The Making of a Radical Poetics: Modernist Forms in the Work of Bob Cobbing : Elements for an Exegesis of Cobbing's Art

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The Making of a Radical Poetics: Modernist Forms in the Work of Bob Cobbing

Elements for an Exegesis of Cobbing's Art

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I, Mark Jackson, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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Abstract

I survey Cobbing's considerable and varied output, placing it initially into approximate chronological phases. I discern formal and aesthetic traits and their development over time. I attempt to place the work within wider poetic and artistic traditions, namely avant-gardism, the British Poetry Revival, sound and visual poetry, and the exploration of artistic form. I propose an understanding of flow as an intersection of two axes: linear temporality (flow time) which exists outside of social time, and multidimensional or constellatory spatiality which is generated by certain artistic works. The body bridges social time and flow time through creative gestures and by unifying temporal elements. I trace the features of abstraction as they emerged throughout roughly the first half of the twentieth century in visual art, sound poetry and lexical poetry. I define poetic and artistic form, noting that radical works explore traditional boundaries of space, and discusses the politics of form. I examine theories of perception to arrive at a synthesis of form and perception in what I term the Event, where the engaged perceiver participates with the radical work in what constitutes a revolutionary activity. I include close readings of Cobbing's *Jade-Sound Poems, Domestic Ambient Noise* and a sound performance of *Container Leaks*, applying my findings with regard to flow, abstraction, the politics of form, perception and space. The thesis concludes that Cobbing's work, which constitutes a new poetics and exemplifies avant-gardist practice as a breaking out of old forms, can inspire radical modes of living if we engage creatively with the world. I believe this work provides a comprehensive exegesis for understanding Cobbing's challenging work in relation to addresses to form and perception, an interpretation which is currently missing from the critical field.

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List of illustrations

All Bob Cobbing illustrations included are reproduced with the kind permission of the Cobbing family.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Cobbing: À L'aventure

'If one perceives art as anything other than strange, one does not perceive it at all.'

- Theodor Adorno[1]

> *Adventure*
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> *Aventure*
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> *Aventureux*
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> *Adventure*
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> *Aventure*
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> *Aventureuse*
>
> *Adventurous*
>
> *A l'aventure*

- Bob Cobbing[2]

A Practical Demonstration

In *The Poethical Wager* Joan Retallack mentions Bob Cobbing in a paragraph-long list of artists which includes Gertrude Stein, Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Virginia Woolf, Stéphane Mallarmé, Filippo Marinetti, Kurt Schwitters, James Joyce, William Carlos Williams, Jackson Mac Low and Ian Hamilton Finlay.[3] This is Retallack's list of some 'lost female literary revolutionaries', equating the female with the silenced, invisible, unintelligible 'other' – not merely, literally, women. Such a list, and Retallack's neo-feminist contextualisation of it, reveals the marginal nature of Cobbing's work and the prestigious company of radical, twentieth-century artists Retallack rightly identifies it to be part of. By most standards these artists' work, if increasingly less so by the passing of time and their broad influence, can be said to be 'strange'. And it is in this strangeness that Adorno locates a cultural value, a shared terrain between artist, perceiver and artwork wherein transfigurations may take place. Retallack continues:

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[1] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 262.

[2] Bob Cobbing, The 'A Poem'*,* in *ABC in Sound,* 5th edn (London: Writers Forum, 1994) (no page numbers).

[3] Joan Retallack, *The Poethical Wager* (London: University of California Press, 2003), p. 136.

art, particularly literature, helps form the direction and quality of attention, the intelligences, the senses we bring into contact with contemporary experience. A related question concerns the ways in which contemporary poetics invites us into an ethos of the collaborative making of meaning. "Making," poesis, is always the key. This is an imaginative activity that materially affects the life one lives in language [...]. How can writing and reading be integral to making sense and *new*sense (sometimes taken for *non*sense) as we enact an ongoing poetics of daily life?[4]

Cobbing's work, spanning six decades of the twentieth century and poking its head around the corner of the current one, as difficult and, indeed, strange as adherents and detractors alike find it, provides occasion for us to explore Retallack's ideas. I argue that Cobbing's visual poetry and sound performance launch considerations of attention and perception. These characteristics link to Modernist concerns around form and abstraction. Underpinning this is a provocation of the senses which, though Modernist in character, connects with our contemporary experience, in particular a collaborative making of meaning – between writer, reader, text and writing collaborators.

Retallack's critical perspective is valuable in attempting to make sense, indeed *new*sense, of Cobbing's challenging work. In a rallying call to all commentators on poetry, Retallack writes that she is 'in search of a poesis that wagers on [hope, optimism and despair] in unsettling but synergistic conversation'.[5] In response, my search is for a poetics that posits the sensory and motile body at the heart of an expressive performance of linguistic and other material which has profound and sustainable transfigurative currency. Like Retallack, I would join up the activity in Cobbing's work with contemporary social environments. For Retallack, an acknowledgement that in 'the new city-states of multinational empire, there are increasing demands that projects of a global political ecosystem come into conversation with articulations of localized desire' is essential to poetic explorations which are concerned with 'complex realism, reciprocal alterity, polyculturalism, polylingualism, contemporaneity. A search for new ethical and aesthetic models is inevitably, haphazardly, contingently under way'.[6] Throwing my hat into this (re)search for ethical and aesthetic models, the essential

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[4] Retallack, p. 12.
[5] Retallack, p. 19.
[6] Retallack, p. 13.

medium in my work is the exceptional and undervalued work of Cobbing, and I shall sketch the relationship between such contexts and the work created by avant-gardist practitioners. It is further worth noting that since the Second World War there has been a decline in the visibility of avant-garde movements during a time they have arguably been most needed. Chapter 3 will address the specific reasons for this.

Though few in number, there exist already fine readings of Cobbing's poetry which consider its materials and content. Whilst not wishing to diminish the importance of close reading, in fact much of my critique relies on it, I aim to place Cobbing's work on a more macro level. It is not clear from existing academic studies (with the exception of Steve McCaffery's quite generalised accounts of twentieth-century sound poetry) where Cobbing's work, and by extension the wider field of sound and visual poetry, fits into late twentieth-century art and poetry movements, what value it may have with regard to the social and political crises facing us at the beginning of the twenty-first century, where it sits in relation to the post-World War II decline in avant-gardism, to Thatcherism, Blairism – need I add the Blairite-Thatcherite bent of the 'Coalition', in power from 2010-15? – and to postmodernism. I do not pretend for a moment to have answers to all of these questions, but it appears too few commentators are making this type of inquiry. I explore how Cobbing's work enters a dialogue with artistic developments in the last century by identifying as its central concerns space, perception, memory and abstraction.

Poetry and poetics, at their more jagged, radical edges, are about designing or forming new rules for art and, by extension, social structures. Avant-gardist art pushes at the seams of possibility, as a means of showing and leading the way, and strives to define what shape and quality may emerge the other side of those seams. Retallack notes the importance of a mutually created field of possibility, mutually created, that is, by the radical and the mainstream:

> [T]here are conservative tendencies built into any habitus, but to the extent that modernity defines itself through its ongoing experiments in thought and living, every crisis of conservation versus transfiguration should present an opportunity to make new meaning. […] [E]xperiment and tradition should, in an

ideal world, form the dialogic energy that creates vital cultures. In fact, nothing of energy happens without this synergy.[7]

She perceives the role of the avant-gardes in socio-political terms: 'With the high stakes involved in appearances of control and completion (careers, money, respect), forms that refuse these illusions are necessary to retrieve space for creative living from a culture blindly driving toward total regulation of the imagination.'[8] I return to the issue of establishing space for creative, and progressive, living in the thesis conclusion. Retallack isolates the key components of the avant-gardes as material, form and meaning and links these to possibilities created. She identifies the radical artistic gesture itself as both means and end: 'What twentieth-century innovative artists came to see is that the form that the experiment takes is not preliminary to the answer, not preliminary to the creation of the art object. It *is* the answer. It *is* the art'.[9] Cobbing himself viewed his own work similarly. It was, he wrote, 'no academic exposition but a practical demonstration', giving a sense of the adventure/aventure alluded to in the first poem of *ABC in Sound*.[10] Jeff Nuttall frames the same principle slightly differently: 'The study of art deals indeed with ideas, but the practice of art does not.'[11] Radical art as a transfigurative medium, not by *doing what it does* but by *being what it is*, forms a vital strand of my argument in chapter 4.

As well as being a publisher, workshop protagonist and poetry politician, Cobbing was a multi-faceted poet and artist whose work dissolved the boundaries of lexical poetry, visual and concrete poetry, sound poetry and art performance. Although always insistent that his work was 'poetry', it is worth noting here that Cobbing's adventurous art has more affinity in form and purpose with Picasso or Stravinsky than it has with Hughes or Larkin. I link Cobbing's artwork, visual poetry and certain aspects of his lexical poetry with developments in early twentieth-century visual art. These strands of his work themselves cross the lines of other media and artforms – all interrelating through the medium of the body. Cobbing's visual work is constantly in dialogue with the work of the Impressionists, the abstract painters, Abstract Expressionism, Mallarmé,

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[7] Retallack, p. 91.
[8] Retallack, p. 53.
[9] Retallack, pp. 97-8.
[10] Bob Cobbing, *Changing Forms in English Visual Poetry – the Influence of Tools and Machines* (London: Writers Forum, 1988) (no page numbers).
[11] Jeff Nuttall, *Art and the Degradation of Awareness* (London: Calder Publications, 2001), p. 108.

Dada, Futurism and Letterism. My colleague at Birkbeck, Holly Pester, set out in her thesis to define new ground for sound poetry:

> [T]he extensiveness of [Steve] McCaffery's survey [on sound poetry in the '70s] has left the project of sound poetry feeling *complete*. Indeed sound poetry is now an historical category and its key contemporary practitioners, those who categorically identify their work as 'sound poetry', seem to desire to root their work in its perceived tradition.[12]

I recognise the necessity to redefine the field for practitioners, yet my work aims to position itself largely within that 'perceived tradition', particularly of the *poetics* of sound and visual poetry, as I feel a number of significant oversights have been made in placing the work of Cobbing and others, not to mention that the 'tradition' of visual poetry (Pester's thesis focuses predominantly on sound poetry) is potentially extensive. I introduce angles of approach, such as reading sound and visual poetry through phenomenology, contextualising them within abstraction or incorporating the writings of Indian vocalist Ansuman Biswas, which I believe freshen the debates. I identify Cobbing's sound performance, particularly in respect of Dada and Futurism, as interwoven with the concerns of space, form and perception.

It was my original intention to inquire into how Cobbing's work, so obviously in conflict with the dominant set of (albeit professional) Sunday poets from the Movement to Armitage and Motion, sat within his postmodern peers. How, for example, do the complexities of Cobbing's approach to perception relate to, or even comment on, Warhol's visuals or Koons's sculptures? Is the Cubist deployment of materials in space and time akin to or different from the novels of Vonnegut, Pynchon, even Beckett? I came to the conclusion, for now, that so vast is the scope potentially covered by postmodernism and so universally lacking in agreement are commentators as to its remit, the comparison of works on the basis of one supposed definition, purpose or style is a mammoth inquiry of its own, outside the scope of this thesis. Retallack acknowledges the breadth of the problem: 'The self-consciousness we've labelled postmodernism has created a constructive geometry of attention, foregrounding clusters of cultural silences that range from retrovalued styles to inquiries into the

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[12] Holly Pester, 'Making Speech-Matter: Recurring Mediations in Sound Poetics and its Contemporary Practice' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, Birkbeck College, 2013), p. 18.

ethically suppressed.'[13] I have decided to leave the inquiry into this 'constructive geometry' of postmodernism to others and focus on the specific territory covered in the following pages. This is not to gloss over an obstacle but to decline to handle a set of questions which themselves could constitute an entire thesis. Retallack acknowledges the ineptitude of the distinction between modern and postmodern, and tentatively offers 'the more dynamic concept of a (chaotic) continuous contemporary' which erases the temporal shift implicit in the established terminology.[14] I will not be adopting 'continuous contemporary' as a substitute term, but will bear in mind its helpful eradication of the pre-/post- idea of modernity. Retallack continues:

> We've been calling the crisis of character that cumulative self-consciousness inflicts on us "postmodernism." The communal optic nerve affixed to that *post* affixed to *modern* is useful in scoping memory and desire. Is a confusing, embarrassing sense of postness the trial we must make our way through in order to arrive at new visions of possibility?[15]

Nuttall however takes a different view:

> The development of consumer bric-a-brac appearing in the later Pop Art although often held to be a continuation of Dada and Surrealism, was existentially different. Although appearances and material were similar, even identical, their use was a celebration of consumerism, not a subversion.[16]

The dialectic contrived here between Retallack and Nuttall, of course, relies on their referring to postmodernism, or postmodernist work, as the same thing, which we cannot assume at all. I argue that Cobbing's work is essentially Modernist in nature, so not having to draw contrasts with work labelled 'postmodern' will avoid driving into critical culs-de-sac. I therefore tend to avoid the 'confusing' term *postmodern* as it is unhelpful for our purposes. To claim Cobbing's poetry owes a great deal to Modernism is not inherently to claim it has nothing to do with postmodernism, though I share Nuttall's suspicion of many things postmodern:

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[13] Retallack, p. 13.
[14] Retallack, p. 13.
[15] Retallack, p. 103.
[16] Nuttall, *Degradation*, p. 41.

> Marshal McLuhan […] was able to say in the late Sixties 'Art is anything.' If art is anything, then it was a very short side-step to proclaim it nothing. Capitalism, newly promoted in its consumer proliferation, had found a way to hamstring its internal opposition.[17]

In this we can trace a line of thinking that supposes that postmodernism itself, in allegiance with capitalism, disarmed the avant-gardes, an argument that Nuttall, with no little hyperbole, accuses Andy Warhol of being almost singly responsible for.[18] In chapter 3 I prefer to consider the impact of the dominance of a conservative mainstream in the aftermath of global atrocities mid-century.

My interest in Cobbing began in the early 1990s when, as a young poet discovering Surrealism, Modernism, the Beats and radical poetry in English from the latter part of the century, I saw Bird Yak perform at Vertical Images (later VI or various temporary designations based around the initials), a co-operatively run, London-based poetry group I participated in for some years. I attended the Writers Forum workshop from 2000, around which time I began to explore sound and visual poetic forms. I have always had an exploratory approach to performance, integrating improvisation, multi-voice readings, song and reading with musicians, dancers and visual displays. This thesis, then, is practice-informed (if not practice-based) in that I bring to it questions and problems that have arisen in my own creative processes. The current phase of my creative work is to develop a rounded response to Cobbing and his peers, and during this process I have written and performed much less.[19] It should further be noted that my methodology is not to produce a historicist discourse – my arguments are presented as an inquiry of poetics, which includes historicised components, particularly in chapters 1 and 3. Inevitably, as with any study spanning a significant period of time, there is a temporal element, an unfolding, a logic hinged around continuity that passes through transformations. Jerome Rothenberg's idea of the Revolution of the Word, encountered in chapter 4, posits that there is an on-going concern to push artistic form and expression against whatever prevailing norms dominate at any given time.[20] These

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[17] Nuttall, *Degradation*, p. 92.
[18] Nuttall, *Degradation*, pp. 103-8.
[19] This period, stretching back nearly 10 years at time of writing, has also coincided with teaching professionally and raising two children, both factors further restricting opportunity for poetic practice.
[20] Jerome Rothenberg, *Revolution of The Word: A New Gathering of American Avant-Garde Poetry 1914-1945* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), p. xv-xxii.

necessary and perpetual gestures typify how this temporal unfolding is gathered up in the idea of continuous transformations rather than a logic of repetitions. Moreover I lay claim to a structure and approach that is constellatory, rather than strictly linear, a means that characterises the critical work of Eric Mottram, John Cage (both of whose writings underpin some of my key arguments) and Allen Fisher. In his four essays in *The Topological Shovel* Fisher uses a constellatory approach for a condensed overview of twentieth-century poetics. In 'Thumbnail Lecture' he alludes to factors changed by 'mad leaps or juddering twistors' and explains he 'wanted a model that changed, that would not simply make inscription/trace on the magic writing pad, but could also spin the whole quiet frame of its perceptive singularity'.[21] The precedence for such methodology can be found in Benjamin, particularly his later work, Adorno and Charles Olson. Robert Kaufmann, referring to 'Benjamin's (and, through Benjamin's influence, [...] Adorno's) crucial theory and practice of the *constellation* and *force field* [*Kraftfeld*]', identifies how the constellatory methodology in both writers reveals findings like amassed conglomerations rather than simply divisible, easily-digested arguments:

> [T]he *constellation* and *force field* [...] are often and rightly understood as an intellectual attempt nondeterministically to locate and dynamically connect elements (historical, socioeconomic, cultural) that are not initially given as relational but that, when animated (constellated) into conjunction, create or reveal a signifying force field. That force field for its part illuminates the larger social reality whose elements have been brought together in affinity and tension (rather than in a falsely integrative, positivistic totalization) to make the constructivist force field itself visible.[22]

The critical approach of constellation and force field mirror Olson's idea of poetic 'composition by field'.[23] Olson's critical work informs my theory of flow (chapter 2). In a letter to Robert Creeley he wrote:

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[21] Allen Fisher, 'Thumbnail Lecture', in *The Topological Shovel* (Ontario: Gig Editions, 1999), p. 6.

[22] Robert Kaufmann, 'Adorno's Social Lyric, and Literary Criticism Today', in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. by Thomas Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 354-375 (p. 366).

[23] Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse', in *Collected Prose*, ed. by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 239-249 (pp. 239-40).

> man as object in field of force declaring self as force because is force in exactly
> such relation & can accomplish expression of self as force by conjecture, and
> displacement in a context best, now, seen as space more than a time such[24]

The constellatory methodology can be summarised as one not strictly adhering to the linear (temporal) logic of conservative academicism, but embracing a multiplicity of (spatial and other) possibilities leading to conclusions neither immediately intelligible nor without tensions or contradictions. It creates, crucially, a poetic composition; there is a rupture of the territorial divisions between the critical and the poetic work. The thresholds between the two thereby become fluid. There is a strong sense coming from Cobbing (note his description of his work as a 'practical demonstration') and one of his main collaborators Lawrence Upton that their commitment was to poetic practice as research and discovery. The same argument could equally be made in respect of much twentieth century avant-gardism: consider the anti-intellectualism of Dada or the poetic qualities of the 'theory' of Cage, Mottram and Fisher. This emphasis on the work, rather than the writing about the work, acknowledges the tendency of critical responses to *fix* where artistic practice tries to *unfix*. We get a further sense here of Cobbing's lifetime in poetry as an adventure rather than merely exploratory (though *exploration* often adequately describes the process). In this light, and conceding that this is essentially a piece of academic work to be assessed, something of a constellatory method is necessary to avoid accusations of writing from within the enemy camp, which, given the absence of a practice element, this thesis is potentially exposed to. An aspect of this constellatory approach is methodological, and the techniques employed across the various chapters include historicist surveys, tours of the relevant critical field, manufactured dialectics, critical analyses and close reading. Overall, my critical exposition, I believe, works outwards from these findings and ultimately informs the embodied response to sensual materials. Whatever Cobbing's claims, much thinking went into the kind of poetry he created. His work demands the audience responds from *inside* the poem rather than from the privileged position of self-assumed authority generally accorded to critical thinking. I aim to bring out the *thinking* embedded in the work, as what we may call sensual thinking is not inferior to philosophical, critical or any other kind of thinking. I cannot, however, totally avoid the contradiction of offering

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[24] Charles Olson, *The Mayan Letters* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1968), p. 67.

intellectual elements of critique in relation towards work seemingly avoidant of intellectual discourse in trying to work out a map for reading it, though this, along with other tensions and indeterminacies, could be said to be part of what Cobbing's poetry generates: conversations, tensions, workings-through.

Terminology

I will deal now with the key terminology in the thesis, some of which requires lengthy explication. In cris cheek's essay 'Bob Cobbing' he coins the terms 'transmitter' and 'receiver' to refer respectively to artist/poet/writer/performer and a kind of hybrid reader/listener/viewer.[25] For the former, I see no reason to depart from the conventional terminologies, as they differentiate between different writerly and physically expressive modes. I prefer the term 'perceiver' for the latter conundrum, not least because it accords perception its vital place in the artistic equation but as it also suggests a motility that cheek's more passive terminology does not avoid. With reference to the Writers Forum workshop cheek has used the phrase 'those who were actively performing as participant witnesses' to describe the presenting poet's audience;[26] the sense of the listener-reader performing and participating captures the essence of what in chapter 4 I refer to as the engaged perceiver, yet the notion of witnessing is, again, perhaps a little static.

Art, particularly that of the avant-gardes, engenders change. Art that is itself mutable bears greater influence on the perceiver's mutability. The terminology assigned to such processes is problematic. *Transformative/transformation* seem somewhat insipid, whilst *transcend/transcendence* bring with them potentially mystical or religious associations. I relied on *dissident/dissidence* in previous work on Cobbing, but now feel that dissidence has limiting connotations as I wish to acknowledge the potential of artistic engagement as affecting the whole bodily and societal organism, not merely in

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[25] cris cheek, 'Bob Cobbing', *British Electronic Poetry Centre*
<http://www.soton.ac.uk/~bepc/forum/cheek_cobbing.htm> [accessed 3 March 2007] (para. 16 of 43).
To be fair to cheek, he does use the term 'perceiver' in his thesis, 'Hybridising Writing: Through Performance and Collaboration' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Lancaster, Edge Hill College, 2004).
[26] cris cheek, 'A Roundtable Discussion of the Life and Work of Bob Cobbing', *Penn Sound*
<https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Cobbing/Suddenly-Everyone-Began/
Cheek-Cris_05_Discussion_Suddenly-Everyone-Began_KWH_10-11-07.mp3> [accessed 15 December 2014].

terms of political protest or unrest.[27] In the passage quoted earlier Retallack uses 'transfiguration' to approach an overall sense of the force in 'modernity' and 'experiment'. I feel *transfigure/transfiguration* best capture a general sense of metamorphosis, if one can sideline any religious inference, not least in the very literal, and literary, sense of crossing or going beyond (*trans*) characters or signs (*figures*).

The generic terminology used to describe the work of Cobbing and others continues to be problematic. Descriptors for late twentieth-century non-mainstream poetry have included The British Poetry Revival, linguistically innovative poetry, British and Irish Innovative Poetry, underground and the more wide-reaching counter-culture. The first term, coined by Eric Mottram to describe the UK poetry between 1965 and 1975 that challenged the mainstream dominance of the neo-conservative Movement Poets, is perhaps the most accepted.[28] Yet it remains awkward, not least as commentators can broadly refer to works (as I do) both outside this period and from beyond these isles which share enough common concerns for a single term of reference to be appropriate, certainly no more or less so than as a grouping for the significant British poets active within that decade or so. As far as possible, to avoid clumsiness and restricting the scope of work (can visual poetry be innovative only in terms of its *linguistics*?), I refer to poetry that falls under such classifications as 'radical', in the seventeenth century sense of revolution rather than the conservative meaning of 'root' or 'origin'.

The umbrella term for innovative, progressive or challenging artforms, *avant-garde*, poses difficulty for many observers. The arguments against the term range from advocating that all pigeonholing of art is limiting and unhelpful to the belief that any distinction between artworks on the grounds of their popularity, political or social content or the degree of defamiliarisation or indeterminacy misleads and makes a set of unsupportable assumptions; it sets up, in other words, the wrong debate. Whilst not wishing to side-track into this discussion (not an irrelevant one in the meta-scheme of things), I do recognise the genuine difficulties 'avant-garde' raises. Retallack summarises the problem neatly:

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[27] Mark Jackson, 'Acts of Dissidence: The Poetry of Bob Cobbing' (unpublished master's dissertation, University of London, Birkbeck College, 2007).

[28] Eric Mottram, 'The British Poetry Revival, 1960-75', in *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. by Robert Hampson and Peter Barry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 15-50.

> Theories of "defamiliarization" are very familiar […]. What is not so well understood is how the positive material of avant-garde or innovative or new (choose the term that offends you least) art remains visible to the person whose primary experience is persistently that of the *absence* of the familiar rather than the *presence* of the new.[29]

Retallack's critique of appearance suggests that if the perceiver of an artwork is passive, disengaged, they will not be receptive (perceptive) to its content. Appearance is a regime controlled by capital and what appears in unexpected form becomes dismissed by conservative critics who crave the familiar, which maintains their control. Thus the 'newness' of radical art inherently acts as a critique. Nuttall suggests:

> Artists know that the expansion of human awareness is perpetual […], conclusions are never final. They must, in Marcuse's words 'break the monopoly of established reality (i.e. of those who established it) to *define* what is real.' Because of this, either militantly or secretly, they retain the ability to digress, divert or disobey. Obedient art is not possible.[30]

The disobedience of artists developing or pushing the boundaries of established forms acts in itself as a mode of resistance to corrupt authority, but a generic term to denote this *advance guard* (the military connotations are highly ironic) of different artforms and artists can never be entirely satisfactory. I opt for *avant-gardes/avant-gardism* to denote art that is any combination of innovative, challenging, unsettling, ground-breaking, novel or disobedient. Yet I contend that what ultimately separates avant-gardist art from other art is its potential to greatly alter a perceiver's consciousness with the presence of the new not an absence of the old. I do not engage with the debate over the term avant-garde, though the debate does legitimately question assumptions.

I use the term space to refer to aspects of the physical and abstract or philosophical environment. Chapter 3 discusses at length poetry which presents space in relation to traditions of language dispersal into the page space and at a semantic level. I connect space to the concept of void, a territory external to the subjective individual wherein the unknown resides and which presents the possibility for personal and collective

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[29] Retallack, p. 28.
[30] Nuttall, *Degradation*, p. 30.

transfiguration.[31] The space of this void is conceived therefore as a realm without matter or structures which the consciousness of the subject encounters. The void exists outside the social and the political. Chapter 3 surveys the writings of Wilhelm Worringer, Virginia Woolf and Henri Michaux to come to a relevant understanding of void. Space as referred to in the sections examining poetry deals largely with literal page spaces, which in Mallarmé especially is reinforced by deferred semantic completion; yet it further addresses a conceptual semantic schism between the referent and things referenced. Space is also addressed as a dimensional entity in visual art, such as in Cubism and Rayonism, where the conventional understanding of proportionate, dimensional space is challenged. These senses of space inform our sense of void.

I am careful to avoid a protracted, tangential engagement with various understandings of the concept of subjectivity, but some clarification of its meaning for our inquiry is required. The Oxford English Dictionary defines subjectivity as the 'quality in art or literature which depends on the expression of the personality or individuality of the artist; the individuality of the artist as expressed in his work'.[32] *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* offers something more ornamental: 'writing of strong personal feelings directly expressed and dominated by the mind's shaping power.'[33] Cobbing himself stated, 'I'm not awfully interested in authorship as an idea. As far as I'm concerned once I've put something on the page or yelled something into the air it has its own existence and I'm fairly irrelevant to it then.'[34] This movement away from a consistent authorial position, a process prevalent in many Modernist works and a major concern of twentieth-century literary and artistic movements, notably Structuralism, was important to the investigative principles of the Writers Forum workshop. cris cheek recalls: 'One of the tropes of poetry that was being openly tested at these workshops was the unitary voice of epiphanic glibness. The lyric *I* countered by, or mobilised

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[31] In contrast, for example, to the Geneva School's conception of space: 'The G[eneva] critics believe that lit[erature] articulates an author's attempt to formulate and cope with experience […]. A basic metaphor is that of an inner mental space, an initial void, from which consciousness emerges to plot the characteristic architecture of its experience.' *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 454.
[32] *OED Online* <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk> [accessed 12 December 2014].
[33] *Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 1229.
[34] *Radio Radio,* 'Cobbing interviewed by Martin Spinelli', *Penn Sound* <http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/groups/radioradio/ 07_Bob-Cobbing_Radio-Radio_NY_2003.mp3> [accessed 18 July 2007].

through, polyphonic compositions or at the very least multi-tasking attentions.'[35] cheek's description of the lyric *I* – the established, consistent narrative voice of literature – as unitary (individualised and unifying), epiphanic (centred on personal revelation) and glib (uncritical) indicates the kind of subjectivity Cobbing and his contemporaries sought to destabilise. A century earlier Mallarmé put it in similar terms: 'If the poem is to be pure, the poet's voice must be stilled, and the initiative taken by the words themselves, which will be set in motion as they meet unequally in collision.'[36] This mobile word collision was a driving force in the work of Mallarmé, Williams and Stein; the exploration of their work in this light forms a major part of chapter 3.

John Cage dealt extensively with the term indeterminacy in his lectures and writings in the '50s and '60s. In chapter 2 I employ it as a process for retrieving unconscious memory through conscious artistic methods. Cage's understanding of indeterminacy addresses both form and spatial concerns and drives my investigation into abstraction's characteristics in chapter 3. His critical works are also examples of the kind of lived experience emphasised by phenomenology, echoing Cobbing's idea of the 'practical demonstration'. For Cage indeterminacy defines the quality of performance in certain compositions which have a unique combination of structure, method, form, frequency, duration, timbre and amplitude; 'the purpose of indeterminacy would seem to be to bring about an unforseen [sic] situation.'[37] According to Cage, Bach's *The Art of the Fugue* is indeterminate with respect to its performance as the timbre and amplitude are not given by the composer and the sequence of the parts (structure) is variable; Stockhausen's *Klavierstück XI* is indeterminate as the performer must give the piece form, yet this indeterminacy is 'unnecessary since it is ineffective' as the performer will almost inevitably revert to a form 'essentially conventional to European music'; Feldman's *Intersection 3* however is determinate as, although method and amplitude are indeterminate, two separate performances will be very similar.[38] Cage was famously against improvised performance, preferring composition by chance methods or using scores with unconventional notation. Similarly, Cobbing's live performances were based

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[35] cheek, 'Bob Cobbing' (para. 5 of 43).

[36] Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Crisis in Poetry', in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, ed. by Vassiliki Kolocotroni and others (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 123-27 (p. 126).

[37] John Cage, 'Composition as Process', in *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1968), pp. 18–56 (p. 36).

[38] Cage, 'Composition', pp. 35-6.

around visual poetry used as scores rather than the relative freedom that improvisation permits. Cage's 'Lecture on Nothing' uses extended spaces between words, phrases and punctuation and observes the interconnectivity between space and time:

> This space of time   is organized
> .   We need not fear these   silences, –[39]

Here Cage physically presents the gaps or silences as space, creating indeterminacy of form since each reader will read those silences differently. The logical endpoint of such stretching of page space would be a completely blank text with the reading constituting nothing but the consistent hum of surface noise, Cage's 'silent' composition *4'33* embracing and enacting this specific point. Joan Retallack's comments on Cage, whose work she effectively conflates with new poetry (sound, visual and lexical), foreground the idea of the void (see chapter 3). For Retallack, Cage redefined 'silence as all that we're not attending to at any given moment', which leads us to the surprise 'discovery that silence is not empty at all but densely, richly, disturbingly full'.[40] This structureless hum is therefore the site of potential transfiguration: 'It's the infinite messiness of that noise that gives each of us the chance to invent our own life patterns. New poetries are filled with noise, with surface indeterminacy.'[41] The voiding of structured content in indeterminate works focuses the perceiver's attention on the conception and limits of silence and noise. For Adorno, indeterminacy creates possibilities for meaning where works in socially determined forms, the 'familiar', lose their potency through being overworked and overexposed: 'What everybody takes to be intelligible is in fact not intelligible at all […]. When something becomes too familiar it stops making sense. What is immediately accessible is bound to be lifeless.'[42] Yet the composer Gyorgi Ligeti warns that the overworking of a piece can apply to avant-gardist procedures. In 'Metamorphoses of Musical Form' he considers the method of serialism in composition, the relentless application of which, he argues, can lead to 'automatism': '[t]here is really no basic difference between the results of automatism and the products of chance; total determinacy comes to be identical with total indeterminacy.'[43] Ligeti discerns,

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[39] Cage, 'Lecture on Nothing', in *Silence*, pp. 109-128 (p. 109).
[40] Retallack, p. 16 and p. 111.
[41] Retallack, pp. 41-2.
[42] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 262.
[43] Gyorgi Ligeti, 'Metamorphoses of Musical Form', in *Die Reihe 7: Form – Space*, ed. by Herbert Eimert and Karlheinz Stockhausen, trans. by Cornelius Cardew (Pennsylvania: Presser, 1965), pp. 5-19 (p. 10).

ultimately, 'total determinacy' in overworked attempts to move away from socially determined forms – from the auto*matic* to auto*matism* – echoing the lack of meaning Adorno identifies in those given forms. Cage's silences and spaces may be, perversely, full but not with predetermined meaning. The perceiver uses the space as a *tabula rasa* for exploring their own subjective meaning. The danger that Ligeti notices applies to works where there is almost pure form and the content has no space to shape the form.

Robert Sheppard's manifesto-style 'Propositions 1987' illuminates indeterminacy. In a series of maxims relating to 'linguistically innovative poetry', Sheppard notes: 'Indeterminacy and discontinuity are central notions for this poetry' and '[i]ndeterminacy need not mean randomness' but can be 'a dialectic of choice and chance'; crucially, '[p]erception is an indeterminate process – for the writer writing, for the reader reading [... and] [t]he role of subjectivity in the text will be indeterminate, the self/selves discontinuous' as '[s]ubjectivity becomes a question of linguistic position, or of a discordant polyphony of voices, rather than one of a single authorising presence'. The types of indeterminacy include: '[s]tructural (and syntactic) indeterminacies of poetic form (and of grammar and of discourse)', '[s]emantic indeterminacies of reference and sense, multiple ambiguity' and '[r]hythmical indeterminacies of syllable and line: developing, often, conterminously with poetic activity'. Sheppard summarises that 'the poem's affirmative moment' is where 'its indeterminacy and discontinuity [...] co-extend with the reader's act of reading'.[44]

Retallack further embeds the notion of indeterminacy into the complexity of the world, suggesting it is thereby liberating: '[c]omplexity–the network of indeterminacies it spawns–is the condition of our freedom.'[45] She notes the limitations of the determinate work of the conservative mainstream, agreeing with Sheppard that the reader becomes active to complete meaning (the adjective 'ideal' here is laced with irony):

> The ideal poetry of depiction is a series of images strung together in rhythmically unbroken sequences that appear to reveal rather than construct a world. [...] [T]he reader is not any more spurred to imaginative agency than one who has

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[44] Robert Sheppard, 'Propositions', in *Far Language: Poetics and Linguistically Innovative Poetry 1978-1997* (Exeter: Stride, 1999), pp. 23-28 (pp. 24-26).
[45] Retallack, p. 83.

just reviewed an airtight logical proof. Why act when all the work has quite
clearly been done?[46]

The crucial common effect of indeterminacy then is the emphasis on the perceiver's
contribution to the text's semantic, aesthetic and ethical dimensions, in contrast to
Marjorie Perloff's understanding of the term. In 'Normalizing John Ashbery' she claims
the tactical difficulties of Ashbery's image-rich poem of regular syntax 'These Lacustrine
Cities' reveal 'much greater indeterminacy' than *The Waste Land*.[47] This claim is based
on its initial impenetrability and its hard-to-reach meaning.[48] I argue indeterminacy, in
the complex and political definitions of Cage, Sheppard and Retallack (notably
Sheppard's links to perception and subjectivity) – not Perloff's restrictive sense – is a
feature of abstraction and crucial to understanding Cobbing's work.

L'aventure

I do not claim to provide a definitive understanding of Cobbing's work. The principles of
his (unstated) poetics and approaches to poetry were that the solution was in the work
as an on-going concern. It was neither highly theoretical nor intellectual. I am
essentially undertaking a project to offer some means to apply philosophical, social and
political critiques to what many have found to be confusing, impenetrable art. One of the
foremost features of Bob Cobbing's adventurous poetry is a playfulness and a humour
that passes through all phases of his work, from playful digs at tourism in the early
work to complex (i.e. indirect) satirical elements aimed at academicism in *ABC in Sound*
to Cobbing's curious growls and sustained tones alongside Hugh Metcalfe's cabbage
patch hat, gas mask and farting noises in Bird Yak. Yet I do not dwell on such delights.
My focus is on developing a vocabulary for *reading* and *seeing* the work in relation to
vital questions of twentieth-century art. These include ideas central to Modernism and
late Modernism, namely the specific characteristics of abstraction; artistic and critical
approaches to form and perception; and the potential in artistic community for a

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[46] Retallack, p. 118.

[47] See Marjorie Perloff, 'Normalizing John Ashbery', in *Jacket 2* (1998)
<http://jacketmagazine.com/02/perloff02.html> [accessed 8 January 2013] (para. 18 of 33).

[48] Ashbery himself picks apart the poem's narrative, revealing its distinct semantic coherence, in a
broadcast available at *Penn Sound*: 'Interview with Bruce Kawin on WKCR Radio, May 5, 1966'
<https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/podcasts/PennSound-Podcast_18_Ashbery.mp3> [accessed
19 January 2015].

resistant, creative and progressive society. I maintain that Cobbing's work builds on themes and visual aesthetics found essentially in Modernist work.

My first chapter gives a brief (in relation to the volume of his output) overview of Cobbing's artistic productions, placing them into chronological phases for the purposes of reference and establishing the creative characteristics at work. Such an introduction is crucial for a poet so little discussed. Chapter 1 sets out the inquiries undertaken in chapters 2 to 4. Chapter 2 works towards a theory that identifies the union of temporal and spatial modes in certain artforms. I call this aspect, after Bergson, *flow*. Chapter 3 explores the features of abstraction that emerged, loosely speaking, during the Modernist period in European and American art and poetry. Such features, I contend, permeate Cobbing's work and establish solid critical ground for recognising the continuing importance of Modernist concerns in relation to avant-gardism, oppositional and or formally and politically radical art. I maintain throughout that Cobbing's work demands a detailed attention to the precursory field of Modernism, though, as indicated, my overall approach is not one that historicises. My fourth chapter examines the relationship between form and perception in visual art and poetry, and questions how extreme forms and considerations of perception determine a work's political nature. This central cluster of chapters shelves close attention to Cobbing's work in order to cement the critical and analytical ground through which to read it. I anticipate the reasons for this structure will become clear upon encountering the application of the fundamental findings in chapter 5. In noting this I reiterate the claim to making use of a constellatory methodology, reflected in the chapter titles ('figure', 'towards', 'mapping', 'synthesis', 'beyond') which indicate a moving, on-going process of understanding. Chapter 5 ties in what was opened up in chapter 1 with the theoretical explorations of the central three sections, as I focus closely on some of Cobbing's most radical and difficult visual and sound poetry, discerning an unprecedented creation of movement in the poetry's making and its re-making in the act of perception. Making, as Retallack advises, is the imaginative activity that is always key; movement is the thread that perpetually runs through making. Making, for Bob Cobbing, was a perpetual *aventure*.

Chapter 1

Figure of the Creative

Sockless in sandals,

gibbering his wares

in unintelligible shrieks and hisses,

a 'poet' merely disrupts

the solid, sensible business

of the night.

The people hear gibberish;

Poets ! how can nothing be said

with all that noise ?

- Bob Cobbing[1]

'You've got to free the poem from the page and, as Henri Chopin says, "take it onto the streets".'

- Bob Cobbing[2]

In this opening chapter I document Cobbing's work historically, placing it into approximate phases. The chapter is subdivided into sections headed by the years which demarcate those periods. Rather than an attempt to neatly package Cobbing's work into convenient chronological stages, moving in smooth evolution from one period to the next, this is an attempt to group his output in order to chart its diverse movement and identify significant moments, in doing so arriving at a greater understanding of his prolific and varied oeuvre. A selection of his poetry from each period will be discussed in order to survey the broad range of work he produced. Through this categorisation I will identify Cobbing's work as concerned with many of the themes and techniques of Dada and other Modernist and late-Modernist movements, including those associated

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[1] Cobbing, 'If he knew what he was doing', in *bob jubile: selected texts of bob cobbing 1944-1990* (London: New River Project, 1990), p. 50.

[2] *Radio Radio,* Cobbing interviewed by Spinelli.

with Apollinaire and Schwitters. I will contextualise the difficult and radical nature of the work in terms of avant-gardist anti-traditions, making reference to pattern and visual poetry, concrete poetry and sound poetry practised by groups or movements such as the Dadaists and the Ultraletterists. It is no surprise, given this backdrop, that Cobbing's poems often have little meaning in any conventional sense. One objective of this chapter is to give an indication of what his impact and importance were and to describe some of his work so as to lay the ground for subsequent development of theoretical perspectives. It should be borne in mind that the readings I give in this chapter are provisional and, as will become clear later in the thesis, amongst a number of potential understandings of the work due to its largely indeterminate core. My underlying aim is to arrive at an understanding of how Cobbing, in the most unprecedented and original way, brought together the Modernist concerns of the sonic and visual, of sound and text, and of where his poetry resides in terms of its oppositional credentials. As I begin to work towards an exploration of Cobbing's work in terms of a new poetics, I also begin to identify him as a figure of the creative. In his concentration on the sound and visual aspects of poetic creation he was restoring to poetry what most of his contemporary mainstream poets seemed content to ignore: that poetic language and poetic form, for centuries, had arisen out of the sound of words and the shape on the page. Yet Cobbing's achievement lay not solely in giving back to poetry what had always previously been there, but in propelling the art forwards in radical, transfigurative ways. As a contribution to the critical discourse on the significance of sound, print and materiality in poetry, Marjorie Perloff has attempted to define poetic language: '*Poetic* language is language made strange, made somehow extraordinary by the use of verbal and sound repetition, visual configuration, and syntactic deformation.'[3] Cobbing's work engages with Perloff's crucial contention 'that however central the sound dimension is to any and all poetry, no other poetic feature is currently as neglected'.[4] Cobbing's life work can be seen as something of an anti-career as he was always more concerned about the quality of his output than his standing or profile. The anti-career that emerges from the ensuing chronology reveals a variety of utopian and democratic ways of liberating language – freeing the word – through what was a profound exploration of what may arise out of the visual and sonic dimensions of

[3] Marjorie Perloff, 'Introduction: The Sound of Poetry', in *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound*, ed. by Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 1-9 (p. 7).
[4] Perloff, 'Sound', p. 1.

poetry. By way of introduction to the main content in this chapter, following a brief biography, I shall attempt to contextualise Cobbing's work within twentieth-century sound poetry, a wider tradition of visual poetry and in relation to his radical contemporaries. I aim to show that his use, or misuse, of the word was language made very strange to the point of becoming, in sound and text, unrecognisable as such and that drew upon established forms and modes whilst simultaneously, as a manifestation of avant-gardist exploration imbued with its own kinetic energy, transcending those forms and modes to create new ones.

Robert Walter Cobbing was born on 30 June 1920 in Enfield, Middlesex. His father was a signmaker and as a child Cobbing was raised within an assembly of the Plymouth Brethren, a non-denominational Christian movement. He attended Enfield Grammar School and was a conscientious objector during the Second World War. He trained as an accountant before taking up teacher training at Bognor Training College. Until 1964 he worked as a graphic artist, painter, poet and English, Music and Art teacher. He taught English for twenty years, spending his final spell at Enfield Grammar where he met Jeff Nuttall. Together, Cobbing and Nuttall initiated a number of creative ventures for students. In the early '60s, at Alder County Secondary School in East Finchley, Cobbing set up the Rhubarb Club.[5] He later used his teacher training to work on performances with school children. He played with a recorder group in his twenties, but his involvement with art and poetry groups began in 1950[6] with the Hendon Experimental Art Club, essentially a collection of local painters, and the Hendon-based magazine *AND*[7] for which he was to be the main editor of its occasional issues for almost half a century, the last *AND* under Cobbing's editorial stewardship coming in 2002. In 1952, with John Rowan, he formed Hendon Writers Group, producing his first sound poems in 1954. In 1957 Hendon Writers Group was renamed Group H which then became (or merged with) Writers Forum, a poetry workshop which was to last up to and beyond Cobbing's

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[5] Professional reference from Alder County headmaster, 1964, exhibited at *ABC in Sound*, Exhibition Research Centre, Liverpool John Moores University, 20 November 2013.
[6] Various online sources, including the British Library's timeline (<http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelpsubject/literature/authors/cobbing/cobbing.html#timeline> [accessed 4 December 2014]), date the Hendon Experimental Art Club's inception as 1951, but this was disputed by curators William Cobbing and Rosie Cooper at the *ABC in Sound* exhibition.
[7] *AND* was subsequently to lose its upper casing.

death.[8] Writers Forum was in time to become an internationally respected press and workshop, as Cobbing himself was to later engage in creative collaboration with some of the most prestigious artists associated with international avant-gardes; prior to that, in those groups referred to above, Cobbing's creative and collaborative involvement was on little more than a local level. In 1963 he met, and shortly afterwards married, Jennifer Pike. Pike was to be figural in his work for the rest of his life, designing covers for Writers Forum publications, dancing as part of Cobbing's group Bird Yak, contributing to the workshop and as a champion of his work. Writers Forum began publishing in 1963 and was to publish over 1,000 titles before 2002. It existed as a vehicle for young, British poets but also published works by John Cage, Allen Ginsberg and Ian Hamilton Finlay, all of whom enjoyed an international reputation. Cobbing left teaching in 1964 and managed the paperback and poetry departments at Better Books on Charing Cross Road, London. Opened by Tony Godwin in the 1940s, this shop was the venue for a number of events and happenings associated with what Jeff Nuttall termed Bomb Culture, the British version of the 1960s counterculture.[9] In the late '60s he co-founded, with Stuart Montgomery, the Association of Little Presses (ALP), an organisation that promoted the work of small publishers in Britain and Ireland. Cobbing took the role of Vice President. The first ALP catalogue in 1970 contained details of over 500 publications from 65 member presses. Today the potential for small-scale publishing operations, with only perhaps a handful of individuals involved in the entire set up, to reach audiences, assisted as they are by the resources offered by digital printing and electronic media, appears something of a luxury in comparison to the way small presses operated in the '60s, '70s and '80s. The principles behind most small press

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[8] William Cobbing and Rosie Cooper date the formation of Writers Forum as early as 1952, with it existing simultaneous to the various Hendon art groups. Writers Forum, they claim, was set up by some of the Hendon Experimental Art Club members. cris cheek notes that an '*open* workshop' was incepted in 1952, see 'Bob Cobbing' (para. 1 of 43). Cobbing himself stated there had been a workshop 'since 1951', *Radio Radio*, Cobbing and Lawrence Upton interviewed by Martin Spinelli, *Penn Sound* <http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/groups/radioradio/ 16_Bob-Cobbing_Lawrence-Upton_Radio-Radio_NY_2003.mp3> [accessed 18 July 2007]. The British Library website uncertainly suggests that Writers Forum was founded in 1959, <http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelpsubject/literature/authors/cobbing/cobbing.html> [accessed 4 December 2014]. Steve Willey asserts in his thesis that Writers Forum came into being in 1958 as a merger between Hendon Poetry Society (founded September 1950) and Hendon Writers Group (formed December 1952, 'Bob Cobbing 1950-1978: Performance, Poetry and the Institution' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, Queen Mary, 2012) (available at Willey's website: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B16bR23I6ruaNGJUbG1wMTFKMDQ/view?pli=1> [accessed 3 March 2015]), p. 35.
[9] See Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture* (London: Paladin, 1970).

ventures were concerned with side-stepping corporate intervention and having complete artistic control over publications that were usually photocopied and stapled by hand in small numbers without external distribution. In 1970 Cobbing began printing entire books by himself using duplication machinery bought with an Arts Council grant. In 1976 he was instrumental in organizing a sound poetry festival at Earls Court. In the 1970s he convened the Poets Conference in Earls Court. From the late '60s to 1977 Cobbing was on the council of the Poetry Society during what Peter Barry has termed the Poetry Wars;[10] there is little doubt it was the society's most fertile and interesting period not least because Bob Cobbing opened a public print shop on their premises, allowing his own equipment to be used by any poet who wanted to self-publish. Despite such acts of subversion, he was awarded a Civil List pension for services to literature. Cobbing continued to use his own printing equipment throughout the 40 years of his, largely solo, operation of Writers Forum, thus enabling him to control the means of production. He was a prolific writer and performer and continued to work right up to his death on 29 September 2002.

Steve McCaffery has traced the modern development of sound poetry in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, enabling us to historicise and place artistically Cobbing's work.[11] McCaffery details the following major developments: Christian Morgenstern, around the turn of the century, and Paul Scheerbart, whose 'kikaloku' appeared in 1897, are known as precursors to Swiss Dada leader Hugo Ball's first 'Lautgedichte' (sound poem) in 1917; Tristan Tzara's explorations of sound through ethnopoetry around the same time as Ball; the Dadaists' fun and games at the Cabaret Voltaire – McCaffery describes the simultaneist poem as 'an early example of intermedia'; Raoul Haussman's development of optophonetics in 1918; the Russian Futurists and their *zaum*, or 'transrational language'; the distinctive phonetic experiments of Kurt Schwitters; Letterism and its off-shoot Ultraletterism, which included François Dufrêne (whose 'cri-rhythmes' were a notable development), Henri

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[10] See Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* (Cambridge: Salt, 2006).

[11] Steve McCaffery, 'Sound Poetry: A Survey', in *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue: for the Eleventh International Sound Poetry Festival Toronto, Canada October 14 to 21, 1978*, ed. by McCaffery and bpNichol (Toronto: Underwich Editions, [1978 (?)]), pp. 6-18, and in McCaffery, 'Voice in Extremis', in *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. by Charles Bernstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 162-177.

Chopin, Gil J. Wolman and Jean-Louis Brau;[12] and in the 1950s the radical addition to the sound poet's toolbox of the tape recorder, exploited in Chopin's 'poesie sonore'.[13] The Ultraletterists arguably made the most significant break from the word as a semantic unit in focussing upon 'the letter over the word as the basic unit of their poetic composition':[14] they succeeded in an erasure of semantic signification where the Dadaists and the Futurists had retained 'the simulacra of semiosis'.[15] In chapter 3 we shall see how the Ultraletterists' motions to free the voice from speech indicate a conflicted subjectivity and the eventual emergence of abstraction in sound performance. Cobbing enjoyed a close artistic relationship with Chopin for some years. His interest in the sound of poetry emerged originally from the sonic quality in the works of writers such as Whitman, Poe, Stein, Joyce and Bunting; in a radio interview, though guarding against acknowledging being part of a tradition or school, he noted his influences as Marinetti, Kerouac, Joyce and Stein.[16]

Visual poetry has equally a lengthy and little studied history, dating back to at least ancient Greece. Dick Higgins' book *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature* traces the pre-1900 history of shaped poetry (he makes a tentative, if unnecessary, distinction between 'pattern poetry' and its modern equivalent 'visual poetry') from 1700 BC to Mallarmé at the end of the nineteenth century. Using script to form shapes on the page has existed across many cultures for centuries; Higgins notes:

> The story of pattern poetry is, in fact, not the story of a single development or of one simple form, but the story of an ongoing human wish to combine the visual and literary impulses, to tie together the experience of these two areas into an aesthetic whole. Pattern poetry did not originate in any one simple situation or even century [...]. It is [...] an attempt which recurs century after century to make the synthesis, in almost every Western literature and many Eastern ones.

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[12] I prefer this translation of *Lettrisme*, a more precise term than the more common *Lettrism*, and advocated by certain members of the group.

[13] McCaffery, 'Survey', pp. 8-9.

[14] McCaffery, 'Voice', p. 166.

[15] McCaffery, 'Voice', p. 164.

[16] *Radio Radio*, Cobbing interviewed by Spinelli.

Furthermore, there is no consensus on associated terminology and, for Higgins, pattern poetry is 'extremely hard to define since it is no one thing'.[17] Willard Bohn has attempted such a definition: 'visual poetry can be defined as poetry that is meant to be seen,'[18] although this is too loose as it suggests that the appearance on the page of 'non-visual' poetry is redundant. Cobbing's work may help us here as it is possible to categorise his visual poems into concrete, visual and those with elements of the two. In more recent times, Italian Futurism and Wyndham Lewis' Vorticism, between the two major World Wars, produced magazines which presented text unconventionally and made use of images as poetry. The Fluxus community in the '60s (including Higgins), influenced by John Cage's ideas of indeterminacy and known for their radical use of materials, produced handwritten works and ones where text would be displayed in upside down, back-to-front or slanted orientations. Ian Hamilton Finlay's first edition of concrete poetry came out in 1963 (Finlay was also an artist and sculptor) although a group of Brazilians, Noigandres, were using the form in the '50s and Apollinaire's shape poems, *Calligrammes*, published in 1918, could be similarly categorised. Cobbing made concrete poems from the mid-'60s onwards and his contemporaries included Finlay, Chopin, Edwin Morgan and dom. sylvester houédard (known as dsh and, like Chopin, a sound poet). It was out of these uncommon approaches to text layout that Cobbing developed his unique type of visual poetry.

Some years after having established himself as a recognised poet, Cobbing was to become associated with the British Poetry Revival, a loosely defined movement of poets who were essentially reacting to the mainstream dominance of the Movement poets in the 1950s. Where Movement poetry was antimodernist and committed to a semantic and emotional clarity within established, overworked structures, the 'revival' took its influence more directly from Modernism and its associated avant-gardist practitioners. The revival in the UK gathered momentum following Allen Ginsberg's 'happening', the International Poetry Incarnation, at the Royal Albert Hall in 1965 and its legacy continues today, with publishers such as Veer, Salt and Reality Street (plus a post-Cobbing Writers Forum still functioning) flourishing well into the twenty-first

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[17] Dick Higgins, *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 3-4.
[18] Willard Bohn, *Modern Visual Poetry* (London: Associated University Presses, 2001), p. 15.

century.[19] Many of Cobbing's friends and collaborators, not to mention numerous participants in the Writers Forum workshop, are bracketed with the revival. Jeff Nuttall, Tom Raworth, Lee Harwood, Maggie O'Sullivan, Lawrence Upton, Allen Fisher, Adrian Clarke and many other poets of international pedigree, if varying enormously in their materials and formal concerns, have all shared a drive to produce poetry that is radically inventive. Cobbing's place in this cultural development extended into its administration and, through his position in the Poetry Society, took him into direct conflict with the kind of neo-conservatives the British Poetry Revival was attempting to offer an alternative to.[20] However, in contrast to most other English poets, Cobbing was influenced by the sound and visual concerns of the European avant-garde. He was also a lover of film and dance and cared little for the distinctions between artforms, as noted by cris cheek:

> Projecting towards hybridisable boundaries between poetry and painting, poetry and drawing, poetry and music, poetry and film: all of which [...] Cobbing took an active interest [in]. He was really interested in the interstices between poetry and other artforms. He didn't see there being a fixed boundary, he was interested in the conversations.[21]

The dissolution or extension of boundaries will become a key theme in my exploration of Cobbing's work and my attempt to place it historically and artistically. Established or unthreatening boundaries are broken through in his work on a number of levels: in terms of space, form, semantics, perception and genre. Emerging from the survey of Cobbing's practice I conduct in this chapter, are a gradual obliteration of lexical material and the development of a complex relationship between the sonic and the visual. I hope it will be clear that his impact as a practitioner in and performer of unforeseeable, challenging, multi-medial creative acts, in producing these two essential features, was a major contribution to the unstated intentions of the British Poetry Revival.

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[19] The website for Flat Time House, a gallery in Peckham, south east London, claims that Cobbing, whilst at Better Books, 'hatched plans' with Allen Ginsberg and Alexander Trocchi for the International Poetry Incarnation, *FTHO* <http://flattimeho.org.uk/exhibitions/blow/> [accessed 23 June 2014]. I can find no verification of this claim elsewhere although Chris Beckett notes Cobbing did read at the event, 'From the Bombast of Vachel Lindsay to the Compass of Noise: The Papers of Bob Cobbing at the British Library,' *Electronic British Library Journal* (2010) <http://www.bl.uk/eblj/2010articles/pdf/ebljarticle92010.pdf> [accessed 26 March 2015] (para. 33 of 41).
[20] See Barry, *Poetry Wars*.
[21] cheek, 'Roundtable Discussion'. This comment is an update on a sentence cheek included in 'Bob Cobbing' (para. 6 of 43).

Cobbing's artistic work spanned over five decades and consequently can be placed within a range of significant contexts in terms of twentieth-century avant-gardism. His early work was set against the backdrop of the Second World War, which itself followed an intense and prolonged period of international radical art from the 1910s-1930s. This 20-plus year period is generally understood as the Modernist period, and some of the major concerns of Modernism, form, space, perception and abstraction, were also dominant aspects of Cobbing's work. During the '50s and '60s, the post-war consumer boom and the changing roles in society that affected the young and women in particular were overshadowed by the nuclear threat, a central concern of the Bomb Culture in the UK in the '60s, as the prominence of avant-gardist work that had so characterised Modernism faded. I shall now chart Cobbing's phases as they developed chronologically, though again I reiterate that this should not suggest a seamless temporal transition.

1942-1964

Cobbing claimed he composed 'with the piece in mind' not an audience. He explained his methodology was to have 'no theory beforehand' and as 'mainly […] a matter of trying things out to see what would happen'.[22] He explored these very Cagean processes by following wherever they took him, resulting in work which was continuous and constantly changing.[23] Evident in this early period is work with non-figurative images which presage the visual poetry of later decades. Although the extent of Cobbing's explorations intensified from the mid-'60s onwards, this early period clearly shows a commitment to radical experimentation.

The mid-'40s to mid-'60s saw Cobbing produce some purely visual work on duplicator and/or typewriter, sound poems and lexical poems. His first sound poems, that is, at this stage, poems with invented words, were produced in 1954. Cobbing's description of 'First duplicatorprint, 1942' as the result of the discovery of 'interesting patterns' created by the mimeograph duplicator suggests a degree of accident in its creation.[24] The mimeograph works by placing a stencil on a drum and turning a handle to push ink through the stencil. The intended use can be altered by turning the handle at different speeds, interfering with the paper as it is wound through the machine or creating

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[22] *Radio Radio*, Cobbing interviewed by Spinelli.
[23] See in particular Cage's essay 'Lecture on Nothing'.
[24] Steven Ross Smith, *Ballet of the Speech Organs: Bob Cobbing on Bob Cobbing as interviewed by Steven Ross Smith* (Saskatoon: Underwich Editions, 1998), p. 1.

mirror images by placing the stencil the wrong way round. Although the specific result of this piece may not have been planned, it is likely that Cobbing was manipulating the machine in order to see if he could obtain any notable results. 'First duplicatorprint, 1942' is mostly a smeary, indeterminate image with some well-defined lines suggesting both black and grey-white triangles. There is no suggestion that the marks originated in letters. 'White Horse' (1944) is a white on black smearing of a shape similar to the

Fig. 1 'Shore' (1947)

White Horse of Uffington chalk hillside figure in Oxfordshire. The image rests in the centre of the page and the smears emerging from the white figure are speckled white patches. This duplicator piece prefigures much of Cobbing's work in the 1980s and '90s with the photocopier. The allusion to the Uffington horse indicates Cobbing's concerns with materials and space: an ancient hillside chalk drawing is reproduced with modern technology onto a two-dimensional paper surface. 'Shore' from 1947 (fig. 1) was most likely created using a combination of collaging and interfering with the duplicator; there are swirls of ink and indeterminate patterns, speckled, off-white and black, rectangles, stretched rectangles and some hand scribbles. 1948's 'Jungle death' is a repeated, inverted image of an outlined, falling or prostrate human figure, white on black, falling upon or lying amongst branches of a tree or veins. The lower image occupies the whole lower half of the page, and the upper image is smaller and within a series of frames which have not copied fully and so appear to be losing their complete blackness. 'Factory' (1951) was an exercise in discovering the effect of allowing duplicator ink to dominate the visual space. The resultant bleak smears almost erase the outline of a building with chimneys, the image most likely a photograph. With its partial indeterminacy and presentation of erasure or inked overlays, 'Factory' is equally suggestive of the environmental effects/defects of industrialization as it is of the value of art as provocative and puzzling. A year later Cobbing composed 'Ballet', a visual piece with curved dark lines on various greys, heavy dark lines which give definitions to different sections, and a combination of lines which accentuate movement but in no specific direction, or in any or all directions, anticipating the unfixed orientation of much of his visual poetry in the 1980s and '90s, what cris cheek has called 'all ways

up'.[25] 'Crabtree' from 1955 presents indeterminate shapes almost in negative, or mirrored; the page is divided in half but has echoes of the figural shape in each half, indicating remnants, echoes and memory fragments through process. 'The Parade', also from 1955 and, in its echo of the split page, in many ways a sibling piece to 'Crabtree', shows clearly defined but indeterminate shapes collaged onto various shades of black or grey. The dividing line of both these 1955 poems separates a dark section from a light section; however, in both, the line itself is not absolute due to the grain of the copying and the fact that there are shapes imposed on top which cross the lines. The use of collaging, copying, the layering of shapes onto a background and page division are an early signal of the kind of experimentation with process that would be the thrust of much of Cobbing's later work, which would also regularly feature the effect of indistinct or indeterminate boundaries. These works from the '40s and '50s are full of suggestions of movement or layering; the images in 'White Horse', 'Jungle Death' and 'Factory' retain some simulacra of determinacy but are otherwise amorphous and chaotic as they incorporate a certain changeability within their fixed frames. The completely non-figurative pieces ('First Duplicatorprint', 'Shore', 'Ballet' and 'Crabtree') draw the perceiver's attention to process as much as image: the response is as often *how is this done?* as *what is it?*. For Cobbing, the discovery of interesting patterns was the result of an investigation without fixed ideas of what the processes of producing art might be – he liked to employ 'a little bit of wrong'[26] and stated that 'destruction is an interesting way of doing art', recalling his involvement in the mid-'60s with the Destruction in Art Symposium and his own accompanying visual pieces of the same title.[27] Such processes could lead to an originality and inventiveness with the potential to reinvigorate artistic language.

