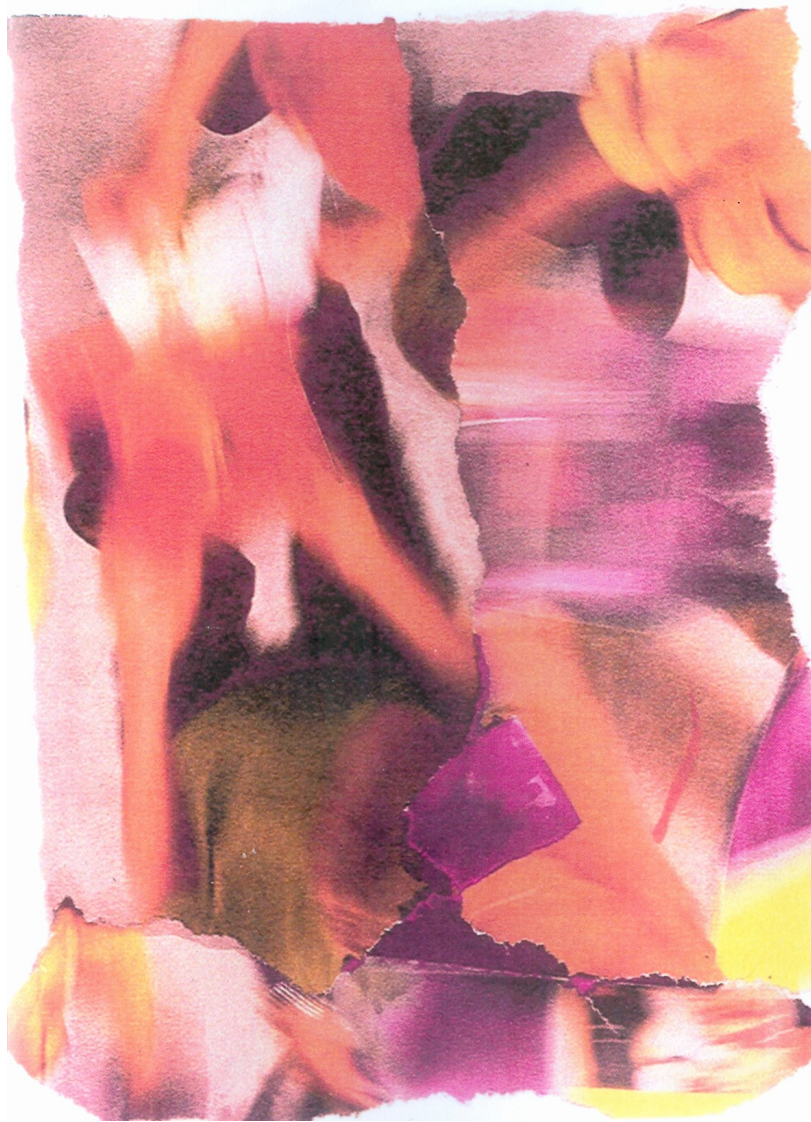
We might put a meta umbrella over all of this by saying that we are all making demands on machines and forms which their manufacturers and advocates have not previously considered. (There was, for instance, an ink duplicator image in the Cobbing exhibition which is almost entirely black – on what was once white paper.)

On the other hand, forms or formal constraints also arise from the way that machines, photocopiers, work.

I have described (**Bob Cobbing: and the book as medium; designs for poetry** in *Readings* 4) how I made my work **Easy Kill** referred to above: “I wrote each page during a single copier cycle, somewhat rehearsed and prepared for improvising, the result accepted or rejected by myself.” And I followed that up with comments in *Xerolage* 41 (**Scat Songs for Chris Funkhouser**): “What I aimed for, retrospectively, in **Scat Songs** was to get 24 varying images with 24 presses of the <copy> button. 42 presses isn't bad. Maybe I'll improve on that in any future copier poem.”

It doesn't matter, of course, if I meet these self-imposed targets or not. What interests me is the effect of the constraint as it produces results which I would not have produced without it. That connects such use of technology with other and more traditional approaches, indicating that the activity is not that different except in what might now be seen as superficialities. It's a way of learning from play whilst obviating the emptiness of *self-expression*.

Speaking of learning from play, I'll end with an image from one of Bob Cobbing's last books: **with our tongue our drills and quadras**. Scraps of magazines etc were fed through a recently acquired full-colour photocopier, sometimes repeatedly; and the results are, I believe, stunning. I have never been able to do these images justice with any scanner or copier; and *Writers Forum* had to spend and spend to get the originals commercially printed in order to get near to the quality of what he achieved. Benedict Taylor and I have worked hard at sounding some of these – most recently on 24th March 2011 at *Space Studios* in London; and we hope to publish recordings shortly.



Optional afterword

engine / house is included in the exhibition *Poetry Beyond Text* at the *Scottish Poetry Library* in Edinburgh until 15th July 2011

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