Cobbing drew on Modernist influences for a number of artworks in different media a few years on from these duplicator works. Three colour abstract paintings, 'The Aquarium' (1959), 'Earth Story' (1962) and 'That's What Life Is' (1963), indebted in no small part to Jackson Pollock, prefigure the much later visual poetry in their presentation of blobs, marks and streaks. The paint is applied very thickly in these

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[25] cheek, 'Bob Cobbing' (para. 14 of 43).
[26] Smith, *Ballet*, p. 9.
[27] 'Bob Cobbing, Sound Poet', *Kaleidoscope,* Cobbing interviewed by Mark Steyn, Radio 4 [31 August 1989], private recording.

works, suggesting an attention to the importance of materials in determining perception. This attention to materials was explored further in three-dimensional works 'Plectrum' and 'Next Year in Marienbad' (both 1964).[28] 'Plectrum' is made from a saw blade, pencils, a stick, a plectrum and metal plates on a board, whilst 'Next Year in Marienbad' makes use of a ruler, metal cables, lock catches and a hook. Both works contain traces of Cubism and Dada with a notable debt to Schwitters's use of found, everyday materials. A concern with texture, indicating the sense of touch to complement Cobbing's better-known adventures into the sonic and visual, was clearly occupying him at this time.

Two visual poems, both titled as 'Duplicatorprint, 1964' in *Bill Jubobe*, explore shade and texture.[29] In the first poem there are faint echoes of lines of words which are just discernible as back-to-front. The process used appears to be a print of a photograph mixed with collaged material. The second poem has smears of ink, possibly copied text, with three collaged elements possibly originating in the first poem. This is one of the earliest, if not the earliest, example of Cobbing treating words in order to bring about their disappearance. Although much of the poetry of this period was lexical, these early visual pieces reveal a venturing into indeterminacy, or partial indeterminacy, of image which was indicative of Cobbing's exploratory methodology, revealing his interest in subverting established forms and paying little heed to distinctions of genre. Even if, by the early '60s, Cobbing's engagement with ideas around form, space and perception was embryonic, there were signs that here was a maverick of a potentially substantial status emerging.

'Rare Monsters' (1956), 'Anger to Angst – A passage from person to person' (1957) and 'Acquitted in Oslo' (1958), all lexical poems, can be grounded firmly in the Modernist mode with shades of surrealism and romanticism. In 1960 Cobbing wrote 'out of the spoils', 'lies like truth' and 'sensations of the retina', the latter of which we shall explore in a little more detail shortly. With these poems, he began to experiment with fracturing the lines and using the arrangement of the words to make patterns on the page, thus anticipating his later concrete and visual poetry. The lines 'Dada impression evocation',

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[28] These five artworks were exhibited at *ABC in Sound*, Liverpool John Moores University, November 2013.

[29] Cobbing, *Bill Jubobe: Selected Texts of Bob Cobbing 1942-1975* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1976) (no page numbers).

from 'Pictures at an Exhibition', written in 1958, and 'a huge mad Kafka castle │ running on borrowed time', from 'out of the spoils', reveal some of Cobbing's source material and how he intended to use it.[30] Aside from this, the early lexical material can be reasonably categorised as juvenilia.

In 1963 Writers Forum published *massacre of the innocents poems by Bob Cobbing and John Rowan*, a booklet of lexical poems by both poets with Rowan providing the only sound poem, 'sonnet on the sound', a mix of Schwittersesque non-words and lexical nonsense. Cobbing contributed seven poems, engaging with ideas such as impressions, texture and surface, language and social space, and critical observations on Catholicism and tourism. There is little worth much comment in this volume, yet it includes the first version of *a line from the observer*, where Cobbing took the sensationalist, scaremongering headline 'Are your children safe in the sea?' and worked it into a five-line poem, altering the syntax in each line as he did with 'Make perhaps this out sense of can you', written in the same year, and 'A square poem' (1989). He returned to the *observer* piece a number of times in later years, overtyping or overlaying obsessively, turning around the direction of the text, forcing the emotive lines of media manipulation into a comic obliteration, at the same time gradually eradicating the sibilant and soothing sound qualities of the phrase to counterpoint the danger inherent in the rhetorical question, that had drawn him to it in the first place.[31] There is something politically empowering about perceiving the serial disintegration of the text in this poem, as if the controlling, sensationalizing voice of the mainstream media is being erased, and, perversely, thereby revealed, by large amounts of ink. It is protest made manifest: a manipulative headline has been appropriated and transformed into something of value, its potency erased by the very materials it relies on to spread its shallow ideology. Cobbing's work rarely gets this close to direct pronouncements on ideology or politics. His approach in this instance exposes how the media use language instrumentally. We shall return in chapter 3 to the wider implications of the instrumentalisation of language by authorities and authoritarian agencies. These serial updates of the *observer* poem were radical re-workings of what was at the outset innovative poetry and they are further examples of Cobbing's work in mutation. Two

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[30] Cobbing, 'Pictures at an Exhibition' and 'out of the spoils', in *VerbiVisiVoco: Selected Poems 1942-2001*, ed. by Michael Lentz (Vienna: edition selene, 2003) (no page numbers).
[31] *Radio Radio*, Cobbing interviewed by Spinelli.

poems of Cobbing's, published on the same page of *and 2* (1960/1), reveal an ongoing interest in perception, and movement and kinesis. The first is commonly known as 'sensations of the retina' and, with a constellatory interplay of the senses, links seeing with touch and sound through the medium of light, very much the painter's relationship with perception:

> sensations of the retina
>
> [...]
>
> eye   standing at extreme perimeter
>
>   listens
>
>   becomes the medium of the heard
>
>   touch makes it move
>
>   returned to motion
>
> light   stepping from its latent anonymity
>
>   explodes in sound[32]

The second, punning on 'still' in its temporal and motionless senses (and quite possibly an echo of the ambiguous senses of the word in Keats's sonnet 'Bright Star') suggests a Bergsonian understanding of the movement of time:[33]

> not this
>
> nor that
>
> nor anything
>
> as simple or as still as this
>
>   grasp all things moving
>
> but understanding
>
> strangles thought
>
> and still is death
>
> and still is all
>
> we've dared to snare

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[32] Cobbing, 'Two Poems', in *and 2*, ed. by John Rowan and Cobbing (London: Arts Together, [1961(?)]), p. 21.

[33] See Chapter 2's account of Bergson's flow.

and life is one and moving still

life is one and moving[34]

During this early phase, where Cobbing was deeply involved in the local arts scene in Hendon and establishing Writers Forum as initially a poetry workshop then a publishing press, he produced work in a variety of media and forms, embracing abstract or semi-abstract visual art, treated photography, painting and collage as well as lexical and text-based sound poetry. He worked with a range of materials (ink, paint, type, paper, found items) and several technologies (duplicator, typewriter, camera). Although it would not be until the late '60s that he gained any kind of international recognition (international acknowledgement preceded any recognition in the UK – to whatever extent he ever managed to achieve that), between the '40s and the early '60s he was establishing himself as a committed, serious artist with a vast breadth of reference points, an adventurous sense of artistic exploration and an interest in the vital philosophical and artistic questions of his century, namely perception, form and the making of meaning. For these reasons I propose we can begin to consider him to be a figure of the creative, as we could Blake, Shelley, Schwitters and Ginsberg.

1964-c.1970

There was a notable shift in Cobbing's work in the mid-'60s, which later led him to describe all his creative output from that time onwards as poetry. This is pivotal to understanding Cobbing's creative and aesthetic development as the work of concrete poets from the '50s (though some decades after Apollinaire, whose work was known to Cobbing) was only just becoming known and no one had ever previously claimed that indeterminate images or artwork that did not contain recognisable words and letters should be called poetry. For the remainder of the '60s he explored the possibilities of text arrangement, presenting isolated letters on the page and using techniques which overlaid and blurred words. By the end of the decade Cobbing's concrete – or shape – poetry had taken on innovative and distinctive forms. He also began sound performances and recordings including experimenting with the tape recorder. In the final few years of the '60s Writers Forum, as both a press and a workshop, began to

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[34] Cobbing, 'Two Poems', p. 21.

surface as an advocate of the kind of innovative poetry for which it was to become internationally recognised. Indeed, during this period, Cobbing's reputation within the international avant-garde was established.

The publication in 1964 of *Sound Poems* (later retitled *ABC in Sound*), an exploration of the visual and auditory possibilities of the English alphabet, marked this significant change. Each letter was accorded a poem of its own, so the sequence is 26 individual poems, each based around a letter. This type of sequencing presented an organizing principle for much of Cobbing's work from that point on, not just in terms of published material but in terms of process. *ABC in Sound* was an unprecedented work in both form and content. The framing around the structure of the alphabet and the principle of sequencing are neither, in themselves, particularly radical nor inventive ideas but through them are woven concerns and approaches that were familiar to many Modernists: innovative attitudes to layout and visual presentation, explorations of fracturing and attention to the poem as sonic material. Added to Cobbing's contemporary twist on these Modernist themes was a multi-medial relationship between the printed text and its sound performance, wherein a kinetic relationship between the two was developing, something that has proved highly influential in British poetry in the ensuing 50 or so years. The influence of Joyce, Dada, Futurism, Schwitters and Letterism are evident in many of Cobbing's sound poems, as Glyn Pursglove has noted: 'Bob Cobbing's *ABC Sequence*, for example, can be seen as such an attempt to pick up some of the fragments from the explosion of *Finnegans Wake*, in the way it explores resources and means way beyond those of any individual language.'[35] Taking this as a starting point for understanding the *ABC* as a vehicle for propelling language beyond its common written and spoken limitations, I shall explore how this sequence poem reveals, in its attention to lettering and word structure, Cobbing's own take on the ideas of the Letterists.

The A poem is a list poem which disregards syntax, description and narrative, thereby accentuating its sound and language aspects. It starts with a line of English, 'Adventure', but is then dominated by French words which resonate phonemically and semantically with 'adventure'. It signals not just the adventure into the alphabetic sequence of this

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[35] Glyn Pursglove, 'Some Contexts for Sound Poetry', *Stereo Headphones*, 4 (1971), qtd as a foreword in Cobbing, *ABC in Sound*, 5th edition (London: Writers Forum, March 1994) (no page numbers).

book-long poem but Cobbing's serious venturing into sound poetry specifically, as well as into a prolonged engagement with artistic form, perception and space. 'Aveugle' ('blind' or 'blind person') and 'A l'aveuglette' ('blindly') are introduced towards the end as arguably near-antonyms to adventure/aventure, yet I would read them as a playful indication that this embarkation on the adventure is being taken blindly, without any clear idea where it is going to end up:

> Adventure
>
> Aventure
>
> Aventureux
>
> Adventure
>
> Aventure
>
> Aventureuse
>
> Adventurous
>
> A l'aventure
>
> Dire la bonne aventure
>
> Aventurier
>
> Aventurière
>
> Aveugle
>
> Aveugle
>
> A l'aveuglette[36]

There is a hypnotic rhythm which is underscored by the repetition of soft consonants and is even enhanced by the line which, visually, seems to break it up: 'Dire la bonne aventure' acts as a bridge or middle eight might in a song, a brief rest from the familiar pattern to lead us back into the sequence. Yet this introduction to the sequential sound poem does more than merely draw attention to the sonic, and to a lesser extent graphic, qualities – the material – of language; as it flips between two neighbouring national languages, we are drawn to the fact that what we have here is *language*, not just *a language*. The intermingling of languages throughout the sequence not only reinforces this but draws attention to the relationship between these graphic and sonic material aspects. The B poem behaves similarly and, with the line 'Bomb bomb bomb bast', provides both an echo of Marinetti's interest in the sonic qualities of machinery and

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[36] This and all subsequent quotations from Cobbing, *ABC in Sound* (no page numbers).

weaponry and a typical Cobbing wordplay as what starts as an onomatopoeic representation of mindless destruction merges into a term synonymous with pomposity and pretension. Is it the arrogance of some unidentified bombers and their commanders that the poem is satirising or was Cobbing heading off accusations of being bombastic before they had been levelled at him? It is legitimate to read it as simultaneously both and neither; the narratives that can be discerned from the limited semantic codes are neither fixed nor definitive. Such indeterminacy allows for uncertain and multiple meanings to exist simultaneously. Three lines later there is a rhythmic echo: 'Em- em- em- phase'; listeners are urged to emphasise but are left to determine themselves what requires emphasis. Is it merely the sound of the poem – *enunciate these sounds!* – or the echoed rhythm or even the semantic possibilities arising out of bombs, pomposity and emphasis?

'A' and 'C' are 14 lines long, as are the later poems for the letters 'J', 'L' and 'X', the standard length for the sonnet, an established and mostly traditional form of poetry. The acknowledgement, use or misuse of poetic forms grounds the work in such traditions whilst simultaneously acting as a breach of them. Cobbing insisted that his work was called poetry, however much it may have appeared or sounded like something else, even something indefinable. The pattern of the A poem is disrupted at the ninth line, thus echoing the Italian sonnet's structure of the octave followed by the sestet; this is a purely structural echo as there are none of the other features of the Italian form such as the sestet acting as a kind of resolution for a problem or question set out in the octave. The C poem also appears to be a structural corruption of the English sonnet which traditionally features three blocks of four lines, each block with its own internal rhyme scheme, with the closing couplet a kind of epigram or summary. Cobbing's take on the sonnet here groups lines together in terms of their sound relation so that the blocks contain three, then four and five lines before the couplet, wryly, tails off with the sound of sleep: 'Zzzzzz Zzzzzz │ Z'. Whether this 'couplet' suggests boredom with the form, the peacefulness of sleep or merely the graphical representation of the *sound* of sleep, it is also an ending, a closure – the final letter in the alphabetic sequence providing a rounding off – and, inevitably, an anticipation of the final poem in the *ABC* sequence. Innovative letteristic strategies such as this repeatedly appear in Cobbing's work from this time onwards. Moreover, there is an implicit contribution to the

discourse on the sonnet, and as such a political statement, a discourse that Jeff Hilson has identified in his introduction to *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets*. Hilson asks:

> why these major publishing houses seem to have put out what is effectively the same anthology [of sonnets]. Sure, some of the poets differ from book to book, but the overall impetus is unchanging: to present a survey of the sonnet from its beginnings to the present-day. The "commonsense" answer is that they are all jostling in a free market for market domination of an ever-popular form. Each anthology hopes to trump its forbears though none of them acknowledges the existence of any of the others. In some ways it's a wholly laughable state of affairs, though also one to be taken very seriously. I would argue that there is a politics of form at work here and that the sonnet has become a focal point for some of the issues surrounding the so-called poetry wars. As a form the sonnet is fiercely guarded, as a read-through of the introductions to many of these anthologies testifies. Just as its varied structural features – 14 lines, octave and sestet, rhyming couplet, volta, etc – are metonymic of the whole form and can't be disturbed without destroying its integrity, so the sonnet stands as a metonym for the kind of poetry published by the big publishing houses. To disturb the sonnet's form too radically therefore is not just to disturb the sonnet itself, or the sonnet tradition, but to endanger the foundations of the wider poetic tradition. I wonder whether this doesn't also go some way towards explaining the recent spate of mainstream sonnet anthologies. At a time when linguistically innovative poetry has been making inroads into the public consciousness – in spite of fierce opposition from some quarters – these anthologies appear, one after the other, to shore up the ruin that such a move threatens.[37]

In daring to challenge the sonnet's traditional, or mainstream, integrity, as the 80 or so poets in Hilson's collection do, Cobbing was implicitly suggesting there is much more life to be eked out of poetic form, and by extension out of poetry in general, than the conservatives would want the poetry-reading public to believe. Hilson's reference to the poetry wars of the 1970s, detailed in Peter Barry's book, summarises the position of the

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[37] Jeff Hilson, 'Introduction', in *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets*, ed. by Hilson (Hastings: Reality Street, 2008), pp. 8-18 (pp. 9-10).

conservative and radical poetry camps neatly. We explore in greater depth the political dimensions of radical form in chapter 4.

Only two of the fourteen lines in the C poem have any C's at all. This initially strikes the reader as a curiosity, yet in the wider context of the whole sequence we see this strategy appear and disappear. Indeed the D poem, by contrast, is persistently alliterative (though not solely with D sounds), creating a bombardment of simultaneously sonic and visual effects. Not merely a highly letteristic device, this arrangement demands the perceiver's attention is focused on the relationship between letter and sound:

> Damudadamudan dancho dachoka dango
>   Dango danko danko
> Dansei dansen dan-yaku Danyubu
>   Darashiganai
> Dare daryoku dasaku dassen
>   Dassen dasu dasu

Again there is a mixture of languages, but this time it is entirely fabricated words interspersed with Japanese terms, a method which is repeated in the Y poem. For the average English-speaking listener, this is pure sound, the very essence of music. With its regular, structured and distinctive layout and absence of semantic codes, the D poem forges a union between sonic and visual.

Save for the assonance in the first line, repeated once towards the end of the poem, the E poem features no more of its titular letter than may be expected in any given text. Instead it proceeds with the kind of rhythmic and alliterative features found in the preceding poems, with plenty of B's and C's. There is also rhyme which works intrinsically with the rhythm and is accentuated by a semantic indeterminacy which brings the materiality of the sound to the fore: 'East-ender extender East India hinderer'. One of the main aspects of E is visual: it has a distinctive shape with lines becoming progressively shorter up to two-thirds of the way down where three single word lines cause the eye to reverse left to right before the final few lines form the shape of a rectangle. It is not a sufficiently identifiable shape for the poem to be described as concrete, but its visual presentation is significant and affects the pace and delivery of the reader, assuming one takes pauses, even very slight ones, at the end of each line. The

sounding of this piece is dependent very much on its shape: the line lengths lend a certain pattern to the rhythm and stresses, with for example the three one-word lines suggesting a slower, broken delivery. Although there may be a diversity of variations in which E could be rendered, its shape narrows the field of possibilities – there are certainly ways it could *not* be read.

The N and Q poems are the shortest in the collection: both are seven lines with only one word or letter per line:

N	Q
Ndue	Kew
Ndemic	Queue
	Cue
Nd-wise	Q
Ndure	
Nded	Coo!

Both draw attention to the materiality of the letter in both its sonic and graphic forms. Whilst clearly retaining recognisable pronunciation, 'N' misspells syllables by dropping the initial *e* so that the letter N provides the phonemic value for /en/. 'Q' lists homophones, with the sound of the letter Q simply repeated five times with an almost imperceptible vowel change in the final line. Both pieces allocate whole lines for the titular letter. N evolves into other sounds and has a suggestive indeterminacy whereas Q changes the spelling and retains traces of semantic connotations, but, as it repeats one sound alone, the ear – and even the eye in reading the page – is drawn much more to the sonic than the visual. The layout of short lines with one line break further influences the 'out-loud' performance as it demands certain stresses, pauses and emphases, although as each extract is seven lines they could be taken together to be a further contribution to the discourse on the sonnet. Moreover reading them as a pair forces reflection on the potential relationship between the sonic and the visual. They can, and do, affect each other depending on the visual techniques and sound sequences that are used. There are multiple possible features in the relationship between these two poems in the *ABC*, but their interdependence is clearly intentional.

'R' is a column poem and, apart from the first and last words, only one word begins with an r. With each line in each of the three columns containing one word alone, performances of this piece would resemble a list poem. Moreover, all the words are real words yet have no apparent (semantic, phonic or syllabic) association with each other. An average readership has a tendency to search for semantic connections but here one can find a certain pleasure to be had from the sound alone if the attachment to conventional meaning can be relinquished. Yet it is the visual layout which is the most prominent feature of 'R' and that arrangement enables the poem to be read in any number of ways: across and down, down and across, diagonally or even selecting words randomly. Again, the visual determines the sonic without prescribing it.

The S poem manages to be simultaneously serious and playful, revealing and misleading. It is a shape piece, again adding weight to the visual as a counter to the sonic and semantic effects. It concerns itself with terminology that resonates with our inquiry: 'Sign │ Sound │ Sense │ Symbol │ Signal │ Speech │ Symptom │ Syllable │ Semiosis │ Structure │ Semantics │ Semiotics │ Signstock │ Synchronic │ Syntactics │ Signsystem'. Without making explicit comment on how these terms inform or are informed by *ABC in Sound*, Cobbing is suggestive of the significance of sonic, visual and semantic meaning. The final, detached, 'Shit', placed about five imaginary lines below its predecessor, is perhaps a playful assessment of the whole intellectual debate around semantics, a reading suggested by Cobbing's comment that his work was a practical demonstration.[38] Yet, as well as a phonic consistency, there is an ambiguity inherent in 'Shit'. It could be taken as an exclamation of powerlessness at all the diversionary technical terminology, a violent critique of academicism or simply another apparently random word invoking the chance processes that were important to Mallarmé and Cage. These are just three potential readings arising out of the poem's indeterminacy.

The 'T' or 'Tan' poem consists of fictitious words which stress rhythmic, syllabic, alliterative and graphic features. Every word starts with the letters t-a-n and there are groupings of four lines similar to stanza divisions throughout. On the page the piece appears barrel-shaped and the typeface increases in size towards the middle from both top and bottom, suggesting a symmetry and depth of field. Cobbing's recorded versions of 'T' are chant-like and the resultant hypnotic effect is indicative of something tantric, a

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[38] See Introduction.

term which one feels the poem is constantly working towards phonically but never actually reaches just as, perhaps, it nods towards the kind of transfiguration associated with the vast diversity of tantric practices. Cobbing described the 'T' poem as 'an attempt to get back to harmony and get back to a feeling of well-being'.[39] This is achieved through its repetitions of invented words which incorporate a persistent letteristic and phonemic focus on the soft, soothing consonants T and N.

Let us rewind a little through the alphabet to examine the G poem (fig. 2). The word 'grin' is repeated seven times, the lines forming themselves into the shape of a grin, presenting a curvature around a top-bottom axis. To identify the grin the perceiver has to rotate the page 90 degrees and is thereby physically engaged in the manner in which the text occupies the space of the page. Both the curved presentation of the poem running from the top to the bottom of the page and its inclusion as part of a serial poem foreground later Cobbing practices. Cobbing engaged in a long exploration into the effects of arranging letters, symbols or marks with an apparent top-bottom direction, in contrast to the left-right direction of conventional reading. *Jade-Sound Poems* from the mid-'70s is a notable work in this regard and will form a core of our inquiry in chapter 5. Another such piece is 'Worm', a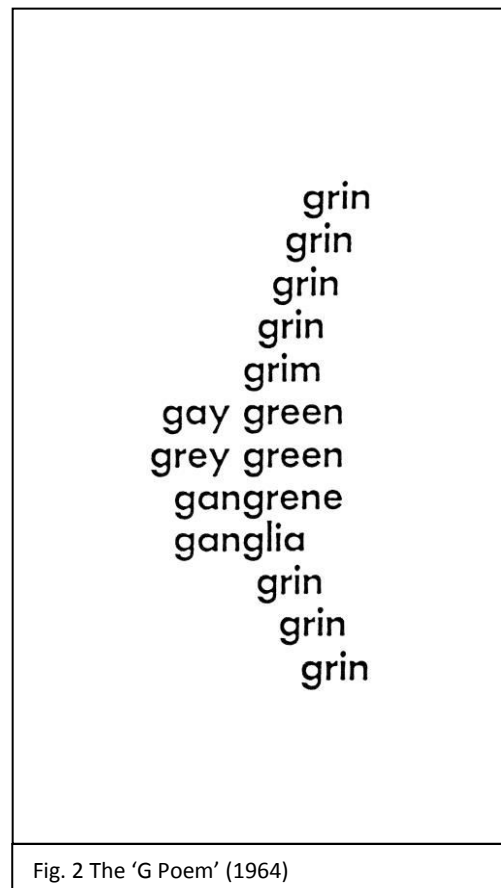lthough some exploration into its exact genesis is required. At the *ABC in Sound* exhibition in 2013, curators William Cobbing and Rosie Cooper claimed 'Worm' was made in 1954, although a version is identified on Anna Barham's blog as belonging to 1966.[40] It is possible that the 1966 version is a Writers Forum reissue as opposed to a Cobbing update, although there is little to suggest he was working with text in this specific manner as early as 1954, which implies

grin
grin
grin
grin
grim
gay green
grey green
gangrene
ganglia
grin
grin
grin

Fig. 2 The 'G Poem' (1964)

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[39] *Radio Radio*, Cobbing interviewed by Spinelli.

[40] 'Suppose I call a man a horse, or a horse a man' <http://supposeicall.blogspot.co.uk/2013/03/voice-body-body-writing.html> [accessed 4 December 2013].

that the exhibition curators may have been mistaken about the dating of the visual version. Michael Lentz accords one page to two 'Worm' poems, one in linear columns and lines, the other the visual poem just mentioned, dating them jointly as '1954-64';[41] this suggests that the visual version in the '60s may have followed an original lined version of the '50s. *bob jubile*, the collection of Cobbing works, published by New River Project in 1990, selected by himself and Jennifer Pike, appears to clear up the confusion: similar to Lentz, the lined and visual versions occupy a single page, the lined one on the left hand side, with the index listing them as 'Worm, 1954/1964; from Eyearun (Writers Forum, 1966)'.[42] Cobbing himself stated that his first sound poem was 'Worm' in 1954 but he did not refer to the visual appearance of the piece.[43] It seems most likely that the visual version of 'Worm' was first published in 1964. Indebted to Apollinaire's calligram 'Il Pleut', it presents overtyped lettering in a number of wavy vertical patterns, the letters appearing shadowed and only with a certain effort of concentration are they legible as words. Each line presents sequences of synonyms for or associations with 'corpse', 'crumbling', instigate', 'hunt', 'wriggle' and 'rust' respectively. The words read top to bottom but require 90 degree rotation, as with the G poem from *ABC in Sound*. However, treated visually with no attempt to capture semantics, the shapes appear to snake *up* the page like flames or strips of material flapping in the wind. *Three Poems for Voice and Movement* (1971) includes a number of pages of lettering, although this is not its exclusive concern, arranged top-bottom in curved shapes. If *Jade-Sound Poems* was to pick up on the visual themes of *Three poems* and 'Worm' in particular, there is also what we might call a genetic line, what Cobbing called 'a certain family resemblance', to be drawn to the exclusively indeterminate, hand-drawn shapes and symbols of *Sound of Jade*, a Writers Forum 1994 publication.[44] The minimal clarity lent to the invented characters in *Sound of Jade* appeared in stark relief to the density of much of Cobbing's visual poetry through the '90s as he was working intensively with significant portions of black ink obliterating possible or previous material in works such as *Domestic Ambient Noise*.

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[41] Lentz (ed.) (no page numbers).

[42] *bob jubile*, p. 76.

[43] Charles Amirkhanian, 'Interview with Bob Cobbing (September 20, 1972)', *UbuWeb* <http://www.ubu.com/sound/cobbing.html> [accessed 13 October, 2014].

[44] *Radio Radio*, Cobbing interviewed by Martin Spinelli.

In 1966 the Writers Forum workshop was around ten years old and the press had been operating for three years or so. *and 4*, published that year, is a good marker for how Cobbing's work was beginning to develop. Whereas the previous editions of *and* had been tentative to say the least (in the case of *and 2*, featuring Movement poet John Wain, bland and conservative in places), *and 4* moves on appreciably from its predecessor, which itself owed considerable influence to the European avant-garde magazines of the inter-war
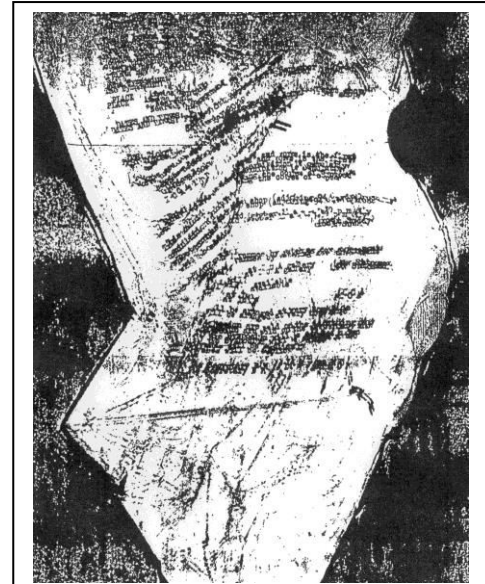

Fig. 3 from *Destruction in Art* (1966)

years, such as those published by Wyndham Lewis, Pound and the Futurists, with its playing with layout and collage. *and 4* is full of visual, concrete and sound poetry and features the likes of Anselm Hollo, dsh, Ernst Jandl, Franciszka and Stefan Themerson, John Rowan and Jeff Nuttall.[45] Cobbing himself contributed 'some number poems', a sequence of six pages consisting solely of typed numbers arranged into rectangles or a combination of rectangles and squares; apart from the first in the sequence, all feature overtypes and the pieces present progressively denser patches. This is again a demonstration of the process and means of production drawing attention to themselves: the process *is* the poem, the machinery announces the creative and physically committed labour that has been expended in production. Labour, machine and text form an intricate kinetic interplay. However the labour is not the industry expended by a poet seeking to exact metrical forms or to construct an emotionally-effective simile, and the machine is misused. Such disobedience with process determines the innovation evident in the text.

Destruction in Art (figs 3 and 4) was an early signal of the visual poetry that Cobbing produced prolifically for the last twenty or so years of his life. It is the product of gradually mutilating and destroying a stencil on a mimeo duplicator. The stencil was the announcement of the Destruction in Art Symposium, held in London in 1966, and Cobbing produced 500 prints from the various stages in the destructive process.[46] From this information we know that the poem started out as a coherent text, yet many of the

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[45] *and 4*, ed. by John Rowan and Bob Cobbing (London: Writers Forum, [1966(?)]).
[46] Cobbing, *Changing Forms* (no page numbers).

resultant visual pieces bear no trace of any lexical material. This obliteration of the word was to become a regular feature in Cobbing's poetry from ten years or so after this
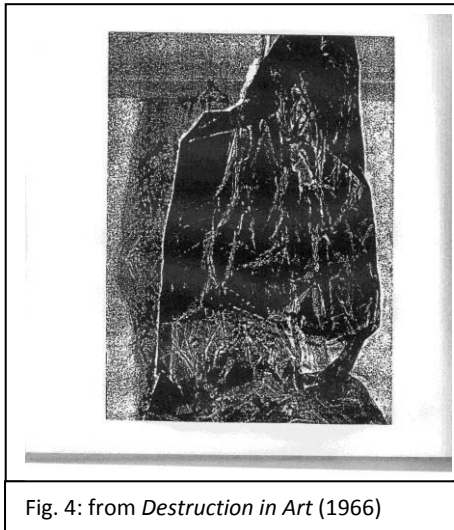

Fig. 4: from *Destruction in Art* (1966)

work, though traces of the word frequently remained or were returned to. *Destruction in Art*'s several pages include large daubs of black ink and what appear to be copies of scrunched up paper which would most likely have been overlaid before placing the paper onto the stencil drum or created by manipulation during the stenciling process. Such dense presentation of materials, where the text is brutalised, taps in to a number of the key themes I aim to identify in his work, namely a loosened subjectivity, novel approaches to form and perception, and indeterminacy as a feature of abstraction. Steve Willey however has proposed an alternative consideration of this piece:

> The occasion of production [of *Destruction in Art*] needs to be reconstructed and placed in dialogue with Cobbing's poems in order for the fuller picture of Cobbing's poetry to emerge. In these terms his poetry can be conceived of as a manifestation of a way of thinking about the relationship between the nature of the event, as a real but occasional gathering of people, and the status of the poem as a literary and aesthetic document, which also functions as a document of the event.[47]

The idea that Cobbing's poems should be in dialogue with each other – and by extension, given their exceptional nature, they are in dialogue with all other poetry – complements my comments about *Destruction in Art*'s aesthetic and radical qualities. Cobbing's role as a protagonist within a community of operators, not least in terms of the Writers Forum workshop, is highly relevant to our understanding of his work and extends the notion of Cobbing as a figure of the creative. And the suggestion that the poem becomes a historical document supports the view that I express in chapters 4 and 5 that there are a range of multiple possible contexts for his work which arise out of the poetry's indeterminate nature.

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[47] Steve Willey, 'Jade-Sound Poems: Bob Cobbing and the Poetic Institution', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 4:2 (2012), pp. 229-258, 234.

As stated earlier, there emerged in Brazil in the 1950s, following a long, multicultural tradition of pattern and visual poetry, a group of practitioners who began to produce concrete poetry. The Brazilian concrete poetry manifesto of 1958 states:

> Concrete poetry begins by assuming a total responsibility before language: accepting the premise of the historical idiom as the indispensable nucleus of communication, it refuses to absorb words as mere indifferent vehicles, without life, without personality, without history — tab[oo]-tombs in which convention insist[s] on burying the idea.[48]

Cobbing's practice of always going back to the word, which includes his lengthy preoccupation with the letter, is demonstrated clearly in his concrete work where the attention to the constituent parts of sentences and phrases (words) and the constituent parts of words (letters) are displayed in patterns which bring to prominence their material value, giving them life and personality. Our discussions of flow in chapter 2 and Gertrude Stein's work in chapter 3 will also reveal how the factor of duration in
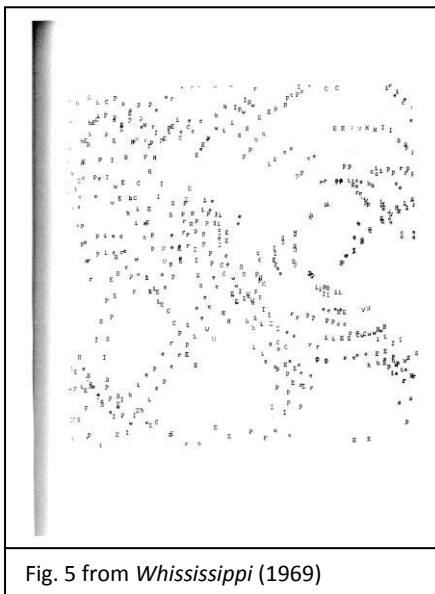

Fig. 5 from *Whississippi* (1969)

Cobbing's poetry gives words a history. The 1969 concrete poems 'Spontaneous appealinair contemprate apollinaire', 'Marvo Movies Natter' and the five-page sequence poem *Whississippi* (fig. 5) show an attention to shape on the page entirely through letter arrangement which revisited the individual poems for the letters E, G, O, S and T in *ABC in Sound* (it would be consistent with Cobbing's humour and love of verbal play to note the missing 'I' from a sequence that would otherwise spell 'egoist'). They can all also be classified as serial poems as there is a clear visual resemblance between each page of the poems. *Whississippi* is a staggering example of how he would dedicate hours of labour to a piece, producing a result whereby the means and processes of production are implied by and are as figural as the finished text itself: again, it is not just a case of what it is but how it is done. The sequence presents individual typed letters which form, in the first poem, an indeterminate sprawl creating an effect not unlike a starry sky. As we progress through

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[48] 'concrete poetry: a manifesto', at Augusto de Campos's website: <http://www2.uol.com.br/augustodecampos/concretepoet.htm> [accessed 24 May 2011].

the different versions we find an increasing number of overtyped letters which, in the final piece, create a very dense, almost blackened, portion. A sequential approach of this nature, and we can add to the above late '60s pieces in this category *a line from the observer* (1966), where the shifts and visual development serve to make the work more and more referable only to its own earlier versions, is an example of 'making the poem more like itself', which breaks through the boundary of the idea of a poem as confessional, or as belonging to a first- or third-person voice or as a work that fits neatly into an established form.[49] *Whississippi* is essentially a chaotic and indeterminate piece, yet it retains remnants of recognisable shapes.

In the mid-'60s Cobbing started working with electronics and was invited for a number of years to the Fylkingen sound festival in Sweden during what many commentators believe to be the most fertile international period for sound poetry.[50] He there struck up collaborative relationships with Henri Chopin and dsh. Chopin was a practitioner who experimented with the possibilities of sound by manipulating and distorting it with technology. In 1969 Cobbing published an essay, 'We Aspire to Birdsong', in which he considers the voice in its 'pure' acoustic ambience and in relation to technology:

> We are aided in our search by sophisticated instruments, the microphone and 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 rhythm and tone, power and subtlety. We are in a position to claim a poetry which is musical and abstract; but however hard we try to do so can we escape our intellect? In the poetry of pure sound, yes....[51]

The concept of intellect Cobbing is concerned with here alludes to placing the body, not the mind, as the figural medium in perception and expression. We shall return to this idea in future chapters given that the body's mediatory role in the process of perception

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[49] See Lawrence Upton, '"NAMING" and "CURSING": some live text-sound composition' at the Universidad Diego Portales's (UDP) website: <http://www.revistalaboratorio.cl/2010/12/naming-and-cursing-some-live-text-sound-composition/> [accessed 11 June 2011].

[50] Robert Sheppard, for example, has referred on his blog to its 'international heyday in the 1960s', 'Bob Cobbing and Concrete Poetry', *Pages* <http://robertsheppard.blogspot.com/2005/03/robert-sheppard-bob-cobbing-and.html> [accessed 11 June 2011].

[51] Cobbing, 'Some Statements on Sound Poetry', in *Sound Poetry*, ed. by McCaffery and Nichol, pp. 39-40 (p.39).

to create meaning forms a significant portion of our argument. Following a number of years using technology to treat the voice, and although he could be found at gatherings at Chopin's house well into the '70s, Cobbing turned away from electronics as he sought to discover the possibilities of voice in its unamplified mode. Whereas with his text production it was Cobbing's use of machines, it was his disregard for them in his sound performances that characterized his most significant work. Again, such an exploratory approach to method and materials, never resting on a formula or seeking to consolidate certain tropes for career progression, occurred towards the end of this (albeit arbitrary) second phase which saw major developments for Cobbing as a creative figure. The 1964 ABC sequence was the genesis of continued exploration into the serial poem as well as steering his poetic interest much more towards sound. 1966 saw him publish *and 4*, the first manipulation of the *observer* poem and take part in the *Destruction in Art* symposium for which he produced the vital manipulated stencil work that prefigured much of his major poetry 30 years later. This three-year period between 1964-66 signals a foot-finding in terms of Cobbing's creative production that was to provide impetus and direction for his industrious, creative labouring for the rest of his life.

c.1970-mid-1980s

The publication of *Sonic Icons* in 1970 signalled a level of sophistication that was to become a trademark of Cobbing's visual and sound poetry from that point onwards. It was another pivotal moment for Cobbing's art. Published by Writers Forum, Cobbing introduced *Sonic Icons* with these announcements:

> sonic

> most of my recent poems are intended fpr [sic] several voices (up to eight or twelve) or for tape, where various layers of vocal sound are superimposed and treated by simple electro-acoustical means

> icons

these visual versions exist partly in their own right, partly as texts for performance and partly as parallels in visual pattern to the sound patterns of the sonic versions[52]

As the anagrammatic, self-referential title and the above statements imply, this collection, in its page version, is a series of investigations of shape and page space. 'hymn to the sacred mushroom' comes in four versions: three 'trees' and a lined poem; the 'trees' are the visual versions, although it would be more precise to categorise them as concrete, and the verbal poem features lines alone. In acknowledging the distinction between verbal and visual poetry in this edition, Cobbing was intensifying the process of bringing together the histories of sound and visual poetry. Purely in terms of his practice, this development is an example of Cobbing constantly discovering new ways of working through an attention to method as opposed to coming up with ideas or taking an ideological stance; he commented in the Kaleidoscope interview:

I don't think I ever set out to do anything. I think that's fatal. I think to have an aim in mind is probably very restricting. It's really a matter of doing things to see what happens. Almost always, if I start something, it comes up to something interesting, not by forcing it at all but by letting it happen. [...] You don't know what it's going to sound like until it's happened.[53]

His later work dispensed with such a manifest distinction between sound and text: by the '80s the visual poems were regularly employed as scores for voice performance. Johanna Drucker suggests that sound, whilst clearly existent in poetry, is not prescribed by graphic codes: 'Sound is not *on* the page, even if a graphic transmission allows for its properties to be notes for reproduction in mental or verbal rendering.'[54] Drucker acknowledges that 'graphical codes are integral to the transmission of poetic forms' but argues that sound can only be an approximation or interpretation of the graphic.[55] By contrast, Ming-Qian Ma proposes that 'typographical visual displays of linguistic units on the page invariably invite, and indeed demand, auditory enactments'.[56] Susan Howe's

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[52] Bob Cobbing, *Sonic Icons* (London: Writers Forum, 1970) (no page numbers).
[53] *Kaleidoscope*.
[54] Johanna Drucker, 'Not Sound', in *The Sound of Poetry*, ed. by Perloff and Dworkin, pp. 237-48 (p. 239).
[55] Drucker, p. 241 and p. 244.
[56] Ming-Qian Ma, 'The Sound Shape of the Visual: Toward a Phenomenology of an Interface', in *The Sound of Poetry*, ed. by Perloff and Dworkin, pp. 249-69 (p. 249).

comment that '[e]very piece of a letter, every shape of a letter, every word, how words are placed on the page, the minute you put a mark on a page, it's acoustic' suggests an integral interfacing between the sonic and the visual.[57] Ma clarifies his argument in terms of the spatial and temporal properties of the graphic; according to Ma, the graphic details of visual poetry 'begin to explore their own sound shapes by way of a reconfigured interface of spacing and temporalizing that break away from the fixed value-ratio indexes through a temporal expansion and a spatial extension.'[58] Crucial to our understanding of how Cobbing developed a sonic relationship to the visual are Drucker's claim that 'graphic features are codes of provocation',[59] Howe's identification of acoustic properties in the graphic and Ma's conclusion that 'the sound of the shape of the visual is the shape of space in the visual becoming acoustically temporal; it is the shape of time in sound becoming visually spatial'.[60] I believe a shift is discernible in the way Cobbing performed his sound and visual poems from the early '70s to the '80s. The exploratory, collaborative work in Koncrete Canticle and abAna typically featured layering of voices and acoustic manipulation through technology. The text versions of the poems were lexical and the performed versions drew out the sonic materiality of the letter. This sonic exploration of the letter includes some progression into the pure sound of sustained tones, hisses or wavering notes. By the '80s Cobbing was performing visual poetry with much fewer words and letters and much darker, brutalised graphic material. The shift in sound performance was towards more abstracted vocal soundscapes which were frequently more of an assault on the listener but as such, though more demanding, more intense and engaging. We can perhaps align the earlier work with Drucker's understanding of the graphic as provocative to sounding as Cobbing's sonic interpretation of the graphic was subtle, suggestive and quite choreographed. In the later work the full force of his body is evident in his verbal expressions of the visual, which correlates with Ma's understanding that visual displays *demand* auditory enactment and that time's shape in sound becomes visually spatial.

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[57] Susan Howe speaking at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2007, qtd in David Grubbs, 'Shadowy Hush Twilight: Two Collaborations with Susan Howe', *PORES 5*, <http://www.pores.bbk.ac.uk/issues/issue5/poetry-and-music/davidgrubbs> [accessed 16 July 2014).]
[58] Ming-Qian Ma, pp. 268-9.
[59] Drucker, p. 243.
[60] Ming-Qian Ma, p. 269.

The '70s and '80s saw a dramatic escalation in the publishing arm of Writers Forum. The typo 'fpr' from the introduction to *Sonic Icons* is indicative of the small scale, self-publishing principles behind the Writers Forum venture and hints at the principles behind Cobbing's use of the Poetry Society's premises for publishing other poets. On one level, the scale (low numbers of pressings, limited distribution) and the self-publishing (permitting total artistic control and rapid production) of Writers Forum publications are themselves signals of an artist working in a rhythmic manner, as if his entire creative life was a poem. Given that, with Cobbing's work forming the largest portion, Writers Forum published almost constantly from the mid-'60s onwards, forethought and planning had to be side-stepped in favour of producing poetry in a serial and constant act in the manner of many of Cobbing's serial and reworked poems. Furthermore, mistakes, accidents and random discoveries were often retained in the published versions as testament to the simultaneity of the moment of conception and the moment of production. On another level, Cobbing's practice itself was a profound oppositional and political gesture.[61] Having total artistic control, no concerns of appealing to a market and no publisher attempting to influence his work permitted Cobbing to create freely. The introductory statements further suggest that at the time *Sonic Icons* was published Cobbing was a little tentative about sounding poems without a clear lexis to work from. As the actions of his performance evolved, in particular his confidence in performing acoustically, and as the visual poetry developed into something completely unrecognisable as anything that had been called poetry before, so Cobbing found the means to articulate the inexpressible, to express the inarticulate.

The poem that follows 'hymn to the sacred mushroom' in *Sonic Icons*, 'serenade for selenal de madeiros', is a serial poem spread over four pages. It starts with a solitary line of text across the middle of the page, the first and last letters of which are cut off by the page edges, leaving the impression that the beginning and end of the poem are off the page, thereby creating boundaries that are simultaneously imaginary and beyond the conventional frame of the page. The second page presents a sun-like shape through a deceptively simple concept of arranging the lines to converge towards a central point where they end around an invisible circle, each line overtyped once just off centre of the original, giving the effect of rays. The next page has two 'suns' with even more 'rays',

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[61] See my master's dissertation, 'Acts of Dissidence'.

making the effect more like fireworks. The final page in the sequence is busier, with rays overlaying other rays to make them look more like stars than suns, suggestive of the accelerated energy of light, a hallucinogenic perception of the sun, a starburst, an ejaculation or a constellation. 'suesequence', seven sequences using block capitals in various arrangements, foregrounds the reworking of the letters of 'TOILET TISSUE' in a 1994 booklet from the epic collaborative sequence with Lawrence Upton, *Domestic Ambient Noise*, to which we shall return in chapter 5 to examine its intricate sequencing implications.[62] Each page of 'suesequence' presents a variety of letters progressively working themselves into unforeseeable spaces on the page; in the sixth poem some letters are upside-down and the seventh arranges the letters in a discernible pattern of three curved lines. Finally 'or ro' and 'beethoven today', sequences of five and eight pages respectively, make use of overlaid type to give the impression of movement, another manifestation of kinetic energy.

Sonic Icons is a significant Cobbing publication for several reasons: its intricate and labour-expending use of the typewriter draws attention to the means and processes of production. Again, the process *is* the temporal now of the poem and technology is the tool through which artistic transformations can be made manifest as transfiguration of the lived environment. Cobbing explicitly marked the relationship of the poem on the page to sound performance as, simultaneously, the visual arrangements of those poems were concerned with shape and sequencing and with creating indeterminacy and a lack of clarity. The foundations for sounding the non-figurative marks on the page had been laid. At this transitional moment, as the clear, patterned shapes of the poems in *ABC in Sound* gave way to the obliterated sections of *Destruction in Art* and the chaotic appearances of 'Whississippi', 'Marvo Movies Natter' and the *Sonic Icons* poems, we can discern a more unpredictable, though more apparent, kinetic energy. The kinetic line along which 'serenade for selenal de madeiros' travels is indicative of all the poems in *Sonic Icons*: it moves through the individual poem-as-sequence and is evident in the poems' shapes and patterns. Indeed, with its perpetual development of the perceptual and visual themes, its dispersal across the page and resultant shape, and its emphasis on sound, suggestion and the near-obliteration of letters through technological process, *Sonic Icons* becomes more of a single kinetic action rather than series of separate

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[62] Bob Cobbing and Lawrence Upton, *Domestic Ambient Noise* (London: Writers Forum, 1994) ISBN 0 86162 562 5 (no page numbers).

actions. Crucially, it is a marker of the development of his own letterism since *ABC in Sound* as it is the point at which Cobbing's shape poems began to take on indeterminate forms which dispensed with legible lettering.

This can be seen in microcosm with the name poems of the early '70s. These were sound poems, very much letteristic, which moved from visual clarity of letter and word towards obliteration and indeterminacy. The serial poem *For Jack Kerouac* (1970) and 'Poem for Gillian' (1971) rework the letters of the name in the titles to the exclusion of all other letters. One poem of the Kerouac piece arranges sequences of two letters into series of squares and the Gillian poem is arranged into three lines of four triangles. 'Ana Perenna' (1971) is characterised by a distinctive shape whereby the first 13 lines are left justified. The remaining twelve are indented to roughly halfway across the earlier lines. It is a chant poem, evocative of the 'hare rama' refrain of the Hare Krishnas and repeating female names mixed in with invented phonemes. In live performance Cobbing sang 'ana', drawing out syllables and phonemes:

> amarimi rama ay mari ramya
> anu anis ina una an-anasa nana
> ana danu una dana ana nina na-ana danu una dana
> > an-anasa nana anu anis ina una
> > ay mari ramya amarimi rama
> > enma ira mariamne ariana rana ira[63]

There is an emphasis on the letters of the name in the title but 'Ana Perenna' does not adhere to this practice rigidly. The sounds that constitute the poem, and are constituted by the poem, are an early example of leakage across thresholds: the formal principle behind the Kerouac and Gillian poems is a leaping off point for 'Ana' where the rules that break the rules are themselves broken. 'The Judith Poem', also from 1971, goes further with visual layout, presenting unreadable combinations of the letters of Judith in uneven, slanted lines which start to obliterate each other through overlaying, so the black ink erases legibility, then through the overlaying of blank space. The erasure of legibility, through an intensification of material and an absence of it, thereby challenges the idea of a fixed relationship between letter and sound.

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[63] All three poems can be found in Lentz (no page numbers).

From the early '70s much of Cobbing's output became increasingly recondite as his work became visually more reliant on shapes, blobs and marks. Whilst he continued to work with lexical material for lexical and concrete poetry, he was on the cusp of immersing himself in the production of poetry which approached abandoning the word altogether. The process of the complete obliteration of lexical material appears to have been a slow one. In addition to the developments through the late '60s concrete poetry and *Sonic Icons* already mentioned, it can be traced through a number of pieces, beginning with 'OW', *Destruction in Art* and the seven versions of *line from the observer* (both 1966). The latter includes a page of completely obliterated text but with a five-line wordplay on the 'are your children safe in the sea?' phrase clearly typed underneath. The *&c* collection (1970), otherwise featuring lexical, concrete and sound poems, includes 'somatic graph of the poets [sic] voice', a streaky ink pattern.[64] Lettering is only just discernible in *15 Shakespeare Kaku* (1971), which is based on the semi-obliteration of letters and their rearrangement across the page to give the appearance of coming from a made-up alphabet or one other than Roman – Cobbing later frequently performed it as a sound poem. 'Sunnet' & 'Sound o sound', both from 1973, start with what is recognisable as written language and, as the series progress through overtyping or multiple copying, obliterate the text until it disappears altogether. 'Winter Poem' (1974) marks a new phase in Cobbing's work and is, arguably, the start of Cobbing's most significant contributions to poetry. It features a series of horizontal streaks and blobs of ink and excludes any trace of lettering. Its creation lay in the unconventional use – or misuse – of a mimeograph duplicator.[65] The 1974 poems 'Portrait of Robin Crozier' and *Sequence*, as well as 'T21t' and 'Flute Trees' from two years later, are entirely visual. A 1977 piece, 'Scorch Scores' presents heavy black and speckled marks and impressions of ink (or paint) running. Finally, 'Game and Set' (1979) presents solely framed speckled patterns. These visual poems created images through the misuse of technology, in the later pieces resulting in there being no semblance of word or letter on the page. Cobbing himself noted that 'one breaks away from words in so many different ways'.[66] Conscious of how the very means of production could determine the nature of

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[64] Cobbing, *&c* (Cardiff: Vertigo, 1970) (no page numbers).
[65] See Sheppard, 'The Ballet of the Speech Organs: The Poetry of Bob Cobbing 1965-2000', in *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents 1950-2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), pp. 214-232 (pp. 221-2). The notion of misuse is addressed in Cobbing, *Changing Forms* (no page numbers) and cheek, 'Bob Cobbing' (para. 13 of 43).
[66] Smith, *Ballet*, p. 1.

his poems, he observed that '[m]ixing one's means helps avoid monotony'.[67] He strove to always produce something original; a major factor in achieving this was his capacity to find new limits, extended boundaries, to the processes he could use. Individual works therefore mirrored the direction his work was heading towards as he was to introduce into the perceptual, spatial, field of the artistic work wider limits, redefined horizons. In this earlier period we can detect a phase in which a number of levels of expansion are occurring. 'Photo-montage No 1' (1970) is an entirely visual 'photographic superimposition'. *Five Vowels*, a series of visual representations of the vowels, made between 1973-4, sees Cobbing using a variety of methods including press-on letters, a copy of a photograph of a wall which had had holes cut into it, and press-on lipstick, applied by lips.[68] This multi-medial approach and its intrinsic refusal to conform to established notions of what poetry is, what it should be or how it should be made links Cobbing as creative figure to Modernist and late-Modernist themes and concerns. A number of questions arise from these considerations: do the abstracted results of obliteration, or erasure, presenting a kind of void, indicate that Cobbing was engaging with major Modernist themes and took them to extremes? Was his way of working related to Cage's notion of indeterminacy in its persistent escape from closure? Was it a generic comment on the limitations of conventional form and the possibilities of language or material innovatively arranged? How are the body and the emotions engaged by these processes? Was there a political or ideological thrust to such radical work? Or were obliteration and the re-ordering of thresholds addressing perceptual experience? We shall return to such questions in later chapters in relation to the notion of flow, the features of abstraction and the politics of form through engaging the perceiver's perceptual experience. Whatever conclusions can be drawn from these inquiries, I shall maintain that Cobbing's gradual creation of interconnectivity between the sonic and the visual was an exceptional poetic development. And it was around the early '70s that his explorations in sound really began to take on fascinating dimensions.

According to Adrian Clarke, Cobbing's confidence and presence as a sound performer developed notably from the end of the '60s, when he was still affiliated to Fylkingen and exploring the technical possibilities of tape, to the mid '70s when he had begun to

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[67] Cobbing, *Changing Forms* (no page numbers).
[68] Cobbing, *Changing Forms* (no page numbers).

develop an acoustic, collaborative approach to voicing texts.[69] There is here an implicit suggestion that as Cobbing freed himself from the constraints of technology his voice, in its acoustic presentation, was freer to discover greater possibilities. Throughout the '70s Cobbing intensified his exploration of performance works for multiple voices and musical instruments, demonstrating another kinetic dimension to his work: the commitment to collaboration as community in action.[70] Cobbing believed anyone could perform sound poetry and his commitment to exchanging creative energies with others often brought forth surprising, radical results. In the early 1970s he formed Koncrete Canticle with Paula Claire and Michael Chant (Chant was later replaced by Bill Griffiths). Between 1970 and 1972, Koncrete Canticle, as Cobbing, Claire and Chant, performed a small number of times at venues such as the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Liverpool Walker Art Gallery, the Oxford Museum of Modern Art and Southwark Cathedral. An eponymously titled recording emerged from this incarnation of the group, a side of vinyl shared with language experiments by Charley Verey, Neil Mills and Thomas A. Clark. Between 1977 and 1992 sporadic Koncrete Canticle performances were staged by Cobbing, Claire and Griffiths.[71] In the early '70s, as abAna, Cobbing first improvised with David Toop (electronics) and Paul Burwell (percussion). They convened for occasional performances right up until weeks before Cobbing's death, their final gig coming at Hugh Metcalfe's Klinker club in London in the summer of 2002.

Although the visual poetry became increasingly dominant in Cobbing's work from the late '70s onwards, the features of earlier phases do repeatedly return to his work. We can discern an organic mutation in the forms he used and a sense of the work constantly

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[69] Adrian Clarke, private email, January 2009.

[70] cheek refers to 'a provisional community' of 'transmitters and receivers', 'Bob Cobbing' (para. 16 of 43).

[71] Berlin Festival, 18 September 1977, Akademie der Kunste. New River Project event, London Musicians' Collective, London, 13 May 1978. International Sound Poetry Festival, St Lawrence Centre, Toronto, 15 October 1978. Goldsmiths College, University of London, 14 November 1978. Cambridge Poetry Society, Trinity College, 16 November 1978. *Speech Beyond Poetry*, Munster Museum, 19 May 1979; The Lyric Theatre, Munster, 21 May 1979. Cambridge Poetry Biennale, 10 June 1979. Brighton Festival, 21 July 1979. Peterborough Arts Festival, Great Northern Hotel, 28 April 1983. New River Project event, London Musicians' Collective, London, 30 March 1984. New River Project, LMC, 20 April 1985. Cobbing's 65th Birthday Celebration, White Swan, London, 30 July 1985. New River Project, LMC, 16 September 1986. *The Theatre of the Voice Revisited*, New River Project event, LMC, London, 14 February 1987. New River Project event, LMC, London, 31 July 1987. New River Project event, Torriano Meeting House, London, 10 December 1988. Performance and interview by Mark Steyn on Cobbing and Koncrete Canticle, 31 August 1989, for BBC Radio 4's *Kaleidoscope*. New River Project event, the Victoria, London, 23 March 1990. *The Voice Box,* Arts Council Poetry Library, London, 1 May 1990. Cobbing's 70th Birthday Celebration, ICA, London, 6 August 1990. Recording funded by the Australia Arts Council and filmed by a crew led by Marcus Bergner, from Melbourne, the Victoria, London, 25 July 1992. Information provided by Paula Claire, private email, November 2007.

being on edge, of there being a perpetual succession of thresholds through which unforeseeable art emerged. By the 1980s, as sound poetry had begun to cement a certain allegiance with the poetry that had by then become known as the British Poetry Revival, Cobbing could be found presenting his visual poems as scores for vocal performance with the likes of Allen Fisher, Maggie O'Sullivan and Johan de Wit. The 'texts' took the form simply of shapes and marks, and the sound poems that arose from such texts were a combination of grunts, tones, sustained notes, yelps, howls and almost any other form of vocal utterance imaginable. Cobbing also performed sound collaborations with cris cheek and continued his often uneasy but significant partnership with friend and fellow Writers Forum editor Lawrence Upton, with whom in the 1990s he was to produce the 300 plus pamphlet sequence *Domestic Ambient Noise* and countless accompanying performances.

Mid-1980s-early 1990s

The ensemble Bird Yak featured Cobbing on voice and a variety of acoustic instruments (bodhràn, flexitone, kazoo, small cymbals), Hugh Metcalfe on guitar, violin, drums, cymbal and gas mask, and Jennifer Pike dancing with occasional contributions from Lol Coxhill on saxophone or clarinet and sound poet Clive Fencott, who performed at some events in the '80s. They gave live performances for around twenty years, their final gig just weeks before Cobbing's death. Cobbing used his visual texts as scores for his sound poetry accompaniment to the improvised music, driven by Metcalfe's almost childish absurdism, but he also read lexical poems, frequently veering into a combination of indeterminate sound poetry and recognisable words within one piece. There was a flavour of sophisticated anarchism to Bird Yak, producing work that could be categorised simultaneously as "high" and "low" art. Although Cobbing, now advancing in years, would sit near-motionless but for the movements of his head as he vocalised, the performances were full of literal, physical movement: Pike's dancing incorporated a variety of props, including on occasion a white sheet behind which she would be silhouetted as a light was projected towards it; Metcalfe would change instruments, playing guitar with a bow through a hole cut in its back or anything that was to hand, balancing a beer glass on the end of a pool cue, and fitting and removing a gas mask, to name but a few of his antics. Coxhill was a virtuoso reed player with an international reputation in the free jazz community; his contributions to Bird Yak would range from

playing sections from jazz standards to abrasive soundscapes to choppy parps and grunts. It is interesting to note the development of Cobbing's voice from the time of his early sound work during the '60s to his work with Bird Yak. These later performances conveyed a vocal conviction that is lacking in the earlier recordings. The physical presence of his voice had become more rich and resonant and there was a new boldness in the range of sounds he produced. His vocal resonance went through an ever-changing passage – as indeed did his production of letters, characters, shapes and marks, his collaborative ventures, and what he published. The figures created (by this creative figure) took a range of forms and media and made innovative use of traditional poetic materials (page, rhythm, voice, percussion) and unconventional ones (bodhràn, copier, dance, text shape, found objects).

Bird Yak events might well have seemed extreme even to those who hailed the Cabaret Voltaire as the new anti-art or who championed Schwitters's sound poetry as an antidote to bourgeois complacency, and indeed they made some of the endeavours of the 1960s sound poets appear tame. They were, besides, further proof of the kinetic qualities of Cobbing's work: the adaptive process through which the visual poems became sound poems in performance provides a key insight into this movement. As cheek notes, the improvisatory nature of the events formed part of a larger picture:

> The point being that exactly how one interprets ambiguity and improvises smudges and dashes is still only to be negotiated through experience. A vocabulary for improvisation and the confidence to employ that vocabulary is constructed through practice.[72]

This wider sense of kinetics as manifested through practice incorporates the developments of Cobbing's investigations into what could be done with sound. His sound poetry had moved from the somewhat highbrow endeavours within the European avant-garde in the '60s, through explorations of multi-voice performance, resulting in extraordinary events produced by a community of protagonists in the Koncrete Canticle and abAna projects, to now producing a hybridised prototype of word- and non-word-based sound, contemporary dance, performance art, free jazz and atonal, untutored, formless non-music. There was an absolute and irrefutable

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[72] cheek, 'Bob Cobbing' (para. 14 of 43).

inimitability about Bird Yak. The success of this project was driven essentially by Cobbing's work as practice, which thrived on the principle of not having an aim in mind, and the method, in this case, of improvised performance created within a collaborative community. The negotiation through experience that cheek writes of was neither quite the *provocations* discerned by Drucker nor the *demands* described by Ming-Qian Ma, although there is room for all of these in our understanding of the process. cheek has described Cobbing's visual poetry as jumping off points for performance, a description which would marry more with Drucker's, but there was a substantial presence and energising quality in Cobbing's later vocal performances which helps map the growth of the on-going relationship between text and voice. His use of the visual poems as scores for improvisatory performance formed over a long period; the marks and blobs do seem to have acted provocatively, but, moving towards Howe's description of the graphic as innately acoustic, as the practice became more established his vocal presentation suggests he read them as being imbued with qualities, simultaneously temporal and acoustically shaped, that *insisted* on certain sounds or vocal textures. Cobbing's own relationship to his expressive gestures was itself under continual negotiation.

Early 1990s-2002

Much of Cobbing's later work consisted of visual texts, artist's books and markings that were used as notations, or scores, for performance. Throughout this period, as Bird Yak gigs became a regular feature of Cobbing's life, and Writers Forum, as both a press and workshop, continued to flourish, Cobbing persisted with his experiments of textual processes and production, lexical and visual poetry, and sound performance. He also worked on more directly collaborative works with other poets, such as the *Domestic Ambient Noise* project with Upton. Following Cobbing's death, Upton, initially alongside Adrian Clarke, has carried on the work of running Writers Forum.

As Cobbing maintained, he always returned to the word, meaning that he never totally abandoned letters or words in his work, and he retained in his output a significant amount of material that was lexical, that is, could be read in conventional ways and bore close relation to familiar language structures.[73] One lexical piece from this late period, 'I

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[73] Eric Mottram, *Composition and Performance in the Work of Bob Cobbing: a conversation* (London: Writers Forum, 2000), qtd in Sheppard, 'Ballet', p. 216.

am an old old man' (1999), reveals Cobbing's willingness to be wistful and reflective, whilst enjoying the humour that was never far from even his most esoteric work:

> I am an old old man
>
> You do not know how old I am
>
> At this time of night
>
> I should be tucked up in bed[74]

The vitality and creativity in live performances of this poem challenged the very idea that the narrator was old. It was as if the energy he had generated from being a lifetime figure of original and creative work was still coursing through him. 'Random and system' (1999) seemingly gives a direct insight into Cobbing's way of working with his various materials and how he channelled the world through his work. The lines are centred, naturally creating a flowing shape down the page, but it is the semantic content here which holds the most interest. It starts with a possible description of performing visual text and its artistic context:

> poetics of domestic noise
>
> fabric of the everyday
>
> a silent tongue sounding
>
> an eye scanning
>
> does a blank page not have a duration
>
> is it silence or noise
>
> we tongue it with our eyes
>
> polyphonic skin of event
>
> on the pool of meaning making

It continues in a manifesto style as if to reveal some of Cobbing's artistic processes, particularly in relation to his visual poetry:

> active erasure of existing common sense
>
> interrogating conventional boundaries
>
> through gesture and posture
>
> through habitus and through manipulation

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[74] *Verbi Visi Voco* CD in Lentz.

[…]

noise overwhelms

blotches and globules

inkish stains that muck out the page

smudge and puddles gouges and smears

erasures   blottings out

blur   slippage   fracture   erosion

to the point of overload

bedfellows in linguistic terrorism

the stuff and the blob

articulate fissures within

artifice of page

depictions of textuality

so dissipated as to be unreadable

conceptually packaged artists' shit

Notwithstanding Cobbing's admission of the 'interrogating' of 'conventional boundaries', a critical feature of his work that we shall see become a core of my theorising around space, form and perception, this section of this late poem draws on radical approaches to the boundaries and limits of all three. If the 'stuff and the blob' pronounce gaps on the page, or from the created page, it must be out of these spaces that Cobbing considered sound to arise, suggesting that the relationship between the visual and the sonic, therefore, is determined if not prescribed. The unpunctuated question 'does a blank page not have a duration', as well as the idea of interrogating boundaries, engages with the debate about how the visual is sounded, suggesting Cobbing's position would tally with that of Ming-Qian Ma in defining the inherent sound shapes in the graphic as temporal and spatial. A few lines on, the statement 'vocal sounds *imitating* meaning' suggests that out of the temporal arises something that inevitably resembles, or could substitute for, meaning. The spatial and temporal manifestation of the visual and the sonic – that is, their artistic form – give rise to a novel experience of perception on the part of the perceiver. And in 'Random and system' we shortly get a clear indication of Cobbing's belief in the interconnectivity of the heard

and the seen – in short, that the sound of poetry is in intimate relationship, in fact in dialogue and negotiation, with its text:

<div style="text-align:center">

aural and visual registers

create charged transitions

juxtaposing material elements

interweaving language and things

</div>

The poem proceeds to seemingly describe specific Cobbing pieces, some of his methodological usage of materials and the process of a sound performance, as if to indicate how these charged transitions can manifest themselves:

<div style="text-align:center">

verticalised stripes of dark matter

subsequently revolved through ninety degrees

fold or scrunch of surface of the page

archeological finds

from the discarded fluff

mimesis of ur-language

psychic darkness

an incomprehensible void

grunts hums are positively encouraged

exclamatory vocal gestures

fold upon fold of buckled developments

trivia tittle tattle yiminy piminy

</div>

The bathetic slippage of this final line into a playful sound gesture is something of an echo of the 'Shit' at the end of the S poem in *ABC In Sound*: it acts as a hiatus in the poem's form and suggests all the allusions to theorising and poetics that otherwise dominate the poem can be negotiated through sound gestures themselves. And we note the linear progression of this section travels from descriptions of processes and presentations of visual poetry, through a 'darkness', a 'void', to the 'grunts hums' and 'vocal gestures' of sound performance. The implication is that there is a separation between the two arts, in fact a chasm, yet our considerations of *void* in chapter 3 will suggest that this void is not so much a nothingness as a structureless realm of creative potential. The kind of ludic play signalled by 'yiminy piminy' continues into the next

line: 'mispellings mishearings misunderstandings'; note the misspelling of misspelling! The poem ends by noting the ambiguous relationship between the indeterminate sounds of sound poetry and desire. It celebrates, or advocates, sounding as 'hingeing' (note another misspelling), in the senses of levering or pivoting and opening up or revealing, in the threshold between continuation and its disruption:

<div style="text-align:center">

sounds not based on speech

hingeing between continuity and discontinuity

underpinning or undermining

the desires that drive[75]

</div>

Our discussion in chapter 4 of the possible effects produced through avant-gardist expression will touch on the notions of rupture and unifying.

After years of giving something of an impression of trying to find a way out of conventional modes of signification, Cobbing is prepared to use those very modes ('Random and system' is a list poem and 'I am an old old man' is in nursery rhyme form) to reveal some truths about his work. This was no going backwards but, as he realised the end of his life was not far off, Cobbing was prepared to give some insight, as well as injecting a certain lightness, into his work. Many who followed his performances and were familiar with his work in the later years would consider his most impressive late work to have been the indeterminate visual texts and sound performances. In light of this, these 'returns to the word' contain clarity and clarification and indicate that any suggestion that Cobbing intended to be obfuscatory is a misjudgement. His creative exploration did not have an interest in exclusivity.

Disrupting the Solid, Sensible Business

Cobbing's work can be a vehicle for understanding the relevance of avant-gardism at the end of the twentieth century as much as it can illuminate historically the very same at the start of it. In the latter part of the century, when much contemporary poetry and art turned its back on avant-gardism, the work that Cobbing produced can be seen as both indebted to many aesthetic characteristics of Modernist poetry and art and an active agency in developing and making relevant Modernist themes and concerns. The lineage

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[75] Lentz (no page numbers).

of Cobbing's formal approach of breaking from the conventional poetic line, creating shaped text, shapes and blobs through technological manipulation, large white or dark sections of page, and using the voice as an expressive mode only intermittently reliant upon recognisable words can be traced to the formal approaches of Modernist movements and the mid-twentieth century (essentially European) avant-gardes. I will make a case in the remainder of this thesis that explorations into certain concerns of Modernist poets, painters and sound artists in the early-mid part of the last century, namely the artistic use of visual space, the design of innovative form and the resultant inquiry into the nature of perception, have unearthed crucial questions for the nature, purpose and processes of poetry and art that have yet to be satisfactorily concluded (indeed, inquiries of this nature are ongoing). Cobbing's work picked up on a dormant set of questions that a significant majority of other poets and artists, major and minor alike, had chosen to ignore, and he freely utilised a whole gamut of the aesthetic traits of the Modernist and mid-twentieth century artists who had originally posed such questions. His first major work of sound poetry, *ABC in Sound*, at a relatively early stage of his language experiments, not only embraces these questions but reveals how they overlap with each other. The five sonnet-length poems, plus the two seven-line ones – 'N' and 'Q' – that could be paired as a single poem, in revealing an easing of the boundaries of an established and conservative form, capture one aspect of the *aventure* that Cobbing had set out on. If Modernism had challenged the authority of conventional poetic models, Cobbing's work picked up that challenge and pursued it further, endangering, to reiterate Hilson's words, 'the foundations of the wider poetic tradition'. One of the findings of my research will be that what was endangered by such work was not the tradition itself but a reliance on the tradition as the only valid mode of poetic expression. Cobbing's radical forms always required negotiation with (and openness to) traditional forms. Though 'G' is the only concrete poem in the *ABC*, a number of the poems are notable for how their shape on the page differs from traditional versed poetry. They all raise questions about the dominant mode of occupying page space poetically, and in the case of 'G' forcing physical actions on the part of the perceiver to rotate the page and thereby participate in how the text is perceived visually. The shapes formed by individually typed letters in the concrete typewriter pieces such as *Whississippi* reveal great energy and industry in their production; it is readily apparent that hours of labour were required to produce works such as this. Furthermore the

formal structuring of these pieces as serial picks up from the *ABC* sequence and looks forward to a method Cobbing constantly revisited, achieving its most extreme manifestation in *DAN* in the 1990s. *Whississippi* also contains obliterated portions, a technique earlier developed in the visual versions of *Destruction in Art*, which foreground the intricate indeterminacy of the visual texts of the late period. The *ABC* poems started a complex, ongoing exploration of his interpretation of Letterism which developed continually throughout his life. Cobbing's own experiments with the letter acted as a hinge for a number of the central themes of his poetics: they articulated inquiries into the relationship between the sonic and the graphic, the dispersal of material in space (and in turn the question of form), the making of meaning and the role of the perceiver. *ABC in Sound*, the late '60s concrete poetry and the early examples of visual poetry (from *Destruction in Art* onwards) engage the perceiver sensorially by privileging the sonic and the visual over the semantic – though this is not to suggest there is no semantic value in these poems at all – thereby inviting the body to be a producer of meaning. I aim to show that meaning is not lost in Cobbing's sound and visual poetry, but that what meaning is recoverable relates to the concerns of form, space and perception and is manifested primarily through the body. These developments intensified as his explorations of the visual appearance of text became ever more demanding from the 1980s.

I propose that there are a range of levels on which Cobbing's artistic life can earn him the nomination of a figure of the creative. He addressed major philosophical and artistic concerns – perception, form, meaning-making – building on the explorations of Modernism and late-modernism and pushing boundaries still further. Right up until his eighty-third and final year, he never settled on any mode of working in the interests of career progression or self-promotion, but always put the work first. Practice of this nature led him to discover radical ways of working with technologies (duplicator, typewriter, camera, photocopier, microphone, tape recorder, computer, printer), diverse materials (ink, paint, paper, canvas, found objects) and instruments (bodhràn, kazoo, cymbals, flexitone); his sonic and visual experimentation, both solo and in collaboration, produced exceptional, unprecedented results. In the later phases his sound poetry, whilst ostensibly based on the visual work as jumping off points, commonly became a 'reading' of the objects and people in the room. The text, frequently

devoid of anything recognisable as language, was often an irrelevance as performer and perceiver entered a dialogue where the exchange was a loop, or flow, of physical energy. From here I shall seek to define a process of flow, finding its usefulness in understanding spatial and temporal artistic actions, and to discern the characteristics of abstraction that underpin radical form and the perceptual process. These are our major inquiries in the next two chapters, following which I shall seek to establish the perceptual process as a vital component in artistic expressions which utilised new forms, restating the problems of established understandings of space and creating artistic gestures that were inherently political. Cobbing's work will reveal itself as a radical and unprecedented vein of what, at the beginning of the century, had been an international, collective investigation, but which, by the end of the century, had become a marginalised and suppressed project.

Chapter 2

(Towards a Vocabulary for) Flow

'As they step into the same rivers, other and still other waters flow upon them.

One cannot step into the same river, nor can one grasp any mortal substance in a stable condition, but it scatters and again gathers; it forms and dissolves, and approaches and departs.'

- Heraclitus[1]

Having written his first text-based sound poem in 1954, Cobbing began to experiment with the physical expressiveness in sound ten years later. He became involved with European sound artists such as Ultraletterist Henri Chopin, who was based in Ingatestone, Essex from 1968-1986, and, from the late '60s, with those who set up and performed at the Fylkingen festival in Sweden.[2] His early ventures explored the possibilities of manipulating technology by recording with and treating playback of the tape recorder. Recordings exist of him performing his concrete poems, such as 'Whississippi' from the late '60s, which he performed with Koncrete Canticle well into the '70s. In the early '70s he abandoned the tape recorder and developed collaborative projects in which he performed non-linear poetry as part of multi-voice experiments or with musicians.[3] The Koncrete Canticle and abAna groups originated in this period. In the late '60s Cobbing produced a considerable amount of concrete poetry, and his interest in using the space on the page to create interesting patterns evolved through the '70s until he began to regularly produce what became known as visual poetry in the

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[1] Heraclitus, Fragments 50 and 51, in *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, ed. by Charles H. Kahn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 53.
[2] Amirkhanian, 'Interview with Bob Cobbing'.
[3] By non-linear I mean broadly the non-semantic or that which disperses constellationally into space. Much of Cobbing's sound and visual work fulfils this definition. See chapters 1, 3 and 5.

80s.[4] His visual poems would often have a basis in lexical material but, through sequencing, the letters would become obscured or obliterated. Cobbing created work on the duplicator, typewriter, camera, photocopier and computer, as well as using different collage techniques; these *means of production* perform the *meaning* of the poems as much as their *content*. Many of the visual poems contain blobs and marks with no discernible lettering or image, serving as extreme examples of Olson's idea of open verse.[5] In the 1980s Cobbing fronted the anarchic ensemble Bird Yak, which grew from his vocal performances of visual poetry; he treated the visuals like the kind of musical score used by Cage and other experimental composers, improvising sounds as he followed the lines, marks and shapes on the page. Cobbing's live performances hinged around physical, graphic and sonorous expressive gestures. In these collaborative groups, tending towards total- or semi-improvised performance, a unified force of body, text and voice would be realised to generate a unique creative energy. The body, variously referred to in the following pages as *organism*, *individual* or *subject*, needed to be receptive to the suggestions and interpretations coming from the other performers as well as the text that Cobbing would be reading as a score. Great effort was expended in the production of the visual scores, as noted by Lawrence Upton's comments on *Domestic Ambient Noise*:

> [P]hotocopying, collaging and computer print out – were the most used; but there were others. [...] Those methods were rarely used in isolation; so that items might be collaged prior to scanning/copying. Yes, we altered hard copy, tore it, wrote on it [...]. I might actually interfere with the scanner just as Cobbing interfered with the photocopier. [...] Bob tended to work with the visual material in the image he was varying.[6]

The leaps and dances which sprung from the page were translated, in a manner not dissimilar to synaesthesia, into vocal tones, grunts, wails, growls or any number of other

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[4] Chapter 1 has charted this development in greater detail, and it is worth reiterating here that there was not a clear, linear progression through these phases as some of Cobbing's artwork in the 1940s was abstract and a number of '60s pieces featured indeterminate elements.

[5] Charles Olson, 'Human Universe', in *Collected Prose*, pp. 239-249. See also Eric Mottram, *Towards design in poetry* (London: Veer Books in association with Writers Forum, 2005) and Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), p. 53.

[6] Lawrence Upton, private email, 5 July 2007.

indeterminate utterances. Cobbing discovered a close relationship between the sonic and the visual *beyond* the mere fact that written language relies on graphemic symbols to form letters, words, sentences and paragraphs which have a phonemic, verbal correlation. The graphic material – blobs, streaks or mere marks – acting as notation on the score, often alongside lettering or partial imprints of letters, would prompt a particular vocal utterance. However the totality of these utterances did not form a consistent system as such in the same way that written and spoken language has certain commonly understood principles, albeit there may be a tendency that certain vocal gestures would be triggered by certain graphic details. Cobbing and Upton both described the process in their live collaborative performance as being more dependent on responding to what the other was doing and additional environmental influences.[7] Cobbing's exploration of this relationship allowed for creative acts which worked beyond the common usages of language in everyday communication. The vocal manifestation of this exploration required the full commitment of the body in order to shape and project the sound. In short, we can discern a flow of energy which passed between the bodies of the performers and between text, voice and body. This is fundamentally a performance-based circuit which informed the idea of *flow* I have arrived at in previous work.[8]

In this chapter I would like to develop the idea of flow and to inquire into how it can be a useful concept, specifically in relation to poetic and artistic gestures. I believe flow can have significant resonances for poetics, performance, philosophy and personal practices such as meditation or reading, yet up to now it has meant different things to different commentators. A number of critics have relied on the term to describe their theorising around certain aspects of temporality and movement. None however, with the exception of Bergson's psychological philosophy, have arrived at a specific, all-encompassing definition of flow. The purpose of this chapter is to arrive at a vocabulary for and an understanding of the term which can later be tested and developed, not only in relation to Cobbing's work but beyond this thesis into an understanding of how radical artistic gestures function. I shall survey a selection of these ideas, none of which

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[7] *Radio Radio*, Cobbing and Upton interviewed by Spinelli.

[8] Jackson, *Acts of Dissidence*, pp. 15-18.

strictly defines a process that is the same as our deployment of the idea of flow, but all of which are useful in seeking a synthesis of their most useful theoretical qualities. I shall signpost how these qualities can illuminate Cobbing's work ahead of a more integrated critique in chapter 5. My argument is that flow has both a non-physical and a physical dimension, and can be conceived of in terms of lines; the non-physical line is bound up with real time – not the spectacular, or social, time discerned by Guy Debord – and follows a linear progression, while the physical is concerned with relations in space and consists of a multitude of constellational lines. When these temporal and spatial lines intersect the process of flow arises. I will explore the role of memory in the process of perception to inform our understanding of flow. Memory is engaged in Cobbing's poetry through features I call *momentary signs* and a process I call *recognition*. It will later be my case that Cobbing's work exemplifies Charles Olson's notion of creative enaction and can be understood as a manifestation of the process of flow. Our starting point will be a mapping out of some key ideas that will be useful throughout the chapter: firstly, Bergson's conceptions of flow, duration and perception, followed by approaches to evolution and lines.

Flow and Theories of Selection

Bergson's idea of flow emerged from his challenges to mechanistic and teleological conceptions of evolution in his 1911 work *Creative Evolution*. He notes that both approaches ignored the significance of time, and his subsequent theory has a temporal dimension at its heart. Bergson posits that, rather than our consciousness consisting of a continuous series of divided moments, each replacing the previous, we exist in a single, unchanging state. He terms this state *flow*: 'we change without ceasing and […] the state itself is nothing but change. […] States […] cannot be regarded as distinct elements. They continue each other in an endless flow.'[9] For Bergson, flow consists of Duration, his term for real, lived time. In *Matter and Memory* (1896) he determines the relationship between past and present as one where the role of Duration in the present is critical: 'We shall never reach the past unless we frankly place ourselves within it. Essentially virtual, it cannot be known as something past unless we follow and adopt

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[9] Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (London: Dover Publications, 1998), p. 2.

the movement by which it expands into a present image.'[10] Time references are differentiated in Bergson's thought as follows: the past is time already gone; the present, the *instant in which time goes by*, occupies a Duration which is on either side of a mathematical point – one side is the past, the other the future; the present is therefore 'a perception of the immediate past', which involves sensation, and 'a determination of the immediate future', which realises itself in action.[11] Duration is immeasurable since if we try to capture a moment it has already gone. This sense of duration as a state that is very real but impossible to capture, and therefore always moving, is central to Bergson's idea of flow. He emphasises the accumulation of the past into the present:

> My mental state, as it advances on the road of time, is continually swelling with the duration which it accumulates: it goes on increasing–rolling upon itself, as a snowball on the snow. […] Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances. And as the past grows without ceasing, so also there is no limit to its preservation. […] [T]he past is preserved by itself, automatically.[12]

According to Bergson, present perception is a process that arises in the object not in the individual. The external stimulus impresses sensation on the body, the sensations then select from its bank of 'memory-images' which memories are useful in order to prescribe what action, or movement, the body makes in response to the stimulus. The present is an accumulation of past moments: the past exists in the present as memory-image and is actualised by perception. The past is thus preserved by itself, and it is memory that binds the past with the present. Bergson's sense of memory here is that it is unconscious and perception stimulates access to useful memories formed from the presence of the past. The word 'useful' is appropriate for this Bergsonian memory as it is the memory responding to perception and sensation which leads to purposeful action. Charles Olson's essay 'Human Universe' suggests that a circuit of influences passes between objects in the material world and the organism, the human body; these are received through the contact point of the skin and transmitted back into the external

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[10] Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), p. 173. By 'image' Bergson essentially means object or action.
[11] Bergson, *Matter*, pp. 176-77.
[12] Bergson, *Creative*, p. 2 and pp. 4-5.

world. Olson argues that it is the human organism itself which makes 'selection from the phenomenal world'.[13]

Bergson's and Olson's readings of the process of perception informed how both interpreted the course of evolution. Their ideas, though slightly differing in respect of selection (Bergson suggested selection was more of an unconscious process, as evidenced by his description of consciousness accumulating Duration like a snowball), can both be understood as a rejection of Darwinian evolution. Consequently, Bergson's findings were discredited with a resurgence of Darwinism in the mid-twentieth century whilst 'Human Universe' was in part a response to Bergson. *On the Origin of Species* was, of course, a tremendously significant development in thinking around the evolution of species. For the first time, life was theorised as non-theological and subject to a process of nature that Darwin termed selection. But the idea that the fittest survive, that there is a goal or purpose in evolution, rather than the human creative being at the core of living matter, was challenged by Bergson and later Olson. For Darwin, nature varies spontaneously and a mechanism selects from the variations. This process of selection Darwin called evolution and its mechanism is survival in a competitive environment. The environment selects those characteristics which lead to survival; there is, in effect, a machine that selects. Where Darwin believed the ultimate goal in nature, which spontaneous movement is subjected to, is to survive, Olson rejected the idea of Darwinian selection on the grounds that it impoverishes the phenomenological world. In western traditions of evolution, according to Olson, the richness of the world is diminished by an intellectual act that selects; this act is the creation of symbols, which he linked to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle at the very dawn of western philosophy and the production of logic and classification. Although he avoided directly affirming Bergson's immanentest notion of the *élan vital*, Olson challenged Darwin in adopting Bergson's idea that evolution is in fact not driven by mechanistic selection.

Lines

The idea of lines, operating genealogically, as set out in Tim Ingold's book *Lines: A Brief History*, helps us move towards a model for the idea of movement itself having a

[13] Olson, 'Human Universe', pp. 155-162.

purpose rather than solely a direction. The lines of movement are not literal and straight but virtual and may travel in any direction. For Bergson, we find meaning in movement through human activity; for Olson, it is through creativity. Ingold considers the post-Darwinian idea of the gene no less metaphysical than Bergson's *élan vital* as he questions the absolute authority of the genealogical model:

> The past, in short, does not tail off like a succession of dots left ever further behind. Such a tail is but the ghost of history, retrospectively reconstructed as a sequence of unique events. In reality, the past is *with* us as we press into the future. In this pressure lies the work of memory, the guiding hand of consciousness that, as it goes along, also remembers the way. Retracing the lines of past lives is the way we proceed along our own.[14]

Ingold's conception challenges genealogy by suggesting there is continuity between past events and present experience which are held together by memory, rather than a passing down of genetically encoded information between generations. Indeed, Olson's idea of memory is that it is inscribed in cultural and artistic practice and is therefore necessarily social. Ingold's summary of Bergson's view of evolution similarly suggests that memory is socially determined:

> Let us suppose, with Bergson, that every being is instantiated in the world not as a bounded entity but as a thoroughfare, along the line of its own movement and activity. This is not a lateral movement 'point to point', as in transport, but a continual 'moving around' or coming and going, as in wayfaring. How then would we depict the passage of generations, where each, far from following the previous ones in a connected sequence of synchronic 'slices', leans over, as Bergson puts it, and touches the next?[15]

This wayfaring intimates a multilinearity to the flow of consciousness with multi-purposes and whose influence is not bound by linear progression. The boundaries of these lines are therefore not conceived of as parallel edges which contain and direct the lines but as thresholds between the material portions from which and to which the

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[14] Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 119.
[15] Ingold, *Lines*, p. 117.

wayfaring lines transfer material. Both the OED and The Chambers Dictionary define thresholds as predominantly flat, right-angular points in space – as lines or borders (only Chambers' inclusion of a 'limit of consciousness' suggests a more amorphous kind of boundary).[16] However in some of Cobbing's work thresholds form a mergence, or liminal space, between the black and the white, between the clean and the dirty, between the shape and the indeterminate blob, between the ink and the paper. They operate in a multilinear fashion as they flow from one impression to another and back again. This can be seen in some of Cobbing's extreme visual poetry such as *Destruction in Art* (1966), *A Processual Double Octave* (1984), *When the Computer wasn't Looking* (1989) and certain additions in the *Domestic Ambient Noise* series (1990s). Ingold's model of evolution depicts what he calls a 'braid of lines that continually extends as lives proceed' where generational influence misses the next generation but continues to *touch* future generations.[17] They are lines that, as they reach over thresholds, do not appear to be temporally linear as they seem not to operate according to linear time. Yet their existence in time can only be linear as time moves only in one direction. In their constellational manner these lines carry and pass on *influence*, matter, creating a spatial dispersal of material. Movement occurs in time and through points in space, bearing influence as it travels between subjects. This process echoes the presentation of material in Cobbing's visual poetry where a kind of *leakage* is presented, discerned in the thresholds between the dark and the lighter patches of ink or between overlaid material and what appears to lie underneath. In these works we can imagine lines 'reaching over', exerting their influence. An example of this can be found in the booklet in the *Domestic Ambient Noise* series from November 1994 (ISBN: 0 86162 562 5) (mentioned in chapter 1) where Upton's variations enlarge and distort Cobbing's original theme to give in parts a speckled phasing between the sections of white page and black ink.[18] In these respects much of Cobbing's work carries the presence of Cézanne, Stein, the Russian Futurists and Schwitters, which will be made more explicit over the remainder of the thesis.

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[16] *OED Online* <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk/ search?searchType=dictionary&q=threshold&_searchBtn=Search> [accessed 14 December 2014]. *The Chambers Dictionary*, 12th edn (London: Chambers Harrap, 2011), p. 1625.
[17] Ingold, *Lines*, p. 117.
[18] Cobbing and Upton, *Domestic*.

Memory

I will now engage with the thoughts of John Cage, Ansuman Biswas and Michael McClure to work towards a fresh understanding of the role of memory in perception and creativity. The sensation-perception-memory equation gives rise to movement, action, at which point we can see the possibility of flow as a creative energy arising. As we have seen in Bergson's determinations of a present that engages useful, unconscious memory, to which we can add Ingold's notion of memory binding past and present, flow relies on memory as a way of staying in the present and not becoming detached from it. Although there is an immediacy in the momentary perception, this immediacy only has movement when an aspect of memory is brought to bear on the sensation. Memory is both stored and active. We may draw on memories consciously or unconsciously as our bodies respond to different stimuli in different situations. Bergson's definition of memory as the survival of past images which leads to action through sensori-motor functions has the impressions received as the 'intelligent' vehicle in the process, unlike Olson's formulation of the body itself as the agent of selection:

> My body is a centre of action, the place where the impressions received choose intelligently the path they will follow to transform themselves into movements accomplished. Thus it indeed represents the actual state of my becoming, that part of my duration which is in process of growth.[19]

If we consider performances of improvising musicians, who will have spent years training the fingers and/or breath and the mind to enable them to make use of scales, notes and sequences to generate unprecedented, indeterminate creative acts which themselves have not been composed or rehearsed, we start to understand flow as the manifestation of learnt material in unpreconceived gestures. John Cage's essay 'Composition as Process', specifically the section 'Indeterminacy', can inform our emerging sense of flow. Cage considers a number of musical works in relation to their component parts and whether they can consequently be defined as indeterminate with respect to their performance; he explored their intrinsic potential to be different and therefore unique each time they are performed:

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[19] Bergson, *Matter*, p. 70, p. 177 and p. 78.

One evening Morton Feldman said that when he composed he was dead; this recalls to me the statement of my father, an inventor, who says he does his best work when he is sound asleep. The two suggest the "deep sleep" of Indian mental practice. The ego no longer blocks action. A fluency obtains which is characteristic of nature.[20]

Cage's essential point is that a performance can be deemed indeterminate if method, form, frequency, duration, timbre and amplitude are sufficiently unfixed in the composition or conception of a piece. Random methods or unconventional structure do not, in themselves, bring about indeterminate performances. It is, for Cage, the work of unconscious memory – what Bergson called dormant memory-images, which are always present – retrieved through conscious artistic processes which gives rise to the original act that is genuine indeterminacy. This implies that, without unconscious memory being summoned in this way, the composition would otherwise be passive towards the external bodies it encounters because it would not engage memory in order to constitute the environment. Through these procedures, Cage intimates, the ego's stubborn influence is bypassed and the truly creative 'deep sleep' is attained. The suspension of ego achieved resonates with Cage's interest in the transcended self and Buddhism, and suggests that the human organism is active, i.e. selective, in the process where memory influences movement. We can therefore equate indeterminacy with genuine originality, which follows Olson's thinking on creative agency and implies that Bergson's notion of the body as a passive passageway for the selective impressions diminishes its role.

Indian writer and vocalist Ansuman Biswas's essay 'Sound and Sense' deals with the energy that passes between the human body and other material objects. We can here introduce the idea that language, its variants and its associated properties have a crucial relationship to physical flow.

It becomes clearer when you're a foreigner. Language consists of grunts, tics, gestures, tones, melodies, flourishes, and steps, as much as discrete words.

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[20] Cage, 'Composition', p. 37.

> Sounds are fuzzy haloes of meaning rather than fixed objects. Writing obscures
> this fact.[21]

These observations support Steve McCaffery's view that the semantic is privileged
above the material in the everyday use of language:

> The materiality of language is that aspect which remains resistant to an absolute
> subsumption into the ideality of meaning […]. To see the letter not as a phoneme
> but as ink, and to further insist on their materiality, inevitably contests he status
> of language as a bearer of uncontaminated meaning.[22]

But Biswas goes further to describe the rewards of immersing oneself in the pure sound
of language. 'Sound and Sense' comments that the flourishes of oral dexterity that create
spoken language, the intricate interplay of muscles and tissue, the tones that usher from
the throat, the pitch that is controlled in the back of the mouth, all reveal the production
of speech as a complex and sophisticated series of gestures. And the voice is the most
portable, most accessible and most affordable instrument available. When sound
performers (and this includes singers in all traditions) use their voices to free their
bodies, and their bodies to free their voices, they are creating a circuit of flowing
material. The combination of voice and body mutually expressing themselves reveals
the beginnings of the organism's journey towards flow, a circuit within the individual
organism that mirrors Olson's circuit between skin and world, itself a microcosmic
action within the wider social, phenomenological world. Biswas writes of the techniques
he uses to recall complicated patterns of sounds for performance of South Indian
Carnatic music, for which he uses *Konnakol*, a language which is semantically empty but
grammatically and syntactically consistent. It is an arduous, mistake-prone task, using
recognised words from some languages as homophonic prompts and more random
methods in a colossal effort to recite the complex, abstract sound patterns. He describes
his practice (in this case, literally *practising*) as if it was an arduous meditation,
requiring total dedication and the utmost concentration. Through the practice he

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[21] Ansuman Biswas, 'Sound and Sense', in *Playing With Words: The Spoken Word in Artistic Practice*, ed. by
Cathy Lane (London: CRiSAP, 2008), pp. 41-47 (p. 42).
[22] Steve McCaffery, 'Bill Bissett: A Writing Outside Writing', in *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-
1986* (New York: Roof, 1986), pp. 93-106 (p. 105).

encounters a desire to give up, which he overcomes by observing it calmly: 'The patience to start again is the key thing. And then each repetition is like water on a stone. And I revel in the fluid movement. The flow gathers its own joyous momentum. Eventually I am grooved.'[23] It is useful memory that becomes the tool for recall. In other words, he builds up an accumulation of actions so that body and voice can yield themselves to the natural rhythms of the environment as the entire organism creates the flow of energy. It is the flow which in turn enables the organism to maintain its position within environmental rhythms. Biswas here has isolated a vital transitory point that shall be elucidated later in this chapter, namely the transition between operating in social time and escaping into flow time, achieved through his utterances which escape the time of conventionally structured language. As he embraces the pure sound of the semantically empty Konnakol, his voice disperses sonic material into the environmental space, not along the linear path of habitual linguistic exchanges, but in many directions.

Cage's point that a fluency arises when the ego no longer blocks action is echoed in Michael McClure's reflections on consciousness in *Meat Science Essays*. McClure considered the effects of peyote as a direct journey to memory in a present moment not unlike Bergson's pure perception (a hypothetical concept Bergson uses in *Matter and Memory* to refer to perception that does not engage memory):[24]

> Peyote […] temporarily straightens the synaptic chains of memories and confusions and our cyclical repeatings of thoughts and feelings – the hang-ups. It creates a revolt against habitual ways of feeling and action and frees us to make direct gestures – we walk straight to our desires without the memories of past failures and denials making a negative cloud of interference.[25]

McClure here adversely evaluates the retention of previous failures and denials as negative interfering influences in the present, effectively a blocked memory. Like Bergson's 'useful' memory this blocked memory is unconscious memory, though a separate aspect of it; it is memory that may remain dormant or give rise to neurosis or

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[23] Biswas, p. 44.
[24] Bergson, *Matter*, p. 26.
[25] Michael McClure, *Meat Science Essays* (California: City Lights Books, 1963), pp. 25-6.

other non-conscious habits. McClure's description of the peyote effects call to mind Blake's poem 'Ah! Sun-flower' which details an overcoming of blocked memory:

> Ah, Sun-flower! weary of time,
> Who countest the steps of the Sun,
> Seeking after that sweet golden clime
> Where the traveller's journey is done;
>
> Where the Youth pined away with desire,
> And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow,
> Arise from their graves and aspire;
> Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.[26]

The youth and the virgin overcome their neuroses, their allegorical death or blocked desire or action, as the sunflower points the way towards the sun's warmth and energy. The personified sunflower, though 'weary', is imbued with desire – a wish to travel elsewhere – and is the embodiment of an organism constantly in motion due to its engagement in a perceptual process as it traces the movement, or 'steps', of the sun. We see here that subjects engaging in an unhindered perception can loosen the hold of neurosis, the blocked memory, and allow productive – useful – memory to emerge. The productive, creative aspects of memory, beyond the clouding of the ego, can be engaged through the kind of techniques that give rise to indeterminacy outlined by Cage and those employed by Biswas to aid recall. What McClure does not acknowledge however is that even the memory that provokes neurotic behaviours can be useful if the energy within it is unleashed. Consciousness can be transformed, or freed, if we access memory's energy through the process of flow, an insight that, in their advocacy of certain creative techniques that enable the subject to break free of the dominance of the ego, is profoundly understood in the writings of Cage and Biswas.

In the act of perception we select, unconsciously or consciously, what memories are relevant. For McClure we may still make choices on the basis of a neurosis, a blocked past; this applies whether the memory is selected unconsciously or consciously, as it

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[26] William Blake, 'Ah! Sun-flower', in *Selected Poems* (London: Phoenix, 2010), p. 49.

does equally in fact to Bergson's useful memory though Bergson does not concede this. Cobbing's work confronts this view as it is, in its address to modes of perception, a critique of memory: memory is both mobilised and criticised at the event frontier – the point of contact between the perceiver and the artistic work, what I have previously termed the contact boundary.[27] Cobbing's methods, as detailed in chapter 1, are largely Cagean but they include matter as memory. Memory for Cobbing was not straightforward, and it could be said that the dark, chaotic, turbulent (graphic and sonic) appearance of much of his visual and sound poetry acknowledges a blocked memory. To select is to be active or critical in relation to memory. Through practice, in both senses of the term, we can train, or retrain, ourselves in the choice of memory to move straight to our desires where, in Blake's metaphor, the warmth resides that the sunflower is seeking. McClure locates this direct passage in the ingestion of peyote, where Cage and Biswas have found it in committed, dedicated artistic processes. In chapter 3's discussion of abstraction we shall find parallels with Henri Michaux's description of the peyote experience, which seems to capture flow's poetic energy.

Spatial Axis of Flow

Earlier we considered Tim Ingold's notion of lines and how their wayfaring suggested a transmission of material through space. In the following section I aim to sketch an understanding of the spatial axis of phenomena. Underpinning my argument will be Gustav Sobin's adaptation of Heraclitus's idea of flow. Sobin's reflections on design as a manifestation of contemporary philosophical flow in his essay 'Undulant-Oblique: A Study of Wave Patterns on Ionico-Massalian Pottery' opens up our understanding of what processes occur as matter moves through space, in particular his ideas of flow as loose form and multiple points of origin and his tracing of the etymology of rhythm. Sobin's essay examines the rapid, leaping patterns of lines on pottery from the sixth century BCE at the beginning of the Ionian colonisation of Massalia, now Marseilles. He observes: 'the wave pattern tends to oscillate freely, to ripple in a loose set of seemingly erratic intervals. […] We seem to be in the presence […] of a graphic rendering of that

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[27] See Jackson, *Acts of Dissidence,* pp. 5-6.

very flux Heraclitus himself first evoked.'[28] For Heraclitus flux is the 'apparent contradiction of opposites in the inseparable flow of the singular: that of Being'. It gives the impression of operating through space in a manner that our three-dimensional conception of space would struggle to understand: 'For the fuller's screw, the way, straight and crooked, is one and the same.'[29] Sobin sees the artisan's work on Ionian décor as expressing the fluidity of Heraclitus's philosophy:

> It spoke of a universe in continuous motion, change, in which "all things are driven through all others" by a single governing principle. The waves, indeed, illustrate that principle. Existing in a harmony of "opposing forces," they, like Heraclitus's lyre, vibrate to a series of tensions and releases.[30]

The freedom of the potter's lines reveal, for Sobin, an artisanal materialisation of Heraclitus's principle of a-directional flow. It is 'an incipient–emergent–energy flow', a supposition that recalls Bergson's *élan vital* and sets up the idea of form as modifiable, which evokes McClure's account of peyote acting morphologically.[31] Sobin explored the Greek etymology of flow which gives a sense of it not only as movement, through its associations with rhythm and dance, but also as quantity, time and form:

> Flux, flow, we're reminded of the Greek infinitive, *rhein*, which describes this very movement, and which Emile Benveniste qualified as the "essential predicate" in Ionian philosophy from the time of Heraclitus onward. In Benveniste's luminous essay, "La notion de 'rhythme' dans son expression linguistique," we learn that *rhein*, as generatrix of *rhitmos* (from which we derive *rhythm*), signifies the manner in which objects in nature are deployed, positioned, momentarily situated. In combining *rhein* (to flow) and the suffix – *thmos* (suggesting the mode by which a particular action is actively perceived by the senses), we arrive at the signifier for an immensely rich, immensely variable

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[28] Gustav Sobin, 'Undulant-Oblique: A Study of Wave Patterns on Ionico-Massalian Pottery', in *Luminous Debris: Reflecting On Vestige In Provence and Languedoc* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 137-144 (p. 139).
[29] Sobin, p. 138. Heraclitus quotation from Fragment 59, cited in *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Complete translation of the Fragment in Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. and trans. by Kathleen Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956). A fuller is a tool for grooving.
[30] Sobin, p. 138. (Heraclitus, Fragment 51, ibid., Sobin's trans.).
[31] Sobin, p. 139.

quantity. *Rhitmos*, at this diacritical moment in Western thought, isn't to be seen as some idea, some fixed, inalterable concept, but as the fluid architectonics of each given instance. "It designates form," in Benveniste's words, but "form as shaped by the mobile, the moving, the liquid; as something that possesses no organic consistency of its own. It is more like a pattern drawn across water, like a particular letter arbitrarily shaped, like a gown, a *peplos* casually arranged, or a sudden shift in an individual's character." It constitutes form, certainly, but form as something "improvised, provisional, modifiable."[32]

For Sobin, flow then has a philosophical history, intrinsically contains movement and alludes to the placement of objects in space. The understanding of flow as a mobile energy at 'each given instant' is particularly crucial. Sobin's flow also requires an engagement with sensory perception and assigns form in a manner unfixed and shaped by movement. We find a telling pointer here, with the idea of flow as loose form, to the corruption, disintegration and re-emergence of letters in Cobbing's visual poetry of the '80s and '90s and, by extension, as we shall explore in chapters 4 and 5, to the very nature of avant-gardist form, which in its fluidity – its movement against and beyond boundaries – can be seen as artistically, politically and socially necessary. Our exploration of *Jade-Sound Poems* and *Domestic Ambient Noise*, in particular, will indicate how movement is inherently manifested in Cobbing's work. However the persistent, attacking rhythms of lexical pieces such as 'Ana Perenna' (1971), 'Ata Matuma' (1978) and the 'D', 'E', 'P' and 'Z' poems from *ABC in Sound* (1964), in addition to the lexical aspects of the sound and pictorial poems *Alphabet of Fishes* (1967) and *Alphabet of Californian Fishes* (1985), are further testimony to the notion that Cobbing's work manifests the qualities of *rhitmos* that Sobin describes. *Rhitmos* is further evident in the elastication of rhythm in Cobbing's tendency to hold and draw out a word, note or sound in his vocal performances.

The potter's lines as described by Sobin, as they reflect the notion of a universe continually creating, appear to flow with such vivacity they seem to be an organism themselves:

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[32] Sobin, pp. 139-141. Benveniste citation from Emile Benveniste, *Problèmes di linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 1:333 (Sobin's trans.).

> [T]he potter was giving free play not to his own whims and fancies but to the vibratory flow of yet unregulated energies. He was, we might call it, expressing himself in an ontological script, the calligraphy of *Logos* itself. The parallel lines he traced appear to rush, undulant, out of some immediate if invisible point of origin. They rise, plummet, exult – convulsively – about the flanks of some terra-cotta vase like a freshly released creature. If anything, they seem *alive*.[33]

Sobin's essay brings flow directly into the realm of poetics by comparing the flowing strokes of Ionian pottery to Klee and Olson. The world, including, notably, its works of art, flows continually in an act of creation:

> We might be reminded, too, in the realm of modern aesthetics, of Klee's definition of art as *Gestaltung*: as form in the perpetual process, or act, of formation. Or Olson's interpretation of the poem as a "high energy construct" in which "form is never more than an extension of content." These, indeed, are archaic canons. Together, they share a common vision. Within that vision, the world (and the works by which that world is made manifest) erupts continuously out of an irrepressible point of origin.[34]

In making a connection with *archaic* ideas of flow, some of the potential in Olson's poetics is drawn out here, but there is yet greater resonance between the two if we consider both to be addressing a notion of flow that is equally a radical development of conservative modes of being and a desirable, creative state. By extension it is useful for us to consider multiple points of origin, as we recall Ingold's notion of genealogical lines. There are irrepressible and multi-located points from where content, simultaneous with form, arises: all things being driven through all others as a potentially endless stream of lines arising from different points in space. Sobin fills the gap in Bergson's description of the enduring universe, which constantly creates itself through its duration seemingly without positions in space, or certainly without fixed points in space. This conception of matter dispenses with ordinary space and appears as a constellation. It brings to mind the Buddhist notion of Indra's net, the metaphorical web bedecked with jewels within

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[33] Sobin, p. 141.
[34] Sobin, p. 141. Olson citation from 'Projective Verse', p. 16.

which all things are reflected, and implied, by everything else. With this interpenetration, things can appear to take up multiple points in space: multiple spaces are occupied as matter moves along a temporal axis. This constellational dispersal into space I shall call one dimension, or axis, of flow.

Sobin's historical contextualisation of the potters' echoes of Heraclitus' flow draws us towards an idea of how the Ionians perceived the intersection of time and space, and how this spontaneity can support our theoretical understanding of flow:

> The waves writhe. About the rims, shoulders, hips of so much earthenware, the pattern thrives in each of its fresh releases. As conceived by artisans, it celebrates the preconceptual. It speaks of a world that hasn't fallen under the dictates of human determinism. Spontaneous, convulsive, this original wave pattern, however, will adorn Ionica-Massalian pottery for a remarkably short period of time. Under the effects of an emergent humanism, the pattern itself will rapidly harden. Codified into bands of identical, oscillating units, it will vanish altogether as an expression of emergence. By the fifth century B.C., it appears as little more than a script confined to mechanical repetition. It has fallen victim, in short, to number.[35]

Under the influence of measure,[36] Sobin continues, *rhitmos*, the free-flowing dance, mutates into the more ordered, metronomic *rhythm* that we are familiar with: the countable rhythm that is a division of time.[37] This leads in to a consideration of the temporal axis of flow.

Temporal Axis of Flow

Bergson's Duration is qualitative, or lived, time and consists of the vital pulse of life, the *élan vital*. This qualitative time is theoretically different from the time that is measured and reversible. Guy Debord calls this measurable time *spectacular time*, though I shall

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[35] Sobin p. 142.
[36] Against the background of New American poetry, William Carlos Williams used 'measure' against existing prosody. Although non-prosodic, Cobbing's poetry is governed by rhythm not measure, though as we shall see in chapter 3 Williams opened up a poetic use of space that informs our understanding of Cobbing's approach.
[37] Sobin p. 142.

refer to it as *social time*. Debord concentrates on the divisibility of quantitative time. For him, spectacular time is an abstraction of 'irreversible time'; it is time-as-commodity, the time of production, which 'manifests nothing in its effective reality aside from its *exchangeability*'. It is time devalued and has an equivalence in '*consumable time* which, on the basis of a determinate form of production, presents itself in the everyday life of society as a *pseudo-cyclical time*', which is the '*consumable disguise*' of time-as-commodity. This pseudo-cyclical time has false attributions of value and contains 'homogeneous and exchangeable units'. It therefore can be carved up: 'it must manifest itself as a succession of artificially distinct moments.'[38] This complements Bergson's notion that neither Duration nor movement are divisible.[39] Spectacular time 'typifies the consumption of modern economic survival – of that augmented survival in which daily lived experience embodies no free choices and is subject […] to a pseudo-nature constructed by means of alienated labor'.[40] The divisions discerned by Debord most likely go back to early civilisation, possibly way before the introduction of number that Sobin identifies; it is likely they coincided with the advent of agriculture in the Neolithic period, yet their current features are distinctly that of late capital:

> It builds, in fact, on the natural vestiges of cyclical time, while also using these as models on which to base new but homologous variants: day and night, weekly work and weekly rest, the cycle of vacations and so on.[41]

It is the time of the spectacle: it consumes images and, as an image, consumes time. The idea of saving time only serves to allow more time for leisure which is, almost invariably, bound up in passive visual media such as television, film, theatre and the computer. We might observe how *YouTube* is a classic consumer product of our time: it parades as being inclusive and democratic, anti-corporate even, but it was swiftly hijacked by advertisers, promoters and self-publicists. The manner in which phrases such as *time is money* have become ingrained unquestioningly into the lexicon of our culture reveals the extent of the influence of social, or spectacular, time. Of the spectacle, as one could similarly now write of *YouTube*, Debord notes:

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[38] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 110.
[39] Bergson, *Matter*, pp. 246-53.
[40] Debord, *Society*, pp. 110-11.
[41] Debord, *Society*, p. 111.

> [W]hat has been passed off as an authentic life turns out to be merely a life more *authentically spectacular*. [...] Cyclical time was the time of a motionless illusion authentically experienced; spectacular time is the time of a real transformation experienced as illusion. Innovation is absent and the past dominates the present.[42]

Debord's formulations on time, here, equate to what we otherwise call 'the clock' and what historically has been a notable characteristic of industrial and post-industrial production, hence my term *social time*. Social time is divisible: it can be interrupted, manipulated or re-shaped. My contention is that flow works outside of social time and operates along irreversible, lived, time. I propose to call this real, lived, irreversible time *flow time*. It runs parallel, or theoretically opposite, to social time. Social time may interrupt an engagement with blocked memory, though useful memory will sidestep social time. Bergson's terms for the flow of consciousness that operates within flow time, or Duration, are 'fluid mass' and 'moving zone'.[43] Such descriptions hint at multilinearity, but Bergson was clear to stop short of defining Duration outside of linear time. It would seem inaccurate to consider Duration, as much as social time in fact, as anything other than linear, given that it is, as Bergson states, irreversible: 'we could not live over again a single moment, for we should have to begin by effacing the memory of all that had followed.'[44] This linear progression of flow time, akin to Bergson's Duration, is the other axis of what I call flow.

Thresholds and the Dissolution of Social Time

To summarise our understanding of flow so far, then, we need to recap how material operates in both a temporal and a spatial dimension. Both useful and neurotic memory remain unconscious until the perceiving subject makes use of them in preparation for action as a response to sensation; however the individual may also employ conscious processes to access memories. This utilisation of memory may cut across social time or may be interrupted by it. The actions that proceed from perception occur in space and involve exchanges of energy between bodies with the human subject as the (conscious

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[42] Debord, *Society*, pp. 112-13.
[43] Bergson, *Creative*, p. 3.
[44] Bergson, *Creative*, p. 6.

or unconscious) selecting agent. To consider in a little more detail how this manifests itself in real actions, let us return to the reflections of McClure. In an echo of Shelley's aphorism, '[p]oetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar,'[45] McClure describes the peyote trip as stripping away the barriers to true perspective, a term he uses to describe an aspect of flow:

> To really see perspective again, suddenly and without a veil, as it truly is is an illumination. As it is normally is WRONG! Perspective drifts and flows and is more horizontal than we know. […] [T]o see the dark edges of definition upon all material things, and all things radiating chill or warm light – is to know that you've lived denying and dimly sensing reality through a haze.[46]

This description of the dark edges of definition upon all material things brings to mind Ginsberg's expansive 1949 impressions of Cézanne's paintings. In a 1965 interview, 'The Art of Poetry No. 8' published in the *Paris Review*, Ginsberg discussed with Thomas Clark his response to Cézanne around the same time he was experiencing his Blake visions some fifteen years previously, a period which appears to have been one of visionary or hallucinatory lucidity. Ginsberg discusses his experience as a perceiver of Cézanne's paintings:

> I was looking at Cézanne and I suddenly got a strange shuddering impression looking at his canvases, partly the effect when someone pulls a venetian blind, reverses the venetian – there's a sudden shift, a flashing that you see in Cézanne canvases. Partly it's when the canvas opens up into three dimensions and looks like wooden objects, like solid space objects, in three dimensions rather than flat. Partly it's the enormous spaces that open up in Cézanne's landscapes. And it's partly that mysterious quality around his figures […].[47]

Cézanne typically painted thick, bold outlines around his figures and objects which infused the figures and objects, as well as the outlines themselves, with a great deal of

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[45] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', in *Shelley's Prose*, ed. by David Lee Clark (London: Fourth Estate, 1988), pp. 275-297 (p. 282).
[46] McClure, *Meat*, p. 26.
[47] Thomas Clark, 'Allen Ginsberg', *The Art of Poetry*, 8 (2004) <http://www.theparisreview.com/media/4389_GINSBERG.pdf> [accessed 15 June 2010], p. 14.

movement. From 1875 he began a series of paintings featuring figures bathing by a river. *Baigneurs* (1898-1900), which was displayed at the Stein Family exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris in 2011-12, presents a group of lounging male bathers in what was by then an established Cézanne motif of human forms foregrounded against water and vegetation.[48] On extended, almost meditative viewing, the figures seem to come to life, appearing to lift off the surface of the canvas. Perceiving these thresholds – again simultaneously gaps and joins – between figure and object or figure/object and background, Ginsberg was able to see a whole universe, an effect which he then attempted to transpose into language by juxtaposing words with a considerable semantic distance between them, which he did with the final section of *Howl*. These impressions resonate with Cobbing in terms of how thresholds can be perceived to simultaneously separate and join objects. A year before Ginsberg's impressions of Cézanne he had heard Blake's voice reading some of his poems, 'The Sick Rose', 'The Little Girl Lost' and 'Ah! Sun-flower', which led to what he described as 'a breakthrough from ordinary habitual quotidian consciousness into consciousness that was really seeing all of […] eternity in a flower'. Ginsberg's later renunciation of the Blake vision was an un-neurotic self-realisation.[49] We can go beyond McClure's contentions, and take a more phenomenological view of perspective where thresholds are constantly brought to the fore as figure, that is, brought into *focus* in both senses of paying attention and being made clear (and in turn unclear), as Ginsberg saw in the movement intrinsic to Cézanne's thresholds. We then can get a further sense of flow as a constellation of activity, a multilinear movement of material which permits, or demands, access to the rhythms of organic functioning, devoid of the preoccupations with past failures and which experience the world with clarity. In Cobbing's sound performances, the temporal aspect of sounding intersects with the spatial thresholds leaping from the page and occurring in the physical environment of the performance, thereby creating serial thresholds. In these thresholds, simultaneously both joins *and* gaps, the potential of flow as a process which suspends the ego emerges in a manner reminiscent of the removal of the veil described by McClure and Shelley and further tallies with Cage's artistic methodology and Biswas's practice. This lifting of the cluttering and clouding of

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[48] Exhibited at *The Stein Family*, Grand Palais, Paris, 7 January 2012.
[49] Clark, pp. 24-41.

the concerns of blocked memory leads to a clarity we otherwise can never truly experience: 'In the high [...] there is the sureness of looking down on real solid brilliant fact.'[50] Flow, however, is not a 'high' and in terms of its material movement has no specific direction; being in flow is literally to be amongst the material bodies through which it is being transmitted. It does not travel along linear paths. The key revelation about what McClure calls perspective is that there is no perspective as such, only relative positioning within the material world. McClure's account of the peyote hit illuminates the process of flow as it reveals a heightened awareness, consciousness, of one's relative spatial positioning with a dissolution of social time: 'The dissolving of Time and the cosmic super-reality of Space's vast breathing is a vision beyond value for men who can be conscious of Space for only moments in normal lives of earthly seeking.'[51] His acknowledgement that '[s]harp divisions between inert and organic disappear' underpins the phenomenological reading of Cobbing's visual poetry as a spatial event where conventional thresholds are dissolved.[52] We shall investigate further in chapter 5 how these aspects are manifested in Cobbing's work.

Bodies

The following section will now explore the pivotal role of the body in relation to perception, memory and flow. It is important to consider how we participate in flow and how this notion of physical matter dispersing through space along a non-physical movement of time can benefit us, and given that we are all, like it or not, subject to social time, how we enter the flowing presence needs to be resolved. My argument is that flow is a transfer of material between bodies which, if generated in such a way that the ego's dominance can be overcome, enables the organism to adopt the path of flow time. The human body is the indispensable element in the transmission of materials. The body's role in the phenomenal, physical world is that of mediator.[53] I will argue that

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[50] McClure, *Meat*, p. 27.
[51] McClure, *Meat*, p. 28.
[52] McClure, *Meat*, p. 31.
[53] Deleuze and Guattari's conception of flow, as put forward in the first chapter of their political analysis of desire *Anti-Oedipus*, could possibly add to our discussion of flow, given its Marxist-psychoanalytic reading of the functioning of bodies within society as means of production, driven by desire, and my reliance in this thesis on avant-gardism as transfigurative in its political and socio-historical dimensions. The idea of flow in *Anti-Oedipus* does not however make a helpful contribution to the vocabulary we are working towards in this chapter. For Deleuze and Guattari, everything is a machine – the breast, the

through creativity, practice or lifestyle we can partake in the process of flow through the body as subject. The body, as it extends into the world, connects with flow time through creative gestures and can unify different elements according to their temporal qualities. Simultaneously, physical bodies in space reveal an interpenetrative process which presents the idea of flow as a constellation. The process of perception discerned by Bergson, where sensations arise from the object and leave an impression on the subject who then scans the memory for useful information to inform action, cannot exist without that subject, without the body: sensation may arise in the object, yet it cannot play a role in perception without a body to perceive. Similarly, the movement or actions, whether potential or actual, which result from the sensation impressed cannot come about without a body to carry them out. Olson goes further than Bergson to state that the process of adapting phenomena for our own use cannot be separated from perception, which he here refers to as reception: 'I equally cannot satisfy myself of the gain in thinking that the process by which man transposes phenomena to his use is any more extricable from reception than reception itself is from the world.' He went on to intuit that reception of the phenomenal world is similar to the connection between an individual's 'inner energy' – desires, hopes, dreams and the like – and the organism that bears it: 'I am not able to satisfy myself that these so-called inner things are so separable from the objects, persons, events which are the content of them and by which man represents or re-enacts them […].' He considers the skin to be the vital contact point, what I term the contact boundary, between body and world, and 'what happens at the skin is more like than different from what happens within'. In an echo of his statement that form is an extension of content, Olson's definition of these connections sets up a way of thinking about the process of reception and how what he calls our 'inner energies' are transmitted outwards: 'The process of image […] cannot be understood by separation from the stuff it works on.' Olson declares we must enact, not describe, and that it is art that enacts: 'art is the only twin life has […]. Art does not seek

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mouth, electronic machines – and all manner of material flows through these machines. The currents flowing between desiring-machines function in a linear direction: 'Desiring-machines are always binary machines […]: one machine is always coupled with another. […] [T]he binary series is linear in every direction.' Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: The Athlone Press, 1984), p. 5. Contrary to our flow, Deleuze and Guattari do not consider its temporality or its spatial multidimensionality; theirs is a different kind of flow altogether.

to describe but to enact' and action can be 'the equal of all intake plus all transposing'. This creativity is crucial to the binding of the flow process:

> [M]an at his peril breaks the full circuit of object, image, action at any point. The meeting edge of man and the world is his cutting edge. If man is active, it is exactly here where experience comes in that it is delivered back, and if he stays fresh at the coming in he will be fresh at the going out.[54]

The key words here are *active* and *fresh*. Olson's point is that we need to be open to the environment, not push against it; our actions must be creative and productive otherwise we break the flowing cycle of *world→reception→organism→transmission→world*. It may be said that the circuit of object, image, action is reductive, and we must not lose sight of the fact that the organism does not exist separately from the world of objects but is part of it. Yet whatever the complexities of perception and the organism's relationship to the world the essential understanding needs to be that we are able to operate outside of social time through creative gestures, and this connects us with the linear time of flow. The antithesis to being creative is to submit to social time or to allow the past as neurosis to interfere with the process of fully engaging in flow. It follows from this that we should consider certain resonances as the body participates in creative actions. Let us therefore take a look at the work of Joseph Beuys, some key Dada performance artists and shamanism to explore the body in relation to creativity.

Beuys's 'actions' frequently involved the artist conducting simple or everyday gestures. In *Filz TV* (1970), the television set stands as a transparent representation of the social reductionism of leisure time, which we recall is an aspect of Debord's spectacular time, the time of the spectacle and commodity. Beuys attacks the set with boxing gloves then, having sliced a sausage which he places on various points of the blank screen, moves the set to the corner of the performance space, the room, where, as he leaves the picture, it remains as a television- or radio-style soundtrack plays out. The set occupies the dead space it does in countless living rooms around the world.[55] In one of his best known pieces, *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), he spent three days in a cage with a

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[54] Olson, 'Human Universe', p. 162.
[55] Joseph Beuys, *Filz TV* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApLbz1Idzqk> [accessed 13 May 2011].

coyote.[56] The political innuendo in this action was thinly veiled and merely added to the irony of the piece's title. Beuys's stand against American militarism was well-known and the symbolic associations of the coyote, a powerful god to Native Americans, were explicit. In a powerful gesture of protest, he travelled to New York for the performance and out again without setting foot on American soil. He presented the body in its merest motion, without demonstrativeness or histrionics. The body was the focus for illuminating social and political truths, a gesture made all the more potent by its absence, as in the case of *Filz TV* where the set is left in space unwatched, a broadcasting medium disengaged from perception. Beuys's placement of his own body at the centre of his art has drawn comparisons with shamanism. Although there are many traditions of shamanism (and we shall take a closer look at the role of the shaman in ritual shortly), the role of the shaman is generally understood as bridging the world of humans and other species with the spirit world. By placing his body in the centre of his actions Beuys was equally forming a bridge between the world of social time, which he mocks and satirises, and flow time, which is implicitly, absently, proposed as an alternative. In doing so the body introduces duration, which introduces flow time. Beuys's work also notably employs radical form, and an acknowledgement of perception with the body at the centre, to create social gestures with a political countenance.

The Dada dance associated with Rudolph von Laban and Mary Wigman, utterly shocking in its time, dispensed with the purely aesthetic staged or theatrical gestures that characterised the dancing body in performance in the nineteenth century. Wigman's approach to performance attracted the description 'abstract'.[57] She made use of masks, grotesque costumes, intense facial gestures and, barefoot (not previously acceptable in the official dance world), she moved in a mannered or rhythmic fashion often accompanied by unconventional instruments (for dance) such as a gong. Dance critic André Levinson commented in 1929:

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[56] Footage can be seen online: *Coyote. Joseph Beuys in America* <https://vimeo.com/5904032> [accessed 12 May 2015].
[57] Annabelle Melzer, *Dada and Surrealist Performance* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 98-9.

The new dance demands a painful tension of the whole being. The dancer's eyes exclaim, her fingers flare; her body writhes with terror; she squirms on the ground, stamps furiously, collapses exhausted. To all the flexions and tractions of her members she lends a spasmodic violence. The classic dancer, by her ballroom-like rebounding, by the elasticity of her supple ankle and practised kick, gives us the illusion of an imponderable soaring. She defies gravity and twits the world of weight. The modern German moves, implacable, with her whole bulk, accenting heavily each tread or tap of her unshod heal. The classic ballerina aims at grace; Mrs Wigman's pupils seek their effects in a rupture of the harmony of the body, in an elegant deformation.[58]

This deformation achieved through using forms unfamiliar to the artform is a means of redefining subjectivity; this idea will be explored in relation to poetry and visual art in the following chapter. Laban worked in partnership with Wigman for many years, devising and choreographing for her and other dancers. His experiments with silent dance – dance without music – revolutionised a European dance scene that had become somewhat static for around 200 years in its narrow pursuit of aesthetics. Laban's summary of his intentions calls upon a number of the themes we are discovering are important to flow – the interaction of time and space, rhythm and the body:

[R]hythm is experienced by the dancer as plastic (three dimensional). Rhythm is for him not time-duration divided by force accents as one tries to interpret this concept in music. Rhythm is the law of gesture according to which it proceeds at one time more *fluently* and at another time less *fluently* in its sequence in *space* with a sequence of time (duration). As a result tensing and detensing (relaxation) originating within the body whole are *force* nuances.[59]

The inclusion of this very muscular sense of tensing and detensing indicates an activity for the body that is missing in Olson's more restricted account. It further acts as an indication of the perceiving artist and the engaged perceiver merging into flow through rhythm incorporated into unconventional form.

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[58] André Levinson, 'The Modern Dance in Germany', *Theatre Arts* (1929), p. 144, qtd in Melzer, pp. 90-91.
[59] Rudolf von Laban, *Die Welt des Taenzers* (Stuttgart: Walter Seifert, 1921), p. 55, qtd in Melzer, p. 92.

In the 1967 Pre-face to the *Technicians of the Sacred* anthology, Jerome Rothenberg writes that the poet in primitive societies may also be dancer, singer and magician, and the poem, or even merely the line (lines which have 'considerable duration'), is part of a larger, multiform event.[60] The 'poet' is the one who masters many techniques to unify the disparate elements – he is here essentially referring to the shaman, the individual who plays a pivotal role in ritual and ceremony.[61] The relevant point, although Rothenberg fails to acknowledge it, is that the poet unifies the multiple forms in time. Through dance, song, chanting, repetition and so on, the poet gathers up the various expressive forms into one accessible one:[62] the body inevitably occupies part of space and the work is manifested according to rhythm, the intersection of elements and forms, and utterance, all of which occupy a duration and are discernible in Cobbing's sound performance. The energy, arising from disparate sources, progresses temporally through space, emphasising the temporal and spatial axes of the process of flow. Revealingly, Rothenberg describes modern poetry as being in a 'post-logical' phase.[63] He cites an extract from a Navajo Indian poem which gives a sense of the process, in ritual, of going beyond the physical through physicality. Hitherto, a male divinity has been invoked and his presence requested along with a series of nouns that have a connection with weather or the outdoors (cloud, lightning, rainbow, darkness). The poem continues:

> With these I wish the foam floating on the flowing water over the roots of the great corn
> I have made your sacrifice
> I have prepared a smoke for you
> My feet restore for me
> My limbs restore, my body restore, my mind restore, my voice restore for me

[60] Rothenberg qualifies his use of the term 'primitive' as referring to those societies where poets remain the 'technicians' – in a non-electronic sense – of ritual and sacred practice. Jerome Rothenberg, ed., *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Europe and Oceania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. xxv.

[61] Rothenberg, *Technicians*, p. xxvii.

[62] Rothenberg, *Technicians*, p. xxviii.

[63] Rothenberg, *Technicians*, p. xxix. The contemporary poetry Rothenberg is referring to is broadly synonymous with 'The British Poetry Revival' (in the UK), 'linguistically innovative poetry' or 'radical poetry'. See Introduction.

> Today, take out your spell for me
>
> Today, take away your spell for me
> Away from me you have taken it
> Far off from me it is taken
> Far off you have done it
>
> Happily I recover
> Happily I become cool
>
> My eyes regain their power, my head cools, my limbs regain their strength, I hear
> again[64]

It is notable how, despite the differences in the type of work they are associated with, Beuys, Wigman and Laban, and the shamans described by Rothenberg all use the body in a ritualised way. Beuys's body acts as a bridge between social time and flow time; Wigman's rupture of the body's harmony, perhaps ironically, prepares the body for an engagement with creative flow; and the Navajo Indian poem reveals a post-ritual restoration for the body following physical fragmentation. All three undergo a ritualised disorganisation of the body, which involves scanning the body for useful memory from what we might call the bank of unconscious memory. They show, above all else, the human body at the core of a process where all things are driven through all others. Biswas's Konnakol brings to mind this kind of shamanic practice of creative actions manifested through dance and chanting. Cobbing's voice could draw both artist and perceiver into almost trance-like states by going beyond the 'foggy cloud' of semantic meaning.[65] Enhanced by his use, with Bird Yak, of bodhrán, flexitone and a child-like *non*-musicality, this lent his sound poetry a shamanic edge which recalls the disorganisation of the body we have discerned here and may further bring to mind Schoenberg's avant-gardist song, the sound work of Maggie O'Sullivan and McClure's poetry. We can even trace a weak, shamanic force through Hugo Ball and the Dadaists to the Plymouth Brethren, the non-denominational group that Cobbing was associated

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[64] From 'The Night Chant (after Bitahatini)', in *Technicians*, ed. by Rothenberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 84.
[65] Biswas, p. 44.

with in his early years. The title of one Cobbing publication, *Glossolalie un Hallalie* (1997), references 'glossolalia', the Brethren's practice of speaking in tongues. Biswas concludes his essay with a telling comment on the process of going beyond rational, ordered thought in order to transfigure common consciousness, one which, significantly, he aligns with truth: 'I throw off the data collecting –ologist and immerse myself in the performative moment. From which the clear truth shines out'.[66] Cobbing's practice of dismantling normative physical modes of experience opens a threshold onto the creative modality of flow.

Flow as the Intersection of Bodies: Memory and Recognition

The final section in this chapter takes further steps with the concept of flow and develops its application in relation to Cobbing's sound and visual poetry and asks what benefit an artistic event that engages flow can offer. We have discovered two axes through which the various components pass: flow, I am proposing, is a constellational dispersal of material into a spatial field which escapes social time and operates within flow time. Flow can be understood as a temporal movement of physical, graphic and sonorous material through space. Poetic performance can be informed by the exploration we have undertaken of duration, linearity, constellations and movement in our search for a vocabulary for flow, and it is these characteristics that essentially distinguish Cobbing's work from conservative and more static art.

Sobin has drawn a direct line between the philosophy of forms that followed Heraclitus, those that broke away from Heraclitian flow, with the kind of Aristotelian classification that informed Darwin's evolutionary theory, and the impotence of some postmodern art:

> With the ossification of the wave pattern, we become witnesses to the cryptic birth of a certain technological ideation. Traveling from *Logos* to *Eidos*, we reach – in an amazingly brief period of time – the very thresholds of concept, an order of thought that no longer needs to acknowledge its own origins, inception, emergence. In recognizing no antecedent, it cannot, in turn, generate sequence,

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[66] Biswas. p. 46.

translate energy. Static, self-sufficing, it can do little more than replicate – *ex nihilo* – its own formulations.

How much of modern conceptual art today celebrates this very immobility, exults in its own truncated vision? "Sad," Schiller will warn Hegel, "the empire of concept: out of a thousand changing forms, it will create but one: destitute, empty." We see it all too often in galleries; read it, over and over, in postmodernist journals; find ourselves increasingly exposed to an astonishingly similar, astonishingly rigid vision of existence. An art so deliberately sepulchral can only be, indeed, an end-art. Can only be, finally, a vain exercise in the service of a terminal aesthetics.[67]

Cobbing's work follows the principles of the open poem, in contrast to the closed gestures of the conservative poetry that dominated the mainstream after the Second World War and the empty, sepulchral art that has followed Modernism. His poetry, like Blake's, was a making of world and self. It was a radical, unforeseeable art; like Bergson's flow, stimulated by the élan vital, it was in constant motion. It achieved this, firstly, through its basis in poetic form, in rhythm, which we remember from Sobin has etymological links with spatial placement and loose form. Rhythm in Cobbing retains the linear duration of any poem, but, given that the sonic or visual material is loosened from the conventions of signification, as we shall demonstrate shortly, and the manner it is dispersed into space, it is not subject to the constrictions of social time and therefore operates in flow time.

The temporality of a performance may include the expectations and responses of the performers and perceivers (constituted by other performers and audience). The time it takes for an event to take place – Bergson uses the example of sugar dissolving in water – is not *thought*, it is *lived*, in that it coincides with other 'times', such as any impatience an observer may experience. According to Bergson, the individual elements in the event – the water, sugar and melting – are therefore abstractions which operate within a

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[67] Sobin, p. 143. Quotation from Friedrich Schiller, 'L'esthetique des rhythms', in *Regard, parole, espace* (Lausanne: Editions L'âge d'homme, 1973), p. 158 (Sobin's trans.).

'whole' which is a consciousness.[68] The components in a performance, including rhythm, as noted with Mary Wigman's dance, have a materiality and they engage in an exchange within physical space. These components include the body of the performers, instruments and voice, text used as score and the sound generated, as well as any incidental noise or physical entity in the room coming, for instance, from the audience. In a Cobbing performance, the interplay of text and voice demonstrates this, where indeterminate shapes and marks, and semblances of letters and words, would give rise to uncategorisable, visceral utterances. These physical elements drove themselves through all the others; they were interdependent and flowed in and out of each other, behaving as a constellation. There was, furthermore, the specific way Cobbing dealt with language that also propelled the work towards flow. His explorations of the possibilities and properties of uttered and written language were, contrary to his own assertions in fact, a trans-language: a move beyond the norms and conventions of established language.[69] Cobbing's use, misuse and corruption of language imbued his work with a quality of movement which gave rise, to paraphrase Sobin, to an incipient emergence. This was reinforced by his working practice of constantly striving for new creations. Chapter 5, with close studies of Cobbing works, will make these arguments more explicit. Essentially, we see flow working as an intersection of bodies – physical, graphic and sonorous material – in space, behaving in a non-linear, constellatory manner, along a linear progression of time. Cobbing's poetic performance can be seen as an embodiment of Olson's call for us to, creatively, *enact*.

Flow for Biswas, as with Olson's cycle of perception, is a physical circuit of energy, by-passing thinking, forethought and preconditions. Cobbing stated that he did not think about what a text was going to be before he created it, he just followed his instincts within the parameters – and often outside them – of the machinery and methods he was

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[68] Bergson, *Creative*, p. 10.

[69] Cobbing saw sound poetry as an attempt to return to pre-verbal sounds: 'Sound poetry seems to me to be [...] a recapturing of a more primitive form of language, before communication by expressive sounds became stereotyped into words, when the voice was richer in vibrations, more mightily physical.' 'Some Statements', p. 39. Though reliant upon expressive sounds that may replicate the pre-verbal, I would contest that sound poetry is a post-verbal language, or a trans-language, as one cannot undo the knowledge of ordered speech once it is acquired; it is a going *beyond* the rational rather than a *return to* the primitive. Rothenberg's use of the term 'post-logical' for contemporary poetry supports this view.

using,[70] as well as any methodological restrictions such as those employed in the *Domestic Ambient Noise* series.[71] These instincts were informed by an intense attentiveness to perception echoing Olson's cycle, where humans must be 'fresh' – attentive – and Biswas's account of his forceful engagement through concentration. Yet this is only part of the story of flow in Cobbing's work. What he created that was exceptional was the movement of material, both visible and sonic, that leapt from the page of a visual text and circulated via body and voice back into the physical space and time of the vocal performance. Such movement carries the work into a state of flow where the work of more standard vocal performers, even less exploratory sound poets, subordinates itself to social time through its form. Being in flow, for Bob Cobbing, was about being open to physical connection, as a perceiver, with objects in the material world, and allowing material to pass between the various media of page, text, body and voice. This routine led to a discovery of physical and vocal gestures that existed almost entirely in the moment of their production, a realisation that exceeds classification, a partial aspect of memory, engaging only the memory that gives rise to utterance, the physical movements of diaphragm and vocal chords. We find a pertinence here in Bergson's words, 'an original moment of a no less original history'.[72] To understand these kinds of signs, not semantic signs in the Saussurian sense, we can explore what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls an 'expressive value', a quality that articulates a mood or energy rather than specific *things* within a system of classification:

> We must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon. It is in this atmosphere that quality arises. Its meaning is an equivocal meaning: we are concerned with an expressive value rather than with logical signification. The determinate quality by which empiricism tried to define sensation is an object, not an element of consciousness, indeed it is the very lately developed object of scientific consciousness. For these two reasons, it conceals rather than reveals subjectivity.[73]

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[70] *Radio Radio*, Cobbing interviewed by Spinelli.
[71] See chapter 5 for Lawrence Upton's explanation of the methodology in *Domestic Ambient Noise*.
[72] Bergson, *Creative,* p. 6.
[73] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), p. 6.

The in/determinacy that Merleau-Ponty links with empiricism (perhaps *in/determination* would be a better translation) can be aligned with the Cagean sense of in/determinacy though Merleau-Ponty's terms have a firmer basis in philosophy rather than in the effects of art. However, as our exploration of abstraction in chapter 3 will suggest, the relationship between indeterminacy and subjectivity is key to an understanding of the workings of avant-gardism. Cobbing's sound and visual work achieved a performance of expressiveness that both included and lacked signs. We shall encounter this duality in close proximity in our study of *Jade Sound Poems* and his vocal performance in chapter 5. These new kinds of signs, clearly not conventional signs (which can be stored in a dictionary or memorised with ease), I would like to term *momentary signs*. The qualities of those presentations which lack and those which contain signs are shaped by the relationship established between those signs as they simultaneously occupy a shared space. Engaging flow is a profound physical and non-physical process, where raw materials are conveyed about space in time. Cobbing's momentary signs effected a flickering recall of memory in an otherwise original event. An equally *essential* manifestation of flow as Biswas's learned phrases, Cobbing's was a kind of hyper-organic transmission of materialities that rejected any idea of the *market* or *career poetry*, itself a gesture of resistance to conservative norms.

Merleau-Ponty's PhD thesis from the École Normale Supérieure, published as *Phenomenology of Perception* in 1962, grappled with some of the key critical and theoretical questions of existentialism, the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, and much literary and artistic work, both theoretical and creative, of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is all, arguably, underpinned with Hegel's radical reworking of ideas of spirit and consciousness and restores freedom to perception in response to Plato's and Aristotle's opposing explorations into the perceptual process and Kant's belief in perception's dependence on the mind. Aspects of his thinking can be aligned with Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, despite the fact that Merleau-Ponty sets up his brand of phenomenology against transcendental philosophy. Merleau-Ponty

refers to our experience of things as 'the ultimate court of appeal in our knowledge'.[74] This is arrived at by the removal of memory as inevitable in the role of perception:

> A field which is always at the disposal of consciousness and one which, for that very reason, surrounds and envelops its perceptions, an atmosphere, a horizon or, if you will, given 'sets' which provide it with a temporal situation, such is the way in which the past is present, making distinct acts of perception and recollection possible. To perceive is not to experience a host of impressions accompanied by memories capable of clinching them; it is to see, standing forth from a cluster of data, an immanent significance without which no appeal to memory is possible.[75]

Merleau-Ponty's reasoning here is a revision of Bergson's idea that sensation stimulates action through memory, implying that mental or material echoes inevitably rely on a process of recollection. Cobbing's tendency to generate new forms through distorting material, for example in the serial pieces, made any sense of recognition uncertain. Such procedures constantly keep the participants in the work in the present – recalling the role of Duration in Bergson's flow – yet the echoes and suggestions of familiar materials stimulate memory. For the reader of Cobbing's visual texts memory is engaged (rather than completely removed as it is in the sepulchral works of, say, Warhol or Koons), then questioned, as it forms part of the kinetic activity at the contact boundary. I shall use the term 'recognition' to denote this process in Cobbing's work; it encapsulates the visual echoes of material in their imperfect or distorted state and the pulse which moves beyond mere memory, which would include unconscious memory, or repetition. Recognition is a device used in lexical, line-based poetry where repetitive features, such as rhyme, rhythm or alliteration produce effects of familiarity. Cobbing's visual work plays with recognition as it defamiliarises poetic conventions whilst also engaging memory. Merleau-Ponty's observation that 'to look at an object is to plunge oneself into it' describes the very engagement of a committed perceiver of Cobbing's visual and concrete poetry.[76] For Merleau-Ponty, in perceptual experience objects are 'incomplete

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[74] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 23.
[75] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 22.
[76] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 67.

and open', an understanding which we can apply to Cobbing's work to help us see it as an unfixed, motile entity.[77] Perceivers are invited to acknowledge an altered mode of memory that kinetically launches material into the contact boundary between text and perceiver. It is a memory that carves a territory which unifies Bergson's idea of useful memory and the blocked or neurotic memory, associated with McClure, with Merleau-Ponty's removal of the inevitability of memory in perception to place us in lived experience.

The question of signification, particularly in sound poetry, is also addressed by Merleau-Ponty. In the section 'The Body as Expression, and Speech', according with our studies of Bergson, Beuys, Wigman and shamans, he states that the world is experienced through the body: 'it is through the body that I perceive 'things'.'[78] (In chapter 3 the thoughts of Eric Mottram will reinforce this understanding.) These things, or objects, including language, carry an expressive value which is experienced through the body of the listener or perceiver, since sense, rather than fixed within the object, is 'everywhere present'.[79] Again, this is a re-evaluation of Bergson's notion of perception arising in the object. In a verbal exchange, change within the listener takes place as s/he takes up an intentional or *intended* sense originating within the speaker: one communicates, not with representations or thought, but with a speaking subject, whose speech is set in motion by a 'sense-giving intention' which is adopted by the listener who finds 'a synchronizing change of my own existence, a transformation of my being'.[80] Merleau-Ponty describes 'an immanent or incipient significance in the living body [which] extends [...] to the whole sensible world, and our gaze, prompted by the experience of our own body, will discover in all other 'objects' the miracle of expression'.[81] The body therefore is the active agent in discovering meaning. Merleau-Ponty's proposals here filled in the gaps in Bergson's theory of the body being a channel for impressions and were a foregrounding for Biswas and, as we shall explore in future chapters, Mottram. Our perceptual experience of the world leads us to find expression – significance (immanent, incipient or otherwise) – in all other 'things'. Signifying actions, whether

[77] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 70.
[78] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 186.
[79] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 180.
[80] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, pp. 183-84.
[81] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 197.

they are word, gesture or grunt, are broadcast and discovered through the body. Any vocal exchange involves a shift within the individual. Cobbing's poetry is a radical, unprecedented exchange which invites an equivalent transformation in the perceiver, privileging the physical material over the semantic. The perceiver's experience of the perceptual field is new each time: each meeting with voice or text is a different phase of the perpetually changing state. Where there are no fixed boundaries or exit points, as we could say is typical of a Cézanne painting or a Cobbing visual poem, the objects and figures merge and flow into both one another and into the background. The lack of clear distinction between figure and ground intensifies this process. The perceiver's engagement with the work becomes more active, more total, as there is a new kind of threshold between states. These dark edges of matter therefore accord us a definition, a meaning, for self-realisation, not a meaning born of statements or slogans or using any form of common language but a self-realisation, prompted by an expressive value, that arises through a corporeal engagement with the physical, multilinear dispersal of material existing in a continually fleeting present as it advances along a linear path of time. Such mapping helps explain the process of escaping the ego described in the practices of Cage and Biswas.

The Elements of Flow: A New Poetics?

The findings of this chapter allow me to posit for the first time the possibility that, on account of a radical and innovative approach to perception and memory, Cobbing's work was a new poetics. We have worked towards a vocabulary for flow through a synthesis of Bergson's idea of Duration, the possibility that we may engage or disengage with flow as implied by McClure, and the notion of social time proposed by Debord. I have determined the temporal axis of flow as one that runs in a linear direction outside of social time; it is a state to be attained, not the fact of things. The relationship between flow time and social time is that one can step out of the commodity orientations of social time through a creative engagement with the world incorporating an engaged perception. Feeding into our synthesis is Olson's circuit of influences and call for creative gestures, Ingold's wayfaring lines, Sobin's dispensing of ordinary understandings of space (derived from Heraclitus), Ginsberg's descriptions of the expansive gaps in Cézanne, and Biswas's positing of the voice as a flowing circuit. I have

suggested that when the flowing process is engaged, material is dispersed into space in a multidirectional fashion. In order to make meaning of this movement of material, the human body plays an active and selecting role, choosing either useful or blocked memory. To choose creatively we can employ the methods of Cage or Biswas, or aim for the ritualised disorganisation of bodies evident in the work of Beuys, Wigman and shamans (there may be no need for a distinction between the two). Our understanding of the writings of Merleau-Ponty has led to a consideration that the body is able to perform this function through a perceptual process that engages memory through the body making meaning. If we agree with Merleau-Ponty that the visual field we perceive is made up of thresholds, which are spaces to create new meaning, Cobbing's work, in destroying conventional thresholds, opens up spaces to create meaning by producing a critique of memory, thereby giving the individual more control over the choices. Cobbing's use of persistent rhythms in his lexical and sound poetry, as informed by Sobin's etymological study of *rhein* and *rhitmos*, show the fluid patterns which lend to the works provisional form. Perceivers' engagement with such loose form reinforces the materials' radical handling of memory. It seems highly possible that a poetic approach to perception and memory of this nature indicates a new poetics.

We have in this chapter pointed to Olson, McClure, Cage, Biswas and Sobin, through their various forms of artistic and critical practice, as figures of the creative. The intensity of Cobbing's poetry achieved solely through his diverse and exploratory practice, rather than the kind of meta-commentary utilised by these other commentators, reinforces our claims in chapter 1 for a similar designation for Cobbing, emphasising his work as an artistic rather than an academic performance. The manifestation of flow through rhythm in form links poetry to Olson's urge to creativity and the wider fields of artistic practice, including the realisation of radical form in performance and on the page, and has political and social implications. The roots of such an exploratory poetic lifetime will be noted in the next two chapters, which focus on documenting the relationship between form and perception and, initially, on moves towards abstraction in Modernist art and poetry.

Chapter 3

Mapping the Features of Abstraction

Chapter one outlined the essential phases of Cobbing's considerable and varied output, noting his extreme, novel practices in sound and visual poetry, which themselves form part of long and largely unrecognised traditions which coagulated in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century. Chapter two explored how a process of flow may inform an understanding of our responses to art. From the inquiry in this chapter I aim to show how Cobbing's sound and visual poetry are indebted to certain strands of Modernism not merely in terms of their aesthetic features but in respect of their social, political and compositional principles as well as their effects as art. I therefore take abstraction as my main theme, not merely because it was a radical and important artistic development during Modernism and late Modernism but because, in tracing its origin in and progression through the modern period, I believe we can discern a set of features which in turn helps us identify the prominent aspects of Cobbing's work. How abstraction arises in different artforms is significant for Cobbing as his work is interdisciplinary and displays the same characteristics that we find in visual art, sound poetry and lexical, page-based poetry. The overall premise here will be that, contrary to an established view that *Finnegans Wake* was the last work of British and Irish literary Modernism or that Modernism was abandoned after the Second World War, there were new demands placed upon artists in the years just prior to and just after the War which required a radical approach to language. The impact on the global psyche in the wake of the Holocaust and the two world wars was immense. Between the 1910s and the 1930s artists had ventured to attack conventional and authoritarian modes of language, seeing the way that language had been instrumentalised as a major tool in promoting military ambition and the spread of empire. After World War II it appears that the horrors quelled this response, with only a few fringe figures adopting the responsibility of the challenge to treat language radically. Cobbing's work towards the end of the century became a progressive counterpoint to the regressive antimodernists and much that could be labelled postmodernism. As Robert Sheppard has noted, linguistically innovative poetry 'looks to the more extreme forms of modernism (*Spring and All* not *The Waste Land*; *Finnegans Wake* not *Ulysses*), those still not wholly assimilated, and

neutralised, by the Movement orthodoxy in British Poetry'.[1] I aim to give below a comprehensive account of abstraction as a Modernist approach, clearly mapping its features, to show these different artforms have common concerns.

This chapter covers the early part of the twentieth century, that is the period just before the recognised beginnings of Modernism in the 1910s, up to the middle third of the century when Cobbing began to produce art, at the beginning of the period known in some quarters as late Modernism. The features of abstraction I discuss are: an absence of representation, innovation of form, multiplicities of space, a radical questioning of subjectivity, and indeterminacy. It should be clear that the purpose here is not to pinpoint a historical tipping point into abstraction, nor to decree if a particular work is abstract or not, nor to claim that the works discussed here were the only works of their kind, but to discern the features of abstract works or works that moved towards abstraction. This informs our inquiries into the shaping of twentieth-century artistic form and the condition of poetry and poetics in the latter half of that century. I identify primarily two reasons for the moves towards abstraction in early literary Modernism as, firstly, a development of artistic inquiries into perception and, secondly, as a response to the intrumentalisation of language. Crucial to an understanding of the perceiver's engagement with abstraction is the conception of the void, and this is the starting point for this chapter, following which I trace the development of abstraction in visual art and page-based and sound poetry, starting with a study of Mallarmé's late nineteenth century poem *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard*, which I argue opened up new possibilities for the treatment of space and subjectivity in poetry.

Towards the Void

Wilhelm Worringer, in the essay 'Abstraction and Empathy', challenges the notion widely held in modern aesthetics that empathy is the basis for the value of a work of art.[2] The premise of his essay is that we seek in art a pleasure through its aesthetics. I

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[1] Sheppard, 'Propositions', p. 23.

[2] Modern aesthetics was a strand of art criticism that 'no longer takes the aesthetic as the starting-point of its investigations, but proceeds from the behaviour of the contemplating subject', Wilhelm Worringer, 'Abstraction and Empathy', in *Modernism*, ed. by Kolocotroni and others (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 72-76 (p. 72). I have used Worringer as a helpful way in to the discussion of the void but I am careful to avoid being drawn towards an aesthetic position.

distance myself from this position in my emphasis on art's formal, political and perceptual dimensions. Worringer states,

> [T]he urge to abstraction is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world; in a religious aspect it corresponds to a strongly transcendental tinge to all notions. We might describe this state as an immense spiritual dread of space.[3]

For Worringer, it is not the artist's empathic understanding of the world wherein the work of art's unique quality lies but in the impossibility of comprehending the universe's vast temporal and spatial dimensions and the anxiety that this provokes. We have an innate dread of this vastness, unsurprising if one considers that prior to the mass lighting of cities in the twentieth century (in terms of human history a very short time ago) it would have been common for individuals, at night time, to be literally and physically confronting complete darkness. It is somehow (and somewhat perversely) unimaginable to conceive how far away, in terms of time and distance, is the end of the universe, the *imaginable* limit of space. *Void* would be a more appropriate term for the apparent emptiness of night and outer space: essentially an absence of visible material where social structures cease to operate. The poetic, a term which can apply to all artistic acts, is a performance from the world of material experience which can move into a comparable void. Its energy (in the abstract or metaphorical, rather than *common*, sense) bursts into the space available, manageable only by its recognisability, its familiarity, its lines, its edges: that is, the form from which it arises. Worringer's identification of the urge towards abstraction 'finds its beauty in the life-denying inorganic'.[4] I would counter that abstraction actually moves towards the void through the world of disarranged material experience, the world of perception and sensation. Yet Worringer's sense of abstraction as inspired by an immense dread of space allows us to view it as political: the void, as a potential realm for the expansion of human consciousness, is where an opening up of radical political and social change can take place, where we can build structures anew. It is, no less, the fear of freedom which is encapsulated in this fear of space.

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[3] Worringer, pp. 74-75.
[4] Worringer, p. 72.

Virginia Woolf's inquiry into the nature of the void enables us to see it further as a site for potential revolution. Her 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* addresses the idea of the void through her powerful descriptions of darkness and the sea towards which she draws the existential plights of her characters. In this I discern an invitation to readers to consider enormous spaces external to the characters and to themselves. I read these spaces as analogous to our sense of a formless void. These descriptions reveal to us what is at stake when one is drawn to the threshold of the void, which will be pertinent to our understanding of the role of the engaged perceiver in the Event in chapter 4. In part one, 'The Window', as the noise of the children playing ceases, Mrs Ramsay becomes conscious of the 'monotonous fall of the waves on the beach'. She experiences this sensation as mostly soothing; however at times the waves 'suddenly and unexpectedly [...] remorselessly beat the measure of life, [making] one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea'. This sound 'made her look up with an impulse of terror'.[5] The comforting rhythms of nature therefore can terrify as they bring us to the void, suggested by the sea's vast, unfathomable depths and darkness. Later, her need '[t]o be silent; to be alone' is described as 'a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others'. This stillness leads to an expansion of her consciousness: 'When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless.'[6] The wedge of darkness, depicted as unimaginable space, is the site of peace and inner content:

> Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. [...] There was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability. Not as oneself did one find rest ever, in her experience [...], but as a wedge of darkness.[7]

The second section of the novel, 'Time Passes', begins with a description of an encroaching darkness which consumes the house where the characters are staying:

> So with the lamps all put out, the moon sunk, and a thin rain drumming on the roof a downpouring of immense darkness began. Nothing, it seemed, could

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[5] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1938), p. 18.
[6] Woolf, *Lighthouse*, p. 72.
[7] Woolf, *Lighthouse*, p. 73.

survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers. Not only was furniture confounded; there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say 'This is he' or 'This is she.'[8]

The process of the darkness capturing everything, so that bodies and minds disperse into space, introduces the idea of the void as a metaphorical or metaphysical entity, as well as a physical, spatial one. Here it conforms to our notion of the void as a realm without structure. However in parallel to the process of flow which can be approached through creative (useful) memory or blocked by neuroses, there are choices as one advances towards the void. Mrs McNab, the caretaker who has taken to drink, tends to the house in the family's absence. Following their departure and the description of the encroaching void, the house is silent and still. She utters a sound which is 'robbed of meaning, was like the voice of witlessness, humour, persistency itself, trodden down but springing up again'.[9] The voice, described as meaningless but equally indicative of the monotonous, unfulfilling drudgery of her circumstances, seeps out from the stillness, the blackness. As the primary medium through which language travels (more physical and immediate than the pen), the voice creeps out as a momentary sign as the void encroaches. Woolf further draws a parallel between the void and flow: 'In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing […] was struck into stability.'[10] Perhaps one emerges from or into the other, or perhaps one is a negation of the other: the fear of freedom invoked by the void interrupts our bodies' fluency. We further note it is shape – material objects, or remnants or memories of them – in which flow is stabilised. As the house, over time, falls into increasing dilapidation Mrs McNab feels less certain about visiting: 'She didn't like to be up here at dusk alone neither. It was too much for one woman, too much, too much.'[11] Her highest degree of apprehension, then, is at dusk, the threshold between light and dark, neither day nor night. Mrs McNab, her faculties clouded by age, disillusionment and alcohol, is quite unable to approach the void receptively, an attitude in conflict with Cage's advice to simply let the idea occur, to

[8] Woolf, *Lighthouse*, p. 145.
[9] Woolf, *Lighthouse*, p. 151.
[10] Woolf, *Lighthouse*, p. 186.
[11] Woolf, *Lighthouse*, p. 159.

approach the void openly.[12] Woolf's void is a pivotal point of tension, where fear and freedom, and the possibilities and limitations of consciousness expansion, meet, 'For what could be more formidable than that space?'.[13] *To the Lighthouse* addresses the void in the space of experience and asks questions about the production of experience. It can be interpreted as a critique of bourgeois experience where the limitations imposed by cultural and political systems keep the void at bay from experience or create anxiety as one approaches it.

For Henri Michaux, the poetic traverses the boundaries between 'that space' and the material world, and is not constrained by conventions of meaning. In *Miserable Miracle*, he describes a peyote trip in dense and powerful terms.[14] The tract is a diary-like account of the experience which becomes concerned with the essence of the poetic, achieved partly through a reverse personification as the narrator adopts the identity of the poem. He cites a furrow, analogous to the poetic line: 'I see a furrow. A furrow with little, hurried, transversal sweepings. In it a fluid, its brightness mercurial, its behaviour torrential, its speed electric. Seemingly elastic too. Swish, swish, swish it rushes along showing innumerable little tremors. I also see stripes.' An enormous space then opens up in the furrow: 'A furrow without beginning or end, as tall as I am and whose average breadth is appreciably the same above and below, a furrow I'd say comes from one end of the earth, goes through me and on to the other end of the earth.' The narrator first experiences a vast space between himself and the furrow before fusing with the furrow and immediately being confronted with a temporal perception of his consciousness that has echoes of Bergson's Duration: 'yet it is myself, it is each of my instants, one after the other, flowing in its crystalline flux. In this flux my life advances.' For Michaux the space is a 'no-man's land', recalling the dread of space Worringer alludes to, but also a fluidity.[15] In this process he has identified the fundamental unit of lexical poetry, the line, unifying with the ego-consciousness (poet) to create a flowing energy which he acknowledges in its spatial *and* temporal dimensions. Cage also makes these links. In 'Lecture on Nothing' he implies the void is identical with poetry:

I have nothing to say

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[12] Cage, 'Lecture', p. 110.

[13] Woolf, *Lighthouse*, p. 182.

[14] The English translation, peculiarly, omits the third word 'Mescaline' from the title of the original as if the risk involved in altered states induced by chemicals or plant derivatives is in some way a moral issue.

[15] Henri Michaux, *Miserable Miracle* (New York: New York Review Books, 2002), p. 13.

<pre>
          and I am saying it   and that is

    poetry¹⁶
</pre>

Three brief paragraphs later and the peyote leads Michaux to another essential characteristic of the poetic, perception, both visual and haptic: 'Enormous sheets of cardboard, bigger than screens, of a gray that is unpleasant to look at and a texture that must be unpleasant to touch, are being handled very briskly by hands I do not see.'[17] He is then engulfed by a tidal wave of little coloured dots which he describes as a 'deluge'. Far from the silence of Cage's void, Michaux's is a void filled with sensation.

Michaux's findings are consistent with what we may consider to be central understandings about the essential nature of poetry which have telling resonance with regard to Cobbing's work. Whether spoken or on the page, poetry has both a temporal dimension, a duration, and a spatial dimension, as its materials (the spoken or written word) exist within a spatial environment. These elements are energised at the interface between the work and the perceiver, indicating that the poetic cannot arise without a process of perception. That the no-man's land of space, the void, is *dreaded* reveals the typical anxiety induced in the audience; perceivers must commit, engage, with the work to experience the realm of potential transformation. Furthermore the void may arise with the suspension of familiar perception. Michaux's anxiety about the void is an echo of Stéphane Mallarmé's poetry where this anxiety is turned into form and expresses the loss of a rational map.

Mallarmé's Void

Mallarmé's 1897 poem *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* ('A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance') was a highly influential, pre-Modernist work, notable for its radical lexical and visual presentations. It was not published in book form until 1914 and only published with Mallarmé's typographical instructions in 2004.[18] It still appears remarkable today. The most immediate observation one makes is in relation to its

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[16] Cage, 'Lecture', p. 109.
[17] Michaux, p. 14.
[18] Publisher Michel Pierson claims his 2004 edition is the only one 'to have taken care to redraw the missing fonts or unusual characters and scrupulously reproduce the layout of the author', Paul St John Mackintosh, 'A conversation with Michel Pierson, resurrector of Mallarmé's *Un coup de Dés*', *Teleread* <http://www.teleread.com/poetry/a-conversation-with-michel-pierson/> [accessed 21 December 2014] (interview format).

structural dispersal across the page. Starting with the opening clause, which gives an initial lie to semantic and visual closure, the semantic thread repeatedly goes off at angles giving the subsequent clauses the impression of continually intersecting each other. We can view the clauses as planes. Mallarmé makes the temporal, or conventional, poetic line simultaneously spatial through this discontinuity. The intersecting planes are analogous to the angular blocking of space that Picasso and Braque were to explore a decade later but remain temporal in the way these oblique departures are built up. The rhythmic time of each line, as well as what can be discerned as having semantic value, is intercepted at angles by the ensuing sense of the next:

<div align="center">

UN COUP DE DÉS

</div>

      JAMAIS

     QUAND BIEN MÊME LANCÉ DANS DES CIRCONSTANCES
ÉTERNELLES

      DU FOND D'UN NAUFRAGE

SOIT

    que

      l'Abîme

> **blanchi**
>> **étale**
>>> **furieux**[19]

('A throw of the dice | never | even when truly cast in the eternal | circumstance | of a shipwreck's | depth | can be | only | the abyss | raging | whitened | stalled')[20]

The vast white spaces are traversed by the eye and ear where conventionally punctuation would separate the list of adjectives. The normal, one-character typographical spacing between words is stretched; between many of the words this stretching takes up the length of a whole line, with only one word arranged across the space of a conventional poetic line, and in a number of instances the white space between words occupies more than a whole line. Reading this typographical arrangement disrupts conventional practices of reading. The perceiver may 'read' these white spaces, taking some seconds between words, but equally may take merely one extra pause, maybe two, in between words which are a line or more apart. This makes reading (perception) of the *stretched* white spaces *condensed*; the space on the page expands and contracts simultaneously. The spaces in between the words then start to open up, drawing the perceiver towards them where the void of content and structure may allow for a reformulation of consciousness. These spaces, like Rothko's dense, bold colours or Malevich's black shapes, can be seen as another manifestation of the void into which the perceiver is drawn. In echoing the sea's vast, dark spaces where the shipwreck is entombed, the poem's voided space also recalls Woolf's engulfing sea. *Un Coup de Dés* underwrites the void by presenting and constantly reinforcing the absence inside language. It is the space of Michaux's peyote trip: 'An immense space running between my body and the furrow, with the furrow running through the middle.

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[19] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira le Hasard*, in *The Meaning of Mallarmé: A bilingual edition of his POÉSIES and UN COUP DE DÉS*, ed. by Charles Chadwick (Aberdeen: Scottish Cultural Press, 1996), pp. 125-33. Chadwick, like Pierson, claims this is the version authorised by Mallarmé. I have been unable to render the typographical spacing perfectly due to Mallarmé's strategy of spacing the poem within the frame of the double-page spread.

[20] I have gone with the translation from the Poetry in Translation website. This interpretation by A.S. Kline does a fine job of capturing the rhythm and ship-like motion of the original whilst also being quite literal (*faithful*) to Mallarmé (it further benefits from the space afforded by webpage layout); the decision, for example, not to follow a chronological translation of the final three adjectives ('blanchi | étale | furieux') retains a flowing poetic charge absent from Chadwick's translation of 'white | at full tide | raging', which manages to avoid the inherent friction between *étale* (spread, stalled) and *furieux* (furious, angry). <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/MallarmeUnCoupdeDes.htm> [accessed 3 November 2014].

Sometimes there is nothing running through this space. (Strange, I thought I was full.)'[21]
It is the space in *To the Lighthouse* where objects cannot be discerned. Mallarmé's poem
illustrates how chance may occur in the void; chance is related to movement and
movement is the potential for change.

The apparent first clause of *Un Coup*, 'A throw of the dice never can be only the abyss',
gets interrupted by the lines 'even when truly cast in the eternal | circumstance | of a
shipwreck's depth'. If the dice throw can be conceived as 'never only the abyss', and it
takes a somewhat twisted leap of faith to comprehend it as such (Mallarmé was writing
some twenty years before Surrealism), the subordinate clause contains a still greater
degree of indeterminacy: how can the dice throw be cast into a shipwreck's depth
(wrecked ships tend to be underwater), what is its 'eternal circumstance' and, perhaps
most oddly, how can it be cast 'truly' or otherwise? A first reading mimics semantic
completion but attentive inspection reveals a repeatedly deferred narrative linearity.
This highlights the uneasy connection, or rather the high degree of indeterminacy,
between the 'chance' of the dice throw and the abyss (void), reinforced by the vast
blank page space behind the words. A leap of faith is required for the perceiver to
comprehend the demanding set of negations in *Un Coup*; this begins in the expressive
body (the poet) and creates non-linear spatial relations through the poetic line,
including its absence or negation. This non-linearity, given that we commonly perceive
ourselves to exist in fixed, linear dimensions, demands an act of 'faith' similar to the idea
of the body as interpreter and maker of signs, as proposed by Eric Mottram (see Italian
Futurism, below). The rapid succession of tangential, indeterminate phrases in
Mallarmé's poem, exaggerated by the vast white spaces on the page, like Woolf's Lily
Briscoe's perception of the 'great distances' between the Ramsays playing, conveys a
profound sense of space.[22] There are gaps in the physical spaces between the words
themselves as well as between the words and what is available as meaning. The fusion
of mind and body alluded to in *To the Lighthouse* captures the effect for the reader of *Un
Coup*; the writing – the material – seeps out into the white space and merges with it. The
abyss then takes off at angles three more times, as it is described in apparently
contradictory terms: 'raging | whitened | stalled'. In fact, if we take the line break

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[21] Michaux, p. 13.

[22] 'In the failing light they all looked sharp-edged and ethereal and divided by great distances.' Woolf,
Lighthouse, p. 85.

between the lines 'restraining the surges | gathered far within' to be a pause less than a full stop, the entire poem becomes one lengthy non-sequitur, reading the phrases as a series of planes that cut across each other, evoking the spatial planes in Cubist painting. These visual and semantic, or desemanticised, patterns, something akin to a constant cubist shifting, continue through the poem, increasing in intensity through the use of repetition, a conventional poetic feature. Mallarmé endeavoured to disperse the space of the conventional poem: 'the versification demands [the blank spaces], as a surrounding silence, to the extent that a fragment, lyrical or of a few beats, occupies, in its midst, a third of the space of paper. I do not transgress the measure, only disperse it.'[23] In so doing he introduced space *inside* the typography as opposed to around the borders of the poem, thereby accentuating the deferral of semantic closure as the meaning is continually delayed or spaced, leaving it open to contingency (the theme of the dice throw). This dispersal of space shifts the perceiver's attention as Joan Retallack, commenting on Cage, Duchamp and D.T. Suzuki, has noted: 'the transformation of the nature of attention was the key to the constructive transfiguration of experience.'[24] *Un Coup*'s treatment of space is therefore political for the following reasons: it suspends recognition, it discovers the force inherent in language and it is an assertion of radical freedom. It is what Rothenberg terms 'raising alternative propositions'[25] or as Mottram puts it, 'dynamic design is revolutionary'.[26]

Cubism, Futurism and Rayism

There is some consensus as to the point when abstract works were first produced by visual artists but it is considerably harder to historicise an equivalent shift in poetry. Virginia Woolf's reference to human relations, religion, conduct, politics and literature changing 'about the year 1910' helps determine a pivotal moment – and a major aspect of this shift was indeed away from representational art.[27] Marjorie Perloff highlights how the trend was towards abstraction in terms of representation and, affirming

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[23] Mallarmé, 'Preface to 1897 version of *Un Coup de Dés*', *University at Buffalo Electronic Poetry Centre Digital Library* <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Mallarme.html> [accessed 21 December 2014] (para. 1 of 1).
[24] Retallack, p. 176.
[25] Rothenberg, *Revolution*, p. xviii.
[26] Eric Mottram, *Towards design in poetry* (London: Veer Books in association with Writers Forum, 2005), p. 47.
[27] Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', in *A Woman's Essays, Selected Essays: Volume 1,* ed. by Rachel Bowlby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), pp. 69-87 (p. 71).

McCaffery's view discussed in chapter 2, a greater privileging of the visual and oral over the semantic:

> [J]ust as Cubist and Futurist collage constituted a break with "mimesis," a putting into question of the illusions of representation, so the "new poetry," whether Kruchenykh's vowel poems, or Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, or Pound's injection of the ideogram or the found text into the verse structure of the *Cantos*, was a way of calling into question the lingering faith in the logocentric subject, the unifying Poetic Theme. […] [T]he visual and oral dimensions of poetry […] were given renewed importance.[28]

These artistic shifts around the beginning of the twentieth century created new perspectives for perceivers as they were brought to the threshold of the idea of the void shaped by the ideas of Worringer, Woolf and Michaux. The terror of space may arise from the uncertainty that accompanies a newly-defined subjectivity arising from the diminution of faith in the logocentric subject. Retallack sees this as a challenge: 'Proposal for a healthy politics of identity: to demand the right to work on one's subject position rather than to live out its destiny.'[29] One way of meeting this challenge would be to understand the newly defined space of Modernist works as infinite vectors or planes. Vectors have both direction and what mathematicians call magnitude; they therefore both *traverse* and *make* space. Mallarmé's lines function in this manner, suggesting that we make space as we move in it. In the wake of Mallarmé's new type of line, or vector, how we perceive, move in and thereby make space artistically became a concern for the painters and poets of what was later to be termed Modernism. There was a certain overlapping of these considerations by visual artists and poets, although (Mallarmé and possibly Apollinaire excepted) the work of the Cubists and that of abstract artists Goncharova, Kandinsky and Malevich dealt with questions of space some years before they were taken up by any major poets. Although never abstract, Cubism in particular was the artistic precursor to Modernist literary approaches to space. Cubist representations of space challenged preconceived ideas about how space works and therefore Cubism can be identified as a crucial turning point in the move towards abstraction in both visual art and poetry.

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[28] Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 190.
[29] Retallack, p. 116.

Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) (fig. 6) was radical and confrontational for a number of reasons. The oil painting depicts five female figures, supposedly prostitutes from a brothel in Avignon, of whom none are conventionally attractive, two are sporting masks and each has a somewhat sinister, emotionless air about them. The figures are disjointed and their body parts are not in

Fig. 6 Pablo Picasso: *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*

proportion. The painting's subject matter, its hostile rejection of any sense of celebrating an ideal of the human form and the influence of African sculpture were each radical approaches to visual content. Yet it is in the alteration of traditional senses of perspective where we can detect a strain that refigured formal conventions of visual art. The fragmented women do not appear to be on a consistent surface and they overlap each other with no depth of field. There is no attempt to make the figures or their spatial relativity lifelike. Kandinsky commended Picasso for his bold leaps and always being a step ahead of his audience; he noted that 'Picasso is trying to arrive at constructiveness by way of proportion' and that, in 1911, he achieved 'the logical destruction of matter […] by a kind of parcelling out of its various divisions across the canvas' yet maintaining 'an appearance of matter'.[30] Picasso's 1911 paintings such as *Ma Jolie* and *La Coiffeuse* do retain an appearance of matter but I would contend do not destroy it; the figures in the earlier *Les Demoiselles* are clearly representational, identifiable as the human form. The paintings of Picasso and Braque were to become more and more fragmented, but neither artist completely abandoned the figurative.
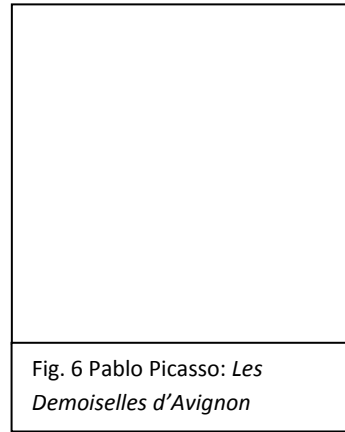
In Braque's *Violin and Candlestick* (1910) the essential shapes of both eponymous objects can be discerned but again with an absence of depth or logical spatial relations. The build-up of layers of shapes in blocks suggests other objects without assuring the perceiver they are actually there. These objects, or painted representations of them, can only be found in this arrangement on a canvas. We are being asked to think of painting's subject matter as not something immediately recognizable from the real world, and certainly not something that performs as it does in the real world. Braque's idiosyncratic use of shade, colour and the line made for uncomfortable viewing in 1910. Through this arrangement, the material (browns, greys, blocks and layers) bursts out

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[30] Wassily Kandinsky, C*oncerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. by M.T.H. Sadler (New York: Dover Publications, 1977), p. 18.

across the space of the canvas. Like the other grey-brown paintings in this series, Braque's placement of objects does not conform to the perceiver's expectations of flattened, apparently consistent space. Both these paintings, through their opening up of conventional notions of space, address a number of our principal concepts: form, in terms of how shapes and lines create or depart from what is recognizable; abstraction, in that representational painting is put under pressure, although with the Cubists it was not abandoned; and perception, in that perspective becomes disjointed and the perceptual field is awash with sensations which do not act in a way that is traditionally comfortable. Driving both Picasso and Braque was a desire to overturn the established perspectives of landscape and portrait painting which had dominated European art for centuries, a motivation in line with Rothenberg's idea of the revolution of the word or Stein's call for artists to do what is exciting (see chapter 4). Picasso and Braque's early Cubist prototypes had a considerable influence on both the Italian and Russian Futurists and so I now attend to the abstract credentials in the work of Italian Futurist leader Fillipo Tomasso Marinetti.

Marinetti's 1909 'The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism' aggressively urges a major rethink of approaches to poetry. Marinetti regarded the car and its high speeds as iconic of the new era. Speed should be celebrated and reflected in art, necessitating a certain dismantling of established linguistic systems: 'Poetry must be conceived as a violent attack on unknown forces.'[31] Marinetti's 1912 'Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature' advocates abolishing syntax; excluding adjectives, adverbs and punctuation; using verbs only in the infinitive; and avoiding free verse.[32] Such propositions give little direction with regard to artistic approaches to text layout, which he addressed in his 1913 manifesto, 'Destruction of Syntax – Wireless Imagination – Words in Freedom'. Here Marinetti proposes a series of measures he called 'parole in libertà' (words in freedom), including replacing free verse with a lyric expression that discards syntax and punctuation, the connecting units of language,[33] and disrupting regular typography: 'typographical harmony [is] […] contrary to the flux and reflux, the leaps and bursts of

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[31] Fillipo Marinetti, 'The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism', in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. by Umbro Apollonio (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), pp. 19-23 (p. 21-22).
[32] Perloff, *Futurist Moment*, p. 57.
[33] Marinetti, 'Destruction of Syntax – Wireless Imagination – Words in Freedom', in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. by Apollonio, pp. 95-106 (pp. 98-99).

style that run through the page.'[34] The intention was to free the potential power of the word, a notion that was to resonate strongly with Bob Cobbing, and reject the then-dominant Symbolism. The cover of Marinetti's 1914 *Zang Tumb Tumb* (also known as *Zang Tumb Tuum*) features sloping text, curved text and intersecting text. On the inside pages, single letters are seemingly randomly scattered about the page, text forms patterns and lines (such as three words in a circle and vertical and sloped phrases) and text is centred across the page.[35] Marinetti's typographical inventiveness had the potential to challenge the authority of the letter, the word's ultimate unit of divisibility, but the presentation of space in his work remained flat and linear. For Marinetti, as for Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, 'the problem of space remained'.[36] For both Mallarmé and Marinetti, the disruptions of text appearance raise questions about how layout informs meaning by addressing the imbalance of the semantic and the material components of poetry, although they both retain clear lexical material and a semblance of narrative, which may suggest their works are not fully abstract. However *Un Coup*'s earlier embodiment of a new, spatial poetics identifies it as a seminal work in terms of space, void, subjectivity and perception. It therefore contains most of the features of abstraction we are in the process of identifying, whereas Marinetti's texts (with the exception of his practice of collaging and overlaying, which was to influence Cobbing) seem comparatively tentative, despite his stated revolutionary intentions. In the visual artworks of Marinetti's Italian contemporaries Carlo Carrà and Giacomo Balla, however, there was significant development from Cubist approaches to representation.

'Manifesto of the Futurist Painters 1910', published by Carrà and Balla with Gino Severini, Umberto Boccioni and Luigi Rossolo, also endorsed aggressively abandoning established forms: 'Sweep the whole field of art clean of all themes and subjects […] used in the past.'[37] The Futurist painters produced new themes and subjects, almost inadvertently accelerating the progression away from representation, though a subject as such was largely retained. Balla's 1913 oil painting *Abstract Speed the Car Has Passed* depicts not an object but an impression of a vehicle's speed. Its swirls, shapes and

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[34] Marinetti, 'Destruction', p. 104.
[35] Pages from *Zang Tumb Tumb* can be seen at Tactile <https://tactileword.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/futuristtypography.pdf> [accessed 14 May 2013].
[36] Woolf, *Lighthouse*, p. 198.
[37] Carlo Carrà, Giacomo Balla, Gino Severini, Umberto Boccioni and Luigi Rossolo, 'Manifesto of the Futurist Painters 1910', in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. by Apollonio, pp. 24-26 (pp. 25-26).

foregrounding of colour – soft blues and whites, not the darks and reds one might think more obviously associated with speed and violence – create a space to observe a sensory field, whilst its title indicates that it is *of* something, triggering semantic representations. Balla's attempts to capture speed lack the aggressive character advocated by Marinetti and suggest that where the more democratic Dadaists struggled with the idea of speed, the Futurists identified with it rendering their treatment of it somewhat uncritical. The capturing of motion and the kinetic qualities in Balla's painting ask perceivers to contemplate movement within consistent, two-dimensional space – the effect is too flat for them to engage with the vast dimensions of the void. Carrà's *Demonstration for Intervention in the War* (1914) (fig. 7), a small collage of tempera and pasted paper on cardboard, was his attempt to abandon representation of the human form and realise Marinetti's parole in libertà.[38] As a progression towards abstraction, with no recognisable image, it is at a threshold. It contains script, blurring genre distinctions, and found text, with discernible yet indeterminate references to the king, the army and Italy, amidst unpronounceable sequences of repeated vowels and consonants; there are also two sequences of green, white and red stripes resembling the Italian tricolour. Whereas Balla's passed car presents a consistent examination of the human condition, Carrà's collage, despite its identifiable lexical material – or even because of its indeterminate presentation of language – challenges the very idea of self: it lacks, in its absence of a single narrative, consistent subjectivity. This is reflected in the vortex arrangement of the materials which Perloff claims compels viewers to make individual connections. The juxtapositions and contradictions of this 'verbal-visual overkill', she states, invite us to impose our own ordering system.[39] Yet this is a recommendation to decode, the kind of dogmatic interpretation that indeterminate works demand we reject. If however we note the absence of a stable subjectivity, meaning-making becomes a more embodied experience, as Eric Mottram has noted: 'a language might be made of anything; the body makes and uses systems out of anything. Semiology is the science of all signs, including linguistics. So that the work can be considered as sign-making.'[40] The body makes *and* interprets signs, so our experience becomes open to every kind of material. The absence of a stable subjectivity can be found in different phases of Cobbing's work. The letteristic name poems, for example,

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[38] Carrà letter to Severini, qtd in Perloff, *Futurist Moment*, p. 61.
[39] Perloff, *Futurist Moment*, pp. 63-64.
[40] Mottram, *Towards design*, p. 9.

remove narrative and the perceiver focuses on the arrangement and materiality (sonic and visual) of the letters. *For Jack Kerouac*, the 'Judith poem' and Cobbing's tribute to the Scottish poet '65 Anagrams for Edwin Morgan' do not have a consistent, first-person subjectivity but one that starts to suggest multiple possible subjectivities. At another extreme the ferocious brutalisation of material in *Destruction in Art*, a *line from the observer* and *Domestic Ambient Noise* thoroughly upends the perceiver's capacity for a stable subjective position at the contact boundary when their body is fully committed to the encounter. A physical engagement with the materials that burst in multiple directions out of Carrà's vortex enables the perceiver to open up to the work on a range of levels in addition to the visual. Carrà's vortex sucks the perceiver's gaze into a diminishing point, beyond which is the formlessness of the void. Yet this presentation of space equally diminishes into and expands out of specific points of the collage.[41] In the absence of a unifying narrative, the unsettled subjectivity, working simultaneously with this diminishment and expansion, requires the perceiving body to respond in a constellatory manner to the work. There are no fixed points upon which we can stabilise our perceptual field, an effect more evident in the Cobbing pieces which brutalise material than in the name poems. In early Modernism, having been loosened from its traditional and consistent first or third person perspective, the question of subjectivity became a moot one for artists.

Fig. 7 Carlo Carrà: *Demonstration for Intervention in the War*

Driven by Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh, the literary front of Russian Futurism, with direct challenges to the authority of the model of signification, wanted to revolutionise language. Echoing the intentions Marinetti advanced for parole in libertà, they stated their intention to '[t]hrow Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc. [...] overboard from the Ship of Modernity'[42] and, in 1913, Kruchenykh proposed *zaum*, or

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[41] The notion of the vortex indicates how presentations of space were being re-thought around the beginning of the century. Percy Wyndham Lewis's UK movement, Vorticism, founded in 1913 and effectively ended by the First World War before it had really got going, with Cubism as its primary influence, produced some major avant-gardist poetry, prose, paintings and sculptures and *Blast* magazine. Yet, not unlike the Italian Futurism that Wyndham Lewis was so scornful of, and despite some provocative and amusing polemical rants in the Vorticist Manifesto (published with *Blast 1*), there is little of particular help in Vorticist works in terms of our charting of abstraction.
[42] David Burliuk, Alexander Kruchenykh, Victor Khlebnikov (Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov periodically used these alternative forenames) and Vladimir Mayakovsky, 'Slap in the Face of Public Taste', in *Russian*

'transrational language'. In 'New Ways of the Word (the language of the future, death to Symbolism)', he demands: 'Why not get away from rational thought, and write not by means of word-concepts, but of words freely formed?'.[43] Notably, he further questions poets' attachment to semantic signification: 'What is surprising is the senselessness of our writers striving so hard for *meaning*, [...] one needs *new words and a totally new way of combining them*.'[44] The logic behind this was that 'irregular structuring of a sentence [...] generates *movement and a new perception of the world* and, conversely, that movement and psychological variation generate strange "nonsensical" combinations of words and letters'.[45] Kruchenykh advocated grammatical irregularity, including absence of form agreement, eradication of the subject, pronouns and prepositions, neologisms, unexpected phonetic combinations, colour and unusual rhyme, typography and syntax. Much of Kruchenykh's intention can be seen in Cobbing's methods: privileging the visual over the semantic, movement, a new perception, strange combinations of words and letters, and all the revisions Kruchenykh applied to grammar. (Cobbing did work with colour, though, as with the tape recorder, he did not persist over a long period.) The syntactic pieces 'Make perhaps this out sense of can you' (1973) and 'A square poem' (1989) exemplify this sense of movement. In marked contrast to his later visual poetry, which repeatedly shatters boundaries, these poems are confined within a tight frame, creating a more digestible 'new perception' than the rampant and overwhelming new perception of *Domestic Ambient Noise* and similar later works.

It is noteworthy that *zaum* and the Futurist manifestos preceded World War I. Artists were identifying language as a powerful tool in furthering the European colonisation of so much of the globe which had accelerated throughout the nineteenth century. Kruchenykh notes painters' moves towards abstraction were a re-evaluation of space and time: 'Previously, the painters' world had only two dimensions: length and width; now it has acquired depth and relief, movement and weight, the coloration of time.'[46] Perloff observes how his short 1913 poem 'dyr bul shchyl', a text-visual assemblage (contrary to Perloff's claim that it is a sono-visual assemblage), which is accompanied

Futurism Through Its Manifestoes, 1912-1928, ed. and trans. by Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 51-52 (p. 51).

[43] Kruchenykh, 'New Ways of the Word (the language of the future, death to Symbolism)', in *Russian Futurism*, ed. by Lawton and Eagle, pp. 69-71 (p. 71).

[44] Kruchenykh, 'New Ways', p. 72.

[45] Kruchenykh, 'New Ways', p. 73.

[46] Kruchenykh, 'New Ways', p. 75.

by a non-representational Rayist drawing by Mikhail Larionov, is non-referential but contains Russian script and recognisable sounds from the language.[47] Kruchenykh's visual poem 'Portrait of Akhmet' radically reworks poetic convention but again relies on lettering and the reformatting of structural effects such as the line and internal rhyme.[48]

Although Kruchenykh was critical of the Italian Futurists, the Russians shared the Italians' determination to find a new form of representation for literature and visual art.[49] And like the Italians, it is in the latter that moves towards abstraction are more perceptible. Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov, Natalya Goncharova and Larionov's 1912 publication *Mirskonstsa* (*Worldbackwards*) features a cover by Goncharova, similar to a child's collage, suggestive of a flower or dancer but, strictly, indefinable, creating tensions between text and drawing, poetry and image, and representation and non-representation. Goncharova's work was soon to draw heavily on Larionov's Rayist theories (which more than echo William Carlos Williams' ideas about space, discussed later in this chapter):

> We perceive a sum of rays proceeding from a source of light; these are reflected from the object and enter our field of vision […]. [I]f we wish to paint literally what we see, then we must paint the sum of rays reflected from the object.[50]

Goncharova's *Blue-Green Forest* (1912-13) belies its title with an assemblage of ray-like strokes of blues and greens not clearly indicative of any objects in a forest. There is a hallucinogenic quality to the painting whereby faces and natural features begin to emerge after prolonged gazing. Goncharova's Rayist paintings act as a conduit, with a lineage traceable, through Futurism and Cubism, from Impressionism to abstraction. For Lyotard the abstract is characterised by the organisation of material, the form, and there is a heightened disposition that channels libidinal energy, which he calls the 'libidinal dispositif', arising from the perceiver being unable to find a reference:

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[47] Perloff, *Futurist Moment*, pp. 123-24. I adopt Rayism rather than the more common Rayonism for the same reasons as I prefer Letterism.

[48] See Marjorie Perloff's impressive interpretation in *Futurist Moment*, pp. 139-140. Perloff produces penetrating close readings but her criticism lacks ideology and fails to explain the relevant politics.

[49] 'The Italian "amateurish" Futurists, with their endless ra ta ta ra ta ta, are like Maeterlinck's heroes who think that "door" repeated a hundred times opens up a revelation.' 'New Ways', p. 76.

[50] Mikhail Larionov, 'Rayonist Painting', in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*, ed. and trans. by John E. Bowlt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), pp. 91-100 (p. 98).

> [T]he abstract is an instance of *jouissance* proper. [...] [and] does not come through a simulacrum-effect, but by means of the organization of its material alone. [...] [T]he libidinal *dispositif* is noticeable in every abstraction [...] in that it thwarts the client's transference onto a simulated object, onto a reference.[51]

Lyotard's sense of abstraction is useful but fails to take into account the body as an agent of meaning-making. In *Blue-Green Forest* the richness of colour and the carefully intersected arrangements executed by the thickly applied oils create an indeterminate effect and present, as could be said of Picasso and Braque, a radical reworking of how perceivers experience space. Abstraction is manifested through matter, not its absence. The resultant movement within space becomes the 'subject', rather than a physical object, in contrast to Balla's attempt to capture speed. Creeley and Olson's aphorism that we recall from chapter 2, 'Form is never more than an extension of content',[52] is qualified by Eric Mottram's idea that form is not something added to artistic materials – structure is inherent in them. Mottram describes abstraction as a resistance: 'The movements of art and science in [the twentieth] century lie towards experiencing structure which is not associative or symbolic or comparative – that is, resists being an act of recognition.' For Mottram, this absence of representation comes through structure, a key determinant of form, which itself, anticipating our following chapter, can rupture established forms.[53] The intersected, rayist strokes of *Blue-Green Forest* constitute in fact both content and structure – and thus form. The perceiver's inability to transfer onto a referenced object invites an absorption in the textures, colours and shades, demanding an embodied, perceptual response, which is how what I shall term the engaged perceiver may respond to Cobbing's visual poetry, detailed in chapter 5. Only Goncharova's title indicates the painting's subject. There is an absence and presence of both referentiality and subjectivity between which this painting oscillates. The momentary signs in Cobbing's visual poetry and a good deal of his lexical poetry, in their thwarting of a reference, are charged with this tension. The W poem in *ABC in Sound* retains identifiable words but given their palindromic arrangements lifts them out of any familiar semantic context (perhaps all good poetry does this). This further disturbs the genre boundaries between poem, sound poem and nursery rhyme:

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[51] Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 245-46.
[52] Olson, 'Projective Verse', p. 240.
[53] Mottram, *Towards design*, p. 13.

        drown word   drawn ward

        ward draw   prawn warp

        beware era web

        ebor draw wardrobe[54]

Peter Manson's observation that Cobbing's reading of this poem in 2000 emphasised 'the semantic element over the formal, to the point where the repeated line 'drownword' came over as a powerful malediction' stresses the point: the poem has semantic value, though that value is unfixed and expressed and perceived bodily.[55] A stable subjectivity is loosened in this relatively early poem, where later pieces such as *Four Letter Poems* (1981) combine an absence and presence of referentiality with radical presentations of space to utterly unsettle the perceiver's subjective stance.[56] As we shall see in the work of Kandinsky and Malevich, Goncharova's unseating of conventional subjectivity combined with unconventional presentations of space are equally relevant as modes of abstraction as the thwarting of a reference.

Kandinsky and Malevich

It would be an oversight not to mention Kandinsky in a survey of visual art working towards abstraction in the early part of the twentieth century. Yet much of his well-known work is generally described as abstract without any consideration as to which features of abstraction it contains. Throughout the 1900s and into the Blaue Reiter period in the 1910s his paintings became less representational through his application of colour in relation to form. The material arrangements in *Murnau – Kohlgruberstrasse* (1908) and *Landscape with Factory Chimney* (1910), with their vibrant daubs of primary colours, comparable to Cézanne's treatment of the outline, give rise to the *dispositif* identified by Lyotard as an aesthetic response despite their retention of referential objects. The Composition series, from 1911 onwards, often regarded as his first abstractions, originated in figurative sketches; the indeterminacy of the shapes and swirls and the colour arrangements do not totally abandon reference to possible

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[54] The 'W Poem', *ABC in Sound* (no page numbers).
[55] Peter Manson, 'Bob Cobbing Solo', *Wordpress* <https://petermanson.wordpress.com/prose/bob-cobbing-solo/> [accessed 3 June 2015].
[56] *bob jubile*, pp. 72-73.

objects.[57] In *Composition IV* (1911) for example objects are, with little effort, discernible. However *Improvisation: Deluge* (1913) anticipates the dream images of Surrealism and the total absence of representation in Abstract Expressionism. Its non-representational shapes and an absence of narrative and unifying theme echo the abstract qualities discerned in Italian Futurism and Rayism. Yet, like *Blue-Green Forest*, prolonged gazing reveals a hallucinatory quality where figures and objects begin to appear. Indeed, both paintings require a physical and temporal commitment on the part of the perceiver to fully appreciate the works. For Mottram, this placing of the body as key to how works *mean* alters what is *meant* by *meaning*.[58] In Kandinsky's and Goncharova's paintings the non-attachment to objects does not negate the principle of experiencing abstraction with the body. It is through sensory perception of such works that perceivers may undergo a transfiguration as a result of questioning subjectivity and conventional space, and this remains the case even given the possibility of referential objects.

Kasimir Malevich's 1912 paintings *Head of a Peasant Girl* and *Peasant Woman* evoke Cubism and Rayism, including mere suggestions of a subject which, like Goncharova's painting, is indicated in the title alone. With *Pilot*, a conglomeration of monochrome geometric shapes published in *Troe*, a 1913 collaboration with Khlebnikov, 'Malevich presents us with the disintegration of three-dimensional space and its rebirth as something mysterious, something other.'[59] Malevich's untitled drawing to accompany Khlebnikov's poem 'From Sahara to America', itself a disrupted narrative which veers in and out of identifiable form, is a geometric landscape which 'presents us with familiar objects – light bulb, wheel, pipe, leg – decomposed and fragmented in what is an intricate network of interlocking and overlapping planes, of light versus dark, circle versus triangle'.[60] Here adopting a Cubist approach to perspective, disintegrating, indeed, three-dimensional space as Tatlin did with his hanging sculptures, Malevich presents objects, though the context is indeterminate and therefore challenges the perceiver's subjective position through the body which interprets the signs. The specific 'interlocking and overlapping' arrangements on the page destroy any possibility of an obvious narrative in relation to the objects present. However, despite lacking

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[57] *Kandinsky: The Path to Abstraction*, ed. by Hartwig Fischer and Sean Rainbird (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), pp. 108-09.
[58] Mottram, *Towards design*, pp. 7-12.
[59] Perloff, *Futurist Moment*, p. 144.
[60] Perloff, *Futurist Moment*, p. 150.

determinate context, the objects remain. Malevich stated that Futurism renounced the 'painterly' in favour of the 'dynamic'.[61] He applauded Cubism for its fragmentation of the object but himself strove to destroy the object in order to place art at the threshold of the new: 'From Malevich's point of view, Cubist art remained, despite its great innovations, rooted in the traditional faith in pictorial synthesis.'[62] Malevich's Suprematist paintings of black or coloured shapes on white backgrounds take the radical edges of Cubism and Futurism to create an effect so simple, yet utterly exceptional. Begun in 1913 and first exhibited at the 1915 *0-10* exhibition in Petrograd, they are, I would argue, pure manifestations of the kind of organisation of materials that Lyotard and Mottram allude to. They replace narrative with geometry and, as self-contained events, abandon references to external objects and thus are referable only to themselves. Despite their two-dimensional appearance they put pressure on the perception of space-time as they have a (spatial) depth which exists temporally (the perceiver's duration). *Black Square* (fig. 8) has no narrative, no adherence to an object and no unifying theme. Its form is transparently defined by its content, rather than its framing, and it lacks representation. It forces the perceiver to renegotiate subjectivity, as Abstract Expressionism was to do decades later. Rothko's maroon paintings, for example, are so dense they are capable of invoking a reaction of terror, drawing the perceiver towards the vast depths of the void. As early as 1965 Cobbing's manipulation of materials created *Stills from an Old Movie* with large, pure-black daubs of ink which complexify the clarity of Malevich's two-tones. Woolf's Mrs McNab would find a Rothko, a Malevich and certainly Cobbing's brutalising visual poetry truly terrifying. *Black Square*'s evocation of the archetypal cosmic manifestation of the void, the black hole, makes it a key work in respect of our documentation

Fig. 8 Kasimir Malevich: *Black Square*

of radical approaches to space, involving subjectivity but not in a conventional way. The following section on the moves towards abstraction in sound performance will provide us with further insight into how subjectivity in abstraction was addressed.
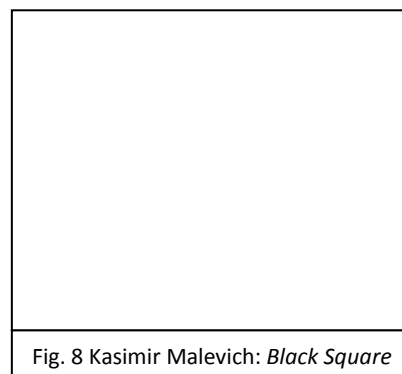
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[61] Perloff, *Futurist Moment*, p. 66.
[62] Perloff, *Futurist Moment*, p. 116 and p. 65.

Towards Abstraction in Sound Performance

In tracing these key artistic advances I propose an argument at odds with a common view that poetry's first abstractions were Dadaist sound poems. The liner notes for one of Schwitters's CDs, for example, refers to *Ursonate* as a 'totally abstract piece'.[63] However sound performance did not achieve what Steve McCaffery describes as 'full orality' until the 1950s, with the Ultraletterists.[64] 'Full orality' suggests a bodily expression free from all traces of semantic signification which would include phonemic and syntactic structures. This expression would project sonic material externally where it would alter the material nature of the aural space through which it travelled. Adopted by avant-gardists seeking to respond to the way language was used as a propaganda tool by governments, authorities and media, sound poetry and sound performance notably increased in activity during the twentieth century. We shall start our survey with the earliest known sound poems towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Following Lewis Carroll's well-known inclusion of 'Jabberwocky' in *Through the Looking-Glass* as early as 1871,[65] the first known modern practitioners of poetry to break with semantic coherence to create poems by mixing real and made-up words were German writers Christian Morgenstern and Paul Scheerbart around the turn of the twentieth century. Morgenstern, an author and poet, published the playful 'La Groβe Lalulà' in 1905. It contains a mixture of real and invented words, with its emphasis on the repetitive soft syllables of the latter. His famous 'Fisches Nachtgesang' ('Song of the Night Fishes') (1905) was both a concrete and a visual poem consisting of alternate lines of two symbols. Dashes form one set of symbols and the other consists of upturned brackets on their sides or breves, the diacritical marks to denote short vowel sounds. It is a suitable text for use as a sound score although I can find no reference to Morgenstern performing it as such. Novelist Scheerbart's inclusion of the short nonsense poem 'Kikakokú! Ekoraláps!', with its bold departure from meaning, within

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[63] 'From the liner notes to Futurism and Dada Reviewed and Ursonate', qtd in 'Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948)', *UbuWeb* <http://www.ubu.com/sound/schwitters.html> [accessed 14 February 2012] (para. 2 of 7).

[64] McCaffery, 'Voice', p. 166.

[65] '*Twas brillig, and the slithy toves | Did gyre and gimble in the wabe: | ll mimsy were the borogoves, | And the mome raths outgrabe.*' Lewis Carrol, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 134.

one of his longer narratives, *Ich Liebe Dich!*, in 1897 reveals a take on the sound poem that revels in the sounds of language:

> Wîso kollipánda opolôsa.
> Ipasátta îh fûo.
> Kikakokú proklínthe petêh.
> Nikifilí mopaléxio intipáschi benakáffro – própsa
> pî! própsa pî![66]

There remains in their work what McCaffery calls 'the simulacra of semiosis' in the imitation of standard syntactic rhythms and the adherence to the conventions of word structure and line arrangement, though Scheerbart's departure from the aligned left margin is notable.[67] Yet these retreats from conventional literary treatments of sound as subordinate or incidental to semantic meaning created new possibilities for poets; semantics could become less privileged, not necessarily a work's overriding feature. A decade or so later, Marinetti's parole in libertà, with its retention of lexical and semantic material, actually staunched the progress towards abstraction awoken by Morgenstern and Scheerbart. McCaffery's contention that parole in libertà and *zaum* merely achieved the word's 'plasticization and deformation' usefully marks the progress towards abstraction in sound pre-1916.[68]

Nancy Perloff notes how technological progress in recording and transmission accelerated the development of artistic presentations of sound during this period: the phonograph was invented in 1877, the radio in 1891 and the tape recorder in 1934-5.[69] And yet it would appear to be the slaughter of the Great War that immediately triggered the first documented, concerted exploration of sound performance, in Zurich in 1915. The Dada movement sought a new language separate from nation and official culture. German exile Hugo Ball's approach to language was political and ideological: language had been plundered by 'jingoism, literary professionalism, journalism and intellectual vacuity', had upheld the ruling value systems and ultimately led to 'the thinking which

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[66] Paul Scheerbart, 'Kikakokú! Ekoraláps!', in *Ich Liebe Dich! Ein Eifenbahn Roman mit 66 Intermezzos* (Berlin: Schufter & Loeffler, 1897), p. 249.
[67] McCaffery, 'Voice', p. 164.
[68] McCaffery, 'Voice', p. 166.
[69] Nancy Perloff, 'Sound Poetry and the Musical Avant-Garde: A Musicologist's Perspective', in *The Sound of Poetry*, ed. by M. Perloff and Dworkin, pp. 97-117 (p. 98).

[...] made the war a necessity'.[70] He described his *lautgedichte* ('sound poems') as 'phonetic poems', launching them at the Cabaret Voltaire in July 1916.[71] It is notable that, as was the case with many major sound practitioners up until Chopin and Cobbing, Ball's engagement with his particular brand of sound exploration was short-lived. Two of his most well-known poems, 'Jolifanta bambla ô falli bambla' and 'Baubo sbugi ninga gloffa' were, like Scheerbart's 'Kikakokú!', included in a longer prose piece, *Tenderenda the Fantast*. The lautgedichte were similarly based around established conventions:

> Jolifanta bambla ô falli bambla
>
> grossiga m'pfa habla horem
>
> égiga goramen
>
> hollaka hollala
>
> anlogo bung
>
> blago bung
>
> blago bung
>
> bosso fataka[72]

This extract demonstrates how Ball's sound poems adhere to the poetic line and how they utilise routine poetic features such as repetition (here repeating phonemes, syllables and words, albeit invented ones). We can further see in the rhythmic nicety and syllabically-based word structure a mirroring of conventional syntax indicating an underlying suggestion of sense similar to that found in 'Jabberwocky'.[73] Thus we find an authorial presence, an expressive subject analogous to the 'lyric I' which had dominated conservative poetry for centuries. Granted, there is a loosening of the word's attachment to semantic meaning, and the Dadaists' emphasis on live performance placed an orality, a physicality, into poetry that had arguably been in decline since it was a purely oral form, yet there remains a subjectivity, a consistent narrator or author, and a flat, linear approach to space in Ball's sound poetry. His professed intention to

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[70] Malcolm Green, 'Translator's Introduction', in *Blago Bung Blago Bung Bosso Fataka! The first texts of German Dada by Hugo Ball, Richard Huelsenbeck, Walter Serner*, ed. and trans. by Malcolm Green (London: Atlas Press, 1995), pp. 9-51 (p. 36).

[71] McCaffery, 'Voice', p. 163.

[72] Hugo Ball, 'Jolifanta bambla ô falli bambla', in *Tenderenda the Fantast*, in *Blago Bung*, ed. by Green, pp. 89-149 (p. 137).

[73] Green, p. 171.

bring down the ruling value systems through innovative approaches to language thus rings a little hollow.

Tristan Tzara's sound poems were based in part on African forms, in the case of 'nfoünta mbaah mbaah nfoünta' (an example of what McCaffery calls *ethnopoetry*), and on the juxtapositions of multi-voice performances (known as *simultaneist* poetry), where a reliance on conventional semantics remained.[74] However some Tzara pieces, such as 'Toto-Vaca' (1920), like Ball's, used nonsense words throughout. Richard Huelsenbeck's Bruitist poems, an idea he took from Marinetti,[75] were a mixture of semi-sense and inventions similar to Ball's or Tzara's:

> sbeen taken fer 'ome since terday
>
> work
>
> work
>
> breh breh breh breh breh breh breh breh breh
>
> sokobauno sokobauno sokobauno[76]

The Austrian Raoul Hausmann, along with Huelsenbeck a leading figure of Berlin Dada, performed phonetic poems from 1918 onwards. His best known piece, 'fmsbwtözäu', has two lines: 'fmsbwtözäu | pggiv-..?mü'. Hausmann named these phonetic poems *optophonetic*, perceptively describing the optophonetic and the phonetic poem as only 'the first step towards totally non-representational, abstract poetry'.[77] The anti-bourgeois and anti-authoritarian strains of Dadaist creations did not in themselves render the work any more abstract than Morgenstern's and Scheerbart's, but the development of Dadaist sound performance laid a greater emphasis on the physicality of sound. In performance, composed text, as embodied, becomes a physical act. The utterances remained lexical, but a notable development towards abstraction occurred in the embodiment of the text as voice. This repositioning of the voice and body reinvigorated poetry as an oral tradition with the body responsible for making and interpreting signs.

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[74] McCaffery, 'Survey', pp. 8-9.

[75] Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat* (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999), p. 46.

[76] Richard Huelsenbeck, 'Plane', in *Fantastic Prayers*, in *Blago Bung*, ed. and trans. by Green, pp. 55-86 (p. 55).

[77] Hans Richter, *Dada Art and Anti-art*, trans. by David Britt (New York: Abrams, 1965), p. 121.

Painter, poet, sculptor, collagist and designer, Kurt Schwitters is known for his *Merz* creations, permanent examples of installation art whereby the interiors of his homes were transformed into indoor sculptures. In 1922, inspired by Hausmann, he set about composing a long poem which he performed in part, extended and developed before finally publishing in 1932. The resultant *Ursonate*, roughly translated as 'Primeval Sonata', perhaps the most famous sound poem of all, was rigorously assembled in four movements, each section based on a different Hausmann poem;[78] following the typical form of a musical sonata, Schwitters included notes on structure and minor directions on delivery ('soft', 'loud', 'starts very vigorously'). It consists entirely of made-up words, insistently repeats words, syllables and single sequences of vowels and consonants, includes internal consistencies within each movement and emphasises glottic Germanic consonants:

> Rakete rinzekete
> Rakete rinzekete
> Rakete rinzekete
> Rakete rinzekete
> Rakete rinzekete
> Rakete rinzekete

There is a desemanticisation at work, a reduction of the significance of meaning, through which a playfulness and a nursery rhyme-like *dispositif* emerges:

> Oobee tatta tee
> Oobee tatta tee
> Oobee tatta tee tee
> Oobee tatta tee tee
> […]
> Tilla loola luula loola
> Tilla lulla loola luula
> Tilla loola luula loola
> Tilla lulla loola luula

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[78] As noted by Christian Bök in a note to 'When Cyborgs diversify', in *The Sound of Poetry*, ed. by Perloff and Dworkin (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 129-41 (p. 315).

The phonemes and syllables become motifs which give the piece a sense of revolving in on itself:

> Rinnze kette bee
> Rinnze kette bee
> Rinnze kette bee bee
> Rinnze kette bee bee
> Rinnze kette beebee beebee
> Rinnze kette beebee beebee[79]

A densely structured piece, with a composer-performer making decisions and following an established form, *Ursonate* is grounded in the alphabet as is the work of Tzara, Ball, Morgenstern and Scheerbart. Yet, with a similar treatment to which his *Merz* sculptures transformed the body of a building into a creative, internalised space, Schwitters's sound poetry regards the human body as a physical space for vocal utterance, unconcerned with the limitations of meaning, and in the course of its unfolding it propelled sound closer to abstraction. McCaffery describes the excess over semantics in conventional writing as a general economy of meaning, a separation of referential meaning from the sound and ink of speech and writing, which had allowed it to function 'as an entirely referential project'.[80] Signifying language subsumes materiality: 'the language of instrumental reference will always […] downplay the constitutional presence of material exhaustion.'[81] Through the examples of metaphor and paragrams, McCaffery notes 'meaning becomes partly the production of a general economy, a persistent excess'.[82] He calls for:

> […] a writing that transgresses the prohibition of the semantic operation and risks the loss of meaning. […] A return to the material base of language would be necessary as a method of losing meaning. […] [S]ound poetry is a poetry of complete expenditure in which nothing is recoverable and useable as "meaning".

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[79] Kurt Schwitters, *Ur Sonata*, in *pppppp poems performance pieces proses plays poetics*, ed. by Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris (Cambridge, MA: Exact Exchange, 2002), pp. 52-80.

[80] McCaffery, 'Writing as a General Economy', in *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986* (New York: Roof, 1986), pp. 201-221 (p. 204).

[81] McCaffery, 'Economy', p. 205.

[82] McCaffery, 'Economy', p. 208.

[…] [I]t sustains the materiality and material effects of the phonematic structures whilst avoiding their traditional semantic purpose.[83]

An evaluation of these pronouncements in line with Mottram's contentions would argue that something *is* recoverable as meaning in sound poetry, but that what we understand by meaning, as now corporeal rather than semantic signs, has changed. Schwitters's emphasis on sound in *Ursonate* provided a partial reversal of the excess that McCaffery identifies; sonic material is achieved through a familiar lexis but, as the poem pulls away from literary sense, sonic and scripted material is prominent and signification relegated. Cobbing's name poems, such as *For Jack Kerouac*, '65 Anagrams for Edwin Morgan', Ana Perenna' and 'Poem for Gillian' drew on this model and so retain the word in a deformed aspect. Similarly the sounds in *Ursonate* are transcribable and related, by whatever associations through their phonemic resonances and syllabic roots (the 'phonematic structures'), to actual words so the question of syntactically, syllabically-based sound poetry as *complete* expenditure is questionable anyway. The pertinent issue in relation to abstraction is how the privileging of the body suggests a new approach to the handling of subjectivity.

Isidore Isou formed Letterism in 1945 essentially to focus artistic works on letters, numbers and signs to completely escape semantic meaning. Isou made bold claims for Letterism's potential cultural impact and some of his textual innovations, such as making use of graphic images and handwriting, were progressive. His Dada and Futurist-inspired sound poetry included occasional grunts and half screams as if, drawing on Leibniz's infinitesimal quantities ('we cannot penetrate to them [and] there are none in nature'), working through to those infinitesimal particles of language led to utterances resembling pre-verbal sounds.[84] In the mid-1950s François Dufrêne, Gil J. Wolman, Jean-Louis Brau and Henri Chopin split from Isou to form the Ultraletterists, developing their own specific approaches to sound performance. Dufrêne's *cri-rhythmes*

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[83] McCaffery, 'Economy', pp. 214-5.

[84] Gottried Wilhelm Leibniz, 'Correspondence with John Bernoulli, 1698-99', in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. Leroy E. Loemker (London: Reidel, 1976), pp. 511-514 (p. 511). Leibniz later clarified this explanation: 'And it remains true, for example, that $2 = \frac{1}{1} + \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{8} + \frac{1}{16} + \frac{1}{32} + ...$, which is an infinite series containing all the fractions whose numerators are 1 and whose denominators are a geometric progression of powers of 2, although only ordinary numbers are used, and no infinitely small fraction, or one whose denominator is an infinite number, ever occurs in it. […] [I]nfinites and infinitesimals are grounded in such a way that everything in geometry, and even in nature, takes place as if they were perfect realities.' 'Letter to Varignon, with a note on the "Justification of the Infinitesimal Calculus by That of Ordinary Algebra", 1702', in *Philosophical Papers*, pp. 542-546 (pp. 543-4).

featured a range of indeterminate, tape recorder-processed vocal gestures;[85] Wolman's *mégapneumes* concentrated on the breath, generating a gasping effect of breathy sounds and coughs occasionally interspersed with consonantal repetitions; Brau's *instrumentations verbales* combined short and held breaths, clicks and animal-like noises; Chopin performed extreme experiments with the tape recorder, the distorted results sounding dystopian and alien.[86] The Ultraletterists practised vocal improvisation, making the poem's creation and performance one event, 'reconfiguring performance not as a validation of authorial presence (there is no author) but as a profoundly destabilizing force.'[87] This authorless creation, fully escaped from lexical material, was destabilizing because it lacked a subject; the human utterance was brought forth with no semantic or verbal material upon which an audience could comfortably hang its desire for recognition. The way the Ultraletterists arranged their materials, which constituted all facets of the human voice, posited the body as the central force; in so doing their work achieved the kind of characteristics of radical form that we have already explored with the writings of Cage and Mottram, and it gave rise to that channelling of energy noted by Lyotard. Only with the Ultraletterists can we define the struggle to free the voice from speech. The voice itself, whatever its phenomenology, as long as it utters speech, is tied to an idea of subjectivity; speech, in giving vent to expression, inevitably indicates a thinking subject. The Ultraletterists' sound performances must be treated as purely acoustic events, breaking the link between voice and speech. They forced audiences out of a complacent passivity, out of the comfortable zone of being receiving object/s to expressing subject/s. Perhaps identifying its potentially short shelf-life, the Ultraletterists' exploration of sound abstracted from meaning was short-lived as they 'quickly modified their performances into multimedia events', but the potential for individual transformation during such performances, of performer or perceiver, remained in theory at least.[88] The 'abolition of normative meaning' allows for a purely physical engagement, bypassing neuroses and repressions of ego, recalling our earlier studies of Cage, McClure and Biswas.[89] Art at its

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[85] '[T]he utmost variety of utterance, extended cries, shrieks, ululations, purrs, yaups and cluckings' according to Bob Cobbing, qtd. in McCaffery, 'Voice', p. 166.

[86] Examples of the work of these poets, as with all the sound artists mentioned in this chapter, can be found at <www.ubuweb.com>.

[87] McCaffery, 'Voice', p. 166.

[88] McCaffery, 'Voice', p. 167.

[89] McCaffery, 'Voice', p. 166.

most radical induces change in its participants (artists and perceivers). This change can take the visible form of a range of expressions from discomfort or rage to elation. Once the formula for certain practices, such as those of the Ultraletterists, is established, the potential for transformation is reduced. Therefore the key role that such acts play is as a constant revision of our relationship to perception. If the work of Dada is determined abstract in error, the performance of the Ultraletterists can justifiably claim such a description, yet once the term is attached it starts to lose its value and fresh artistic forms of resistance were required. Cobbing constantly freshened his forms and as such his work over time asked more and more challenging questions of prevailing norms.

In their explorations of sonic material and gestures that moved away from official uses of language – the language of the instrumentalisers – the artists discussed in this section were the major protagonists in early-mid twentieth-century sound poetry. In the case of the Russian Futurists it is in their subversion of poetic form; in the cases of the Dadaists, Schwitters and Isou it is most evident in their emphasis on the voice as a physical property, freeing the material of poetry from the voice – as Cobbing puts it, freeing the poem from the page: 'You've got to free the poem from the page and, as Henri Chopin says, "take it onto the streets".'[90] Marjorie Perloff makes a similar observation on Kruchenykh's 'Portrait of Akhmet': 'since its meanings do not cohere in any sort of consistent framework, syntactic parallelism not being matched by semantic equivalence, its words are, so to speak, set free.'[91] Yet the reliance on lexical material, with its established and inevitable link to semantics and syntax, leads perceivers to tend to transfer onto a referential object, remaining in a subject-object relation and therefore trapped in a subjectivity where language will continue to dominate and control thoughts and actions. The move towards abstraction in sound performance, completed eventually but exploited as an independent concern only briefly by the Ultraletterists, was chiefly characterised by an absence of semantics, the verbal equivalent of non-representation in visual art, and a rethinking of subjectivity. Where a definition of subjectivity in visual abstraction remains problematic, its self-evident connection to the thinking subject, manifested in speech, gives us a clearer means of identifying abstraction in sound performance. Through the sound emitted from it, the body was the primary signifying agent for the Ultraletterists, not speech. Their connection with raw,

[90] *Radio Radio*, Cobbing interviewed by Martin Spinelli.
[91] Perloff, *The Futurist Moment*, pp. 139-40.

corporeal energies, given the emergence of various artistic and social phenomena in the late twentieth century such as conceptual art, happenings, raves and many manifestations of intermediality, made possible new art experiences and new types of audience. Indeed, the move towards abstraction in sound and the visual during the early part of the twentieth century was not conducted in isolation from other significant advances and a continuum of its residue can be discerned right up to the present day. These radical developments are found in what we can term a field of approaches to sound and the visual, including the blurring of boundaries between art forms and genres (exemplified by Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay's *La prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France* but seen also in the Russian Futurist and Rayist collaborations already cited), innovative methods of working (definitively illustrated by John Cage, who calls method 'the note-to-note procedure'), and the artist as art (Carolee Schneemann, Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik).[92] These extensions of artistic practice have to some degree questioned the privileging of language as a tool in a power hierarchy, and can inform our understanding of Cobbing's work and his ways of working. Cobbing embraced the historical moment of sound poetry, and if the Ultraletterists had freed the voice from the word and letter, Cobbing explored the desemanticisation of the Word and the brutalisation of the text but always returned to examine how his deformations had transfigured language whilst retaining semantic traces. During no phase did he exclusively use materials without a lexical origin. In fact the Word – through his idiosyncratically-styled letterism – was the basis of the majority of his published work and all his major pieces.

Williams and Stein

We have detailed so far how the Italian and Russian Futurists raised questions about how text could be presented in unfamiliar and unsettling ways and the Dadaists emphasised poetry's physical and sonic dimensions. We have considered how certain Modernist painters, following Cubism, redefined the consistent presentations of space. We have further identified a radical approach to referentiality and subjectivity in different artforms early in the century. However it was some years before Mallarmé's considerations of how language occupies space was taken up by poets. It took the work

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[92] Cage, 'Composition', p. 18 and p, 35.

of two idiosyncratic American Modernists, William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein, to firmly place the question of space, in particular how language disperses into space, at the heart of their particular poetics and, in turn, abstraction. A word of caution, however, is advisable regarding space in sound performance and lexical poetry as being considered analogous or the same. Although in the poetry of Mallarmé and, as we shall see, Williams and Stein, lexical features, including graphemic and semantic aspects, were diminished and the semantic was similarly weakened in the performances of the various sound artists, space in relation to typography can never function in as expansive a manner as explorations of bodily and environmental space. The multidimensionality of the page space in Mallarmé and Williams could be said to penetrate into the physical space of the engaged perceiver – that is, it crosses the conventional thresholds contained within the page.

Stein and Williams were both heavily influenced by Cubism and to some degree sought to replicate, or create a literary equivalence of, Picasso and Braque's arrangements of space. Stein counted Picasso and Braque among many artist friends and acquired a large private collection of Cubist works. She set out to produce the cubist poem and to revive language: 'Confronted with such unexpected associations and wilful incoherence, the reader is forced to question the meanings of words, to become reacquainted with a language that Stein thought had become dulled by long use.'[93] For Williams, as with Mallarmé, the spatial presentation of poetic text was a major concern, and he and Stein both strove to capture the essence of the imagination in the present moment.[94]

Williams broke with traditional form to open up the spatial possibilities of language. 'The rose is obsolete' section of the prose/verse *Spring and All*, through direct addresses to essential questions of poetics, tackles the ideas of physical and philosophical space.

> The rose is obsolete
> but each petal ends in
> an edge, the double facet
> cementing the grooved
> columns of air--The edge

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[93] Anon., 'Note', in Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* (New York: Dover Publications, 1977), p. vi. 'Note' is an uncredited foreword.
[94] 'Stein had been trying to create portraits of people, portraits rooted solely in the present moment', Anon., 'Note', p. v.

cuts without cutting

meets--nothing--renews

itself in metal or porcelain--

whither? It ends--

But if it ends

the start is begun

so that to engage roses

becomes a geometry--

Sharper, neater, more cutting

figured in majolica--

the broken plate

glazed with a rose

Somewhere the sense

makes copper roses

steel roses--

The rose carried weight of love

but love is at an end--of roses

It is at the edge of the

petal that love waits

Crisp, worked to defeat

laboredness--fragile

plucked, moist, half-raised

cold, precise, touching

What

The place between the petal's

edge and the

From the petal's edge a line starts

that being of steel

> infinitely fine, infinitely
>
> rigid penetrates
>
> the Milky Way
>
> without contact--lifting
>
> from it--neither hanging
>
> nor pushing--
>
> The fragility of the flower
>
> unbruised
>
> penetrates space[95]

The subject of 'The rose is obsolete' is, to echo McClure's description of Olson's *Maximus Poems*, the poem's architecture.[96] Etched clearly into a surface reading of the poem is a poetic lexis: 'an edge', 'grooved', 'cuts', 'ends', 'sense', 'a line', all terms on some level identified with *the poem*. An understanding then follows that the rose itself acts as an emblem for the poem; the rose's physical characteristics, 'petal', 'petal's edge', 'flower', can themselves be seen as spatially transferred or extensive metaphors for the poem's constituent parts: the line, sense, edges, its *geometry*. Williams here retains a traditional poetic feature, the metaphor, but radically transforms its application: these are not traditional metaphors since the petal, for example, does not indisputably *stand for* the poetic line but, through a process of transference, can be compared to it by extension of the poem's concerns. This forges an engagement with the spatial properties of language. With its clauses taking angular turns and distortions of physical space, to an extent calling to mind *Un Coup de Dés*, 'The rose is obsolete' has some equivalence in the kind of abstraction found in Kandinsky's improvisations, Goncharova's Rayist paintings and Cubism in that we are presented with multiple possibilities of space. Space is not considered flat, linear or one-dimensional, just as Cubist paintings create multidimensional space and deal with a multiple movement of the senses in relation to the material world; the senses are not subordinate to flat, ordered arrangements within space. *Un Coup de Dés*, Rimbaud's *Illuminations* and Cendrars and Delaunay's *La prose du Transsibérien* disrupt the linearity of narrative at least in part by temporal fracturing,

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[95] William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*, in *Imaginations*, ed. by Webster Schott (New York: New Directions, 1970), pp. 88-151 (pp. 107-09).

[96] McClure refers to 'the architecture of the poem itself', McClure, *Scratching the Beat Surface: Essays on New Vision from Blake to Kerouac* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982), p. 43.

in contrast to, say, Larkin's *Whitsun Weddings* which follows a predictable direction of narrative, line and stanza. Similarly, 'The rose is obsolete' has no consistent, ordered narrative direction but brings into focus the relationship between content and form. We find 'edges' on the edge (later moving inwards along the line), 'ends' on the end, and language mirroring form as 'The edge | cuts without cutting' where 'cuts' cuts into the previous line. There is very little punctuation and several non-sequiturs where words and sense drop out of the space one expects to see them. Language is depicted as something without weight or gravity: 'The fragility of the flower | unbruised | penetrates space.' Form and materiality, then, mirror each other, the poetic lexis drawing attention to the edges, ends and spaces which, reinforced by the non-sequiturs, make the reader hyper-aware of the white space. The poem's lines of force (its concerns being indeterminate or addressing indeterminacy, radiating in many directions) seem to create space, recalling Mallarmé's vectors. Again we can invoke Worringer, Michaux and Woolf as means to understand what Williams was trying to convey about space. The occupation that 'The rose is obsolete' has with *the poem*, that is, *its own form*, equates to a re-positioning of subjectivity. There is no traditional narrative poetic voice but, in investigating its formula through its own genre, the poem veers close to a kind of self-reflexive, self-reflective narrative, which contrasts with established poetic incarnations of subjectivity which had been typically set from a consistent and accessible first person (and human) perspective. It deals with the non-material (space) and the material (language), the philosophical and the physical, and the subjective voice and narrative with a questioned subjectivity. This recalls cheek's comments on the challenge to the unified voice at the Writers Forum workshop (see Introduction). Williams's poem draws attention to the thresholds between the various elements, thus fracturing conventional boundaries. We could venture that 'The rose is obsolete' is a unifying force between a poetry with and a poetry without a subject.

Tender Buttons is divided into three parts or chapters, 'Objects', 'Food' and 'Rooms'. 'Objects' and 'Food' are characterized by short sections with subheadings, most of which relate to the chapter title. The subheadings of 'Objects' effectively creates a list of domestic items ('A Carafe, That Is a Blind Glass', 'A Box', 'A Piece of Coffee', 'A Plate', 'A Long Dress', 'A Piano' and so on), although the variations reveal a defamiliarising, indeterminate semantic field: 'Careless Water', 'In Between', 'A Little Called Pauline', 'A

Sound', 'A Leave', 'It Was Black Black Took'. The frequent short sentences omit punctuation and deploy repetitions, rapid rhythms and a mixture of sense and indeterminacy. The longer sentences tend to include numerous repetitions, a gathering of momentum and the mixing up of affirmative statements, negatives and double negatives. Retallack has identified movement and perception as Stein's poetic concerns.

> Gertrude Stein, a mater of ambiguities, had a lifelong preoccupation with the problem of description. She had no interest in fixing her poetic gaze. Like the cubists and gestalt psychologists (and, for that matter, biologists) she found life/art principles in motility. It is the first characteristic of the form of life that is her writing. Her implicit theory of description is not one of pointed linguistic skewer but of fluidly dynamic perceptual field.[97]

Williams observed in *Spring and All* that a freshness is found in perception:

> [F]or the moment everything is fresh, perfect, recreated. In fact now, for the first time, everything IS new.
>
> [...]Yes, the imagination, drunk with prohibitions, has destroyed and recreated everything afresh in the likeness of that which it was. Now indeed men look about in amazement at each other with a full realization of the meaning of "art".[98]

The freshness is found in perceiving the sense things that Rancière states are distributed by artistic acts. In *The Politics of Aesthetics* Rancière describes the distribution of the sensible as 'the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and position within it'.[99] In *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* he establishes how art influences this distribution:

> art consists in constructing spaces and relations to reconfigure materially and symbolically the territory of the common [...]. [A]rt is a way of occupying a place where relations between bodies, images, spaces and times are redistributed.[100]

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[97] Retallack, p. 100.
[98] Williams, *Spring and All*, p. 93.
[99] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 12.
[100] Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 22.

In establishing both common and separate parts, this sense distribution 'reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community'.[101] During the 'aesthetic regime of the arts', Rancière's corrective term for Modernism, the sensible (*sense things*) was distributed in new ways but not according to the established view that one of the major characteristics of Modernism was a rejection of representation through the discovery of the two-dimensional surface, painting's 'own proper 'medium''.[102] He makes this contention on the grounds that, as a surface is 'a certain distribution of the sensible', surfaces do not have distinctive features. There can therefore be no two-dimensional surface.[103] Rancière claims that identifying Modernism as a rupture with the past is a misinterpretation. He argues it 'incessantly restages the past' and was 'a new regime for relating to the past'.[104] The arrangements of language in *Tender Buttons* has indeed the effect of redistributing relations between bodies, images, spaces and times in such a way that the work actually connects with *and* breaks from a history of art and literature through what Rancière terms 'a co-presence of heterogeneous temporalities'.[105] Stein's work is a cubist-like approach to space which, as Merleau-Ponty has identified, is determined culturally, socially and politically.[106] It exists similarly in a cubist-like approach to time: in no specific time and in multiple possible times.

The section 'A Purse' displays typical characteristics of the 'Objects' section of *Tender Buttons*:

> A PURSE.
>
> A purse was not green, it was not straw color, it was hardly seen and it had a use a long use and the chain, the chain was never missing, it was not misplaced, it showed that it was open, that is all that it showed.[107]

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[101] Rancière, *Politics*, p. 12.

[102] Rancière, *Aesthetics*, p. 15 and p. 24.

[103] Rancière, *Aesthetics*, p.15. Rancière's argument would dispute the main ground in this chapter, namely that abstraction is essentially a Modernist mode proliferating, if not strictly originating, in visual art. Without wishing to overly digress I maintain that the key features of abstraction identified here go beyond a rejection of representation (which Rancière may agree with) but do include such a rejection (which he would not).

[104] Rancière, *Aesthetics*, p. 24-25.

[105] Rancière, *Aesthetics*, p. 26.

[106] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 291.

[107] Stein, *Buttons*, p. 10.

The descriptions of the purse's colour as what it 'was not', followed by a double repetition of this phrase, engage the senses in an unsettling manner rather than with the wide-eyed freshness of perception. The purse's presence is defined by qualities that are absent. Its first positive description is 'hardly seen' and the sentence closes by informing us that 'all that it showed' was that 'it was open'. This transgression of poetic form radically undermines conventional poetics: the classical feature of imagery, generally a means to enable the reader to imagine an object in its environmental (spatial) relations, is employed as a defamiliarising strategy. The reader can only conceive the purse as what it is not. 'Open' here has the sense of being physically accessible, unlocked or exposed, referring to the open purse, but also alluding to the open work, a text which is semantically open – unfixed or indeterminate. For Eric Mottram,

> a work is a complex of possibilities in a piece of material, a mediation of variants, referent situations, and a number of invitations to action. It may or may not be 'complete' in the classicist sense – whether linear or spatial […]. [The open work] is an invitation to enter (although entrance may mean the experience of repulsion, of being repelled). There can be no coercion from either side. The work always installs freedom.[108]

The invitation to enter recalls being brought to the threshold of the void, and Retallack's take on the possibilities offered by such work links to indeterminacy:

> It's the infinite messiness of that noise that gives each of us the chance to invent our own life patterns. New poetries are filled with noise, with surface indeterminacy. The moving principle of reading poetry is a function of the degree of indeterminacy in the text.[109]

We enter the *mess* of the work, therefore, as a gamble. The rewards are great, as are the risks. Gone are the certainties of linearity, recognisable form and narrative. This field of uncertainty is widened by Stein with the omission of a comma after the first 'use', thereby increasing the rhythm and knocking one clause into the grammatical or syntactic space of the next. Syntax here composes space just as the lines or visual planes do in Cubist art. Stein's syntactically-mobile phrases, as with Williams's dispersal of

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[108] Mottram, *Towards design*, pp. 47-48.
[109] Retallack, pp. 41-42.

indeterminacy, are like Mallarmé's vectors, repeatedly cutting under and across each other. There is a clear overall difference in the Cubist quality in Stein to Mallarmé and Williams's arrangements of space and phrasing as *Tender Buttons* does not disperse text into space on the page or introduce space as a philosophical concept. Cobbing's constellatory explosion of text, exemplified in concrete pieces such as *Whississippi*, *Marvo Movies Natter* and the *Sonic Icons* collection, takes something akin to Stein's lexical dispersal and Williams and Mallarmé's dispersal of indeterminacy to foreground physical relations in space and by extension invoke the philosophical idea of space.

The persistent application of language as a 'thing' builds up pressure until the 'sense things' (Rancière's 'sensible') disperse. 'Things' are significant in *Tender Buttons* initially as objects, in the idea of things that may have a past. The phrase 'a long use' indicates a narrative for the purse, carved into the momentary description, giving the purse a history. Yet 'things' are also important as linguistic material. The word 'thing' itself, including synonyms or substitutes, is used repeatedly in the short book, leading us to consider that things are made of language and language is itself a thing.[110] The reader experiences the *thingness* of language as the phrases occur in space. This contrasts with Imagism's treatment of the *thing* which restricted the use of language to description but not as material that could problematize.[111] The further repetitions of 'use', 'the chain', 'it', 'that' and 'showed' bring forward language's material properties, particularly the sonic, generating in parallel a semantic emptiness, which resonates with Biswas's use of *Konnakol* (see chapter 2) and consequently acts as an example of what I previously referred to as momentary signs. A radical approach to subjectivity in Stein's work is evident in a similar fashion to Malevich's square and the Ultraletterists' wordless vocalising. There is no consistent narrator and no identifiable voice from whose view we perceive the objects detailed. The descriptions are intensified through their creation of a displaced presence which yet incorporates a narrative history. However the distribution of the sense parts, the material words, creates a flatness where all those sense parts have an equal value. The reader's attention is brought to bear intensely on

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[110] See, amongst others: p. 4 ('there is a bargain and if there is the best thing to do is to take it away and wear it'), p. 23 ('there is a shadow in a kitchen because every little thing is bigger.'), p. 48 ('Any little thing is a change that is if nothing is wasted in that cellar.').

[111] 'Use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation' went the second of Pound's Imagiste maxims, 'A Retrospect', in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature Volume 2*, ed. by Paul Lauter and others (Lexington MA: Heath, 1994), pp. 1262-63 (p. 1262).

every word, unlike conventional writing where filler linguistic units such as articles and prepositions are neglected when reading at normal speed. The absence of a narrator or subjective centre here manoeuvres the text beyond voice whilst retaining words. The reader thus becomes an active subjectivity involved in every single word, rather than subjectivity disappearing altogether. Through the disorganisation of text conventions, the perceiver's body becomes disorganised and their subjective position unsettled.

Stein develops the material theme of 'use' in 'Roastbeef', the opening section of 'Food', which embodies some of her writing's major concerns: 'The change the dirt, not to change dirt means that there is no beefsteak and not to have that is no obstruction, it is so easy to exchange meaning, it is so easy to see the difference.'[112] Prior to the final clause the text turns at several angles. Beefsteak's relevance appears to be solely in its echo of the section heading and there is a lack of semantic closure with the pronoun 'that' referring to possibly 'beefsteak', 'dirt', changing the dirt, 'not to change dirt', any combination of these four possibilities or even an unidentified or unnamed noun or phrase. With this in mind, the immediate sense of 'it is so easy to exchange meaning' has an ironic and ambiguous complexion. We can easily change, or exchange, meaning or a meaning can be easily substituted with another simultaneously due to the absence of closed semantics. But, given the linguistic indeterminacy, it is not at all 'easy' to exchange meaning or indeed 'to see the difference'. Cage's 'Lecture on Nothing' is repetitive, tangential and spiral from start to finish. It is grounded by periodic returns to 'nothing' and 'nowhere' and referencing its own structural progression.[113] Retallack links Stein's methods to Cage, in doing so recalling the repetitions and the map-like structures of Cobbing's constellatory concrete poetry and the theme-based visual poetry series, most notably *Domestic Ambient Noise*:

> Gertrude Stein likes to give an unfolding map (now I am here, doing this, having just done that as I move on to do this, which is not that …) of the process of getting lost as she gropes and relishes her way through what Montaigne called the "changeable occurrences and contradictory ideas" of lived dailiness. In this way and through the use of repetition she presents a bounded pattern of indeterminacy. When John Cage wrote his "Lecture on Nothing," he had clearly

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[112] Stein, *Buttons*, p. 21
[113] Cage, 'Lecture', pp. 109-26.

> learned from his reading of Stein that this principle could be applied to musical composition and language [...].[114]

However the effects are not entirely similar. Stein applies the repetitive/getting lost technique in the sentence,'[i]t does not mean that there are tears, it does not mean that exudation is cumbersome, it means no more than a memory, a choice, a reëstablishment, it means more than any escape from a surrounding extra.'[115] This results in the exudation of tears (not 'there' anyway) which may not be 'cumbersome', yet the exudation of the words we read are decidedly cumbersome. Furthermore, the repetition in the phrases 'it does not mean' and 'it does mean' force us to inquire what the abstract pronoun actually refers to. Where a single use of these phrases would have the reader blithely accepting that 'it' refers to an unspecified state of being, as in the phrase 'it is raining', its repetition activates the reader's subjectivity in the making of any kind of meaning. 'Lecture on Nothing', through its compositional method which results in a near-noiseless tranquillity, urges its reader to dispense with neuroses and blocks to free oneself of the ego's subjectivity. Stein's dance with language is rapid, noisy and pleasurable and forces the reader's subjectivity to be an active and free participant in the artistic encounter. Imbuing words with a wild, almost illegal pleasure is a means to establish an often ignored quality that they have. Cage, moreover, is an advocate of not forcing ideas but enjoying them if they come:

> Most speeches   are full   of ideas.   This one   doesn't have to have   any
> .   But at any moment   an idea   may come along
> .   Then   we may enjoy it.[116]

Stein's technique has equally little investment in the outcome – if a provocation, an engagement or an awareness arises, we may take pleasure, a pleasure driven by the text's movement. In 'Roastbeef' Stein employs an absence of punctuation to knock the phrase 'there is use' into *itself*, an echo which lingers even as we read on, doubling itself each time as two facing mirrors, or indeed Indra's Net, create endless and ultimately indecipherable reflections: 'All the time that there is use there is use and any time there

[114] Retallack, p. 58.
[115] Stein, *Buttons*, p. 21.
[116] Cage, 'Lecture', p. 113.

is a surface there is a surface, and every time there is an exception there is an exception and every time there is a division there is a dividing.'[117] Stein herself observed that 'history teaches' and there is no repetition: 'Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches.'[118] Such a notion suggests how repetition, acting as the ghost of memory, performs on surfaces. The following extract, its playful character prominent, moves from surface to suggestion to silence, but then gives us not silence but an increasingly rapid, somehow noisier – indeed cumbersome – series of conflicts and uncertainties:

> Any time there is a surface there is a surface and every time there is a suggestion there is a suggestion and every time there is a silence there is a silence and every time that is languid there is that there then and not oftener, not always, not particular, tender and changing and external and central and surrounded and singular and simple and the same […].[119]

Roastbeef's handling of language reflects *Tender Buttons* as a whole, challenging the use of language as common material exchange through the use of indeterminacy and determinacy, the open and the closed. A text can exist as a recognisable whole by including material content as letters, words, punctuation, syntax and the signified elements of the individual words (*meaning* has a materiality); but equally this material can be arranged to trigger a certain recognition that leads to a thwarting of our habitual modes of understanding. This contrasts with the overdetermination Ligeti identified in serialism and *embodies* both determinacy and indeterminacy rather than one becoming identical with the other. This swing between extremes of determination fashioned a new, radical narrative, which Cobbing developed in his syntactic poems.

Stein and Williams's arrangements of their linguistic material, and Williams's spatial arrangements, much like the artistic decisions of Picasso, Braque, Goncharova, Malevich and Kandinsky, show how form arises inherently from content to produce, with the continual deferral of semantic closure foregrounded in *Un Coup de Dés*, a new way to create poetic meaning. Mottram calls this 'the release of logic from excessive linearity'.[120] Mallarmé, Williams, Stein and later Cobbing all achieved significant formal

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[117] Stein, *Buttons*, p. 21.
[118] Gertrude Stein, 'If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso', *Penn Sound* <http://writing.upenn.edu/library/Stein-Gertrude_If-I-Told-Him_1923.html> [accessed 9 July 2013].
[119] Stein, *Buttons*, p. 21.
[120] Mottram, *Towards design*, p. 24.

innovations by abandoning the excessive linearity of line-based poetry with sequential narratives, regular and uniform layout, and predictable productions of meaning. As a result the following multiple effects seem to erupt from the pages of their work: words and possible meanings disperse across the space of the page and beyond, memory's role is reconfigured and our own subjectivity becomes the dominant mode of making meaning (though the very idea of meaning itself is transformed). Chapter 5 investigates how traces of this kind of multiplicity are manifested in Cobbing's poetry. I shall end this chapter with a more detailed exploration of the socially controlling, semantically rational map which the avant-gardes were, in part, attempting to dislodge.

The Instrumentalisation of Language

Erica Hunt has noted how control is exercised through language in a manner that could be described, in a common distortion of the word, as clinical:

> Dominant modes of discourse, the language of ordinary life or of rationality, of moral management, of the science of the state, the hectoring threats of the press and the media, use convention and label to bind and organize us.
>
> The convenience of these labels serves social control. The languages used to preserve domination are complex and sometimes contradictory. Much of how they operate to anesthetize desire and resistance is invisible; they are wedded to our common sense; they are formulaic without being intrusive, entirely natural – "no marks on the body at all".
>
> These languages contain us, and we are simultaneously bearers of the codes of containment. Whatever damages or distortion the codes inflict on our subjectively elastic conception of ourselves, socially we act in an echo chamber of the features ascribed to us […].[121]

The artistic crisis around language evolved throughout the last century alongside an instrumentalisation of language which, through propaganda, media reports and public speeches, had permitted the excesses of empire and the slaughters of the First and Second World Wars. Selective reporting, slogans such as 'Your Country Needs You' in Kitchener's 1914 conscription campaign, the Americans' more recent tendency to label

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[121] Erica Hunt, 'Notes for an Oppositional Poetics', in *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. by Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof, 1990), pp. 197-212 (pp. 199-200).

military campaigns with a boys' comic sense of sensationalism (*Operation Desert Storm*, *Operation Enduring Freedom*), and established euphemisms such as *friendly fire* and *collateral damage* are prime examples of language used in this way. Such instrumentalisation was at the core of language's social value, as Guy Debord writes in 'All the King's Men': 'Power lives off stolen goods. It creates nothing; it co-opts. If it determined the meaning of words, there would be no poetry but only useful "information".'[122] The artistic response to instrumentalisation was to reconfigure the way perceivers see, read and hear art. The visual and sound artists and poets I have discussed in this chapter were politically-minded, not mere aesthetes. Their moves towards abstraction variously incorporated novel forms, indeterminacy (which included upsetting the logic of linearity and new ways of making meaning), spatial dispersals of material, reconfigurations of memory, and the interplay of each of these features with a shifting subjectivity. These moves were, ultimately, an engagement with the void, the suspension of existing order and site of potential socio-political change. They attempted, in part, to dismantle perceptual and semantic reason in order to empty language of its core social value, that of how it represents, signifies and determines. Mallarmé, Williams, Stein and the sound poets strove determinedly to detach the Word from instrumentality by emptying or estranging its semantic content. The possibility is then presented to readers to discover their own active subjectivity within artworks. For Retallack the link between intelligibility in art and cultural values is crucial:

> In the sciences, intelligibility is a sign that the current paradigm is still functioning. If the horrors of the twentieth century are to be taken as a challenge to our humanist conceptual frameworks, it's clear that many of our social paradigms have been working against us. In the arts and humanities untroubled intelligibility is a sign of denial.[123]

However, within ten years of the vital works we have referred to by Williams and Stein, a programme of Nazi ethnic cleansing was underway and World War II beckoned. Senseless and vain atrocities committed against the people of Coventry and Dresden were to pale alongside the unthinkable violence perpetrated in Auschwitz and on Hiroshima. The instrumentalisation of language was pushed into a new phase. Vast Nazi

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[122] Guy Debord, 'All the King's Men', *International Situationniste*, 8 (1963), *Situationist International Online* <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/kingsmen.html> [accessed 27 November 2012] (para. 4 of 13).
[123] Retallack, p. 103.

rallies, stirring up loyalty through fear and a common sense of racial superiority, utilised speeches and song. Allied propaganda through posters, television and film ensured unified action. It appeared the artists had failed – language, it seemed, had been fetishized. Debord's belief in the transformative power of poetry, in this light, can appear somewhat hollow: 'What is poetry if not the revolutionary moment of language, inseparable as such from the revolutionary moments of history [...]?'.[124] If radical art breaks up bourgeois meaning it is not then well-placed to carry out the revolution itself. The role for artists is to perpetually prepare the ground for a new language, which is then occupied by others on the outside. We shall address these questions in the following chapter as we consider the rupturing or unifying effects of avant-gardism and Jerome Rothenberg's notion of continually engaging in a revolution of the word. If the unstated aim of Modernist and late Modernist avant-gardist artistic exploration had been to reclaim language from the instrumentalisers, how much more emphatically could they have lost than to have the enemy commit the most violent and extreme acts of genocide in human history? Consequently, artists appeared for a while to largely give up on principles of artistic revolution after Hiroshima and Auschwitz (Adorno's claim in a 1949 essay that to write poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric notwithstanding).[125] There is no little irony that since the 1950s the technological instrumentalisation of language has actually intensified. And this is where we find Cobbing's work so important. He was prepared to continue with extreme artistic exploration, pursuing many of the significant themes that were important to radical artists prior to the Holocaust and the A-bomb, in defiance of an impotent and reactionary mainstream (from the Movement poets through to Armitage and Motion). Central concerns of his poetry were a liberating of language and an unintelligibility achieved through works that deployed an absence of representation, innovation of form, multiplicities of space, a sophisticated engagement with memory, a reconfigured subjectivity and indeterminacy.

Towards a New Poetics?

We have observed in this chapter some late Modernist responses to the fragmentation of the international community. The Ultraletterists emptied their work of the properties

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[124] Debord, 'King's Men', (para. 4 of 13).
[125] Theodor Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981), pp. 17-34 (p. 34).

of language altogether and John Cage began using invented scores as a new system in the language of musical composition. Abstraction seemed to be a response with a degree of appropriateness to Adorno's baiting, although as detailed above its roots lay largely in the Modernist years of the early twentieth century. Cobbing's work, maturing in the wake of the post-war economic boom and as the '60s counterculture and the Cold War began to exert their profound influence on the post-war generations, did not abandon the features of abstraction we have identified. However Cobbing noted, in his own rebuff to Chopin and Dufrêne, he always returned to the Word, a process best seen in the disintegration and reappearance of lexical material in his visual poetry, the semantic residues in his sound poetry and the radical discovery of the possibility of sounding visual poems as scores: 'Whenever I turn to non-verbal sounds, Chopin welcomes me with open arms! … But I go back to the word again, and they [Chopin and Dufrêne] tell me the word is finished.'[126] Without totally abandoning the Word or letter as sign or material, he invested into language an alternative signifying process. It was a democratising of performance and creativity through a process of flow, with space presented as multiple and non-linear; this rises from the tensions forged by momentary signs. Cobbing's sound performances owed their material roots to the early-mid twentieth century, synthesising the lexical achievements of Ball, Hausmann, Schwitters, Isou and Chopin with an exploratory attitude to space and Cagean chance methods signalling a poetry, and a poetics, embracing the interfaces of poetry and critical thought, in forms not seen before. In the remaining chapters I will explore how this energy in Cobbing's work appears to arise from innovative approaches to space, form and perception and, due to a complex interweaving of various features of abstraction and indeterminacy, achieves an effect equal to more than the sum of both. In short, I shall seek to ascertain whether Cobbing's later work in particular generated new relationships or interactions between materials and form, thereby furthering our aim to establish Cobbing's work as a new poetics.

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[126] Eric Mottram, *Composition and Performance in the Work of Bob Cobbing: a conversation* (London: Writers Forum, 2000), qtd in Sheppard, 'Ballet', p. 216.

Chapter 4

Towards a Synthesis of Form and Perception

Chapter 3 examined how the formal decisions of Modernist and late Modernist artists shaped the key aspects of abstraction. Cubist innovations and the Futurists' deployment of original materials disrupted representations of space. The Rayists' brush strokes captured certain qualities of light which, along with Kandinsky's improvisations and Malevich's stark Suprematist paintings, made major strides in transforming art's function as predominantly representative. Dada sound performances placed the living body at the centre of meaning-making and the Ultraletterists reworked understandings of subjectivity, as did poets Mallarmé, Williams and Stein. The two male poets revolutionised poetic page space and Stein deployed intricate, repetitive syntactic arrangements to make exceptional demands of the reader. In chapter 2 we identified perception and memory as key components in the motions which give rise to flow (the manifestation of learnt material in unpreconceived gestures). These actions are brought about by a stimulation of memory which triggers conscious or unconscious selection and keeps the perceiver engaged with the present. We can make choices based on a blocked past, decisions which will stimulate neurosis. Cobbing's work, as a critique of the role of memory in perception, can play a part in freeing us from these neurotic tendencies: memory is engaged and then transcended, dismissed or made irrelevant as the body becomes figural in making *new*sense of the work. In this chapter I shall conduct a deeper exploration of both form and perception, which we might term *axes of the poetic moment*, to establish an understanding of them with regard to their theoretical backgrounds and their significant participation in the processes of radical art. Through this I aim to provide further insight into Cobbing's work and practice and simultaneously address the social and political role of oppositional art. The essential arguments in this chapter are that there is an intrinsic political dimension to artforms that push the boundaries of form, and that critiques of twentieth-century avant-gardes must consider, and have an understanding of, the role of perception. Picking up on the

groundwork laid in chapters 2 and 3, I wish to address the largely absent consideration of what actually constitutes artistic form and move into a discussion around the relationship of form and perception. I name the encounter between the two the *Event*.

The Problem of Form

The debate around poetic and artistic form has intensified in recent history. It emerged forcefully in the early Modernist period with French poets Mallarmé and Apollinaire and was taken up in earnest by Modernist painters, Stein, Williams and various localised movements such as Futurism (as detailed in chapter 3). Critical and artistic preoccupation with aesthetics and art's formal qualities, from the likes of Roger Fry, Clive Bell and Ben Shahn, acted as a counter to the avant-gardes for much of the first half of the twentieth century before Charles Olson, in the 1950s, reprised the position of the Modernist avant-gardes. The debate was added to in a rather piecemeal fashion over the ensuing decades: in the '60s and '70s Herbert Marcuse moved away from the consensual Marxist hypothesis of a revolutionary proletariat to advance the argument that artistic form can be socially, and thus politically, liberating; and the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets provided a post-counterculture position through poetic forms consisting of disrupted syntax, indeterminacy and semantic ambiguity as they sought an alternative to the logic of bourgeois capitalism. My discussion below attempts an overview of this century-long exchange in order to move towards a workable, contemporary synthesis of the various approaches to both radical and conservative form.

The general principles we use to define form can apply to both conventional, or mainstream, modes of operation and radical, or avant-gardist, modes, though due to the issue's very nature we find the discourse of radical form incorporates a dialogue with its more conservative cousin. It seems initially straightforward to see how in visual works space and lines are the two essential elements that define form. This is problematized as soon as we recall our discussion of abstraction. We covered the multi-dimensionalities of space in Cubist works in chapter 3: the outline of a figure or of a work is suggested not by its regularity or harmony but by the multiplicities of possibility in the spatial relations of its figures, objects or shapes. We further recall how Cézanne's lines are unstable, due to the heavy application of paint at the threshold between figures and objects, making the paintings appear three-dimensional. Kandinsky's pronouncement

on the value of Cézanne's work illuminates the question of form (we recall from chapter 2 how viewing some of Cézanne's work is to literally see movement in space):

> Cézanne made a living thing out of a teacup, or rather in a teacup he realized the existence of something alive. He raised still life to such a point that it ceased to be inanimate. [...] [He was] endowed with the gift of divining the inner life in everything. His colour and form are alike suitable to the spiritual harmony.[1]

Cézanne's blurring of the line, creating an unprecedented depiction of figures and objects whose spatial relationship is established through thresholds rather than purely lines, thereby establishing a new form in visual art, gives perceivers the space to realise deeper visual qualities within the figures and objects.[2] The dread of space, tracked in chapter 3 in our discussion of the void, expressed in various ways by Worringer, Woolf and Michaux, is precisely the reason why it is necessary to engage form with space. When familiar form no longer acts as an intermediary between the perceiver and the work, as is the case in the work of Cézanne, Malevich, Goncharova, Kandinsky, arguably Picasso and Braque, and most definitely Rothko, the dread becomes an overpowering force. The works of these artists take on the challenge of shattering the boundaries of form to directly unsettle perceivers with the effect that they may reflect upon their role in the perceptual process, which is another way of saying they are forced to contemplate their consciousness, underlining the role of perception as a key ingredient in the question of form. In all of Cobbing's major work (*ABC in Sound*, *15 Shakespeare Kaku*, *Jade-sound Poems*, *Domestic Ambient Noise* to name a few) he persistently asks questions of established forms. To engage with Cobbing's life work is to go on a process of self-discovery through the ever-changing forms.

I will now develop the inquiry by pitching the Lithuanian-American artist Ben Shahn against Olson as they both address the pertinent relationship between form and content in the work of art. Shahn's essay 'The Shape of Content' claims form is the embodiment of content, whereas Olson, in 'Projective Verse', following Robert Creeley, posits that form extends out of content. Shahn's attachment to Clive Bell's reductive notion of "significant form" is noteworthy. Bell claims '[w]e have no other means of recognizing a work of art than our feeling for it' and that if a work of art does not move us

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[1] Kandinsky, *Spiritual in Art*, p. 17.
[2] This was noted by Allen Ginsberg in the Paris Review interview, see chapter 2.

aesthetically, it is not art.[3] The initial impression is that Shahn's conception of form is one where the form of a work suppresses, limits, the content, in contrast to Olson's sense of form which is that it is created by an outward expansion of the content as it makes a bid for connection with the world. For Shahn, '[f]orm is formulation – the turning of content into a material entity, rendering a content accessible to others, giving it permanence.'[4] But form is not merely a physical manifestation of materials for Shahn, it also has an art-historical dimension:

> It is the visible shape of all man's growth; it is the living picture of his tribe at its most primitive, and of his civilization at its most sophisticated state. Form is the many faces of the legend – bardic, epic, sculptural, musical, pictorial, architectural; it is the infinite images of religion; it is the expression and the remnant of self. *Form is the very shape of content* [my italics].[5]

There is a validity in Shahn's understanding of form on both counts: in conventional poetry and art form gives permanence to the arrangements of lines and colour (the materials), and form inevitably has a historical dimension as the style and objects depicted in artworks emerge from a specific historical moment and no new forms (artforms, genres or practices) would otherwise ever come into being. 'Content' here for Shahn carries both the sense of physical, artistic materials and socio-historical archetypes. He further notes that 'in the case of abstraction content is its point of departure, its cue, and its theme'.[6] Certainly, abstraction is not without content. Shahn proceeds to develop his connections between form and materials:

> [F]orm is not just the intention of content; it is the embodiment of content. Form is based, first, upon a supposition, a theme. Form is, second, a marshaling of materials, the inert matter in which the theme is to be cast. Form is, third, a setting of boundaries, of limits, the whole extent of idea, *but no more*, an outer shape of idea. Form is, next, the relating of inner shapes to the outer limits, the initial establishing of harmonies. Form is, further, the abolishing of excessive content, of content that falls outside the true limits of the theme. It is the

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[3] Clive Bell, 'Significant Form', in *A Modern Book of Esthetics*, ed. by Melvin Radar (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), pp. 287-97 (p. 288 and p. 291).
[4] Ben Shahn, 'The Shape of Content', in *Esthetics*, ed. by Radar, pp. 297-306 (p. 297).
[5] Shahn, p. 297.
[6] Shahn, p. 302.

abolishing of excessive materials, whatever material is extraneous to inner harmony, to the order of shapes now established. Form is thus a discipline, an ordering, according to the needs of content.[7]

Here his argument repeatedly falls down, based as it is on a range of assumptions about a work's purpose. Form may well be the embodiment of content but it equally has the power to push the boundaries of content and inner determinations or qualities rather than setting them exactly. This can be evidenced in Cage's notion of indeterminacy with regard to Bach's *The Art of the Fugue*, Malevich's Suprematist paintings or Cobbing's serial visual and concrete poems. For Merleau-Ponty and Olson, there is no such thing as inert matter in art, yet it would be a reasonable assumption to make that a work can be rendered inert by its treatment, as indeed, with a certain irony, Shahn's conservative definition of form as restrictive tends to. This can be understood in much the same way as the commodification of art when works are packaged into mass-produced posters, table mats, t-shirts and the like. The idea of a theme is, similarly, restrictive: many works, including indeed those just cited, have form rather than theme as their point of departure – in fact, form in many ways *is* the theme as it may be repeatedly discovered anew in each work. The idea of form acting as a marshalling of materials works with representational art and even with certain practices such as collage or cubist spatial arrangements as the organisation of the content determines the form. However, in Cubism the arrangements of materials are not restricted by the boundaries of form but the process of arranging acts like a key, to enable artist and perceiver to reach towards, to unlock something that is beyond the boundaries of the work. This is what Kandinsky saw in Cézanne's paintings. In such works the idea of harmony, or *spatial consistency*, is an irrelevance (Picasso's *Demoiselles* is an arch example) and excessive materials often provide a work's content, as seen in Carrà's *Intervention* collage or Jeff Hilson's *Stretchers*, poems which repeatedly introduce and loop new motifs and themes so that the layers of semantic possibility continually push out (stretch) in many directions, much like Stein achieves in *Tender Buttons*. Sean Bonney states in 'Letters on Harmony':

> [O]ur system of harmony knows so well it contains its own negation that it has mummified it. And while we know we live within a criminal harmony we also know we are held helplessly within it as fixed subjects, or rather as objects, even

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[7] Shahn, p. 305.

cadavers, of an alien music. But never mind, just as protest is useless only

because it stays within the limits of the already known so 'the hidden harmony is

better than the obvious' – Heraclitus.[8]

This can be construed as a direct attack on rigid, predictable form, the mummifying

system that fixes and objectifies us; the harmony that cannot be seen, the harmony of

transfigurative resistance and that brought about by shifts in invisible, unmeasurable

consciousness, has no apparent shape or size. Applying Bonney's sense of harmony to

Cubism, the excessive materials shatter the constrictions of mummification, awaking

perceivers from their static expectations around artistic form and releasing them from

the constraints of social norms. In light of these refutations, form is not, as Shahn claims,

inevitably a 'discipline' but can be the result of a work's arrangements of lines, and the

consequent creation of space, becoming the creator of its own life *as a work* in *a social

field*. Bonney's insight into the operations of harmony within our cultural exchanges will

be relevant to our discussion of Marcuse and the politics of form, below.

Olson's idea of projective verse fills in some of the gaps in Shahn's argument and neatly

brings us to an application of these notions of form in visual art to poetry. 'Projective

Verse' makes claims for poetry moving towards a dramatic or epic form through

attention to the syllable and subsequently the line with the guiding principle being 'ONE

PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER

PERCEPTION'.[9] (The poetic line, a visual, spatial arrangement, is in many ways

analogous to the painted or collaged line.) Olson distinguishes poetry of 'open' or

'projective' verse, or 'composition by field', from 'closed' poetry, characterised by the

'inherited line, stanza, over-all form, what is the "old" base of the non-projective'.[10] He

draws the following relationship between form and content:

> [T]he *principle*, the law which presides conspicuously over such composition […],
>
> when obeyed, is the reason why a projective poem can come into being. It is this:
>
> FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT. (Or so it got
>
> phrased by one, R. Creeley, and it makes absolute sense to me, with this possible

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[8] Sean Bonney, 'Letters on Harmony' <https://soundcloud.com/#sean-bonney/letters-on-harmony> [accessed 9 July 2013].

[9] Olson, 'Projective Verse', p. 240.

[10] Olson, 'Projective Verse', p. 239.

corollary, that right form, in any given poem, is the only and exclusively possible extension of content under hand.)[11]

The point is that form comes about by following immediately from one perception to the next rather than trying to shovel a set of themed perceptions into a pre-determined form. The poet's priority changes, then, from manipulating themes to fit the framework of the chosen form (sonnet, ballad, haiku etc.) to meticulously attending to each perception. Again, it is the kind of close attention that Ginsberg and Kandinsky paid to Cézanne's thresholds. Olson advises that this close attention is achieved by continually 'calling in' the breath which, by privileging the ear rather than the eye, focuses the composition on the syllable. This attention gives life to the line whose energy then comes under threat from 'a whole flock of rhetorical devices' such as simile and other 'descriptive functions'.[12] Olson is not against using such devices but warns that the attention must be maintained, moving from one perception to the next, to sustain the energy of the line. Mallarmé's *Un Coup* pays studied attention to each perception, and its energy therefore determines the poetic line's spatial relativity. Once the poem has through these means 'forced itself [...] into being' it finds it has, by breath allowing in the 'speech-force' of language, solidity.[13] Poetic form, just as with form in visual art, is largely determined by the relationship between space and lines. Many of the conventions that govern, for example, the sonnet or the haiku – metre or syllabic pattern, number of lines, rhyme scheme and structural shifts – are concerned with how the poem's lines are arranged on the space of the page. The line in conventional poetry and the line in visual poetry are not the same, though the latter is an expansion of the former: the visual poem's treatment of lines shatters conventional form. It could further be argued that the conventions of content, such as addressing themes of love or relationships in the Shakespearean sonnet or depicting scenes related to the seasons in the Japanese haiku, are equally to do with how the poem occupies space *with* its lines as the lines are created by the material representation (the letters and words) which bear the subject matter. The solidity Olson identifies, inherent in the sound of each syllable that close attention to the breath makes us aware of, provides the poem's form rather than a pre-determined framework enslaved by rhyme, metre and other structural (i.e.

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[11] Olson, 'Projective Verse', p. 240.
[12] Olson, 'Projective Verse', p. 243.
[13] Olson, 'Projective Verse', p. 244.

spatial) conditions. There is no consideration of form until the poem is finished. Only then is it apparent what the content has created and what kind of space, or spaces, the lines have generated. Olson's approach to form contrasts starkly with Movement poet Philip Larkin's conventionally-structured poem 'The Whitsun Weddings', which is encountered as fixed, stable and devoid of penetrative or difficult-to-obtain insight.

Larkin's use of the line is predictable and consolidates the defeatist, conservative tone of the poem's narrator. Each stanza is ten lines long, the rhyme scheme is regular, most lines are in strict iambic pentameter (the favoured metre of Chaucer around 600 years earlier), the syntax is grammatically sterile and the narrative direction is consistent and linear. Only the use of enjambment could justify an argument that the poem contains disruptions and uncertainties, that it does not deal entirely with fixed meanings. Yet, notwithstanding that enjambment is of course a traditional poetic feature, the liaison between certain lines merely serves to emphasise the plodding, train-like rhythm, reflects the on-going motion of the train and emphasises the foreseeable syntax:

> There we were aimed. And as we raced across
>   Bright knots of rail
> Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss
> Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail
> Traveling coincidence; and what it held
> Stood ready to be loosed with all the power
> That being changed can give.[14]

Larkin is unaware of the irony in this stanza's closing comment, that a lack of formal poetic ambition *limits* the possibility of 'being changed'. Jeff Hilson's discussion of the sonnet as an abused form, recalling Olson's emphasis on distancing from conventional, 'rhetorical' techniques, bemoans the stubborn use of iambic pentameter in modern poetry and how it leads to an obliteration of what is meant to be recognisable:

> The number of poets who continue to use iambic pentameter on a consistent basis is alarming and after a while the persistent rhythm washing through their poems induces a kind of nausea akin to sea-sickness. [...] Because [the sonnet] is

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[14] Philip Larkin, 'The Whitsun Weddings', in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), pp. 92-94 (p. 94).

> such a well known form – its form *qua* form can after all be taken in at a glance – it is overdetermined and its very recognisability makes it impossible to read.[15]

In addition, we may notice that the form of a poem which is reliant on innovative structure, such as Cobbing's concrete poem 'A Square Poem' (1989), is equally defined by its spatial framing. The 12 lines are spaced in such a way as to produce four 'sides' of equal length, each phrase through its repetition of the poem's 'squareness' calling constant attention to the work's shape with the result that its value as a square is reduced. Form and content ask questions of each other, as the physical shape undertakes a certain metamorphic journey. 'The Whitsun Weddings' has no such relationship to its own space and seems as though it has been plastered onto a flat surface, the work of an artisan not an artist. We are reminded of McClure's comments in the previous chapter that the poetic does not come from a simple, flat dimension, the implication being that Larkin's work is not in fact poetic at all. The key distinction to bear in mind is that a work of art in conventional form presents uniformity of space and perspective within a recognised frame, such as in the landscape, the portrait painting, the sonnet or the haiku; the radical work uses unfamiliar frames where two-dimensional spatial consistency is disregarded.

Shahn's notion of form is conservative, where form is a restriction and dictates to the content. Olson's notion of form is progressive, where form extends *necessarily* out of content; the content, then, the material, dictates the form. Both, however, stop short of an acknowledgement that form is political. Shahn recognises an historical perspective without conceding that historicising has an inevitable political dimension, caught up as it is in social and hierarchical reconstructions. Olson promotes a progressive poetics, equally inevitably political as it refutes conservatism (of form or otherwise). Both acknowledge, in their separate ways, that form is unquestionably entwined with content. Olson's idea of solidity denotes the boundary of a work and the suggestion that form needs to arise out of the content, which provides 'solidity', alerts us to its political nature. My argument is that the question of form is a political one.

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[15] Hilson, 'Introduction', p. 14.

The Politics of Form

I propose that artists' decisions about form are grounded historically and have social and political implications *because* they are revolutionary acts themselves. I do not argue that form is political due to the use of avant-gardist form (often referred to with the rather limiting description 'Modernist form', as if the avant-gardes have only existed within Modernism)[16] being a catalyst for Marxist revolution (not, in any case, a Marxist position), rather that decisions regarding form are loaded with political implications and the various contexts of art are, or are linked to, political contexts. Artists can accept or reject the status quo but they are always working within specific historical moments. Once performed, be it on the page, in the gallery or in a physical space, such as a reading, the work itself is 'set free' and becomes part of a new historical moment each time it is encountered. In my view Cobbing's life work constituted socio-political gestures and with each penetration into a new form he set standards by which, and perceptual challenges through which, society's forms could be examined.

Bernstein sets out the relevant questions in his introduction to *The Politics of Form*:

> [How do] the formal dynamics of a poem shape its ideology; more specifically, how [do] radically innovative poetic styles […] have political meanings[?] In what way do choices of grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and narrative reflect ideology? How do the dominant *styles* of oppositional – left and liberal – political writing affect or limit what can be articulated in these forms?[17]

To which we could add: how do choices of shape, layout and the placement of boundaries reflect the materials of the social world back to the world and engage with it? These questions will be addressed in the ensuing discussion. Bernstein proceeds to usefully historicise the social politics at stake for his contemporaries in 1990s America:

> The decline of public discourse in the United States is an urgent matter best not left to politicians and academics, especially since the conception of public space and of public discourse will have to be radically contested if this situation is to

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[16] See Marianne DeKoven's essay below.

[17] Bernstein, 'Preface', in *Politics*, pp. vii-viii (p. vii). Bernstein's anthology contains some useful insights but ultimately fails to live up to the promises of its title as its contributors concern themselves predominantly with the politics of language and expression, rather than with the actual formal dynamics of the poem as Bernstein suggests they will here.

change for the better. Poetry remains an unrivalled arena for social research into the (re)constitution of the public and the (re)construction of discourse.[18]

The concern currently in the UK, with the rise of the poetry slam and comedy poetry, the sanitised version of all things poetic as promoted by the broadsheet press and Radio 4, and continuing dominance on the GCSE and A-level syllabi of expressively and expressly emotional and accessible poetry in spatially flat forms is that serious, challenging poetry is marginalised into the universities and small, local pockets of activity. Craig Dworkin, in *Reading the Illegible*, notes how poetic meaning has an inescapable historical dimension: 'any particular signification is historically contingent and never inherently meaningful or a-priori.'[19] Keeping in mind these suggestions that art and its forms are born, and continue to exist, within ever-changing historico-political contexts, we shall now explore in some depth the question of form and politics via a brief tour of the following reflections: Herbert Marcuse's 1979 essay *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marianne DeKoven's essay 'The Politics of Modernist Form', articles by Hank Lazer and Jill S. Kuhnheim, both titled 'The Politics of Form', and several essays from the Bernstein-edited collection.

Marcuse's social theory is pertinent as it was part of a broader cultural moment that came frustratingly close to realising revolutionary possibilities on both sides of the Atlantic. Marcuse was affiliated to the Frankfurt School, set up in 1923 and which after World War II grew as a source for the development of radical leftist thinking in Europe.[20] His 1964 book *One-Dimensional Man* was an attempt to reshape social theory in response to the new forms of oppression that emerged after the war and as the Cold War intensified. His work had a significant impact on the New Left in the US as it rejected the standard Marxist position of a proletarian revolution in favour of broader social mobilisation. Having emigrated from Germany to the US in the 1930s to escape the Nazis, Marcuse started working in American universities in the '50s. His liberationist writings of the '60s have been cited as major contributory factors to student and civil rights protests, notably the 1964 pro-free speech action at the University of California, which spread to the counter-culture in the UK and Europe, and

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[18] Bernstein, 'Preface', p. viii.
[19] Craig Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2003), p. xx.
[20] Though Geoghan notes that this affiliation was a little uneasy: for example, Marcuse defended 'Heidegger against many of the criticisms of his Frankfurt School colleagues'. Vincent Geoghan, *Reason & Eros: The Social Theory of Herbert Marcuse* (London: Pluto Press, 1981), p. 7.

permissive social and sexual practices. There is a clear line to be drawn, then, between Marcuse's leftist social theory and the Prague Spring and Paris 1968. Finally, and there may be a little more conjecture in the following assumption (though it ties in with his cultural influence in the '60s), his philosophy impacted on the radicalisation of American poetics in the '60s and '70s with figures such as Robert Duncan and Bruce Andrews. Eric Mottram in the UK was also conversant with Marcusian thought. The impact left by Marcuse's work, then, can dovetail into Bernstein's assessment of the importance of poetry in relation to public discourse at the start of the '90s as much as it feeds my attempts to discern a new poetics and its potential impact on social and political practice today.[21] As broadly influential and pivotal as Marcuse has been in terms of avant-gardist and socio-political agendas, space only permits tackling a small portion of his thought so I focus mostly on his late '70s volume *The Aesthetic Dimension* as its direct handling of the politics of form is key to this chapter's inquiries and it does what he sets out in *One Dimensional Man*, directly connecting artistic expression with politics: 'To liberate the imagination so that it can be given all its means of expression presupposes the repression of much that is now free and that perpetuates a repressive society. And such reversal is not a matter of psychology or ethics but of politics.'[22]

The Aesthetic Dimension claims form has an intrinsic political dimension but it does this by moving away from the established Marxist position on avant-gardism, which was broadly, by the late '70s, that art should be essentially a revolutionary tool that negates subjectivity. It proposes that radical art, due to its unique presentation of worldly materials, has an intrinsic ideological character that opposes dominant societal ideologies. It addresses three crucial areas of difficulty: representation and counter-representation, the avant-garde and subjectivity. Although some of the argument in *The Aesthetic Dimension* appears to be internally contradictory, much of what Marcuse posits helps us move forward with our questions around form, not least in that the supporting arguments can be pushed to more effective conclusions. The starting point is as follows:

> Art can be called revolutionary in several senses. In a narrow sense, art may be
> revolutionary if it represents a radical change in style and technique. Such

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[21] Geoghan notes the decline in Marcuse's popularity by the 1980s, *Reason & Eros*, pp. 1-4.
[22] Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 250.

change may be the achievement of a genuine avant-garde, anticipating or reflecting substantial changes in the society at large. Thus, expressionism and surrealism anticipated the destructiveness of monopoly capitalism, and the emergence of new goals of radical change. But the merely "technical" definition of revolutionary art says nothing about the quality of the work, nothing beyond its authenticity and truth. [...] The political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension. Its relation to praxis is inexorably indirect, mediated, and frustrating. The more immediately political the work of art, the more it reduces the power of estrangement and the radical, transcendent goals of change.[23]

In the much earlier *Soviet Marxism*, Marcuse observes how art reacts to the instrumentalisation of language and repression by rebelling against accepted form: 'the more reality controls all language and all communication, the more irrealistic and surrealistic will art tend to be, the more it will be driven from the concrete to the abstract, from harmony to dissonance, from content to form.'[24] The idea of the 'aesthetic' dimension, in the later work, qualifies how this rebellion impacts individuals; it is not actual or transformative in and of itself, it is representative:

a work of art can be called revolutionary if, by virtue of the aesthetic transformation, it represents, in the exemplary fate of individuals, the prevailing unfreedom and rebellious forces, thus breaking through the mystified (and petrified) social reality, and opening the horizon of change (liberation).[25]

This suggests that innovative form in a work can exist without a radical approach to its substance, as if the form and content are somehow physically and creatively separate. Despite this questionable reasoning, and despite the fact that there is a later recognition of the interdependence of form and content, this point is concluded by noting that 'every authentic work of art would be revolutionary', to include Brecht as much as Goethe, Günter Grass, Blake and Rimbaud.[26]

Yet Marcuse clearly adopts the position in *The Aesthetic Dimension* that the effectiveness of art as subversive lies in more than merely the use of novel form. And it is vital to

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[23] Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (London and Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1979), p. x-xii.
[24] Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 111.
[25] Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, p. xi.
[26] Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, p. xi.

penetrate this rather flat concept to consider the comparative impacts of avant-gardist and conservative form. It is unclear whether there is a link between the arguments that art can be liberating or revolutionary due to either its aesthetic presentation penetrating the social world in an unprecedented way or due to its 'authenticity' as a work of art which bears the truth. The specific question of *how* radical form impacts the social world is addressed later; for now, however, *The Aesthetic Dimension* acknowledges that art's 'own dimension of truth […] constituted by the aesthetic form' lies in in its 'specific historical expressions and manifestations of the same trans-historical substance of art'.[27] Yet the conclusion here is 'that literature is not revolutionary because it is written for the working class or for "the revolution." Literature can be called revolutionary in a meaningful sense only with reference to itself, as content having become form'.[28] This stance against vulgar Marxism thus aligns with an Olsonian one. However where Olson's argument is reasonably robust, Marcuse's definition of form fails to consider multi-mediality or multiplicities of space:

> We can tentatively define "artistic form" as the result of the transformation of a given content (actual or historical, personal or social fact) into a self-contained whole: a poem, play, novel, etc. The work is thus "taken out" of the constant process of reality and assumes a significance and truth of its own. The aesthetic transformation is achieved through a reshaping of language, perception, and understanding so that they reveal the essence of reality in its appearance: the repressed potentialities of man and nature. The work of art thus re-presents reality while accusing it.[29]

We might note that a Braque painting or a Tatlin sculpture, as much as a poem by Gertrude Stein or William Carlos Williams, is not a self-contained whole in the same way as Larkin's poetry as they contain a multidimensionality which pushes at, and out of, the boundaries of the work. Cobbing's serial concrete poems of the late '60s, the alphabet poems, his later visual work and the anagrammatic and name poems similarly deny the notion of containment: there is no fixed entry or exit point and these texts can be 'read' in a different order each time. The idea of form expressed in *The Aesthetic Dimension* is essentially the same as Shahn's restrictive definition of a setting of limits. It is the

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[27] Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, p. xii.
[28] Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, p. xii.
[29] Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 8.

understanding of form as taking material out of its social contexts and transforming it to reveal repressed potentialities that is most penetrative in Marcuse's volume. Cobbing's collaging, use of ink and paint, misuse of technology and desemanticised use of the voice are all examples of how this use of materials matches Marcuse's description of form. These procedures can be seen as a response to what Bonney describes as the mummification of our system of harmony's own negation: the transformation of the contexts of artistic materials is the means by which Heraclitus's hidden harmony can be revealed. For Bonney, the hidden harmony should be better but is not because it has been co-opted or marginalised. Marcuse addresses this in another way in *One Dimensional Man*, discussing Brecht's estrangement effect and noting it is 'literature's own answer to the threat of total behaviourism–the attempt to rescue the rationality of the negative'.[30] Art, then, must own the materials that negate the dominant ideology.

The Aesthetic Dimension addresses Marxist aesthetics and initially challenges the purely ideological conception of art, with the clarification above that art does have an ideological aspect and it is in this aspect that it opposes society.[31] It takes issue with Marxism's restrictive approach to art purely as a tool servicing the revolution in a crass and direct manner as it denies to individuals 'a major prerequisite of revolution,' subjectivity, as 'the need for radical change must be rooted in the subjectivity of individuals themselves,' goes the persuasive reasoning, 'in their intelligence and their passions', experiences which are not necessarily grounded in their class situation and which are not even comprehensible from this perspective. These reflections on subjectivity, contrary to its perception in Marxist circles as a bourgeois luxury, invite a reconfigured role for subjectivity within social and political transformation. With 'the affirmation of the inwardness of subjectivity, the individual steps out of the network of exchange relationships and exchange values, withdraws from the reality of bourgeois society, and enters another dimension of existence'.[32] Subjectivity, Marcuse argues, is the very means through which bourgeois privilege is challenged and alternatives are fermented. This reinforces my argument in chapter 3 that the works of Williams and Stein, along with Malevich's Suprematist paintings, are manifestations of an unfixed approach to subjectivity and as such trigger transfiguration in the perceiver. In his essay

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[30] Marcuse, *One Dimensional*, p. 67.
[31] Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 1 and p. 13.
[32] Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, pp. 3-5.

'The Modern Primer', Williams argues that 'apt use' of the sonnet by traditional
sonneteers has turned the form into a deadening one: 'It is not an invention but anchors
beyond the will–does not liberate the intelligence but stultifies it–and by its cleverness,
apt use stultifies it the more by making pleasurable that which should be removed.'[33]
Jeff Hilson has noted that this 'apt use' has appropriated the sonnet's form and invested
it with bourgeois properties.[34] Williams confirms this view with reference to form in
Stein's poetry and a general comment about innovative linguistic structures:

> [Stein's work] permanently states that writing to be of value to the intelligence is
> not made up of ideas, emotions, data, but of words in configurations fresh to our
> senses. […] [I]t is by the breakup of language that the truth can be seen to exist
> and that it becomes operative again.[35]

Formal innovation is a means by which to achieve a loosening of the poem's hold on the
subject. A liberated subjectivity, according to *The Aesthetic Dimension*, is revolutionary
because it transforms the social contexts of individuals in their historical moments:

> [T]he radical qualities of art, that is to say, its indictment of the established
> reality and its invocation of the beautiful image (*schöner Schein*) of liberation are
> grounded precisely in the dimensions where art *transcends* its social
> determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and
> behavior while preserving its overwhelming presence. […] The inner logic of the
> work of art terminates in the emergence of another reason, another sensibility,
> which defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated in the dominant social
> institutions.[36]

There is a clear distinction here between a work of innovative form and a work of
conventional form: bearing what Marcuse calls the 'truth', the radical work is a defiance
of hierarchical social strata. But it is only a defiance – a 're-presentation' in Marcuse's
words, or *counter-representation* – which falls some way short of where the argument

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[33] Williams, 'The Modern Primer', in *The Embodiment of Knowledge* (New York: New Directions, 1974), pp.
17-20 (p. 17).
[34] Hilson, 'Preface', p. 14.
[35] Williams, 'Modern Primer', pp. 17-19.
[36] Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, pp. 6-7.

actually appears to lead, given the way it tracks the relationship between content, form and revolutionary action.[37] The question of art's relation to ideology is then picked up:

> The reification of Marxist aesthetics depreciates and distorts the truth expressed in this universe–it minimizes the cognitive function of art as ideology. For the radical potential of art lies precisely in its ideological character, in its transcendent relation to the "basis". Ideology is not always *mere* ideology, false consciousness. The consciousness and the representation of truths which appear as abstract in relation to the established process of production are also ideological functions. Art presents one of these truths. As ideology, it opposes the given society.[38]

Elsewhere we find the verbs 'accuses' and 'contradicts' to describe the radical qualities of art. Here the somewhat tautological cluster of three is completed with 'opposes'. What is being traced is a physical, kinetic motion – an alternative consciousness, a counter-representation, real and contradictory, which, if it can indeed 'break the monopoly of established reality', is in fact much more than a representation: it is directly, tangibly and measurably transformative.

The Aesthetic Dimension states that an artwork is historical, can carry the tools of liberation and can reflect class and other divisions in its realisation as commodity.[39] This argument is supported with reference to two key poets: Mallarmé's poetry conjures up 'modes of perception, imagination, gestures–a feast of sensuousness which shatters everyday experience and anticipates a different reality principle' and Baudelaire's work contains 'a subterranean rebellion against this social order'.[40] By virtue of this historical specificity, art has an inherent political dimension – including sanction of the status quo in for example the work of the Movement Poets. A work of art that falls within what we are calling avant-gardism, then, not only opposes 'dominant social institutions' but is the embodiment of revolution in its historical moment. Again, I venture to suggest that Mallarmé's poems *are* that alternative reality and Baudelaire's poetry *is* the rebellion itself. *Un Coup de Dés* presents the poem transformed through form; it is an active, kinetic and physical work which, in its combined effect of spatial

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[37] Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, pp. 8-10.
[38] Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 13.
[39] Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 18.
[40] Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 19-20.

and narrative unfoldings, is a reality itself. It does not rely on statements or slogans to convey a political message. It offers a vibrant, tangible reality through its poetic breath. In a not dissimilar fashion, Baudelaire's prose poems present defamiliarised narrative reality through the quirky behaviour of their protagonists entwined with an absence of poetic convention – no lines, metre, rhyme or repetitions for the perceiver to hang on to – so they stand not as *semantic authority* but as live, authorised *rebellion*, active in that it transforms the perceiver's orientation in their specific social and historical moments.[41] The authority for this transformation comes from the poem itself – art, in its radical modes, engenders radical actions. Little can be more semantically empty than a political or socially-charged slogan. Consider the diluted appeal of Timothy Leary's invocation to a disillusioned generation to 'turn on, tune in, drop out' or Ed Miliband's cringe-making assertion that 'Britain can do better than this', both examples of feeble, if broadly leftist, attempts to incite change. Cobbing's radical formal gestures and subsequent re-orienting of subjectivity, in arguably constituting a new poetics, embody revolution.

In establishing how the precise question of form relates to the social and political impact of art, *The Aesthetic Dimension* adopts a position that tallies with Olson's. It notes that the truth of art lies in its integration of form and content, that it is an illusion that art has an autonomy based on form without content. However much the materials of the world are defamiliarised or presented indeterminately, the content remains 'that of a given [i.e. worldly] material'. Art therefore has social impact because it cannot exist without the materials of the world. It then goes further than the Olsonian position:

> In this sense art is inevitably part of that which is and only as part of that which is does it speak against that which is. This contradiction is preserved and resolved (*aufgehoben*) in the aesthetic form which gives the familiar content and the familiar experience the power of estrangement–and which leads to the emergence of a new consciousness and a new perception. […] Aesthetic form is not opposed to content, not even dialectically. In the work of art, form becomes content and vice versa.[42]

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[41] Charles Baudelaire, *The Poems in Prose with La Fanfarlo*, ed. and trans. by Francis Scarfe, 2 vols (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1989).

[42] Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, pp. 40-41.

On this final point, I wish to align this thesis with Olson's stance, that form is determined and shaped by content, and to dispute Marcuse's extension of it, particularly with reference to avant-gardist work. If the form is radical, the content is pushing against, and thereby expanding, its own boundaries, but the motions do not come back the other way. Content and form can be said to be interdependent but, for Olson, one initiates the other – form does not create the material constitution of the work, although it does transform it; it is the mode which results from the arrangement of those materials. However Marcuse's other point here clarifies this: there is an intrinsic contradiction in art, using the world's materials to critique the world, through which a radical and fresh consciousness, as well as a new *perception*, arises. Only as part of the hierarchies and systems that art seeks to oppose can it oppose them. Bonney's understanding of radical harmony as hidden contrasts with Marcuse's point here. For Bonney, resistance most effectively exists as part of a separate system to that which it opposes, meaning that effective rebellious art seeks to transform the dominant systems from without. For Marcuse, from within the dominant systems, it is form that drives change:

> Restructuring takes place through concentration, exaggeration, emphasis on the essential, reordering of facts. The bearer of these qualities is not the particular sentence, not its words, not its syntax; the bearer is the whole [...] which bestows upon these elements their aesthetic meaning and function.[43]

If it were reasonable to conclude from this that radical or unprecedented form drives radical change, we then read that the promise of the fulfilment of liberation 'is not within the domain of art' as works of art reject the promise that good can triumph over evil and 'such a promise would be refuted by historical truth'.[44] Aside from being impossible to measure, one would sooner expect that those whose experience of the world is informed by radical art evolve more flexible and transfigurative modes of being than others. To break with conventional form does not *abandon* art's autonomy but *strengthens* it as it has transfigurative potential for the individual. Recalling Shahn's inadvertently accurate assessment that conventional form renders matter inert, my position is that where the 'setting of limits' of conventional form contains and restricts the work's content, avant-gardist work is directly transfigurative as its content pushes

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[43] Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, pp. 45-46.
[44] Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, pp. 46-47.

out through the unfamiliar form into the world, restoring to it, in re-presented form, its own materials. It is persuasive to consider a synthesis of the three distinct positions of Marcuse, Olson and Bonney: art must use the materials of the world but in arranging them innovatively, creatively, the materials themselves are transformed – society fears those materials so transformed and suppresses them for the very reason that, transformed themselves, they initiate transfiguration. But do the transfigurative effects of art ultimately fracture or unify? Do they operate within or outside of the systems they wish to change? Muddled though it seems in parts, *The Aesthetic Dimension* retains much that can be useful in our inquiry. We can move the debate about form forward if we take its standpoint in the final pages: 'The aesthetic form is essential to [art's] social function. The qualities of the form negate those of the repressive society.'[45] This is where Marianne DeKoven's article contributes to our inquiry.

DeKoven argues for a new model of unification in exploring what she calls Modernist form. She posits that form need be neither oppositional nor a tool to support the status quo, that it can be seen as a way of creating unity rather than marking rupture.[46] This is initially an appealing proposition, though her case is undermined a little by her selective reading of Marcuse, omitting to register his contradictions, and a raw misunderstanding of indeterminacy or difficulty as mere 'incoherence'. In *The Aesthetic Dimension*, DeKoven argues, Marcuse makes a case 'that formal innovation is revolutionary because it is premised on a mode of subjectivity and a reality principle inimical to and beyond those of bourgeois capitalist society.'[47] She claims 'incoherence is the province of avant garde experimentalism and some postmodernism'.[48] She further notes that 'the debates have concerned the political import of modernist forms, not their nature' but she fails to offer the absent analysis.[49] Despite these weaknesses, DeKoven's essay pertinently aligns Modernist approaches to form with Feminism:

> [M]odernist form's disruptions of hierarchical syntax, of consistent, unitary point
> of view, of realist representation, linear time and plot, and of the bounded,
> coherent self separated from and in mastery of an objectified outer world, its

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[45] Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 53.
[46] Marianne DeKoven, 'The Politics of Modernist Form', *New Literary History*, 23.3 (1992), 675-90 (p. 688).
[47] DeKoven, p. 676.
[48] DeKoven, p. 685.
[49] DeKoven, p. 677.

subjectivist epistemology, its foregrounding of the pre-Oedipal or aural features
of language, its formal decenteredness, indeterminacy, multiplicity, and
fragmentation are very much in accord with a feminine aesthetic.[50]

Echoing Retallack's comments we addressed in our introduction, DeKoven's claims are
significant in respect of Feminism's celebration and promotion of the 'other', the
excluded or marginalised, that which has been denied a place within the prevailing
hegemony, that which has to carve out its own forms in order to integrate (into) those
so-called norms. Hilson alludes to the alignment of gender with form, noting that the
sonnet, a traditional form, 'has long been a form traditionally dominated by men.'[51]
Social and political revolution, closely linked as we identified above with artistic
revolution, is concerned with the liberation and empowerment of individuals who are
denied the privileges enjoyed by the minority ruling elite. With reference to Eliot's
'Prufrock' (far from the most extreme example available), in which '[t]he representation
and its own negation coexist in the text in an oscillating simultaneity, and unresolved
contradiction […]: a coexistent doubleness that is resolved nowhere–that is reinforced
in rather than eased of its contradictoriness by the radically disjunctive *modernist* form
of the poem',[52] DeKoven asks if Modernist form can be seen as a way of creating unity
rather than marking rupture. Invoking Kristeva, she challenges the widely-held notion
that radical art need necessarily result in disruption:

> Modernist form represents, […] in historical twentieth century time, [Kristeva's]
> impossible dialectic, this aesthetic of *sous-rature* which maintains difference
> while denying hierarchy, as a model, an inspiration modern history has actually
> provided, for our efforts at overcoming the seemingly hopeless polarizations that
> characterize contemporary cultural-political life without resorting to ideas of
> apocalyptic rupture or levelling?[53]

This highly theoretical argument may well have some validity, although it would only be
through a close description of certain artistic forms that we would be able to establish
its credibility. In the meantime we shall hold onto the principle of unity arising out of

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[50] DeKoven, p. 677.
[51] Hilson, 'Preface', p. 11.
[52] DeKoven, p. 685.
[53] DeKoven, p. 688.

rupture as an ideal description of the process, bearing in mind that it may be the hidden harmony that is the source of this potential unity.

Hank Lazer's article 'The Politics of Form and Poetry's Other Subjects: Reading Contemporary American Poetry' essentially promotes the avant-garde as a necessary means of opposing conservatism in the face of what he terms 'mainstream craft': 'any version of "craft" *is* ideological, particularly today's mainstream craft which makes "the personal voice" the essential product of an accomplished poet.'[54] Lazer attempts to isolate a useful model for the critique of poetry and states that political approaches are identified in methodological approaches to criticism, though he also fails, despite the specifics promised in the article's title, to deal directly with form. He notes that there are two key areas in the consideration of contemporary American poetry:

> the dissemination of the "subject", accomplished variously by formal innovation, theoretical argument, and multicultural studies [... and] the politics of poetry as a *resistance to appropriation*: resistance to the official verse culture, the marketplace, the dominant culture, and hegemonic ideologies.[55]

The idea of poetry as resistance and as oppositional characterises Lazer's argument: 'a poetic culture is "dynamic, healthy, and interesting" when it is oppositional and innovative, not when it is assimilating an already outmoded, conservative poetics of the personal voice.'[56] He supports Ron Silliman's view that the teaching of a literary canon in education should be abandoned:

> [W]e may begin to have an education by difference, especially differences of culture, context, aesthetic assumptions, audience, and subject position. Rather than an ever-expanding canon of ever-broadening inclusivity, the more effective strategy may prove to be Silliman's rejection of the process of canonization itself.[57]

This implies that, as the difficulty associated with innovative form (a difficulty I put down to the dread of space which perceivers are brought to the edge of by the

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[54] Hank Lazer, 'The Politics of Form and Poetry's Other Subjects: Reading Contemporary American Poetry', *American Literary History*, 2. 3 (1990), 503-27 (p. 525).
[55] Lazer, p. 505.
[56] Lazer, p. 526.
[57] Lazer, p. 522.

expansion of boundaries and presentation of multiple spaces) discourages mainstream encounters with radical art, western culture is missing opportunities to engage with fundamental philosophical and intellectual problems. Such an engagement would make possible on a greater scale encounters between sensory perception and radical form. Lazer's concluding comment is credible, but it lacks a precise consideration of the question of form and politics:

> If poetry is to retain (or return to) a place of importance and excitement, poets must engage in an oppositional practice of form *and* content inseparably. Not just "make it new" for the sake of a commodified novelty, but make it new so that the writing of poetry continues to be radically exploratory.[58]

Lazer's reader is left pondering quite what innovative approaches to form are exploratory of or towards and what the impact is that such practice has on conservatism, outmoded or otherwise. What his article states that is useful for our discussion is the general principle that innovative poetry intrinsically acts as a rejection of authority and that in the US and the UK a cultural position exists that marginalises radical poetry, thereby impacting its potential influence.

Jill Kuhnheim's work on three Spanish American poets who have made innovative use of the sonnet makes a useful contribution to the question of the relationship between form and politics and underlines the importance of culture engaging with radical form:

> Argentine Alfonsina Storni, Chilean Enrique Lihn, and Cuban Reinaldo Arenas return to the sonnet's confined space to express their own struggles to break out of a range of social limitations. Theirs is a kind of formal politics that plays on our preconceived ideas of what sonnets can do. Each of them uses the sonnet's privileged position in Western aesthetic tradition to manifest shifting relations to this tradition and to modernity.[59]

Form is therefore used as a means to engage in social discourse, a point echoed by Debarati Sanyal in her work on Baudelaire in *The Violence of Modernity*: '[f]ormal reflexivity, textual opacity, intertextuality, and irony–devices traditionally thought to

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[58] Lazer, p. 527.
[59] Jill S. Kuhnheim, 'The Politics Of Form: Three Twentieth-century Spanish American Poets and the Sonnet', *Hispanic Review*, 76.4 (2008), 387-412. (p. 389).

remove literature from ethical and political concerns–are precisely what spark a critical encounter between the literary and historical domains.'[60] Kuhnheim further addresses the question of rupture and reinforcement of the status quo which crosses paths with DeKoven's study: 'all poetry, fixed and open forms alike, works within a generic memory in ways that simultaneously disrupt and continue literary tradition.'[61] Kuhnheim's oversight here is that she does not explain how poetry in fixed, or conservative, form disrupts literary tradition. All the evidence, and common sense, would suggest the opposite, that whilst radical form could be seen to both disrupt and propel forward elements of poetic history the use of form in identifiable or easily assimilated modes does not move forward the question of form and so does not promote the idea that boundaries and limits can be expanded and redefined. This omission is most likely accounted for by Kuhnheim's specific concern with a standard form of poetry that has been corrupted. But it is also perhaps due to the lack of a collective understanding of avant-garde form defined by multiplicities of space and expansion of boundaries. In an echo of DeKoven, Kuhnheim proceeds to note what is at stake in the debate: 'Reflections on form also bring to the fore broader tensions between accounts of literary tradition as a history of ruptures or of continuities.'[62] I would add to this that reflections on form highlight how radical art can and does impact on current social values and practices. Crucially, Kuhnheim acknowledges the historical context of artworks, 'poetry is not a genre that remains isolated from history or events,'[63] a point she later elaborates on, linking use of form specifically to a range of contexts which constitute the historical:

> The [...] tension between form and content is central to the creation of meaning. In each case, the sonnet form designates certain limits on what can be said - the constraints of the sonnet are also the constraints of language, of thought, of ideology, and of society. How each writer approaches issues such as gender, sexuality, modernity, and dictatorship through the sonnet exemplifies how we can speak within and against restraints all at the same time. It also exemplifies how poetry as a genre works through a thickening of the medium, in Jerome McGann's words, by "exhibiting the processes of self-reflection and self-

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[60] Debarati Sanyal, *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 5.
[61] Kuhnheim, pp. 389-90.
[62] Kuhnheim, p. 390.
[63] Kuhnheim, p. 391.

generation which set texts in motion, which they *are*". Reading these sonnets as an interaction between aesthetic tradition and the moment, place, and person who produced them brings form and its interaction with history and meaning to the forefront.[64]

Given this 'thickening of the medium', a process where poetry feeds off and expands upon its own design, Kuhnheim makes the valid observation that the poets' engagement within political contexts, the 'meaning' referred to above, is generated through their use, and adaptation, of an established form:

> These poets resignify their cultural legacy essentially and in the process demonstrate its malleability–the sonnet is not monolithic, but mutable. An invitation to reinvent, the sonnet as employed by these three very different poets embodies a range of intercultural experiences of both continuity and transformation. These readings reveal how the choice of poetic form both shapes and depends upon the author's and his or her readers' experience and how a particular aesthetic form is both charged and changed by circumstance.[65]

It is the poem's engagement with historical (cultural, social and political) contexts that generates a transformation of the poem itself as part of that encounter, and the mutability of the chosen form is a key component in that self-generation, echoing McGann's term quoted by Kuhnheim. In addition a refusal to use artistic form in ways which allow the content to expand, recalling Shahn's definition of form as a discipline that restricts content, will reinforce the accepted limits of form and thus restrict the perceiver's conception of the potential that boundaries have to be extended. In a society obsessed with teaching only the canon, perceptions will inevitably be diminished.

Bruce Andrews's essay 'Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis' pushes the debate further. Unsurprisingly, as a leading protagonist of L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poetry in the '70s and '80s, Andrews's notion of form appears to cover only syntax disruption and semantic indeterminacy, yet his argument is pertinent as it explores the actual relationship between poetic form and society. He establishes the ground as fundamentally oriented around writing's social role as intrinsically political:

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[64] Kuhnheim, p. 407.
[65] Kuhnheim, p. 409.

> A desire for a social, political dimension in writing […] intersects an overall concern for language as a medium: for the conditions of its makings of meaning, significance or value, & sense. […] That has meant, in recent years with this work, a conception of writing *as* politics, not writing *about* politics. Asking: what is the *politics* inside the work, inside *its* work? Instead of instrumentalised or instrumentalising, this is a poetic writing more actively *explanatory*. One that explores the *possibilities* of meaning, of 'seeing through': works that foreground the process by which language works, implicating the history & context that are needed to allow the writing to be more comprehensively understood, bringing those building blocks & limits of meaning & sense back *inside* the writing, giving you greater distance by putting them within the internal circuitry.[66]

This sense of distance can be understood as the space created for the engaged perceiver to explore their own social selves, prompted by engagement with the work. We have earlier referred to this space as the void. Andrews's sense of the socio-political qualities of writing is reaffirmed when he argues that the social condition of the various 'bodies' involved in the artistic process leads to an inevitable exchange between them, reinforcing Kuhnheim's, Sanyal's and Rothenberg's views that radical form is an invitation to healthy social exchange:

> The site of the body is social, set in time–socially saturated: the body of the reader (the potential body of a potential reader) & the body of meaning, of the timely materials we make significance out of. There's an Outside = Context. 'Outside authorities' might be ignored; but they can't be understood by being ignored. Even autonomy is not autonomous. So we can take our well-developed attention to signs & our desire for their dishevelment & expose it to a social dialogue, to networks of meaning understood as thoroughly socialized, to questions about the making of the subject (Reading as Writing & Writing as Reading).[67]

With evidence that supports my argument in chapter 3 about the instrumentalisation of language, Andrews identifies radical poetry's capacity to open society's shallow limits:

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[66] Bruce Andrews, 'Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis', in *Politics*, ed. by Bernstein, pp. 23-43 (p. 24).
[67] Andrews, p. 25.

> To *face*–or recognize the face of–a social *horizon*, a border condition or 'scope of operations' & scope of sovereignty. An overall body of sense: not a 'deeper' but a *wider* meaning, within a more nearly total context for it or patterning of it–bound up with the coercive social limits of the possible, the acceptably possible & proper. […] The form that's truly in question [is] the form of society itself.[68]

Therefore, to Andrews, the question of form, in addition to the various contexts of a poem, is crucial:

> An outer context limits & disciplines & naturalizes; it pins meanings down; it positions identities, setting limits to the scope of content & address–so that a text, whatever formal autonomy we animate it with, also embodies & implicates a social situation. The content gives orders to make order content. […] [I]f the system *accounts* for individuals & individual embodiments of meaning, the writing (as reading) can account for the system & help put the *social* self into question. […] [T]he reading might solicit a different future: by getting distance on the sign & getting distance on identity, on how they're produced; by *rereading* the reading that a social status quo puts us through.[69]

Such revelation of society's limits can 'show the *possibilities* of sense & meaning being constructed; to foreground the limits of the possible–& our possible lives; to create impossibility', but we must not lose sight of the essential relationship between the political and historical contexts as 'a writing that counter-occludes, or counter-disguises; that politicizes by repositioning its involvement in, its intersection with, a nexus of historical relations–that is, contingent social relations, an edifice of power– which otherwise 'ceaselessly governs' it'.[70] Andrews introduces artistic method as a field within the wider process which determines the specific political action of writing: 'Form & content unfold within–that is to say, are choices within–*method*, on a total scale. And writing's (social) method is its politics, its explanation, since 'the future' is implicated one way or another by how reading reconvenes conventions.'[71] This reconvening of convention and soliciting of a different future mark the transformative potential of writing and reading as an encounter.

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[68] Andrews, p. 26.
[69] Andrews, p. 27.
[70] Andrews, pp. 28-29.
[71] Andrews, p. 31.

If, as Nick Piombino contends, '[w]e live in a time when most individual experience is reduced to an obscene version of social homogeneity'[72] then Charles Bernstein's reflections are pertinent:

> Poetry can bring to awareness questions of authority and conventionality, not to overthrow them, as in a certain reading of destructive intent, but to reconfigure: a necessary defiguration as prerequisite for refiguration, for the regeneration of the ability to figure–count–think figuratively, tropically.[73]

But how can this be done? If we engage DeKoven's proposal for a model of unification and Andrews's, Kuhnheim's and Sanyal's suggestions that choices around form propel the work into an exchange, noting with Marcuse that subjectivity can be treated as an anti-bourgeois resource, with the slippage in subject-object duality revealing multidimensional exchanges carrying various meanings in the form of gesture, energy, semantic suggestion and physical shape, we begin to see how innovative form can actually operate as a literal tool for transfiguration, not the representative, signifying/symbolic one in Marcuse's argument. Radical form, as a more fertile axis of the poetic moment than its conventional counterpart, engages the work in an exchange with perceivers who may then commune with or fracture from other social bodies, but in either case will be part of a series of kinetic actions triggered by the work. The perceivers' individual subjectivities, through their bodies' receptivity (here we recognise Mottram's bodies as interpreters of signs), then have the potential to undergo the kind of metamorphosis that directly feeds revolutionary activity. That revolutionary activity, of course, may itself be art, which resonates with Olson's proposition that creativity is the source and indication of a well society. If this argument is countered with my own observation in chapter 3 that the global events of the 1930s and '40s indicated that avant-gardism had lost to the instrumentalising forces of conservative authority then the point has been missed. Radical art cannot prevent totalitarian atrocities, but without it human consciousness would be impoverished and our predicament far worse.

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[72] Nick Piombino, 'Cultivate Your Own Wilderness', in *Politics*, ed. by Bernstein, pp. 232-234 (p. 233).
[73] Bernstein, 'Comedy and the Poetics of Political Form', in *Politics*, ed. by Bernstein, pp. 235-244 (p. 243).

Revolution of the Word

Jerome Rothenberg convincingly advances the view that radical exploration in art is perpetual and necessary, even in its seeming impotence. He states in his introduction to the 1974 anthology of avant-garde American poetry that the concerns around early Modernism were more than that the early twentieth century was merely a time of huge technological advancement (a view put forward by the Perloffs and Anna Lawton):[74]

> There is a widespread feeling circa 1914 that consciousness (man's awareness of himself in time and space) is changing. This is taken as both a crisis & an opportunity, & presupposes a continuous need to confront & to integrate new experience & information. A common explanation connects this change, alteration or expansion of consciousness with technological change (the basic condition of the *modern* world) […]. In a world in which "so much happens and anybody at any moment knows everything that is happening," Gertrude Stein sees the artist as the person who "inevitably has to do what is really exciting."[75]

For Rothenberg, the revolution in poetics around the early-mid twentieth century was connected to the ancient role of the shaman, the 'seer', who 'sees and projects his vision to others. […] The modern poem,' he notes, 'is open to everything.'[76] Not only the poem but the persistence of radical poetics and other artistic gestures bear this openness. Kandinsky's take on the role of the radical artist qualifies the need for the vision artists and poets provide: 'the man who does not strive tirelessly, who does not fight continually against sinking, will mentally and morally go under.'[77] The Stein quotation used by Rothenberg indicates that the role of the artist is to constantly try, through what he calls an 'assault', to create new forms. There is more at stake, therefore, than mere historical conditions. There is a continuous *need* for the "revolution of the word", an on-going artistic concern to push form and artistic expression against whatever prevailing norms dominate at any given time. This is a necessary perpetual motion.

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[74] See M. Perloff, *Futurist Moment*, p. 13; N. Perloff, 'Sound Poetry and the Musical Avant-Garde', p. 106; and Lawton, *Russian Futurism*, p. 3.
[75] Rothenberg, *Revolution*, p. xvi.
[76] Rothenberg, *Revolution*, p. xvii.
[77] Kandinsky, *Spiritual in Art*, p. 7.

In 'Ethnopoetics & Politics / The Politics of Ethnopoetics', his contribution to Bernstein's anthology, Rothenberg tracks the expansion of poetic form from Blake onwards as it travelled through Whitman, Rimbaud ('"new ideas demand new *forms*"'), Apollinaire (the "new spirit"), Marinetti (words *and* verse liberated), Pound (the Cantos as historical collage), Khlebnikov ('modernist system-maker'), the Dadaists ('systemdestroyers'), the Surrealists (revolution of the word through dream), Stein and Williams, Olson, the Beats, Cage and the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets.[78] For Rothenberg, the use of innovative form is directly connected to social change:

> It's the poets then who have had it bad – this revolution of the word that's a revolution of the mind & (consistently or not) a revolution in the (political, material, and social) world itself. The first one to decisively link it all was William Blake […]. Over a half-century later, a similar concatenation of language & reality marked what Walt Whitman called "the language experiment" of his *Leaves of Grass* – a radical poetics more immediately influential than Blake's, & whose opening/liberation of the verse line was tied by Whitman to a still potent (& often dangerous) American idea of revolution ("democratic & heretical" he called it).[79]

The mention of Blake and Whitman is far from insignificant for our inquiry here, as both were exponents of innovative form in their time. Rothenberg's agenda is to promote ethnopoetics,[80] a hybrid of old and new forms, which he does by highlighting its oppositional, historical and community dimensions:

> (1) That the multiple poetries revealed by an *ethno*poetics lead inevitably to the conclusion that *there is no one way*; thus, they contribute to the desire/need already felt, to undermine authority, program, & system, so as not to be done in by them in turn, (2) That we bridge history by placing the poem back into history: that if the poem's social/historical dimension is thereby tricky to describe (& it is), it does not diminish the poem (its interest & usefulness at

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[78] Rothenberg acknowledges, with a thick layer of gloss, Marinetti's rightward politics, though it would be fair to say the modes of Italian Futurism fit well into the history of an oppositional, i.e. leftist, avant-gardist, art whatever the pronouncements of its most notorious figure.

[79] Rothenberg, 'Ethnopoetics & Politics / The Politics of Ethnopoetics', in *Politics*, ed. by Bernstein, pp. 1-22 (pp. 2-3).

[80] See my discussion of *Technicians of the Sacred* in chapter 2.

> present) if we so describe it. And (3) that the models in question are all instances
> in which the communal/poetic/public are in conjunction, not in conflict [...].[81]

If we adopt Rothenberg's standpoint as a riposte to the somewhat naïve declarations of DeKoven we begin to see more deeply into how this idea of the poem 'thickening' or developing kinetically has some currency (even if Rothenberg's description 'does not diminish' is in the negative). It moreover strengthens the view that innovative form can result in unity, not rupture, as it generates social exchanges. I reiterate here the point that Bob Cobbing was among a very few international artists who refused to disengage from the Revolution of the Word in the latter part of the twentieth century.

The Perceiving Body

The following section examines precisely how art can bring about transfiguration in the human perceiver. We recall from chapter 3 how the early Modernists' experiments with form were conceived as a challenge to the bourgeois ruling elite, and how Cobbing's work was a recuperation of these avant-gardist forms, practices and principles at a time when such methods were being abandoned in the wake of the Holocaust and A-bomb. The creation of a radical artistic gesture is one thing, but to engender genuine change the work needs to intersect with another axis of the artistic encounter, namely the perception of an audience. Of course not all viewers of radical art undergo demonstrable transfiguration, so in the remainder of this chapter I will set out the case that this occurs when the perceiver is at the peak of their receptive potential and takes place over prolonged engagement with a work of art; that is, they participate in a fully engaged perception. I will determine which aspects of a range of theories of perception, some of which we touched on in chapter 2, are useful to help provide a description of the processes at work in the act of transfiguration through art. Theories of perception played a significant role in twentieth century philosophy, poetics and visual art. There seemed to be a tacit understanding, in the wake of Hegel and Romanticism, that one of the keys to unlocking the processes of the social, political and artistic world lay in insights into sensory activity. Bergson's understanding of perception is that it cannot be separated from memory and consciousness, that memory is held in the body and the impressions, as they pass through the body, select. Olson argues that perception of an

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[81] Rothenberg, 'Ethnopoetics', pp. 9-10.

image is intrinsically connected to the object that gives rise to the image. Merleau-Ponty's notion of perception is that it creates the limits of the perceived object and that consciousness, which is never at rest, is integral to the process. And Mottram notes that the body is a signmaker. It chimes with all these theories that the body must be central to an understanding of perception. Perception as discussed throughout this thesis incorporates all sensory experience, including sound, which, phenomenologically, involves the body as a resonating receiver. If we can come to a viable understanding of perception, it follows that we can determine the role perceivers play when they encounter radical form. We shall start with Bergson.

In *Matter and Memory* Bergson sets out his comprehensive understanding of the process of perception. He describes the body as one 'image' among the aggregate of images which receives and gives back movement, the difference being that the body, unlike the other, inert, images, is a channel for the sensations that make choices.[82] The aggregate of images he terms 'matter', and perception of matter is the images referred to action through the body; perception therefore displays the eventual or possible actions of the body.[83] As matter depends on the body and follows its variations, it comes within the system of consciousness.[84] Consciousness is identified as the existence within which perception resides: 'our successive perceptions are never the real moment of things […] but are moments of our consciousness.'[85] Perception is directed towards action (not knowledge), is full of memories and occupies a duration.[86] Bergson states that an image of an object is not a representation, it is a present image.[87] In perception we travel from the periphery to the centre yet perception occurs outside of the body and is stimulated by affection, or sensation.[88] Memory, which he defines as the survival of past images, interpenetrates with perception,[89] and a key ingredient is movement: 'The *actuality* of our perception thus lies in its *activity*, in the movements which prolong it, and not in its greater intensity: the past is only idea, the present is ideo-motor.' By this understanding, perception is an event: living, moving, not frozen by intellectual

[82] Bergson, *Matter*, pp. 1-5.
[83] Bergson, *Matter*, p. 8.
[84] Bergson, *Matter*, pp. 12-14.
[85] Bergson, *Matter*, p. 75.
[86] Bergson, *Matter*, pp. 21-25 and p. 38.
[87] Bergson, *Matter*, p. 28.
[88] Bergson, *Matter*, p. 44 and pp. 59-60.
[89] Bergson, *Matter*, pp. 70-72.

theory. Bergson proceeds to provide a synthesis of the roles of memory, consciousness and duration in perception by explaining his understanding of their inter-relatedness: 'there is nothing for us that is instantaneous. In all that goes by that name there is already some work of our memory, and consequently of our consciousness, which prolongs into each other, so as to grasp them in one relatively simple intuition [...].'[90] He then hypothesises that '*questions relating to subject and object, to their distinction and their union, should be put in terms of time rather than space*'.[91] Bergson ruminates on the question of whence perception arises, a question that has implications for our inquiry into the process at work when form is met by perception:

> Memory, inseparable in practice from perception, imports the past into the present, contracts into a single intuition many moments of duration, and thus by a twofold operation compels us, *de facto*, to perceive matter in ourselves, whereas we, *de jure*, perceive matter within matter.[92]

Bergson acknowledges here that the relationship between matter and perception may well appear oxymoronic; yet memory is the aspect of perception separate from matter:

> Hence the capital importance of the problem of memory. If it is memory [...] that lends to perception its subjective character, the philosophy of matter must aim [...] at eliminating the contributions of memory. We must now add that, as pure perception gives us the whole or at least the essential part of matter (since the rest comes from memory and is super-added to matter), it follows that memory must be, in principle, a power absolutely independent of matter.[93]

The equation that then appears is: memory is essentially equal to perception, and memory is equated with consciousness, which leads inevitably to the assumption that perception is indivisible from consciousness or, we could posit, that it is in perception that we become conscious – the same as stating that our sensory experience of the world is that through which we relate to that world with a consciousness.

Bergson clarifies the function of sensation and consciousness in *Time and Free Will*:

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[90] Bergson, *Matter*, pp. 75-76.
[91] Bergson, *Matter*, p. 77.
[92] Bergson, *Matter*, p. 80.
[93] Bergson, *Matter*, pp. 80-81.

The automatic movements which tend to follow the stimulus as its natural outcome are likely to be conscious as movements: or else the sensation itself, whose function is to invite us to choose between this automatic reaction and other possible movements, would be of no avail.[94]

The intensity of these sensations, he continues, is our consciousness of the involuntary movements in the states, and space is vital to consciousness:

[T]here are two kinds of multiplicity: that of material objects, to which the conception of number is immediately applicable; and the multiplicity of states of consciousness, which cannot be regarded as numerical without the help of some symbolic representation, in which a necessary element is *space*.[95]

The idea that a symbolic representation is involved gets round the potentially awkward notion that consciousness literally occupies space.

Returning to *Matter and Memory*, Bergson clarifies the features of the vital elements in perception: memory is independent of matter and matter is the vehicle of action.[96] Crucially, the body is placed in the context of duration, not space; the body is 'an ever advancing boundary between the future and the past' which continually drives the body into the future.[97] Memory both records and is itself consciousness, and when the two mix there occurs a motor habit as well as an image consciously located.[98] Consciousness is described as retaining memory images and acting as a selecting agent, dispensing with images that are not useful for any present situation.[99] The idea of the organism selecting recalls Olson's understanding of the process.[100] Through memory perception becomes action.[101] Reflective perception is described as a circuit, with the various elements – the perceived object, perception, the body and images – held in mutual

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[94] Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. by F.L. Pogson (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1910), p. 35.
[95] Bergson, *Time*, p. 87.
[96] Bergson, *Matter*, pp. 81-82.
[97] Bergson, *Matter*, p. 88.
[98] Bergson, *Matter*, pp. 92-93 and p. 103.
[99] Bergson, *Matter*, pp. 96-97.
[100] See chapter 2.
[101] Bergson, *Matter*, pp. 113-14.

tension; disturbances from the object will eventually return to the object, a suggestion that, again, inspired Olson.[102] For Bergson, perception is completed in consciousness:

> complete perception is only defined and distinguished by its coalescence with a memory-image which we send forth to meet it. Only this is attention secured, and without attention there is but a passive juxtaposing of sensations, accompanied by a mechanical reaction. But […] the memory-image itself, if it remained pure memory, would be ineffectual. Virtual, this memory can only be actual by means of the perception which attracts it. Powerless, it borrows life and strength from the present sensation in which it is materialized.[103]

Indeed, it is consciousness that 'illumines' perception which then arises where the object meets memory.[104] In *Mind Energy*, Bergson clarifies the interdependent relationship between consciousness and memory and their separate identity from matter. He notes that without memory we are not conscious and that consciousness is anticipation of the future.[105] Consciousness is, in fact, synonymous with choice and co-extensive with life.[106] Furthermore, in line with Olson, our purpose is to be creative:

> Matter is inertia, geometry, necessity. But with life there appears free, predictable, movement. The living being chooses or tends to choose. Its role is to create. In a world where everything else is determined, a zone of indetermination surrounds it.[107]

Matter is however the inverse of consciousness and they can therefore not be separated: matter is action continually unmaking itself and consciousness is action unceasingly creating.[108] He proceeds to touch on a point of conflict which may help us unlock the social and political implications of radical form meeting with engaged perception: '[s]ociety, which is the community of individual energies, benefits from the efforts of all its members and renders effort easier to all.' Therefore society must both

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102 Bergson, *Matter*, p. 127.
103 Bergson, *Matter*, pp. 162-63.
104 Bergson, *Matter*, p. 194
105 Bergson, *Mind Energy, Lectures and Essays*, trans. by H. Wildon Carr (London: MacMillan, 1921), p. 5.
106 Bergson, *Mind Energy*, p. 11 and p. 13.
107 Bergson, *Mind Energy*, p. 13.
108 Bergson, *Mind Energy*, p. 18.

subordinate the individual and leave the individual free.[109] Yet it is memory for Bergson that activates the other components of the perceptual arrangement.

Returning once again to *Matter and Memory* Bergson addresses a fundamental question for our inquiry, the involvement of the individual in the perceptual arrangement and its subsequent potential for transfiguration: he states that truly free actions depend on the concentrating power of the individual's perception and 'a being which evolves more or less freely creates something new each moment'.[110] Usefulness, purpose and selection are the underpinning principles of Bergson's theory of perception, a position that is more post-Darwinian than pure Darwinian. These principles chime favourably with Olson's more reductive, though arguably more helpful, circuitry description of the perceptual arrangement, which we recall from chapter 2 involves a route from object to image to action, founded upon the notion that the skin, acting as a mediator for the object and the image, suggests there is little separation between the external, material world and the subject's inner desires, dreams and so forth. Crucially, Olson's view is that if we maintain the perceptual arrangement through creative acts we shall be more fluent with the environment. What Bergson is alluding to, as much as Olson is with his insistence on attention to the breath, is a *fully engaged perception*. With this foregrounding of our documentation of the characteristics of perception, we come to Merleau-Ponty's dense and challenging theory of perception as we move further towards classifying our contemporary sense of perception.

In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty states his intentions to 'return to the world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world, since it is in it that we shall be able to grasp the theoretical basis no less than the limits of that objective world'. His aim is to 'restore to things their concrete physiognomy, to organisms their individual ways of dealing with the world, and to subjectivity its inherence in history'.[111] *Phenomenology of Perception* sets out to challenge empiricism and intellectualism and provide a detailed re-evaluation of conceptions of perception. One of its notable successes, and the reason why Merleau-Ponty is such a crucial thinker when it comes to Cobbing's work, is to achieve a synthesis in its understanding of perception in its dual aspects, sound and the visual. It is moreover, in part, a major reworking of Bergson's

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[109] Bergson, *Mind Energy*, p. 26.
[110] Bergson, *Matter*, p. 279 and p. 297.
[111] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 57.

idea of perception, and it is therefore perhaps in the intersections or overlaps between their respective theories that we may be able to provide a useful working understanding of the perceiver.

Merleau-Ponty introduces the element of attention to frame his idea of consciousness. In order to relate attention to consciousness he sets out how perception awakens attention and how attention develops perception. He notes that 'consciousness does not begin to exist until it sets limits to an object'.[112] In empiricism, attention does not bring about new relationships between consciousness and objects; however, for Merleau-Ponty, '[t]o pay attention is not merely further to elucidate pre-existing data, it is to bring about a new articulation of them by taking them as *figures*. They are performed only as *horizons*, they constitute in reality new regions in the total world.' Indeed, attention is 'the active constitution of a new object which makes explicit and articulate what was until then presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon.'[113] Emerging, then, is an understanding of perception that challenges Bergson's. According to Merleau-Ponty perception creates an interpretation, a determinacy, of the material world by setting limits to it. Moreover he is sceptical about the significance of memory in a section where he takes direct issue with Bergson's reasoning in *Mind Energy*, arguing that the ''prompting' figure [...] [is] arrayed in present consciousness itself':

> Before any contribution by memory, what is seen must at the present moment so organize itself as to present a picture to me in which I can recognize my former experiences. Thus the appeal to memory presupposes what it is supposed to explain: the patterning of data, the imposition of meaning on a chaos of sense-data. No sooner is the recollection of memories made possible than it becomes superfluous, since the work it is being asked to do is already done. [...] [T]he 'projection of memories' is nothing but a bad metaphor [...].[114]

Rather than memory being drawn on to identify the percept (perceived object), the object *in the present moment* permits access to the perceiver's store of memories. Such emphasis on the present, rather than, as for Bergson, the past, enables the perceiver to be truly in their perceptual experience, and it is worth noting that Bergson accepts that

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[112] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, pp. 26-27.
[113] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, pp. 28-30.
[114] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, pp. 19-20.

his notions of memory and duration indicate that we are never truly in the present moment. Merleau-Ponty points out that the realm in which phenomenology is operating is not an isolated event but one that is connected to all experience: 'This phenomenal field is not an 'inner world', the 'phenomenon' is not a 'state of consciousness', or a 'mental fact', and the experience of phenomena is not an act of introspection or an intuition in Bergson's sense.'[115] In a passage that relies on the transcendence he claims to refute, Merleau-Ponty's methodology is seen to incorporate a rebuttal of the significance of sensations or impressions in favour of experience within the material world being transformed into meaning:

> The sensible configuration of an object or a gesture [...] is not grasped in some inexpressible coincidence, it 'is understood' through a sort of act of appropriation which we all experience when we say that we have 'found' the rabbit in the foliage of a puzzle, or that we have 'caught' a slight gesture. Once the prejudice of sensation has been banished, a face, a signature, a form of behaviour cease to be mere 'visual data' whose psychological meaning is to be sought in our inner experience, and the mental life of others becomes an immediate object, a whole charged with immanent meaning. More generally it is the very notion of the immediate which is transformed: henceforth the immediate is no longer the impression, the object which is one with the subject, but the meaning, the structure, the spontaneous arrangement of parts.[116]

Perception for Merleau-Ponty, then, is a lived experience in which we make meaning of the world, not a process the perceiver is able to step outside of, and consciousness has in some way to be 'constituted':

> If a universal constituting consciousness were possible, the opacity of the fact would disappear. If then we want reflection to maintain, in the object on which it bears, its descriptive characteristics, and thoroughly to understand that object, we must not consider it as a mere return to a universal reason and see it as anticipated in unreflective experience, we must regard it as a creative operation which itself participates in the facticity of that experience.

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[115] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 57.
[116] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, pp. 57-58.

Facticity is a term Merleau-Ponty uses to refer to something similar to Heidegger's *Dasein*, the concept used in *Being and Time* to denote 'being' or 'being in the world', literally 'there-being'. For Merleau-Ponty there is no fixed idea of consciousness: it is never at rest but in a continual 'creative operation' in the experiential world. Phenomenology, he notes, is 'the *advent* of being to consciousness'.[117] He clarifies this point in his essay 'Cézanne's Doubt', stating of Cézanne's compositions, 'perspectival distortions are no longer visible in their own right but rather contribute, as they do in natural vision, to the impression of an emerging order, of an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes.'[118] In the act of perception, Merleau-Ponty argues, the world itself emerges, and the senses are not the stimuli to action as they are for Bergson: 'The lived object is not rediscovered or constructed on the basis of the contributions of the sense; rather, it presents itself to us from the start as the center from which these contributions radiate.' Cézanne's paintings, he notes, express this 'indivisible whole'.[119]

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology sets out to recast philosophical thinking with a radical methodology. He dismisses the suggestion that our experience and our understanding of experience can be separate from each other, and he rejects the kinds of methodologies that provided the evidence for Bergson's thinking: 'Modern physiology […] no longer links the different qualities of one and the same sense, and the data of different senses, to distinct material instruments.'[120] He observes that we cannot perceive a single, autonomous object for if we did it would be merely an idea. Consciousness is recognised as an immersion within the physical world:

> The whole life of consciousness is characterized by the tendency to posit objects, since it is consciousness, that is to say self-knowledge, only in so far as it takes hold of itself and draws itself together in an identifiable object. And yet the absolute positing of a single object is the death of consciousness, since it congeals the whole of existence, as a crystal placed in a solution suddenly crystallizes it.[121]

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[117] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 61.
[118] Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. by Hubert L Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (USA: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 14.
[119] Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', p. 15.
[120] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 73.
[121] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, pp. 67-71.

And so it follows that the body must be conceived as a subject in order for a perceiver to determine what a stimulus is: 'I cannot understand the function of the living body except by enacting it myself, and except in so far as I am a body which rises towards the world.'[122] We live our lives *in* history and everything is the product of a historical moment. Our tendency therefore towards actions is generated by existence itself, rather than, as Bergson would have it, memory:

> [H]istory is neither a perpetual novelty, nor a perpetual repetition, but the *unique* movement which creates stable forms and breaks them up. The organism and its monotonous dialectical processes are therefore not alien to history and as it were inassimilable to it. Man taken as a concrete being is not a psyche joined to an organism, but the movement to and fro of existence which at one time allows itself to take corporeal form and at others moves towards personal acts.[123]

Merleau-Ponty goes further to address the fundamental assumptions of Descartes's *cogito*: 'The union of soul and body […] is enacted at every instant in the movement of existence.'[124] In a later section entitled 'The theory of the body is already a theory of perception', he notes that the body is in the world and forms a system, and the perceived object is understood through the body: 'I could not grasp the unity of the object without the mediation of bodily experience.'[125] This system forms a 'living connection': 'The thing, and the world, are given to me along with the parts of my body, not by any 'natural geometry', but in a living connection comparable, or rather identical, with that existing between the parts of my body itself.'[126] The guiding principle is that 'we are in the world through our body, and […] we perceive the world with our body'. This connectedness is also fundamental to Olson's understanding of perception. Merleau-Ponty's methodological philosophy presents the following possibility: 'by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourself, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception.'[127] Further to this methodological awareness of the body, and in

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[122] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 75.
[123] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 88.
[124] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, pp. 88-89.
[125] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 203.
[126] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 205.
[127] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 206.

order to grasp Merleau-Ponty's idea of perception as lived experience, an understanding of his notion of space is vital.

Space is described not in terms of physical dimensions but as an enabling power which connects things: '[s]pace is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things becomes possible.'[128] Again, Merleau-Ponty takes issue with the empiricist and intellectualist positions, incidentally challenging Olson's description of a connectedness (Olson actually appears rather empiricist in light of Merleau-Ponty's approach), in order to carve out a new understanding of space which impacts on our earlier discussion of form:

> We cannot understand, therefore, the experience of space either in terms of the consideration of contents or of that of some pure unifying activity; we are confronted with that third spatiality […], which is neither that of things in space, nor that of spatializing space […].[129]

The body's relationship to the world is not an anchoring in a geographical location, but is 'needed to perceive a given spectacle. Everything throws us back on to the organic relations between subject and space, to that gearing of the subject onto his world which is the origin of space'.[130] Our body, then, enables us to operate in space. This leads Merleau-Ponty to the consideration that movement of an object within space is connected to its behaviour rather than its properties; it follows that movement is initially temporal, not spatial. Therefore, addressing Bergson's notion of the perpetual slippage of the present, he notes:

> Things co-exist in space because they are *present* to the same perceiving subject and enveloped in one and the same temporal wave. But the unity and individuality of each temporal wave is possible only if it is wedged in between the preceding and the following one, and if the same temporal pulsation which produces it still retains its predecessor and anticipates its successor. It is objective time which is made up of successive moments. The lived present holds

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[128] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 243.
[129] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 248.
[130] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 251.

a past and a future within its thickness. The phenomenon of movement merely displays spatial and temporal implications in a more striking way.[131]

The phenomenon of movement, then, leads us back to Merleau-Ponty's central problem of how our everyday perceptual setting comes to be constituted. Again, the solution comes through an understanding of our lived experience through the body in order to set the limits of the visual field and organise the world. Perception, for Merleau-Ponty, is formed around what is sensed and '[e]very sensation is already pregnant with a meaning'.[132] In the relationship between consciousness and events, 'there is consciousness, something shows itself, there is such a thing as a phenomenon.'[133] Such are the concerns of Mondrian's series of distinctive grid paintings which present black lines crossing surfaces of white and primary colours. *Composition C (No. III) with Red, Yellow and Blue* (1935), for example, focuses the perceiver's eye on the colour, including the black of the lines, and the square and rectangular shapes; there is no object to suggest narrative associations, and the boundaries inherent in the black lines are in fact not boundaries as there is no ground or depth with which to make relative associations. Mondrian's lines draw the perceiver into contemplations of void. With prolonged viewing, there is movement apparent in *Composition C* but, unlike the movement previously discussed in Cézanne's painting, the 'meaning' is purely visual, purely perceptual. The invitation is to constitute the perceptual setting and recognise that limits to material within the visual field and organisation of it take place subject to the perceiver's individual consciousness. The perceiver survives what Merleau-Ponty calls the disorganisation of appearances, and is potentially transformed accordingly. Commenting on Mondrian's *Composition with Blue and Yellow* (1932), Alan Bowness notes:

> though strictly confined to the picture rectangle, the planes and black lines of the compositions are infinitely extendable. Space loses its illusionistic quality, and becomes something inseparable from the forms in the picture, yet we are always uncertain of the relative situation of one element *vis-à-vis* another.[134]

[131] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 275.
[132] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 297.
[133] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 296.
[134] Alan Bowness, *Modern European Art* (Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p. 142.

Not only are the horizons and thresholds of the work *implied*, rather than actual, space and form are synthesised in order to suggest, if not quite literally achieve, a new dimension of spatiality.[135] *Phenomenology of Perception* made bold claims in light of the previously dominant ideas of Kant and Hegel and the emerging ideas of Husserl and Heidegger. Its placement of the human body at the core of lived experience offered a valuable re-evaluation of perception and was widely influential in roughly the third quarter of the twentieth century before suffering a degree of discredit towards its end. Eric Mottram's poetics in the 1970s would incorporate an encounter with phenomenology and similarly place the body at the centre of the perception.

Mottram's references to perception assist more directly with what takes place when radical form presents itself. For Mottram it hinges around the body's relationship to signs. We noted in chapter 3 his assertion in *Towards design in poetry* that the body makes systems from any material.[136] He later continues:

> Signs may resemble or they may not, and they can fall into where notation is
> neither imitation nor invention. The degree of arbitrariness in presenting a sign
> may be excitement in the risks of perception, edging into the possible nullity of
> the absolutely new sign – or rather, the body coping with it as interference in the
> usual contracts of informations [sic] and communication, or failing to. Sartre's
> psychology of imagination recognises the sheer phenomenology of any sign
> presented to the body – it may be read as any number of references, or a
> simultaneity of references.[137]

Mottram's particular concern is with twentieth century concrete and visual poetry. He claims that radical design (what we have referred to as form) makes social transformation possible by its rejection of conventional signs. In this there is an echo of Olson's warning against the limitations of conventional, 'rhetorical' poetic devices. Mondrian's paintings, like Cobbing's poetry, reject conventional signification. Mottram engages with a philosophy of perception without it becoming a dominant feature of the

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[135] The notion of void functions differently in Mondrian's grid series from the work discussed in chapter 3, in particular Malevich. Malevich's Suprematist paintings provoke conceptions of void and can literally suck the perceiver into a sensory and cognitive sense of the void. Mondrian's paintings, whilst invoking a visual meaning, prompt cerebral associations rather than physical experiences of the void. This is why I avoid the definite article with 'void' when referring to Mondrian.

[136] Mottram, *Towards design*, p. 9.

[137] Mottram, *Towards design*, pp. 11-12.

essay. It is noteworthy that he does not refer to Bergson, Merleau-Ponty or Husserl on the matter of phenomenology, instead referencing Sartre's psychological existentialism. Mottram's understanding of the role of consciousness is closer to Merleau-Ponty's than Bergson's, based as it is in the present moment, activated by the material world and itself the creator of signs. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology acknowledges that perception is connected to all other experience and it creates meaning itself, whereas Mottram's poetics emphasises the possibility of struggle in creating meaning. For both, though, perception is a lived experience. This contrasts with Bergson's rather awkward shoe-horning of the hypothetical notion of pure memory into his description of the perceptual arrangement. For Mottram, as for Merleau-Ponty, the perceptual arrangement, or the processes entered into in the hypothetical space between artwork and perceiver, is a living event in itself: it is not consciousness that creates the object, and the body does not merely select useful memory as a precursor to action, as Bergson claims. For Mottram, the perceiving body makes the signs but as *interference*, as part of a series of actions both indeterminate and indeterminable (in terms of Saussurian linguistics). Indeed, he celebrates abstraction's resistance to recognition allowing for the possibility of 'failure' as well as clarity.[138]

We find at the heart of the various understandings of the perceptual arrangement the human body. Through the body we experience sensory engagement with the material world and it is the means through which we make meaning of that world. Relevant here are Olson's circuit of object-image-action, where the subject must stay fresh – alert – to the experience it receives back, and Mottram's identification of the body as the interpreter of signs. The questions about the roles played by memory and consciousness, which Olson and Mottram do not engage with in any great depth, are crucial. I tend towards including some aspect of memory, in line with Bergson, but with a consciousness akin to Merleau-Ponty's notion that it is in engagement with objects that consciousness is realised. The conception of memory as a projection of images stimulated by matter can be made to work if it is considered to be the means through which consciousness is realised. In fact the body, for Bergson, *is* memory, and this conceptualisation clarifies the role of both. A readjustment of Bergson's notion of memory, though, is necessary to maintain perception in the present, lived, moment.

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[138] Mottram, *Towards design*, p. 13.

Merleau-Ponty's conception of the 'thickness' of the present, which carries the past and the future with it, need not eliminate memory. Rather, with the body as the binding force for consciousness, sensation and duration, memory can be discerned as the element through which all others have to pass. The body is indeed a resonating receiver of material stimuli. Moreover, the idea of the phenomenological field, or the realm in which experience and matter come into contact, as a lived one, in connection with all other experience, is difficult to refute. This further leads us to consider not just the perceptual arrangement, and not just all the elements and processes at work, and not just the lived experience of the individual, but the very fabric of life in the universe, as it pulses with every changing moment, as a continuous and ever-developing event constituted by many single and related events. In 'Cézanne's Doubt' Merleau-Ponty sees in Cézanne's painting a realisation of this interpretation: 'the world is a mass without gaps, a system of colours across which the receding perspective, the outlines, angles, and curves are inscribed like lines of force; the spatial structure vibrates as it is formed.'[139] The apparent movement in Cézanne's *Baigneurs* was created by Cézanne's soft, broad strokes of flesh and pink colour.[140] In a way, the perceiver's eye has to be trained in much the same manner as the senses do with visual poetry or avant-garde music in order to experience the movement in the painting. Such training occurs when the perceiver's body is fully alive to its own resonance, and once it is established the vibrations Merleau-Ponty and Ginsberg found in Cézanne are apparent: the pulsing breath of life is apparent in the strokes and colours of his paintings. The effect created by *Baigneurs* is equally a result of using new methods in much the same way as Olson's projective verse later decreed for poetry. New forms of art require the perceiver to see the world anew. The prickly question of whether perception arises in the object or through the human senses is thus formulated, with a strong possibility that it is both, since the endless series of spatial and temporal events repeatedly emerge. All matter within the perceptual, or phenomenological, field has a connection to all other matter and no emission or perception of light, colour or shape exists in isolation from its relationship with other matter. Given this shaping of the relationship between matter and experience, the role of the artwork, itself an object (matter) involved in an

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[139] Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', p. 15.
[140] See my discussion of this painting in chapter 2.

arrangement (experience) with other matter, can now be examined. Merleau-Ponty tackles this issue:

> What [the artist] expresses cannot, therefore, be the translation of a clearly defined thought, since such clear thoughts are those which have already been uttered by ourselves or others. "Conception" cannot precede "execution." There is nothing but a vague fever before the act of artistic expression, and only the work itself, completed and understood, is proof that there was *something* rather than *nothing* to be said. [...] The meaning of what the artist is going to say *does not exist* anywhere–not in things, which as yet have no meaning, nor in the artist himself, in his unformulated life. It summons one away from the already constituted reason in which "cultured men" are content to shut themselves, toward a reason which contains its own origins.[141]

Notably, Merleau-Ponty draws parallels between the utterance of verbal language, i.e. sound, and visual perception; as we have noted, both require the body to act as a resonating, active receiver of material.

The Event

Our discussion in this chapter has seen us consider form as a means to social discourse, form deployed by the avant-gardes in particular as forging a possible unity rather than rupture, the literary canon as restrictive and writing as intrinsically political. If form provokes social engagement, then radical form prompts an extension of our common social and political horizons. Such an extension may attain unity through rupture, or remain ruptured. The limitations imposed by the canon, restraining as they do the perceiver's potential to fully engage, exemplify how a rupture can operate. Institutionalised attacks on the avant-garde by the mainstream are effectively society attacking itself. The interests of the avant-garde, for the most part, are in revealing the hidden harmony; the interests of the mainstream ruling elite are in maintaining the rupture. All art is intrinsically political, whether it propagates, attacks or is indifferent to the status quo. The art of the avant-gardes is the most politically, and socially, transfigurative form that it takes.

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[141] Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', p. 19.

I now propose that, for the purposes of understanding the perceptual arrangement, the term I have given to the encounter between the axes of radical form and engaged perception, we use the term *Event*. I will argue in chapter 5 that Cobbing's sound and visual poetry, and in particular their radical synthesis in performance, exemplifies this understanding of perception as part of an Event. For now, I maintain that radical form, as practised by artists of the twentieth century avant-gardes, and itself intrinsically political, has profound transfigurative potential when it encounters a fully engaged perceiver whose body, selecting in the present moment any relevant memories, acts as a binding element for the forces of consciousness, perception, movement, direction and purpose in the real, present moment. The moment of perception is one of uncountable moments of perception, or rather, in keeping with Bergson's notion of Duration in respect of flow, one endless, ever-changing moment, which keeps the self creative and therefore intrinsically resistant to dominant ideologies. We can define The Event as we do the perceptual arrangement: the meeting point of innovative form, consisting of material, the work's content, and fully engaged perception, or consciousness. We can further clarify the term Event to refer to a much more complex and developed process than what Kuhnheim describes as 'tension' between form and content. It involves the spatial contact point of form and perception intersecting with all the various temporal contexts, be they social, historical or political. By extension, then, any of the features of abstraction identified in chapter 3 and the temporal and spatial axes that constitute flow as set out in chapter 2 are equally present in the Event. This leads us to consider that what is created at these intersections exceeds the work and the perceiver themselves. Yet any given perceiver is not inevitably in sympathy with the work of art. However, even in revulsion or confusion, their limitations may be expanded. Innovative form impacts the social world when fully engaged perception encounters it. Innovative form, as gesture, shows what is possible, leading the way to the void where decisions are made to engage or recoil. With these radical processes at work, due to their unprecedented nature, Cobbing's sound and visual poetry has considerable transfigurative potential. Chapter 5 will close read some of Cobbing's work in light of my theory of flow, traces of Modernism, the features of abstraction, a range of interfaces and some possible effects for engaged perceivers.

Chapter 5

Cobbing Synthesised

Having articulated working phases of Cobbing's work in chapter 1, explored a vocabulary for flow in chapter 2, outlined the key features of abstraction in chapter 3 and considered the artistic encounter between form and perception in chapter 4, we now need to synthesise and put to the test these various elements and contexts through a close examination of Cobbing's work. The past three chapters have made more general references to Bob Cobbing as we have attempted to identify the significant interfaces within which he was working. Modernism and late-Modernism, twentieth-century avant-gardes, concrete, sound and visual poetry, and late twentieth-century radical poetry are all permeated by notions of and approaches to space, perception, form and abstraction. We have now laid down the general ground informing Cobbing's practice, and it has been necessary to separate the intricate specifics of Cobbing's poetry from that ground in order to ascertain what this wider assemblage contains. In this present chapter I shall explore and test the findings of the previous chapters in relation to Cobbing's sound and visual poetry in order to clarify the strands of Modernism and late-Modernism with which Cobbing was engaging, identify the appearance of flow, underline the political and transfigurative potential of his work through its engagement with artistic approaches to space, perception and form, and to locate the work within post-war poetry and the late twentieth-century avant-gardes.

As outlined in chapter 4, form has been the subject of a major field of artistic contention for well over a century. In the modern era, from the moment that Monet and Cézanne made innovative and radical statements with their works at the exhibitions in Paris in the 1870s and Mallarmé tore up the unwritten rules about how a poem should occupy the space of the page, the question of form has been intrinsically linked with the question of perception. Cobbing produced his first visual work in 1942 and broke away from conventional 'verse' layout in his poems in 1960. There is a sense that his work was always in some ways concerned with form and perception. However, around the mid-'60s the link in his work between these two aspects of the Event became more overt and was explored through the materiality of language. Whilst noting the

significant shift towards letterism in 1964 with *ABC in Sound*, I identify this point as 1966, the year during which Cobbing created the overlaid, partially obliterated texts *Destruction in Art*, 'OW' and the first visual versions of *a line from the Observer*. These prefigured the typewriter concrete pieces 'Panzoologicomineralogia' (1968), *Whississippi* and *Marvo Movies Natter* (both 1969), and *Cascade* (1975). *Sonic Icons* followed in 1970 and *Three Poems for Voice and Movement*, *the Judith Poem* (both 1971), 'A Winter Poem' and *The Five Vowels* (both 1974) all feature elements of obliterated text or type. At that point in the mid-'60s, questions around sensory experience and the role of the body had been restated in visual art and poetics. It was a pivotal moment in the counter-cultural challenge to established authority, and as a brutalised international community tried to digest atrocities, from the concentration camps to the gulags to the Japanese cities obliterated by the A-bomb to Vietnam, the extremes of which had never been known before, the intricacies involved in perception mapped by Bergson and Merleau-Ponty continued to be vital artistic concerns. Some artists in the States and Europe were progressing the ideas of the Modernists in terms of form, abstraction, a reduction of materials, and the possibilities of vision and perspective. Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd, for example, produced work that placed the perceiver in 3-dimensional relation to the artistic object, using unfamiliar materials and, in relation to representation and subjectivity, exceeded prior understanding of abstraction. Around the same time Bridget Riley's two-tone optical paintings brought the question of the reliability of visual perception as a fixed, stable experience directly into focus. A few years earlier, Olson on one side of the Atlantic had incorporated ideas around phenomenologies of perception into poetic theory and Mottram on the European side was shortly to integrate those ideas into his criticism and poetic practice. With these original approaches came a whole new set of questions, and the theories of perception espoused by Merleau-Ponty in particular needed to be tested in a live environment. Over a period of nearly 40 years, Cobbing's work was to explore the visual and aural properties of language in bold, imaginative and pretty much singular ways. There can be no doubting the importance of many key twentieth-century avant-gardist figures whose work has been explored in this thesis in respect of either sound performance or the visual presentation of poetry or visual art, but Cobbing's unparalleled achievement was in his synthesis of the visual and aural properties of language. He was furthermore a major player in sustaining the role of oppositional art during a time of its apparent

decline. In order to establish Cobbing's position within twentieth century avant-gardism, artistic approaches to form and perception, and late twentieth-century poetry I will explore Cobbing's 1976 publication *Jade-Sound Poems*, an early booklet from the *Domestic Ambient Noise* (*DAN*) series and a live performance of a later *DAN*. I will thereby assert my interpretation of Cobbing's work within contemporary poetics and other contexts, related essentially to form, space and perception.

Jade-Sound Poems is a suitable subject for close study for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is a visual work and recordings exist of Cobbing performing it. This will enable some links to be made between Cobbing's various motions towards an artistic synthesis of sonic and visual language. It also retains, in the clarity of its indeterminate presentation of letters, figures and symbols, traces of subjectivity which much of his later visual work completely abandons; this is to say that the indeterminacy of *Jade-Sound Poems* is not created by (complete and linear) obliteration and hence we can capture, through what I refer to as thresholds of obliteration, Cobbing's work in its movement towards the features of abstraction documented in chapter 3. It is also therefore possible to find some critical leverage with which to explore the resonances of the poems. The *Jade* selection is moreover well-placed chronologically to help us highlight the transitions of Cobbing's processes and methods over time. And finally *Jade-Sound Poems* has been the subject of some critical studies and thus provides ample opportunity to place my theoretical reading of Cobbing's work within contemporary critiques, the field of which, it is worth adding, is still emerging. It also foregrounds some of the extreme radical gestures found in *DAN*. I shall start with a general survey of the main critical approaches to Cobbing's work.

The Critical Field

cris cheek's critical writings on Cobbing include a number of articles and essays and a chapter of his thesis on performance and collaboration. cheek, born in 1955 – some 35 years younger than Cobbing – collaborated with Cobbing, participated in the Writers Forum workshop for many years and worked in the Poetry Society print shop in the 1970s during Cobbing's politically fraught tenure there. cheek focuses on performance aspects and what he calls Cobbing's 'generosity', by which he means his inclusiveness

and collaborative practice as part of a creative community.[1] There is a sense that Cobbing's practice, as understood in these terms, links to the idea of flow as a coming together of temporal practice within shared, creative space. cheek notes that Cobbing's work is difficult to categorise, that it 'occurred 'between' rather than within hard categories'. He remarks on Cobbing's adaptability and 'variations', proposing that Cobbing repeatedly transgressed the established boundaries of form in poetry, art, music and dance: 'Cobbing's work was subjected to variation upon variation through performances of print and through public performances of representation.'[2] cheek's emphasis through his descriptions of Cobbing's texts and performances is on the transformative possibilities in performance and how Cobbing re-formed ideas of writing and sounding. The body, cheek recognises, was at the heart of Cobbing's work:

> A performance of writing was an embodied occasion, belonging to neither giver nor receiver; a signal, even secretion, mobilized liminal exchange. Between the writing on the page and writing off the page, projected through the bodies of its temporary operators (its readers), lay sonic orientation and propulsive gesture.[3]

Crucially, though without exploring the intricacies of radical form, cheek identifies this re-forming as political and ethical: 'Cobbing practised a leading politics and ethics of interdisciplinary collaboration for poetry at that time.'[4] He goes further to actually attempt to categorise Cobbing's political position: 'Cobbing's politics and ethos are those of a non-violent anarchist in respect of linguistic power.'[5] And cheek also makes a leap from abstraction, in the streakier versions of visual poetry, to how Cobbing arranged aspects of expression, vocal, gestural and scripted, into a complex exchange: he notes, with reference to some of the work Cobbing started to produce in the mid-'70s, that he

> had begun to exploit the excess of ink oozing indecorously from under the edges of the duplicator stencil. These concrete abstractions of the materiality from which conventional linguistic signifiers were usually isolated brought semantic

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[1] cheek, 'Roundtable Discussion'.
[2] cheek, 'Bob Cobbing' (para. 7 of 43).
[3] cheek, 'Bob Cobbing's Performances', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 4.2 (2012), 159-82 (p. 161).
[4] cheek, 'Performances', p. 161.
[5] cheek, 'Performances', p. 172.

elements into conversation with the extralinguistic, foregrounding the voice as an index of the entire body of language.[6]

This oozing of ink produced the dark patches on his visual work during that period. I refer to this below as thresholds of obliteration. As highlighted by cheek, the thresholds exist not just on the page but disperse into the space between the text and its physical performance, where the extralinguistic utterances of voice are prompted by the oozing ink and obliterated space of the page, and between the sonic expression of the performer (the voice) and the physical perceptors of the perceiver (the ears). The thresholds lie, in other words, between bodies and those on the page appear to pass through other thresholds. Of all the commentators on Cobbing's work, cheek's position appears to accord most favourably with my own.

Lawrence Upton has written many pieces on Cobbing, a good number of them short reflections on specific performances, posted online, self-published or unpublished and privately circulated. He draws on his first-hand experience as friend, collaborator (in print and performance), co-editor, co-publisher and workshop protagonist with Cobbing to provide accounts which are insightful, informative and contain more depth in their descriptive detail of Cobbing's practice than anyone else's. Upton served on the General Council of the Poetry Society with Cobbing at the time of the so-called Poetry Wars. He was heavily involved in both the publishing and workshop arms of Writers Forum throughout the '80s and '90s and, with Adrian Clarke, took over the running of the workshop for a number of years after Cobbing's death.[7] A poet of lexical, sound and visual texts, one of his major contributions to the history of oppositional poetry was the 300 or so booklets of collaborated text with Cobbing in the 1990s, *Domestic Ambient Noise*, which also gave rise to a series of associated sound performances. Upton's tendency in his writings on Cobbing is to provide crucial and unparalleled insight into Cobbing's methodology and the specific technology used by both of them. He often comes across as being at pains to avoid aligning his reflections with an ideological or critical position. One assumes this is a deliberate tactic, either to allow the work to be

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[6] cheek, 'Bob Cobbing' (para. 15 of 43).
[7] Upton continues to run Writers Forum after Clarke resigned his involvement in 2010. A new workshop, calling itself Writer Forum New Series, was set up in 2011. Upton disputes the authority of those running this workshop to use the Writers Forum name, claiming it is 'theft of WF's reputation'. Postings relating to this episode can be read at Upton's Writers Forum Information website, <http://www.wfuk.org.uk/blog/?cat=8> [accessed 14 July 2014].

'explained' without the handcuffs of ideology, encouraging the perceiver to discover their own interpretation, a strategy much in line with Cobbing's own democratising way of practising art, or because Upton is suspicious of academic, aesthetic or political critiques. It may well be a bit of both. In connection with notably radical works of Cobbing's such as *Sound Poems,* 'a line from the Observer'*, Song Signals* and *'*Portrait of Robin Crozier', Upton has noted:

> Cobbing's work is all the same in the way that each of his poems is unlike the majority of the rest, and largely each work is unlike in a different way, and most unlike the generality of what passes for poetry. Call that *innovation* if you want. I think you may be missing an important point. It is the work of a human being seeing and reseeing the world with the participative astonishment usually lost before youth has reached adulthood. It puts the emphasis on the seeing and the making; the innovation is reflective of the inherent honesty.[8]

I would agree without reservation with Upton's main point here, which resonates with cheek's point about variations. But one can go further. I would connect the 'seeing and reseeing' to an engagement with philosophical notions of perception, and the innovative qualities, derived from an honest application to the work, I would link to general practice within avant-gardism and art's vitality in its transfigurative potential. Ideologically speaking, though not a Marxist intellectual position, this is certainly one of leftist poetics that sees innovation of form as a vital tool for revolution. (Significantly, and, one is tempted to add, to his credit, Lawrence Upton refuses to entertain the term 'avant-garde'.)[9] Moreover, had he described Cobbing's work and his association with him in ideological or critical terms it may well have muddied one of the most insightful resources on Cobbing that those interested in his work have available.

Robert Sheppard, Professor of Poetry and Poetics at Edge Hill University, was also a collaborator and contemporary of Cobbing's. Together they wrote and performed the

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[8] Lawrence Upton, 'Working with Bob Cobbing', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 4.2 (2012), 143-58 (pp. 156-57).
[9] Preferring the term 'restless' to describe the kind of work he and Cobbing were involved in, Upton has commented, 'Avant-garde? I hope not. I detest the term. [...] It's either meaningless or it's such a large category and it's so open to misunderstanding, it's just a catch-all for "a bit weird".' *Radio Radio*, 'Lawrence Upton interviewed by Martin Spinelli', *Penn Sound* <https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/groups/radioradio/ 13_Lawrence-Upton_Radio-Radio_NY_2003.mp3> [accessed 3 June 2015].

mixed media, two-voice 2001 poem *Blatent blather/virulent whoops*. Sheppard is able to bring to his critical writings the intellectual rigour of an established academic with the enthusiasm of an advocate and the insight of a peer. His notion of indeterminacy was discussed in our Introduction where we noted that Sheppard uses the term in the Cagean sense rather than Marjorie Perloff's. His writings on Cobbing are part historical document, part celebration of process as radical gesture. He has used the term 'misuse' with reference to Cobbing's practice and has stressed the role of the body in performance.[10] It is telling that he picked up on, for the purposes of a chapter title, Cobbing's reference to Shklovsky's comment that poetry is the 'ballet of the speech organs'. Sheppard has also noted the more general point about the explorations of visual and verbal poetry being concerned with presentations of the materiality of language.[11]

In 2012 Steve Willey completed his PhD on various aspects of Cobbing's work, with a particular focus on his time at the Poetry Society.[12] This period provides the context for Willey's reading of *Jade-Sound Poems* in his essay 'Jade-Sound Poems: Bob Cobbing and the Poetic Institution', published in the Cobbing-oriented edition of *the Journal of Innovative British and Irish Poetry*, edited by Robert Sheppard, in September 2012, timed to coincide with the tenth anniversary of his death. In that essay Willey argues that the timing of the publication of the booklet, coinciding as it did with the culmination of what Peter Barry termed the Poetry Wars, can reveal some of its inner workings, specifically that the value symbols relate to struggles within capitalism. Willey's critique of Cobbing is vital and is underpinned by exemplary and thoroughly detailed research. It places the work firmly within its immediate historico-political interface, a methodology, one would reasonably expect, that accords with my argument in chapter 4 that every poem has a history and the more radical a work's form is, the more political it is. Yet Willey's situating of the text within its historical moment of 1976 only partially tallies with my views for reasons I outline later in this chapter. The essential general difference that I can ascertain between my approach and Willey's is that he narrows the critical perspective as far as possible, focusing on minute details within a work, whereas my methodology is to radiate outwards from the work to draw

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[10] Sheppard, 'Ballet', pp. 214-32.
[11] Sheppard, 'A thing or two upon the page', in *Word Score Utterance Choreography in Verbal & Visual Poetry*, ed. by Cobbing and Upton (London: Writers Forum, 1998) (no page numbers).
[12] Willey, *Bob Cobbing 1950-1978*, pp. 233-62.

distinctions and parallels with the wider political, social and artistic fields. In 2012 Willey stated that Cobbing's work is not abstract, though without providing a definition or listing the features of abstraction.[13] More recently he has clarified his position:

> I don't think I do say that abstraction is meaningless [in my thesis]. [...] I do think that insisting on the 'multiple possibilities of a performance' means a different thing to a practitioner now, than it did in the 70s or at any other time in history. In other words, making claims about the radical openness of an art practice has a history itself, and I think to ignore that history makes the claim meaningless. It also shuts down dialogue (e.g. no meaning is possible because every meaning is possible). Shutting down dialogue is contrary to the spirit of Bob's work.[14]

Whilst agreeing with his final point here, I retain reservations about Willey's position on abstraction as is hopefully clear from our investigation in chapter 3. Abstraction does not merely equate to a radical openness nor does it indicate that every meaning is possible. If abstraction is limited to meaning an absence of an identifiable figure, then Cobbing's work is not abstract. If however it contains the range of complexities outlined in chapter 3, then much of his work can be rightly identified as having qualities of abstraction. Whether a work is abstract or not is not the point. The point is to recognise the qualities within a work and move towards an understanding of how those qualities influence the encounter of the Event. One of Willey's central ideas in his *Jade* essay is that language is flattened in the poems, by which he means that symbols from different systems are rotated to merge into each other and thus reduce their singular identification as the recognisable character from the original system.[15] He suggests that the flattening is symbolic of the desire to find an inclusive, multiple system of valuation that demands a single measure for everything.[16] It is tempting to go along with such formulations, denoting as they do perhaps Cobbing's anarchistic tendencies as observed by cheek. However, as I argue below, the symbols in *Jade-Sound Poems* are not symbolic or codifying; they are indeterminate and thus create possibilities of meaning by creating tensions at the various thresholds.

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[13] Willey, 'Cobbing and the Archive', talk at Innovative Poetry Research Seminar, Senate House, 11 December 2012.

[14] Willey, private email, 28 January 2015.

[15] Willey, 'Jade-Sound Poems: Bob Cobbing and the Poetic Institution', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 4.2 (2012), 229-58 (pp. 241-42).

[16] Willey, 'Jade-Sound Poems', p. 242.

Brian M. Reed attempts to arrive at a materialistic understanding of *Jade-Sound Poems* in his essay 'Visual Experiment and Oral Performance'. He succeeds in making a number of useful individual observations, yet his overall approach to Cobbing's work treats the poetry as a curiosity and as difficult, as if that difficulty is a barrier, a position which wholly fails to engage with the joys and complexities of Cobbing's art. The degree to which any given perceiver encounters the work as difficult is one very significant measure of that work's artistic value. The difficulty resists what Retallack scorns as the 'legitimated model' of 'the cautious world of poetry prizes and establishment publication' and which, evaluating in line with her own notion of *poethics*,[17] risks being mis- or not understood:

> Every "great" innovator was acutely aware of changing circumstances and forms of her or his own times and had to devise a distinctive writing procedure to accommodate them. It's in this sense that authentically innovative work is consciously poethical. It vitally engages with the forms of life that create its contemporary context–the sciences, the arts, the politics, the sounds and textures of everyday life, the urgent questions and disruptions of the times. It's these factors that make it different from earlier work and for a time unrecognizable–to all but a few–as significant extension or transgression of existing genres. For the work to become poethical it seems it must risk a period of invisibility, unintelligibility. This happened with Stein, Joyce, Beckett, Wittgenstein, Cage.[18]

In a transcribed self-dialogue with alter ego Quinta Slef (a name I take to allude to the quintessential self), Retallack further notes the positive vein in which she experiences difficulty:

> Acts of responsible consciousness are difficult, but *the refusal of that difficulty is never benign* [my italics]. In poetries whose energies depend more on questions than answers, whose moving principles engage in exploratory projects and procedures, it is the work's poethical form of life–what informs its geometries of attention–that makes a difference. The contemporary work from which I benefit

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[17] See my comments in the Introduction where I equate Retallack's poethics with a radical poetics.
[18] Retallack, p. 40.

is by poets who care enough about the world in which they live to experience it broadly, to think and learn about it with dedicated intensity.[19]

Reed deliberates at length as to how the poems could be sounded, assuming even the possibility of a consensual, fixed utterance for the symbols on the page. The notion that a sound could or should be *determined* and *fixed* from the marks on the page of a visual poem destroys all the liberating faculties that engaging with difficulty can bring as this is a means for the engaged reader to celebrate and discover the work, themselves and the world. Difficulty is very much a characteristic that stimulates the transfigurative potential.

In that same Bob Cobbing special edition of *The Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* a number of other commentators share their view of Cobbing's work. Chris Beckett's article 'An Englishman and a Scotsman in Vienna' addresses Cobbing's work primarily in terms of its 'voice'. Beckett aligns Cobbing with his avant-garde forebears the Dadaists and the Futurists via William Carlos Williams's treatment of language as an object through what he (Beckett) calls 'the concrete noise of urban modernity'.[20] Beckett concludes his critique by drawing a parallel between Cobbing's approach and the developments of visual and sonic art in Modernism:

> His painterly attention to the quiddity of printer's ink, his manipulation of recorded sound waves, his embrace of aleatory composition and a readiness to derive the new from the found, was consonant with an experimental ground shared by many artists and poets in the first decades of the last century – an emphasis on the materiality of the artistic medium – that had so strongly stimulated Williams [...].[21]

This position is highly persuasive, and I refer to the argument in chapter 4 to demonstrate how it can be developed to embrace a re-orientation of spatial perspective, radical form and an exploration of the perceptual arrangement. Moreover it resonates with Steve McCaffery's observations on excess and materiality, as explored in chapter 2.

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[19] Retallack, p. 19.
[20] Chris Beckett, 'An Englishman and a Scotsman in Vienna: 'Tom' and Tom Leonard in 'The Tom Poems' by Bob Cobbing', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative* Poetry, 4.2 (2012), 191-201 (p. 199).
[21] Beckett, 'Englishman', p. 199.

Greg Thomas, who completed a PhD at Edinburgh University on concrete poetry in England and Scotland in 2013, addresses Cobbing's concrete poetry through the lens of semiotics. He acknowledges that Cobbing's work diffuses meaning in multiple directions but stops short of stating explicitly that, on that basis, it engages with theories of perception, space and memory. His understanding of Cobbing's poetry as open and indeterminate is useful:

> Cobbing's work is often formed from a more semiotically unstable compound, its visual and linguistic aspects not clearly delineated, individual elements rather open upon engagement to interpretation as language, visual gesture or musical score. [...] [W]hereas early concrete poems are generally designed for silent contemplation, Cobbing's are blueprints for performance: free expression using voice(s), body, and/or instruments around the basic formal features of the poem.[22]

The suggestions of a transmediation between artforms and the figural placement of the body in performance also tally neatly with the elements of flow detailed in chapter 2. With these critical perspectives paraphrased, I shall now attempt, through a close examination of *Jade-Sound Poems*, to develop my own understanding of Cobbing's work in relation to these established viewpoints.

Jade-Sound Poems

Jade-Sound Poems (see fig. 9) was first published by Writers Forum in December 1976. It consists of 15 pages of text comprising of letters, numbers, punctuation, ampersands, symbols of monetary value, and script reminiscent of letters from the Greek, Russian and Hebrew alphabets. All but three of the poems have a distinct vertical appearance, though the text typically bends away from a truly vertical presentation, suggesting the perceiver 'read' the poems along an up-down axis. In chapter 1 we acknowledged that, between 1964-1994, Cobbing set a number of texts top-bottom as opposed to left-right, and we noted something of a temporal progression starting with 'Worm' in 1964, leading through the G poem in *ABC in Sound* and *Three Poems for Voice and Movement*

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[22] Greg Thomas, 'Eyearun: Bob Cobbing and Concrete Poetry', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 4.2 (2012), 203-27 (p. 207).

(1971).[23] We can therefore place the *Jade* poems within the particular strand of Cobbing's work that sought to discover novel ways to present language visually and verbally. My position, which I shall elucidate below, is that these original linguistic modes demand physical interaction on the part of poet and perceiver, and so they place poetry firmly as an art of space and of the body. A poetry of space and the body is inevitably and already a poetry concerned with perception. Cobbing wrote in 1980:

> Many tendences (sic) in poetry hinted at by Dada have advanced and are still advancing.
>
> […]
>
> So – poetry of space, poetry of body, of the whole body, poetry of movement, electronic and tape poetry, stereophonic, quadrophonic and multiphonic poetry, computer poetry, non-verbal poetry, shattered syntax poetry, improvised poetry, audience-participation poetry, poetry of physical intensities, mixed-media poetry, group poetry, action poetry, event poetry – all these are developments since Dada.[24]

Cobbing's celebration of these interactive, physical modes of poetry, which he identifies as indebted to Dada, reveals the extent of their significance, during a time that is widely viewed as a crisis in the avant-garde in the latter part of the twentieth century. Mainstream poetry, from the Movement Poets through to Motion and Armitage and many so-called postmodern forms of art have enslaved and, to borrow Sean Bonney's term, mummified art so that its physical motions have been denied.[25] A denial of poetry's physical reality suffocates the life from it. Cobbing's creations would take some suffocating.

In his thesis Willey argues forcefully, and convincingly, against Reed's narrow and prescriptive reading of *Jade-Sound Poems*. Reed advances the view that the poems address 'the difficulties in transmediation' between the written and the oral versions of

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[23] We recall from chapter 1 that it seems likely the visual version of 'Worm' was published in 1964, though it originated as a sound poem in 1954.

[24] Bob Cobbing, unpublished statement, exhibited at *ABC in Sound*, November 2013.

[25] See chapter 4.

a poem.[26] He sets about trying to find a reliable and credible method for the sounds suggested by the characters on the page. Needless to say this is a wild misjudgement of the indeterminate quality of the work and the subsequent potential engagement perceivers may enter into, calling into question their own subjective relation to the text and the possible transfigurations that may occur as a result. Yet Reed's study does acknowledge that once the perceiver is *into* the Event the transfigurative potential starts to gather its own momentum – finds its flow, if you will:

> And what does one do with an unpronounceable consonant cluster like *kxv*?
> Worse, further down is the mysterious nonletter that looks like the Greek letter
> lambda. Or is it an upside-down *V*? 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*. Once one starts seeing *V*'s and *Λ*'s it is hard to stop thinking
> about reflections – or perhaps rotations. The *O* in the center 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."

Reed's conclusions, that Willey reasonably takes issue with, are that the immediate problem that *Jade-Sound Poems* presents is one of how to sound the text, that each individual perceiver, due to Cobbing 'impeding transmediation', may intuit unique soundings, and that the transmediation of the work may itself be a useful subject of the work.[27] In his 'Jade-Sound Poems' article, invoking Izenberg, Willey notes:

> the question that the poem asks is not one of how to read or sound its visual
> material – the historical fact of Cobbing's vocal performances of such material
> helps to raise that question – instead the poem asks us to consider why
> particular types of content (to do with value and measurement) have all been
> flattened to the point that the poem relegates their importance in favour of

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[26] Brian M. Reed, 'Visual Experiment and Oral Performance', in *The Sound of Poetry*, ed. by Perloff and Dworkin, pp. 270-84 (p. 279-80).

[27] Reed, p. 280.

seeing them as abstract visual forms. One answer is that the flattening is symbolic of the poem's desire and struggle to find a system of universal valuation that does not commit exclusions, but which is also not singular, and which can allow for the possibility of solidarity in a capitalist world, which through the mechanism of monetary exchange insists on a single but alienating measure for all things.[28]

Willey refers to the various 'occasions of production', by which he specifically means the historico-political context of Cobbing's tenure at the Poetry Society and two separate, personalised inscriptions Cobbing wrote in copies of *Jade-Sound Poems* to Eric Mottram and to Paula Claire and her husband Paul. The inscription to Mottram reads 'For Eric – Solidarity! Best wishes, Bob Cobbing 10 Jan 1977';[29] Claire's copy bears the words, '11/100 Bob Cobbing 25-28 December 1976 | for Paul & Paula | Christmas & New Year greetings.'[30] He contends that these 'occasions' inform and are informed by the specific material included in the poem and its arrangement. He strives to place '*Jade-Sound Poems* back into the ecology of the Poetry Society, for [...] the poem does have a meaning which can be found if only it is read in context'.[31] Yet Reed's description, particularly its observation of what happens 'the longer one stares', neatly exposes what is implemented when fully engaged perception encounters radical form, that is, when an artistic Event occurs: sensory and intellectual processes that are stimulated in the perceiver take on an energetic flow of transfiguration that has profound implications for the perceiver's physical, physiological and psychological development. It is social and political change in action. Any alteration of social and political structures requires individuals within those structures to be receptive to and/or in favour of that change. What Willey's take on the *Jade-Sound* poems does so effectively is apply the detail from close reading to one historico-political context, that of Cobbing's place within the institutional and poetic struggles of the 1970s.

The *Jade* poems are not to be read left to right as in conventional poetry, nor are they to be considered directionless or moving out in all directions like Cobbing's more obfuscatory, later visual poetry such as sections of *DAN*. In laying down an immediate

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[28] Willey, 'Jade-Sound Poems', p. 242.
[29] *Jade-Sound Poems*, Kings College, London College Archives, MOTTRAM: 5/ 45/ 52-124, 1963-1994.
[30] *Jade-Sound Poems*, The Paula Claire Archive of Sound and Visual Poetry, Oxford.
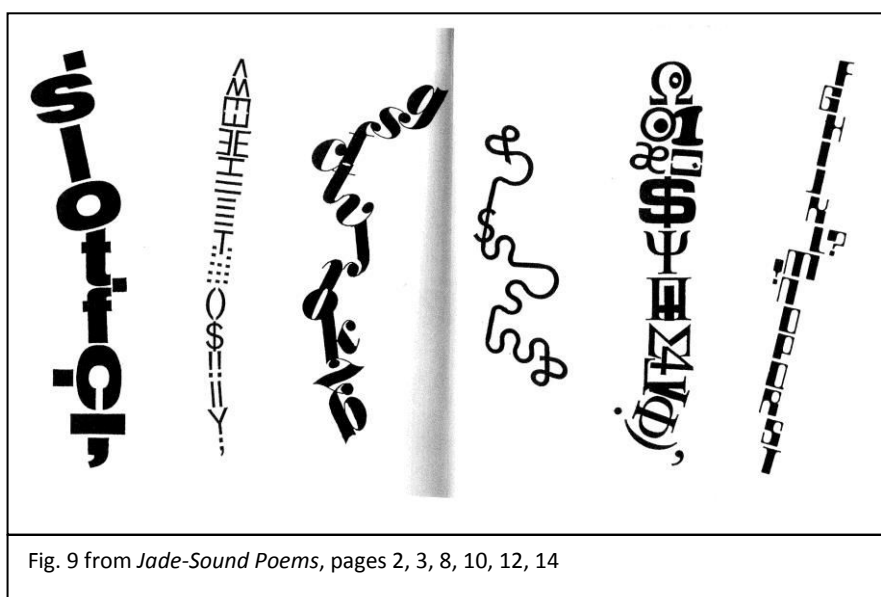[31] Willey, *Bob Cobbing 1950-1978*, pp. 239-59.

marker with regard to direction, the poems also alert the reader to movement. The foregrounding of movement is compounded by most of the poems' slight off-centred position or curvature, or in the case of page ten a maze-like meandering. These poems address notions of dimensionality and the occupation of page space as they simultaneously force considerations of perception, linearity and spatial positioning that keep alive the inquiries of Mallarmé, the Cubists, the early abstract painters, the Russian and Italian Futurists, and Stein and Williams. This motion engenders a range of implications. One is immediately aware of the poems' physicality, not only in their presentation but in the way they must have demanded the adoption of certain physical positions and visceral effort in their creation, and the way they prompt the perceiver to rotate the page to achieve a variety of perspectives. The way the shape of each poem is in some way signalled by its predecessors in the booklet and the curved motion of the type on most of the pages marks a series of kinetic actions. We contemplate the unstable nature of the radical poem which in turn brings to mind the kind of indeterminacy espoused by Cage and Sheppard. I would add that, given perceivers will scan and enter at various and multiple points at different times and there is no logical or practical reason why each poem should be read in a linear fashion following an implicit rhythm, there is something akin to a temporal suspension that propels the experience of perceiving these poems outside of social time. The collision therefore of unusual spatial arrangements with this temporal suspension met by an engaged perceiver creates the Event where the perceiver can experience flow. This is further reinforced by, literally, the consistently flowing appearance of the text.

The cover design is clearly meant to be seen as integral to the rest of the booklet; it should in fact be considered the first *Jade-Sound* poem. We find there upended brackets, stops and a hyphen, which, linking the words 'Jade' and 'Sound', we are clearly meant to read as a hyphen rather than as an indeterminate symbol. Punctuation is hereby introduced as a recurring visual motif. Letters are lopsided and read top to bottom (a possible guide to the suggested direction of reading for the whole series?). A range of typefaces are involved and Ds are represented by triangles, suggesting that the shapes within the booklet may have a coded value. This suggestion is refuted by both Willey's interpretation that there is a flattening of value of the various symbols and my own contention that the signification is unfixed, that it formulates a system of indeterminacy

where some value can be ascribed readily, some linguistic meaning can be imparted potentially and some signs (or symbols) exist without value. The O of 'poems' has lost about a third of its ink to the edge of the page. The M of 'poems' and the W of 'WF' (for Writers Forum) are both rotated with their white triangular indentations (the top of the M and the base of the W) facing each other across the page, though not quite aligned; they are virtually the same character save for an almost imperceptible difference in size and thickness.

The title page contains a series of letters, consonants and vowels, cascading down the page. Close to the middle we see the sequence 'a t z' to suggest A-Z, a nod towards alphabetising and the letterism Cobbing had been exploring in poems since the mid-'60s. This grounds the poem in the *English* language and recalls *ABC in Sound*, Cobbing's various wordplay poems, and the late '60s and early '70s typewriter pieces' presentation of letters detached from their words. The close proximity between some of the characters, where their edges are in contact as if cushioning, suggests a connectedness which, perversely, creates a tension as the letters are not 'joined up' as handwriting would link them and their connection does not conform to logical sense or conventional understanding. On a few occasions this cushioning transforms the adjoining letter, for example the tail of the G at the bottom gives the C below the appearance of an E. The manner in which some of the letters are rotated encourages movement of the page on the part of the reader to discern something recognisable, thereby engaging the perceiver with the text and creating kinetic motions. Specific parts of the text have an equally unique and indeterminate spatial relationship with its other parts (up/down, rotations, curves), prompting the reader to respond with active gestures that engage with their own spatial orientations. There is punctuation above and underneath the F: a colon that could equally be read as two full stops and an apostrophe/comma which also echoes the top of the F (which, due to the character's rotation, is only the top if the page is turned on its side). Before we have even got to the first page proper of *Jade-Sound Poems* the following characteristics have been clearly laid down: movement, a prominence of materiality, which includes the relationship in space of material elements, and the communicative and presentational process in language.

The poem on page one presents considerably bolder type thickness. Here the letters do not overlap and the text holds a vertical line until it curves away to the left towards the bottom of the page with the final two characters. One's initial impression is that it has less movement than the title page, but prolonging the perception presents ambiguities. The exclamation mark at the top could equally be an inverted I, the M could be an upside-down W and, as Reed points out, the upside-down V could be the Greek character 'Λ', or lambda.[32] The lambda, as the eleventh letter of the Greek alphabet as well as denoting a numerical value of 30, carries literary and mathematical values simultaneously. The '!' at the top of the page, interpreted as punctuation, invites a reading from bottom to top. This symbol, and its inherent ambiguity, is echoed on page five which also contains numbers and rows of O's or zeroes. Punctuation here, though not a hindrance as such to

Fig. 9 from *Jade-Sound Poems*, pages 2, 3, 8, 10, 12, 14

reading, does not perform its conventional function. It raises questions about materiality and linearity in relation to the symbolic functioning of written characters, and it transforms according to associations, be they symbolic, physiological or emotional, made in the act of perception. The kinetic motions continue even with a character of static appearance given that it mutates in form as the perceiver's prolonged gaze and contemplation unfold. The text literally transforms before one's eyes, such metamorphosis derived directly from the indeterminate use of materials. If we consider the character as an upside-down, lower case I we can also discern an allusion to subjectivity: the first-person pronoun, as the linguistic notation for individual identity, is, literally, turned upside-down or subverted. No sense of a narrative or lyric voice exists in this poetry; subjectivity is dispersed as the conventional voice is challenged. Coupled with the ambiguous appearance of the character as a punctuation mark and its

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[32] Reed, p. 280.

kinetic effects, we can also see the notion of individual identity as being in the process of transformation.

The piece on page 10, once one gets beyond its immediate appearance as a single squiggle, presents an opportunity to unlock the *Jade* poems. A seemingly innocuous meandering line becomes, once the ampersands at the beginning and end are noted, a possible series of characters that can be located elsewhere in the booklet. The ampersand at the top left of the figure curves into a series of U's or N's, equally a double S or an E, which then veers down the page into two omega (Ω) characters of different sizes, each of which, again, could be a U. It then runs into another, upside-down, omega/N/U before shifting direction again to become a dollar sign, inevitably containing an S. A further omega/N/U follows before the final ampersand in the bottom right corner of the shape. The key here is in the possibility, or, rather, *only* the possibility, that these marks represent the identified symbols. The page may or may not contain symbols that are signs of something, the characters may or may not signify semantically, they may be merely material marks or they may allude to a unified and collectively agreed set of principles or ideas. With these uncertainties and ambiguities the perceiver is forced to question whether these poems are purely aesthetic and from there to address the very act of reading, challenging any assumptions they may have about how language works and what expressive value is.[33] Through this adjustment of how a text operates and how a perceiver interprets, we are led to concerns around form and perception as we are equally reminded of Mottram's comment that social transformation is possible by the rejection of conventional signs.[34] Such a rejection from within a text demands that a new vocabulary is found in the perceptual response. Brian Reed has tried to pin down a way of sounding *Jade-Sound Poems*, whereas Steve Willey has sought an understanding through a historico-political context. Social and political transfiguration is arguably a more likely outcome if conventional signs are not so much discarded but questioned and re-contextualised. This is what I believe *Jade-Sound Poems* does very effectively. The question shifts, then, from *what does this text mean?*, which both Willey and Reed adhere to, and becomes *what can I as a perceiver learn about arrangements of linguistic and other materials and how I engage with the world through my senses?* Through its own disassembling form, the work engages the

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[33] 'Expressive value' is Merleau-Ponty's term: see chapter 2 and *Phenomenology*, p. 6.
[34] Mottram, *Towards design*, pp. 6-14.

perceiver's subjectivity so that the form – the body – of the perceiver is disorganised, recalling the ritual disorganisation of the body in the processes of Mary Wigman, Joseph Beuys and the shamans. In turn this disorganises society's form.

The poems on pages 15, 16 and 17 are the only *Jade* poems not to feature any kind of curvature, though 16 and 17 do slant across the page. Page 15 is unique in that it is entirely straight and contains more than two characters in width. Furthermore it features only punctuation, specifically exclamation marks and stops which, due to their sequential layout, also contain possible ellipses or colons depending on the page's orientation. There is an openness even to these apparently simple marks. The '!'s, as on the page one poem, are simultaneously upside-down, lower case I's, and a single cross hovers above the stop at the bottom of the figure. Should one rotate the page 180 degrees, this character takes on the form of a lower case T without a tail. A cross, of course, has powerful religio-cultural connotations and can be denoted by the letter x, another case of a static character undergoing metamorphosis in the time the perceiver studies it. The transition through a variety of symbols which may or may not have value or significance is paused – literally, punctuated – at this point in the booklet. However, despite the appearance of six exclamation marks (more, if the 'all directions' principle is applied and the stems of the marks form two separate ones with points both above and below) and a number of stops, one sequence of which forms the ellipsis, there is not, as such punctuation would usually decree, an emphatic ending or rounding off here, not merely because there are two further pages to come (three if one includes the solitary symbol on the final page, a circle within a square which twins with the square within a circle on the inscription page at the front of the volume). The punctuation marks on page 15 are liberated from their role as markers designed to assist comprehension of reading. As already noted, there is no comprehension in the conventional sense to aspire to. These poems use the material form of language and its associated symbols to do far more sophisticated and complex things than convey a point, a message, a slogan or a narrative. They are addressing the function of form and the process of perception, two of the ingredients of the Event and both spatial facets experienced temporally if we acknowledge both their creation in time on the spatial plane of the page and the duration occupied by the perceiver, as a body in space, studying them. This duration goes through the kind of metamorphic transformation discussed in relation to the

characters in *Jade-Sound Poems*, simultaneously containing static and kinetic properties, and has a permanently shifting orientation around the spatial vector of our space-time axes. The form of *Jade-Sound Poems*, radical, unprecedented, inherently transfigurative and thus political in nature, is marked by its perpetual kinetic motions, and one's engaged perception of this movement *in time* becomes a realisation of flow in action. The engaged perceiver discovers that their consciousness is constantly in motion, constantly at work, thus flow emerges as the aspect of form and perception which links to the various crossing points of the artwork, be they historical, political, social, individual and so on, as it is the process in which duration and space collide, incorporating different materials from the world and transforming them by doing so. Notably, flow is spatially non-linear, as are *Jade-Sound Poems*. They are also, without question, for want of any alternative terminology, avant-gardist. There is no lyric 'I' and no consistency of voice, the poems are a challenge to the conventional presentation of subjectivity and they do not represent the kind of accessible figures that traditional representational modes of poetry do. We can therefore confidently assert that, not only are the *Jade* poems avant-gardist, they are also abstract.

By way of contrast, it is useful to reflect on how language itself may alternatively be articulated artistically to draw attention to the intrumentalisation of language or its (ab)use by agencies of authority or power. John Giorno's 1966 poem *Constitution of the United States* presents found material from a number of unspecified documents which, through their implicit parody and scoffing tone that emerge through their arrangement, unarguably establishes the poem's position on social uses of language. The second section of 'Article IV' arranges into verse part of Section 2 of the Constitution:

> Section 2   The Citizens
> of each State
> shall be entitled
> to all Privileges
> and Immunities
> of Citizens
> in the several states.

Without comment or qualifying statement Giorno's poem triggers reflection on the application of the noble principles of the Constitution and the hierarchies within the power structures (legal, constitutional, governmental, federal, institutional, corporate, communal) that assert the Constitution as justification for their actions. The reader is not necessarily led to a categorical ideological position but there is implicit criticism of these powerful social agencies. The bathos achieved with the following section, itself characterised by a shift into a direct-address-to-reader mode which renders it simultaneously more threatening and less authoritative, accentuates the implied critique of the use of language to maintain power hierarchies:

> This booklet
> has been prepared
> to assist you
> in discharging
> your duties
> in an efficient
> and intelligent
> manner.
> You are urged
> to study it
> carefully.

The tone may remain formal but the source – a handbook of information for trial jurors in New York and the Bronx – appears to have a family resemblance to the Constitution in that it constitutes an ethical framework for social practice. Yet it has neither the gravity of character nor the profundity of subject matter, and its rather aggressive attempt to wrestle the reader's subjectivity exposes it to criticism as it lacks the very authority it is attempting to establish. Its ethical framework, therefore, lacks ethics. This precipitates a further shift in the next stanza into the legal reportage style of the New York Journal-America which, within the stanza itself, contains a change of register into the impassioned, and uncommonly confessional, exclamation of a legal defendant:

> Euill Long, 58,
> of 25 Market St., Newark,

> interrupted his arraignment
>
> on a homicide charge
>
> before Bergen County
>
> Superior Court Judge
>
> Benjamin P. Galanti
>
> to cry out:
>
> "Don't bother.
>
> I don't want to be tried.
>
> I killed her.
>
> I did it.
>
> I did it."[35]

Constitution of the United States is a long poem characterised by found material undergoing repeated fluctuations in register. It is, on one level, a critique of language in its social uses. Its means of achieving this is to present written text out of its original context and, through montage-like juxtapositions, or what we could call collisions of points of enunciation, imply a critical standpoint which prompts questions about social hierarchies, the power implications inherent in language and the integrity of power hierarchies in different modes of writing. It also uses temporal procedures in specific spatial orientations, as seen in the quotation above where enjambment between short lines, continued for a number of lines, is used when the poem is in the narrative voice but sentence and line ends meet when it is in the character's voice. *Jade-Sound Poems* can also be read as a critique of language, social hierarchies and power relationships, but its means of achieving this political orientation and its tendency to lead the perceiver towards certain reflections is decidedly different. It requires much more work. Even to appreciate the aesthetics of the *Jade* poems demands a considerable sophistication and patience.[36] To extrapolate an implied critique of systems of language

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[35] John Giorno, 'Article IV: Section 2' from *Constitution of the United States*, in *Subduing Demons in America*, ed. by Marcus Boon (Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2008), pp. 43-51 (pp. 43-44).

[36] Despite the attention I have paid to the philosophical, material, political and semantic aspects of Cobbing's work, and although it is categorically not purely aesthetic even in its indeterminate modes, the treatment of these poems as aesthetic objects has a certain value. The question of aesthetics becomes bound up in the question of form, and as we are dealing here with a completely original form of poetry we are equally dealing with a completely original aesthetic. The move *towards a greater indeterminacy*, seen in later works such as *DAN* and *Glossolalie un hallali*, but equally signalled in the early art works and later visual pieces such as *Destruction in Art* and *Winter Poem*, is caught at a particular point with the *Jade* poems. There is complete clarity of sign due to the absence of both overlaying and the corruption or

requires a laborious working out of the poems' material form. But it is absolutely out of the form – the radical, unprecedented arrangement – that the transfigurative or instructive potential of *Jade-Sound Poems* emerges.

The key to unlocking this complex process lies in the repeated appearance of what I shall term thresholds of obliteration. I will later discuss work of Cobbing's which presents more solid or obvious obliteration, but the entry points into this obliteration with *Jade-Sound Poems* is central to understanding the development of his use of technology and materials. Aside from being integral to identifying movement as one of the major features of these poems, it also links in with the concept of the void discussed in chapter 3 if we take the dark areas of ink presented in much of Cobbing's later work to perform two simultaneous functions, one visual, one linguistic. Visually, the dark patches contain equally an absence, or void, of material and an extreme intensification of it; simultaneously they lack linguistic material, bringing the perceiver to the threshold of the anxiety-inducing space we have termed the void. Anxiety can push us towards closer attention to the situation or material at hand as much as it forces the unengaged perceiver to recoil. Anxiety accentuates the experience of *between-ness* at the threshold of the void. Such thresholds are manifested in several ways in *Jade-Sound Poems*. Firstly, the inversions seen with the letters V and W in the page one poem require the perceiver to allow for multiple possible readings and to engage with the poem physically by rotating the page. Punctuation which also acts as lettering comes into this category. In these gestures perceivers find themselves presented with multiple thresholds, sensitive to the metamorphosis of the poem's characters, and will either withdraw or participate more closely with the work, resulting in being more open to alternative realities. If we avoid the anxiety induced by blocked memory we become revolutionary. Secondly, physical thresholds are discovered in overlaps and morphing, such as that seen with the rotated F, the colon and the apostrophe/comma in the title page and the overlaid characters on page 12. And thirdly, thresholds of obliteration are located in symbols whose value or denoted concept are unclear or not easily agreed upon. All punctuation marks in the booklet, the lines and unfamiliar shapes on pages 3, 11 and 12 and the squiggle leading from one ampersand to the other on page 10 all belong to this category. Once these near-obliterations have been noted when working

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manipulation of the image through technological processes. I have chosen to focus on the degree of determinacy rather than the question of aesthetics as key to these poems.

through the *Jade* poems, one becomes conscious of them reappearing in some fashion. V's and W's can be found throughout, if sometimes hidden within another character, the omega sign is frequently present and several punctuation marks make repeated appearances. Whatever is obliterated, then – text, image, letter, word, symbol or form – may return to our field of perception and thus our consciousness. The boundaries between what is seen and clear and what is unseen and unclear are porous, reminding us of the approach to radical form examined previously in the works of Mallarmé, Williams, Stein, Cézanne, Picasso, Braque and Goncharova. We are also reminded of cris cheek's description of Cobbing's work as transgressing established boundaries, not just between forms but also within form. The work operates as a restless liminal object, perpetually veering between thresholds, creating further thresholds as it does – thresholds of thresholds. Re-obliterations keep appearing throughout the lifetime of Cobbing's work, always steering the perceiver to thresholds and the void, and thresholds of the void, which themselves are porous as there is no obvious linearity and, as a result, space is not controlled according to the structures of social time. This can be seen in how the space of *Jade-Sound Poems* is not controlled by linearity or familiarity, which can be disturbing as much as liberating.

The appearance of the poems, with their range of typefaces, bears the hallmark of the Letraset transfers which produced them. Although printing with Letraset in the 1970s was a laborious task the process was not as cumbersome as the Gestetner duplicator, which was a stencil method of printing, nor was one perhaps as physically engaged with it as with the external keys of a manual typewriter. The result is that *Jade-Sound Poems* appear less cluttered and busy than much of Cobbing's other work, both earlier and later, on duplicator, typewriter and copier, possibly due in part to the difficulty of overlaying text with Letraset. And yet Cobbing managed to achieve, through a corporeal engagement with the technology, the thresholds of obliteration we have discussed without necessarily producing text that is obliterated through technological processes, as is plainly evident in the photocopied later work. Cobbing was perfectly conscious of the significance of movement in the means of production: 'What I'm doing on the machine is movement and that movement then gets into the finished work which again

is transformed into movement when I perform it.'[37] Taking an overview of Cobbing's work, Letraset and the computer tended to produce cleaner, clearer visual pieces, and so we can identify differences in his work according to the technology used. What is not evident, however, is a clear and logical linear progression from, for example, uncluttered clarity towards dense obliteration. As with the individual works themselves, the space occupied by Cobbing's work taken as a whole behaves in a constellational manner. That the undeniable movement in the *Jade* poems is achieved with a clear axis of up-down, in other words its materials are not multidirectional, marks them as all the more remarkable, especially in relation to his busier, 'dirtier' work.[38] Technology is one of the means by which the work is located on these various thresholds and vectors; it determines the nature of the poetic form, energises the materials through movement created, establishes the unprecedented perceptual field for the perceiver, and foregrounds the illegibility of the densely printed or copied patches of ink we shall shortly encounter with the *Domestic Ambient Noise* texts, as Cobbing himself acknowledged in his comment about movement. We must also keep in mind that the title of the poems appears to insist they should be sounded. If we turn to considerations of how to sound these poems, the difficulty will be encountered in the spatial arrangements and the disturbance to the familiar, organised dimensionality of conventional space.

This consideration of how these pages constitute 'sound poems' is the main thrust of Reed's article and I have already dealt with how his study approaches the poems with the wrong questions. Taking *Jade-Sound Poems* as a whole we find the only unambiguously pronounceable sounds for English speakers are the individual letters or phonemes, a diphthong on page 12 and the numbers. Individuals familiar with the relevant languages could pronounce the foreign characters, but otherwise the poems are made up of characters relating to monetary value, indeterminate shapes and

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[37] W. Mark Sutherland, 'The Point About Criticism is That it is Frequently Wrong', *UbuWeb* <http://www.ubu.com/papers/cobbing_sutherland.html> [accessed 27 January 2014] (para. 27 of 32).
[38] Cobbing cites bpNichol quoting Stephen Scobie on the terms "clean" and "dirty" concrete poetry. The 'clean' visual texts were largely produced by straightforward copying or printing, with no or little digital or manual manipulation of the image or overlays. The 'dirty' texts were the result of excessive enlargement or manual manipulation, which could include overlays or moving the source material as it was scanned. Cobbing, *Changing Forms* (no page numbers). That all periods of Cobbing's output contain work that could be determined clean or dirty reinforces the difficulty of categorising the phases of his work and further underlines the argument that his life's work, as with individual works, behaves in a constellatory fashion.

punctuation. These considerations lead us to reflect in what way the booklet, as a booklet, is a sound poem. The title, with its carefully placed hyphen, actually connects the word 'sound' with 'jade' rather than with 'poem'. So we are led to consider it is the sound of jade, not the poem as a sounded artefact, that is indicated in the title. Willey considers the role of jade in his article published in the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry.* He argues that 'Cobbing wanted the poem's 'Sound' to emanate from 'Jade', rather than from a particular human subject or subjects who might give voice to the poem by sounding it out'.[39] The placement of the hyphen in the title would indeed seem to support this. Willey makes further associations with jade: it is, he notes, the common name for two mineral species, Jadeite and Nephrite, either of which constitute the microcrystalline structure known as jade. He links this with the Cobbing's 'Solidarity!' inscription to Mottram. The notion of solidarity, coming as it did for Cobbing and Mottram at the height of the so-called Poetry Wars, forms a core channel in Willey's argument in his article but its importance in respect of the jade poems is modified somewhat in his later thesis chapter. The article links solidarity to jade, 'the toughest gemstone', as jade, firstly, 'cannot be refused or denied in the same way' as a person or a poem; secondly, the arrangement of each *Jade* poem reveals a metamorphosis from the 'orderly, completely predictable and repeating pattern that extends in all three spatial dimensions' of jade the stone; and, thirdly, *Jade-Sound Poems* was a response to the capitalist system within which it did and still does exist. As such, Willey argues,

> the formal variation between the separate poems that constitute *Jade-Sound Poems* motivates a belief in 'solidarity' as an ongoing process; a kind of 'solidarity' that would increase in its solidity as a result of continually variant processes. It is this formal internalization of variation that reveals Cobbing's desire to prevent the ossification of the social relations that his poem gave conceptual shape to, even while it was his commitment to work in institutions like the Poetry Society in the 1970s that provisionally grounded his social relations.[40]

In his thesis Willey highlights the pun between 'solidarity' and 'solidity', the former term Cobbing's one in his message to Mottram, alluding to internal, political and wider

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[39] Willey, 'Jade-Sound Poems', p. 243.
[40] Willey, 'Jade-Sound Poems', p. 244.

ideological struggles in mid-'70s British poetry, the latter the eventual state of jade following its 'metamorphic fluidity'. Moreover Willey notes jade as the material for ringing stones in ancient China, denoting not only its high cultural value but that it has 'a meta-relation with respect to value'. He concludes from this that 'the 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'.[41]

Notwithstanding the rather spurious claim that a substance cannot be denied in the same way as a poem or person (I can deny the existence of a gemstone as easily and logically as I can a piece of writing or its creator!), Willey's connections are insightful (if a little over-persistent on the importance of the Poetry Society goings-on) and make germane links between aspects of Cobbing's struggle as an administrator and political player within the poetry world and his struggle as a creator of radical texts. That each of these aspects should not be seen as separable is highly relevant. However I perceive two flaws to Willey's approach. The first is that he seeks what can appear to be a rather fixed set of interpretations of Cobbing's work, so rather than acknowledge *possible* interfaces and *possible* associations he delineates a critical field that sets itself up to be either refuted or accepted. Whilst I support the majority of Willey's findings in that they suggest a specific, viable framework, I would argue it should be acknowledged as just one possible framework among many. Willey berates Reed for not considering the significance of the Poetry Wars in his critique of *Jade-Sound Poems*:

> One of the risks of [Reed's] 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.

Yet Willey himself attempts to fix the context of the poems to one struggle within capitalism, although acknowledging that they need 'to be understood as an ongoing interpersonal and organizational activity'.[42] The second flaw is that, albeit perceptively, Willey picks up on the 'jade' of the title, but then moves away from considering jade within the compound structure of 'jade-sound'. And here we can suggest a range of possible developments upon Willey's critique; namely, jade as sound, the sound of jade,

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[41] Willey, *Bob Cobbing 1950-1978*, pp. 244-45.
[42] Willey, 'Jade-Sound Poems', p. 249.

and jade-sound as surrealist juxtaposition. If we accept Willey's definition of jade in relation to its physical processes and properties as a gemstone, we should also note at least its definition as a colour, as a general adjective and as a noun pertaining to a worthless horse or a not-to-be-trusted woman.[43] Awareness of jade as a rich, vibrant, green colour denotes another aspect of its physical property, not just its solidness, hardness or crystalline structure. Jade as colour is a visual concept, not a cerebral one, and as such invokes notions of perception, the relevance of which we have accorded considerable detail already. As an adjective, jade qualifies something that has the colour, texture or appearance of jade the colour or jade the substance; its associations extend to being jaded, or jadedness: being weary, tired or burnt out, a connection that Steve Willey does make.[44] It covers, therefore, all possible meanings of jade in conjunction with a noun. And as a rare noun itself, the worthless horse or not-to-be-trusted woman imply a negative value judgement. So these sound poems, with these alternative 'jades', could (loosely) denote either 'green-sound poems', 'poems with the sound of jade the stone', 'weary-sound poems', 'poems with no sound-value' or 'poems with the sound of a worthless horse/untrustworthy woman'. All of these possible readings tally with Willey's findings relating to the activities within the Poetry Society during Cobbing's tenure. But they equally relate to any other possible interface: colour as an allusion to perception and even synaesthesia, certainly to physicality and aspects of performance; weariness of Cobbing's struggle within the Poetry Society and with the Arts Council conservatives; poems that on the page are sound poems that are not sounded, or sound poems that do not have a significant value *despite* the range of symbols contained in them or even *because of* the symbols' indeterminate arrangements; and poems that are (curiously) associated with an animal or a very specific type of human. (I would not claim that such a list of interfaces is exhausted here, nor finite, as much as it is also subject to change as new perspectives emerge: critical, social and political ones, for example, repeatedly surface.) Jade as sound, then, could bring to the perceiver's awareness some overlap between colour and sound, or between all physical aspects: voice, appearance, texture, shade and body. The sound of jade may relate to the sound that a precious stone makes when in collision with another object, the sound a synaesthete may imagine a colour makes, the noises made by some unspecified fed-up

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[43] *Chambers English Dictionary 12th Edition* (London: Chambers Harrap, 2001), p. 814.
[44] Willey, 'Jade-Sound Poems', p. 236.

or tired entity or those made by an unvalued woman or animal. These connotations
bring alive the conception of sound as a resonating body, whichever interpretation we
choose to privilege; we are always aware that the existence of or allusions to sound
within Cobbing's poetry will extend beyond those we can initially perceive. The parallel
with Michel Chion's *acousmêtre*, the idea of the disembodied voice in cinema, the sound
that seems to come from nowhere, is provocative.[45] Cobbing's textual references to
sound, as much as his live practice, give body to sound through their resonances, both
conceptual and physical, yet we know we have never fully grasped sound, ephemeral
and amorphous as it is; sound is always appearing from somewhere else, somewhere
beyond the physical objects our eyes are perceiving, a point made by David Toop in
Sinister Resonance.[46] Toop notes that 'sound's boundaries lack clarity' and it has a
'relative lack of form, [which] creates perplexing relationships between the properties
of states: inside and outside, material and immaterial'.[47] Such an understanding of
sound could equally apply to the visual form of *Jade-Sound Poems*, a notion which aligns
the physical presentation of the poems as a representation, or equivalent to a
representation, of sound itself. The poems somehow contain the qualities or properties
of sound. Finally, I would like to introduce the very strong possibility that Cobbing
intended – although intentions aside it is nonetheless a very persuasive reading of the
Jade poems – that the two terms, jade and sound, compounded, form a surrealist entity,
much like Breton and Soupault's 'road of oyster-shells'[48] or Magritte's dis-bodied,
blanket-draped figure,[49] signifiers paired up so they disembody each other, where their
body equates to any conventional, anticipated meaning that they carry. In this there is
an emphasis on 'sound' arising-or-not-arising from 'jade', and 'jade' expressing
gemstones, green-ness, tiredness or something without value independently of 'sound'.
The very idea of sound, and all the cultural resonances it may have, is also accentuated
by its juxtaposition with jade in the compounded term, and this in turn is reinforced
when one considers that all the possible meanings of jade, either as physical material or
as material signifier, collide with the usual meaning of sound as emitted by voice,

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[45] Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision, Sound on Screen*, trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 23.
[46] See David Toop, *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener* (New York: Continuum, 2010), p. 8.
[47] Toop, p. 36.
[48] André Breton and Philippe Soupault, *The Magnetic Fields*, trans. by David Gascoyne, in Breton, Paul Eluard, Soupault, *The Automatic Message*, *The Magnetic Fields*, *The Immaculate Conception* (London: Atlas Press, 1997), pp. 37-145 (p. 82).
[49] René Magritte, *The Therapeutist*.

instrument or, in fact, anything acoustic. 'Jade' and 'sound' exist on the page essentially as material elements, and any signifying properties therein may plausibly exist separately within the phrase. As Willey notes, '*Jade-Sound Poems* is located at the intersection of these two dynamics: the poem switches attention back and forth between particularity and abstraction,'[50] so we can read both sense and a lack of sense into the key phrase 'jade-sound', and even into the whole phrase 'jade-sound poems'.

In terms of sounding the *Jade* poems, then, if we seek to present specific acoustic forms derived from the text in a conventional fashion, as most public media expect us to seek out themes and plot development in a set text, there is little that can be substantiated critically, as Retallack notes of the effect on the perceiver of texts in the conventional omniscient author mode: 'The reader's activity is not one of participatory invention but of figuring out.'[51] We find we may only be able to confidently sound out the small units of language. The idea, from Mottram, that the signs in sound and visual poetry may or may not signify is extended to become material units at the very threshold of signification.[52] We are led to paying very close attention to the minute details – the letters, phonemes and the hyphen in the title. This attention to perception recalls Olson's demand that close attention be paid to each perception as it follows from the previous one, Mottram's proposal that revolution can arise from detaching signifiers from their concepts and the notion introduced in chapter 4 of the engaged perceiver. Reed's attempt to fix the sounding of these poems does leave us with one useful question: not *how should these poems be sounded?* but *how* may *they be sounded?* And the invitation from Cobbing is to explore one's own creative expression in achieving a sonic rendering. Cobbing's view of sound performance was that anyone could do it. In an interview broadcast on Radio 4, he recounts the story of asking the girl who collected him on arrival in Stockholm to perform with him the following day.[53] He has also been documented as saying: 'Many of my poems have been performed by people who have never done anything like that in their lives before. I love to catch people unawares.'[54] One crucial effect that exists for all radical work, and this is Steve Willey's major oversight, is the poem as generative, prompting physical engagement, creativity, study

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[50] Willey, 'Jade-Sound Poems', p. 242.
[51] Retallack, p. 42.
[52] Mottram, *Towards design*, pp. 11-12. See chapter 4.
[53] *Kaleidoscope*.
[54] Steven Ross Smith, *Ballet*, p. 9.

and ultimately an exploration of possibilities of corporeal engagement within a creative community, a position that aligns neatly with cris cheek's. The radical work prompts an invitation to discourse, and in this inherently contains transfigurative possibilities. *Jade-Sound Poems*' intrinsic and extreme radicalism lies in its range of possible readings, that is, in its indeterminacy. This is not to say that I wish to undermine the importance Willey places on the Poetry Wars, but they are by no means the only contextual interface that can illuminate Cobbing's poetry at the start of 1976, or at any time. We may again consider, for example, the struggle over mainstream/non-mainstream British poetry after the Second World War, the decline of avant-gardes, poetry and art's investigations into form and perception from the latter part of the nineteenth century onwards, as well as other contextual factors, more personal to Cobbing, such as his development as a poet, in particular how it was shaped by the influence of his previous allegiances to groups such as Fylkingen and the concrete poetry set, the metamorphic nature of his collaborations, the growing historical significance of Writers Forum press and workshop, and the move towards greater obliteration of textual material, which, although moving slowly, was underway long before the mid-'70s. Any or all of these settings could provide significant insight into the workings of *Jade-Sound Poems*.

We can not only discern a range of contexts for *Jade-Sound Poems* but also that they constitute a range of gestures. They are poems on the page, poems to be sounded (or *not to be sounded* if we adopt one of our readings of 'jade'), poems which challenge the established definitions of poetry, poems as visual artefact and as such continuing the inquiry into the nature of perception, poems whose form and spatial arrangements add to more than a century of artistic inquiry, poems that are indeterminate and sit on a threshold of obliteration, as well as other thresholds, and poems that reveal their technological and material processes. Yet we can go further than to say that Cobbing's work has a range of contexts and that that range denotes its transfigurative potential. It is, I propose, through the work *investigating its very own contexts* that we find it further transgressing temporal and spatial linearities. We can see *Jade-Sound Poems* addressing the idea of revolution in a number of ways. The presentation of language, defamiliarised, reduced to its smallest components, juxtaposing value systems and alphabets, and following unexpected directions, is one means by which these poems comment on and lay challenges to avant-garde poetry at a time of its crisis, whether we

take the short-term view of the static position of 1970s British poetry with a conservative mainstream and a powerful, reactionary elite about to defeat an uprising from a group of literary radicals or the longer-term view of the demise of avant-garde movements since the Second World War. Other ways in which the *Jade* poems perform this action are the form of porous boundaries and innovative arrangements of space. Cobbing was prompting a dialogue about avant-gardist concerns. Revolution is concerned with shattering boundaries and the democratisation of language – not its flattening, which we recall Steve Willey considers is deployed symbolically in the *Jade* poems. The instrumentalisation of language, introduced in chapter 3, evident in political speeches, the law and the printed news media, is a form of social control. Social language is used as a means to exclude and stigmatise individuals and groups; if it were available and accessible to everyone the populace would enjoy greater empowerment. Politicians telling the truth and being genuinely accountable, legal terminology being commonly intelligible and the hidden agendas of newspaper editors becoming visible are all desirable conditions under which language could be more comprehensively accessed by communities. This could be created in the short term by perfectly achievable measures such as equal access to education, i.e. not a system based on the postcode lottery and the privileging of private institutions, and extends also to areas such as healthcare and housing.[55] Revolution is only seriously viable if the protagonists advocate unfixed and unfixable realities and materials and a material world perpetually undergoing movement and change; otherwise one rigid hegemony will only be replaced by another. Joan Retallack has addressed the very process at work in radical art's impact on social movements;

> Although it's usually only the irruption of undeniable trouble (the post-WW II rise of feminist consciousness, the civil rights crisis of the 1940s and 1950s, the Vietnam War, the outbreak of AIDS …) that jolts us into reevaluating discrete aspects of the habitus, experimental arts have tended to launch more global challenges to the values of containment and closure, boundary and identity logics of genres (including those of gender).[56]

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[55] Just prior to the submission of this thesis in 2015, the Conservatives won a slim majority in the UK and now publicly funded services, notably health and education, are under severe threat. The rate of privatisation of the NHS and Further Education is set to increase.
[56] Retallack, p. 17.

A further way in which the *Jade* poems investigate their own context is that, in a post-Holocaust, post A-bomb world, solutions for a peaceful and progressive society may essentially lie in creativity within an open community, which pushes against closure, boundaries and genre limitations. cris cheek's readings of Cobbing's work and my own application of Olson's endorsement of a creative solution are of critical importance here. The stimulus to sounding through one's own creative imagination and the production of one's own innovative arrangement of materials are just two of the ways in which texts such as *Jade-Sound Poems* and *Domestic Ambient Noise*, that effectively *rethink* the letter and the page – and therefore the Word, the poem and the book – can generate creativity within a community.

Domestic Ambient Noise

One additional means by which Cobbing generated a creative community of operators was collaboration. His most ambitious project, the 300 or so booklets of collaborative work with Lawrence Upton, *DAN*, was published between 1994-2000. Early editions in the series were titled *Domestic Ambient Noise* although later booklets and sound performances, using *DAN* poems as scores, featured variations on this name such as *Domestic Ambient Moise* and *Domestic Ambient Buoys*.[57] The method employed by the two collaborators was, for the majority of the publications, for one of them to send the other a page of text, which they referred to as the 'theme', from which the other then produced six variations. The next pamphlet would be six variations on one of the pages from the first one, selected by the originator of the theme for the first booklet, and so on. The majority of the editions, including one of the 1994 ones selected for close study here (ISBN: 0 86162 562 5), were published with seven pages of text, although others varied in length according to what the poet doing the variations felt was appropriate.[58] Upton has explained the process:

> The basic model [was] of taking one text from the other's previous response and making six variations. Those variations [...] made six variations, six images.

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[57] The phrase came about after an invitation from Robert Sheppard to Cobbing and Upton to perform at *The World's Smallest Poetry Festival* at Sheppard and Patricia Farrell's home in December 1994. Sheppard wrote that the poets might expect some 'domestic ambient noise'. See Alaric Sumner, 'Domestic Ambient Buoys (Bob Cobbing and Lawrence Upton) in discussion with Alaric Sumner, August 1999, London', *Riding the Meridian* <http://www.heelstone.com/meridian/interbclu.html> [accessed 5 February 2014] (interview format).

[58] Cobbing and Upton, *Domestic Ambient Noise* (London: Writers Forum, 1994), ISBN: 0 86162 562 5.

> Generally, I'd say, it was quite clear from the booklets, though some variations varied quite widely from the original at first look. There were pamphlets where more than one original was used.[59]

The 0 86162 562 5 edition of *DAN* in question features pages with black and grey shapes, smudges, smears and various presentations of the letters in the phrase 'toilet tissue'. The theme was by Cobbing, with variations by Upton. It bears the characteristics of manipulation using a photocopier, overlaying, enlarging and shrinking. The *DAN* texts, as with the *Jade* poems, do not follow a conventional left-right/top-bottom sequence. For live performances of poems in the *DAN* series there would be no up-down, left-right axis, and no backwards-forwards axis. cheek observes there is 'no right way up'[60] and Upton states, 'you don't need to start from the top left hand corner. That, in some ways, is a tyranny, or can be.'[61] No right way up, then, for performance or private reading. Mottram goes further: 'The sign can be placed on the page without conceding that it is vertical or horizontal, since there is no up and down or left and right in the universe.'[62] My descriptions of the pages of ISBN 0 86162 562 5 assume a conventional top-bottom/left-right axis merely for convenience and consistency. Rotating the page of these poems could give us a markedly different perceptual field, much more so than the rotation required to alter perspective on the cleaner *Jade* characters. The *DAN* poems can always be kept moving by a simple rotation which would reposition the shapes in relation to each other and the perceiver. They also reveal, again akin to the *Jade-Sound Poems*, constant movement in their actual production and, as completed texts, act as indicators of those processes of production as neither published text nor its means of production can be separated from the other.

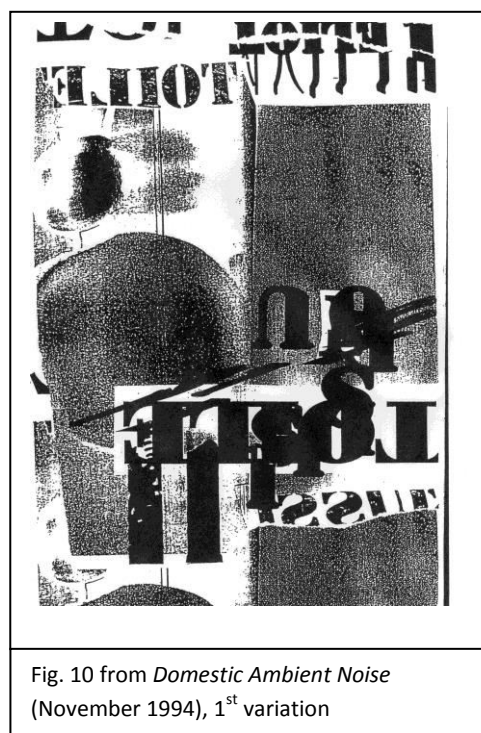In Cobbing's theme for DAN 0 86162 562 5 the letters T, O, I, L, and E appear upside-down and

Fig. 10 from *Domestic Ambient Noise* (November 1994), 1st variation

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[59] Upton, private email, 11 June 2007.
[60] cheek, 'Bob Cobbing' (para. 37 of 42).
[61] Sumner (in interview format).
[62] Mottram, *Towards design,* p. 12.

mirrored (O, I and E therefore simultaneously appear in their conventional directions) towards the bottom right corner of the page. There are what Umberto Eco terms 'suggestive possibilities' of meaning.[63] The words 'etoile' and 'toil' are evoked, neither having any kind of similar semantic value to 'toilet'. 'Etoile' (French for 'star') suggests the cosmic, and 'toil' alludes to labour – one an outgoing radiation of expansiveness, many steps removed from physical expenditure, the other grounded in terrestrial exertions, as is the notion of waste and its disposal which is evoked in both words 'toilet' and 'tissue'.[64] The letters are black with flecks of white across them, as if the fixed boldness unbroken black type would give them is in the process of disintegrating. In the top left corner the letters E, U, S, S and I are seen inverted, as if mirrored, the E and U half-covered by the white top of a rectangular block. In Upton's first variation (fig. 10) the letters are collaged, overlaid and enlarged. In the top left corner there is the suggestion of three black upside-down letters – possibly T, O and I – streaked with white. Below, mirror images of the letters E, L, I, O and T appear (I and O inevitably appear as one may expect), adding to our earlier semantic resonances a possible allusion, and most likely a humorous one, to T.S. Eliot. The T on the far left is obscured by a grainy patch of ink. Two heavy solid lines, suggestive of lower case L's or I's, cover the right and centre of a circular shape. A quarter of the way up a rectangular block on the right the letters I, U and E, half covered, alongside two inverted, clear S's appear, as if from underneath. A thicker and larger I covers the top of the I and breaks into a congestion of inverted letters on a white strip. Only by engaging memory of the theme and the clear, if disintegrating, letters earlier in the poem are some of the characters in this cluster recognisable as letters. From the right of the cluster there is an upside-down T, clipped off by the edge of the page, giving the suggestion of an L; then an O, overlaid above by an S and to the left by an I; next is an obscured letter overlaid by an S; and to the left what looks like an upside-down L and an inverted E. The block continues as we move up the page with a patchy continuation of the two diagonal black lines and the cluster of letters. An upside-down U presents clearly towards the centre of the poem. In variations two and three we see the words 'toilet tissue' clearly presented, facing conventionally, in a black-edged, white font. The first of these appears on top of a horizontal shape of an outer rectangular outline, a smaller outlined rectangle within

[63] Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), p. 53.
[64] Sheppard applies notions of the cosmic to Cobbing's processes of reduction and enlargement. See 'Ballet', p. 223.

and, within that, a straight line. The later variation presents the phrase a little larger over a similar black-lined shape. The letters from the phrase appear in each poem of the booklet until the final two, and even then there remains the possibility that the shapes are distortions through magnification in the copying process of some or part of some of the letters. The units of language appear and disappear throughout the booklet, resulting in a veering between linguistic determinacy and complete indeterminacy. We see in Upton's fifth variation (fig. 11) parts of the block and circle, which appear in various forms throughout the pamphlet, but otherwise only streaky distortions; the poem's now recognisable shapes have morphed into new material presentations and material aspects of linguistic signs are only merely traceable on account of an engaged memory which recalls the letters on previous pages.

We can discern in this edition of *DAN* further development of the various strands we earlier identified in *Jade-Sound Poems*. It marks an intensification of Cobbing's letterism

Fig. 11 *Domestic Ambient Noise* (November 1994), 5th variation

and there is movement and addresses to form and perception. In addition an even greater radical edge is achieved through the wild, unruly productions that arise from text collaboration and the extensive manipulation possible with the photocopier. The lack of solidity in the ink in the lettering of the theme, pronounced and clearly visible by the time the perceiver reaches the letterless fifth variation, can retrospectively be established as significant. This kind of presentation of lettering reveals remnants or fragments of language; the general expectation that letters will appear, historically and socially, as solid and well-defined is subverted here as their appearance is in a state of dissolution, though once deformed they are reinstated anew. The phrase 'toilet tissue', which provides all the letters visible throughout the pages, is given without context. We can impose a context – perhaps one of smutty, schoolboy humour or one that alludes to waste and packaging, implying a critique of consumerism – or treat the phrase as only having reference to its visual appearance in this poem. Both context and no context become possible simultaneously. From this dualistic starting point the letters

are dispersed amongst the pages with clarity, partial clarity and obliteration. Complete words are intimated whilst individual letters are partially or almost totally erased. The letter is treated as material both with and without visual clarity, but always detached from its conventional function in communication. We recall that back in the '60s *Destruction in Art* brutalised the text with its scrunched, copied appearance implying that the text has no value and/or is unwanted. This can be read as Cobbing discarding the Word and the letter, obliterating them, in order to recompose them; this is very much the way Cobbing and Upton treat the letter in this *DAN* booklet. Cobbing's engagement with Isou's Letterism broke through the thresholds of the earlier movement's intention to break language down to its smallest unit. Cobbing's poems go beyond the smallest unit but also re-form language back to the Word within one short serial poem. *Jade-Sound Poems* can now be seen as a progressive marker in this treatment of the letter. As linguistic and interpretative possibilities are opened up in this *DAN*, they exist in the simultaneous act of erasure. Such self-effacing actions take the perceiver in and out of indeterminacy, a kinetic motion leaving the perceiver on several thresholds: between qualitative, vital time – flow time – and reversible, linear, social time; between two and three dimensional space; and between the materials of the world, including characters common to language, so pronounced in the *Jade* poems, and the void embedded within the dense, black blocks of ink. The movement created by the effects of this arrangement of materials is multidirectional, producing unrest at every possible threshold, the poetic form pushed to unprecedented limits and the perceptual relationship between the perceiver and the text's materials undergoes major transformation, exceeding even that of Cobbing's ground-breaking work of the '60s and '70s. The *DAN* series repeatedly engages memory, mobilising it with echoes of shapes and discernible lettering, and offers a critique of it as an aspect of perception while the perceiver becomes conscious of the kinetic motions of memory through material made strange. So, as perceivers note the critique of memory they simultaneously engage with memory as a concept through material both unfamiliar, in that it is unprecedented poetic material, and familiar, as the shapes and letters also reappear in recognisable form throughout. In this edition of *DAN* those worldly materials include semantic possibilities: celestial, industrial and lavatorial. Even where meaning is indicated or possible, closure is denied whilst register and connotations are in flux, perpetuating the

uncertainty of the perceiver's occupation, and simultaneous abandonment, of a range of thresholds.

We recall from chapter 3 how Mallarmé's innovative use of the space on the page in *Un Coup de Dés* creates a coexistent stretching and condensing of the white spaces in the act of reading. Throughout this *DAN* booklet Upton's copied variations enlarge and reduce visual aspects of Cobbing's theme, a technique Cobbing used elsewhere in the '80s and '90s, for example in other editions of *DAN* and *Glossolalie un hallali* (1997).[65] Mallarmé's intention to have the spaces of his poetry read was a gesture of profound importance for twentieth-century avant-gardes, and as a parallel we may think of Carrà's vortex at the beginning of the century as a way of zooming perception in and out of a perspectival point. Throughout the ensuing century artists such as Cage, Tom Raworth, Bill Griffiths, Maggie O'Sullivan, cheek and Bonney have explored different kinds of attention to space in their works. Following Cage's lead with regard to compositional methods and presentation of text, Cobbing's visual poetry has changed the way we engage with the white void on the page – the silence – and the dark void – the simultaneous total absence and absolute presence of material. If we can discern traces of Italian Futurism and Mallarmé in Cobbing's work we can equally suggest his work deals with perception and its relationship to subjectivity in particular, in an utterly unprecedented way. Consider how we read conventional lexical poetry according to rhythm almost entirely determined by the poem's syntax, stresses and rhyme. Cobbing and Upton's use of magnification and contraction alter the speed of perception according to the decisions a perceiver makes about *how* to read the page and which part of it to read. With this kind of poetry, the decisions, once the text has been published, are entirely those of the perceiver. Again this is a means of transferring the figural subjectivity from the poet to the perceiver, much as is the effect of reading Stein's *Tender Buttons*, as detailed in chapter 3.

The *DAN* series and *Jade-Sound Poems* are further illustrations of the serial poem, which Cobbing had been exploring since the '60s, initially with *ABC in Sound*, followed by, amongst many others, the various versions of *a line from the observer*, the later typewriter concrete pieces *Whississippi*, *Marvo movies natter* and *Spontaneous appealinair contemprate Apollinaire*, and *Sonic Icons*. The serial poems recall cris cheek's

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[65] *Glossolalie un hallali*, in *Shrieks & Hisses* (Buckfastleigh: Etruscan, 1999) (no page numbers).

description of 'variation upon variation' and through them we can make connections between some of our key ideas: flow, movement, perception and radical form. The restless, tireless process of manipulating and developing text and image, involving the expenditure of considerable physical labour, presents kinetic motions of form in the transformations of the poems' appearance, transformations which maintain the perceivers' awareness of their lived perception. The exceptional appearance of these texts, due to their form and the movement implicit in their serialisation, cuts through the social time of the engaged perceiver to realise a manifestation of flow. Moreover, if in noting that the earlier poems from the 1960s where Cobbing would use the duplicator or typewriter required a completely new page to develop what we might call, after the practice with *DAN*, the serial theme, the later serial pieces, evidenced by the photocopied manipulations in *DAN* in the 1990s, were physical adaptations of the actual initial theme, either being inserted into the copier or having materials added, and therefore carried the genealogical history of the old page within the new one creating the work's own temporal linearity. His serial work travelled, then, from the fluid and imaginative journey through the alphabet in *ABC in Sound* to the flowing, fluid occupation of page space in, amongst other works, *Whississippi*, *Marvo movies natter* and the later *Cascade* (1975) to manifesting movements of flow, where the constraints of social time are eluded as they coincide with eruptions of multidirectional spatial lines, in *Jade-Sound* Poems, *DAN*, *Glossolalie un hallali* and *Variations on an urban theme* (2001). Flow therefore operates on another dimension as it appears over the course of Cobbing's practice and not just within individual works. Again we see unrest at the various thresholds: between the specific pages of the serial poem, between text and perceiver, and between the temporal passages and themes of the work.

The *DAN* series, not just in its epic scale and rapid rate of production, took the already radical forms of visual and concrete poetry beyond anything that had gone before (and arguably since). It engages with all the major concerns of Cobbing's work: obliteration and indeterminacy, memory, thresholds, the use of materials, production through technology and collaboration. In pushing at these spaces where discernibility and indiscernibility interpenetrate, earlier initiated in *Jade-Sound Poems*, *DAN* demonstrates profound engagement with all of the apparent interfaces; we may add to the list appended to the *Jade* poems above Cobbing's advanced years (he was 73 when the first

DAN was published), the specifics of collaboration in a creative community, and Thatcherism, which had shifted the cultural and political hegemony decidedly to the right since the production of *Jade-Sound Poems*. Perhaps most significantly, *DAN* repeatedly veers deeper and deeper into indeterminacy but still engages with a tension between indeterminacy and determination. This was also one of the notable features of Cobbing's sound work, and so now would be an appropriate point at which to consider the phenomenology of his sound performance.

Container Leaks

In a performance of *Container Leaks*, a booklet in the *DAN* series, Cobbing starts with sustained tones, vaguely reminiscent of a meditational 'om', which underpin and mix with Upton's introduction, a short series of throaty bursts before slowly delivering the line 'one would say is there witnesses a picture would'.[66] Upton then delivers a sequence of cut-up sound and word material, switching abruptly between the two, sometimes in the middle of a word, the sound at times clashing with Cobbing's voice, at other times weaving into and echoing it. Cobbing's noises, intermittently approaching wailing, are occasionally modified by Upton's, demonstrating that no one is leading this piece. Upton ends the reading with the word 'shapes', dragging out the final S until it becomes simply the sound of S, detached from the word, disappearing into silence. In mixing sound and words in performance the conventional boundaries between them are interrogated (here we recall from Cobbing's late poem 'Random and System' the lines: 'interrogating conventional boundaries | through gesture and posture | through habitus and through manipulation'). This same process creates momentary signs, generating a tension between the absence of semantics and the verbal utterances. In this material exchange the sonic and the textual are in dialogue with each other. The theme and sonic expressions undergo constant change, and the two voices operate intermittently as one unit. Extracts from the published version of *Container Leaks* show Upton's handwritten lexical material intermingled with familiar but indeterminate black and white shapes and surfaces.[67] There is that movement or kinesis Cobbing identified in collaboration between text and performer and between performers. This kinetic

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[66] Cobbing and Upton, *Container Leaks* from *Domestic Ambient Noise,* performed on *Radio Radio*, Cobbing and Upton interviewed by Spinelli.
[67] *Container Leaks* (London: Writers Forum, 1999) (no page numbers).

effect dances to the contact boundary where the perceiver meets the work in the Event. As Cobbing indicates in his description of the collaborative process above, the collaboration takes on an organic life of its own. This 'organicity' – the derivatives organ, organism and organisation are all pertinent to the condition of being in this flowing duration – is the creation of, and equally creates, the relationship between movement and space-time. cheek describes it as a dance:

> Occasion of a poem and its temporary operators, those performing as temporary transmitters and those performing as temporary receivers both, are thereby situated as an occasion for provisional community. The roles of transmitters and receivers do not remain fixed and should not be understood as being so. This is a dance. Reception and transmission form a reflexive loop.[68]

Defining the aural rendition of a poem as a dance, an activity in which the body occupies space according to temporal concerns such as timing, rhythm and tempo, leads to a consideration of how the temporal and spatial aspects of sound relate. All around the loop cheek describes is an immersion in the temporal aspects of space and the spatial aspects of time, simultaneously, in fact for that very reason, engaging touch, sight and hearing. The additional dimension to the dance is of course the visual aspect of the score, privileged exclusively to the performers but no less part of the sensory expressive value of the body.

Cobbing's sound and text collaborations with Upton crossed three decades and survived a long period of estrangement from each other in the 1980s where they did not perform or create texts together.[69] That Cobbing and Upton were willing to pursue their creative collaboration despite personal differences is testament to their commitment to a creative community. The *Container Leaks* performance demonstrates a satisfying interplay of two-voice sound poetry where each poet takes the lead at different points, and they create a blend of seamless complement with and rupture from each other. A similarly effective interplay can be heard between Cobbing and dom. sylvester

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[68] cheek, 'Bob Cobbing' (para.15 of 42).

[69] 'He and I had a fairly enormous row as a result of which we said very little to each other for many years. When we started speaking to each other again, I said that I couldn't remember what the argument had been about; and Bob said he could not either. In my case it wasn't true and I doubt it was for Bob. It did, however, seem to be the best thing to say.' Upton, private email, 4 June 2007.

houédard in 'Raymond Lull sound poem'.[70] These collaborations are actions in a community engaging in anarchic, organic, self-organised pockets of resistance to codes of authority, particularly the order (and orderly) function of language: syntax, clarity, phonemic logic and sense. The voices flow, manifestations of an ever-changing matrix, at times merging almost harmoniously, at other times abrasively attacking, almost eroding, each other. They further engage with the issue of figure-ground addressed by Merleau-Ponty's considerations of the operations of visual perception; describing the properties of a white shape on a homogeneous background, he states:

> The colour of the shape is more intense, and as it were resistant than that of the background; the edges of the patch 'belong' to it, and are not part of the background although they adjoin it: the patch appears to be placed on the background and does not break it up. Each part arouses the expectation of more than it contains, and this elementary perception is therefore already charged with a *meaning*.[71]

This meaning is the expressive value Merleau-Ponty describes elsewhere, not a linguistically-determined meaning. For Merleau-Ponty the object perceived is part of a wider field he calls the 'perceptual field', itself made up of 'things' and 'spaces between things'.[72] In the performance of *Container Leaks* neither voice is constantly prominent ('figure'), each is figure for short periods, and at times the voices are both 'ground'. Such a system of acoustics ('system' is Mottram's term for understanding form) provides a further example of Cubist arrangements in Cobbing's work. We have encountered this kind of phenomenology of space in Modernist visual art in chapter 3 and in this chapter in *DAN*, although here we are concerned with sonic space which has a more intelligible duration than three-dimensional or visual space. The phrase 'Cubism in sound' best captures the sonic phenomenology of the intersecting planes of sound of such vocal performances. It may indeed be a relevant phrase to apply to the common experience of hearing, in that sounds always occupy a duration and have spatial origins, though it is near impossible to determine these things accurately (note Toop's description of sound as lacking form and clear boundaries) and what one tends to do is filter all the 'useless'

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[70] Bob Cobbing and dom. sylvester houédard, 'Raymond Lull sound poem' (British Library Sound Archive, 1 CDR0020618) [accessed 10 July 2007].
[71] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 4.
[72] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 15.

noise to truly *hear* what is of relevance in the immediate environment, to isolate the figure. That figure may be speech, music, a soundtrack, the excitement of children, warning sounds, other urban noise and the like. In isolating the sonic figure in Cobbing and Upton's vocal collaboration (even if that figure is the combined sum of their voices), the perceiver is effectively creating it. This skews conventional expectations in its contrast with trends in, for example, modern popular music where we anticipate a figure of voice against a ground of music or in lyric poetry where the figure is the expressiveness of a narrator's subjectivity against a ground of form (constituted by metre, rhyme and so on) and the white page space. Cobbing's and Upton's voices generate momentary signs, in line with McCaffery's contention that a resistance to the absolute subsumption into the ideality of meaning brings material properties to the fore.[73] The status of the respective elements of this material – the two voices – is skewed according to conventional expectations and their material nature is prominent; this forges a transfiguration of the perceiver's subjectivity at the point of contact.

In this recording the material qualities of the voices, in their inter-phasing with each other and their departure towards indeterminate verbal material, play with signification and so generate momentary signs. Cobbing deals solely in indeterminate tones whilst Upton ventures from word to phoneme to alphabetic fragment (hints of letters) to indeterminate sounds. This slippage in and out of indeterminacy recalls the actions of the shapes in the visual poetry of *Jade-Sound Poems* and *DAN* (these shapes also form the marks on the scores for sound performance). In coming in and out of identifiable words or word-fragments, Upton's contributions manage to undercut and override Cobbing's, accentuating the figure-ground (con)fusion. There is a resistance to semantic meaning as sacred although we encounter momentary signs arising from words, letter sounds and word- and letter-fragments. The poets' energy of expression, charged with emotions and other qualities (gentleness, anger, amusement, frustration, inarticulacy, freedom), carries emotional and bodily significant properties (this is the expressive value in momentary signs) found in Cobbing's visual poetry. The voices, in both signifying and not-signifying *risk* the loss of meaning advocated by McCaffery whilst bringing to the fore the material base, not just of language, but also of the body. In

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[73] See chapter 2. Subsumption is a resonant term: it brings to mind the subsumption of the world into universal exchange values by capitalism, a process heightened during the onset of neoliberalism. The resistance engendered by artistic acts then becomes much more than merely symbolic.

risking the loss of meaning the voices, as material, gain the bodily expressive value described by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*. The voice and the skin are our bodies' material points of contact with the world, and in this example of sound poetry the performers' voices meet the perceivers' ears at the site of the Event. If the body signifies by creating momentary signs, that is a meaning or message is conveyed largely through action instead of semantics, then sound performance, in its physical manifestation of material, signifies meta-semantically. There is a bodily exchange – carrying, for example, emotional, physical or psychological expressive value – through the kinetic activity of the properties involved in the Event. As with the material, textual properties in the visual poetry, the experience can be to lose oneself inside the voice: to be situated as material inside other material in the objective world. This experience cannot be captured on a sound recording as the environmental phenomenology, that is the lived physicality of the space, cannot be reproduced through speakers. The contact energy that is generated through an attentive audience in a live setting is specific to the moment of performance and an unrepeatable experience. Each playback using technology creates a new phenomenology. There is much reduced potential for transgressing social time when listening to a sound recording as the contact points between the various bodies are influenced by all the environmental material in the perceptual field, both visible and sensible. For Cobbing's sound performance to run along the tracks of flow, one needed to experience it live. The very action of performing visual poems as sound poems suspends temporal normality and disperses sonic material, originating in visual material, into multiple parts of space. Cobbing's live performances, as much as the visual poetry as text, were manifestations of flow.

Cobbing Synthesised

Our close studies of two of Cobbing's visual texts and one sound performance has moved on our understanding of how his poetics, so often dismissed as 'not poetry' or 'meaningless', generate dialogue and action within the world.[74] Both *Jade-Sound Poems* and *DAN*, through their radical approach to form, disperse non-representational

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[74] Andrew Duncan has referred to Cobbing's sound poetry as 'the world's ugliest noise' and 'unpleasant and frightening', *Angel Exhaust*, 8 (1997), p. 106, qtd in cheek, 'Bob Cobbing' (para. 17 of 43). Jonathan Raban, describing a Cobbing performance, dismissively refers to 'the oddity of those noises officially designated as 'poetry'', *The Society of the Poem* (London: Harrap, 1971), p. 89. In the Cobbing and Upton *Radio Radio* interview Upton describes a heckler at one performance as presumably thinking they were 'charlatans'.

material into space, transforming it in the process, one of many forms of movement, and engaging the perceiver in such a way that social time is suspended. The perceiver is encouraged to engage their own subjectivity in the work as the indeterminate presentation of signs create momentary signs which deny closure of conventional meaning. All three pieces engage with flow and feature the key characteristics of abstraction. By creating an event where radical form meets the engaged perceiver, transfiguration of the perceiver becomes possible. This is a personal, community-based, physical, social and political action generated through a series of intersecting dialogues: between letter and word, word and sound, shape and word, shape and sound, sound and meaning, and text and body.

If the wider critical field of radical poetics remains a little sparse, critiques dedicated to Cobbing's poetry are still emerging. Upton's writings, although some are published online, are frequently circulated only privately or in very small numbers. The publications that feature commentators such as cris cheek, Steve Willey and Robert Sheppard are very much in the minority interest category. This presents a certain difficulty for some of the claims I make in the conclusion to this thesis but it also presents an exciting opportunity. Current commentators on Cobbing's work, from Upton's descriptive documentation to Greg Thomas's acknowledgment of semiotic dispersal to Willey's persistent and detailed drive to establish context, for the most part embrace relevant and critically valid positions. As I have attempted to explain in this chapter, my major contention with the majority of them is that they do not go far enough. Only Sheppard and I make a case for indeterminacy and openness as a primary critical reading; only cris cheek and I lay the emphasis on community as one of a number of significant bodies and an engagement with perception; and I currently appear to stand alone in documenting the significance of space and memory in Cobbing's poetic ventures. In further contrast to others, I emphasise that Cobbing's art is primarily Modernist in character. I have made links between this supposition and developments in late twentieth century art and poetry, in that Cobbing's work strove to maintain as artistic concerns the important and, if not unresolved, ever-developing issues of space, perception and abstraction.

I have aimed to show, through my study of *Jade-Sound Poems*, *DAN* and the sound performance of *Container Leaks*, how Cobbing's explorations in radical form produced

exceptional results relative and relevant to a range of potential historical, social, personal and political contexts, not least artistic inquiries into perception. Such explorations were essentially achieved through the unprecedented nature of his poems' textual and sonic material appearance and their phenomenological displacement of familiar and commonplace spatial and temporal dimensions, determined by the tools that produced them, namely the technological hardware and the materials used. What occurs in the perceptual arrangement – the Event – is embedded in the social, the political and the historical. Cobbing's art could only have taken on its specific innovative forms having had the ground opened up by various Modernist movements, phenomenology, '60s visual art and the long history of shape or pattern poetry. Its occupation of social times and spaces, both at the time of publication or performance and with each revisitation by contemporary audiences, had and has political pertinence due to the manner in which perception is addressed as an experiential and kinetic matter, with the engaged perceiver activated in the Event encounter. The features of abstraction evident in Cobbing's work – an absence of representation, multiplicities of space, multiple and uncertain subjectivities, and indeterminacy – effectuate a re-orientation of spatial relationships through the poems' perceptual processes. Innovation of form, perhaps at its most extreme and challenging in the *DAN* opus, is another means by which Cobbing's work abstracts and is, again, one of the key components in the Event. In the texts of *Jade-Sound Poems* and *DAN* and the recording of *Container Leaks*, in their various kinetic motions pushing out towards and beyond formal boundaries, we find poetic material occupying a temporal dimension, released from the repression of social time, which interfaces with the re-oriented spatial environment in the moment of reading or performance. This pulls together our notion of the Event with the process of flow. In repeatedly engaging with a range of thresholds, in *DAN* and the sound performance particularly, the engaged perceiver is confronted with a physical and conceptual manifestation of void, the realm where social and political transformation may occur. We can go further to draw a contemporary commentary here. The conventional deployment of the left-right/up-down axis is evocative of the linear, geographical and political impositions of the modern western city under late Capitalism and even the modalities of control, primarily economic and military, exercised by the United States since the Second World War. We recall that this was also a time of a decline in the visibility of the avant-gardes and that Cobbing's

activity within such spheres as the British Poetry Revival, the international sound poetry movement and the Association of Little Presses was major although the spheres themselves were marginalised and engaged relatively few people at a time when mainstream poetic culture was in formal, political and aesthetic decline. Cobbing's creation of multidirectional forms in *DAN* and in sound performance surpasses the spatial achievements of, say, Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* which, for all its notable and radical gestures, adheres to the left-right/up-down axes of conventional reading. Cobbing's poetry effectively achieves a suspension of gravity which intensifies the experience at the threshold of the void, and potentially makes revolutionaries of us all. His later work, in particular, radiates – flows – into other significant forms of poetry and other artforms enabling future possibilities. It is in these extraordinary achievements of synthesising concerns of Modernist and late-Modernist avant-gardes with archaic traditions of performing sound and the making of visual images in poetic form, at a time when it required enormous vision, industry and courage to go against the grain, that Cobbing's work can be said to perform a new kind of poetics.

Conclusion

Beyond A New Poetics

This thesis is intended as an introduction to the poetics of Bob Cobbing. Yet it is not simply a thesis about Cobbing. It is about art, poetry, society and humanity. It explores these facets of life through the work of Cobbing and through precursory strands and themes that he developed in his work. It is about his complex arrangements of linguistic and other materials, and how these arrangements were the result of building on the similar artistic arrangements of others. I claim that Cobbing's work was a constellation of Modernism and late-modernism in his dedication to the twin concerns of the sonic and the visual. This thesis is about Cobbing. And not about him.

In chapter 1 I aimed to place Cobbing's output into working chronological phases as a grounding for the research. It now feels appropriate to reflect on how this asssignation can feed into the key ideas of the thesis and my close studies of Cobbing's poetry. I noted in chapter 5 how individual works occupy space in a Cubist manner visually and sonically. This micro level of Cubism is mirrored on a macro level across the decades of Cobbing's practice. Following *ABC in Sound* in 1964 he regularly produced a range of lexical sound poems including the typewriter-produced concrete poems of the late '60s and early '70s. In the early stages of that decade there appeared a strand in his work, of which *Jade-Sound Poems* from 1976 became part, where spatial arrangements shifted from conventional poetic axes and introduced a questioning of the fixed nature of spatial boundaries and possibilities of dimension. In the 1980s a strong core of his work took on a visual presentation where letters and words were often obliterated through technological processes, a phase which segued into the *DAN* series and other extreme poetic undertakings of the mid-late '90s. There is a similar tracking possible in his sound explorations where he moved from manipulating the voice with technology in the '60s, to group collaborations based around sound or concrete poems in the '70s to solo and group performances using visual poems as indeterminate scores in the 1980s and '90s. Yet such linear documentation is misleading. He may have produced, for example, the greatest volume of his visual poetry from the '80s onwards but an absence of a figurative image was present in his earliest artwork in 1942. Technology was used to

overlay and obliterate text to produce dense patches as early as 1966 (*Destruction in Art*). Artworks in the late '50s and early '60s were abstract or used materials three-dimensionally revealing traces of Dada, Schwitters and Jackson Pollock ('The Aquarium', 'Earth Story', 'Plectrum'). Streaks and blobs with no discernible lettering appeared in poems in the mid-'70s ('Winter Poem'). A recording of Cobbing reading the *ABC* poems emphasises the material and playful aspects of the letter and the word as the sounds disperse in a constellational manner, bringing about an unsettled subjectivity.[1] The bearing of Cobbing's artistic practice, much like the arrangement of space in the works discussed in chapter 5, conforms to no conventional or logical linearity. The kinetic impulses radiate in multiple directions in a Cubist fashion, defying categorisation. This Cubism of the phases of Cobbing's work denotes a spatial plane of operation along a temporal axis, which I call flow. In this respect, as much as in respect of individual poems or phases of his work, Cobbing can be identified as a figure of the creative.

I further proposed in the final chapter that *Jade-Sound Poems* demands we move away from trying to grasp conventional meaning and ask instead what, as perceivers, we can learn about complex arrangements of artistic, linguistic and other materials and how we engage with the world through our senses. I believe this is a fundamental plea that Cobbing's most challenging work makes, and in this conclusion I will attempt to answer this question. The relationship of perception to the social and the political leads us to considerations of how a model for community is created by such radical works which do not accord with common social doctrine. The process of engaging with materials can be merged with a proposition of a socially progressive model which is propagated from the encounter of the artistic Event, for as we recall from chapter 4 Bruce Andrews has noted that the question of artistic form is the question of society's form. My exploration of this question advocates continually creative exchanges. Drawing on Cage and Stein, Retallack poses the inquiry in another way:

> Both Gertrude Stein and John Cage ask implicitly in their art, and explicitly in their writing about it, How does one develop a contemporary aesthetic, a way of being an artist who connects with the unprecedented character of one's times?

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[1] *Radio Radio*, Cobbing interviewed by Spinelli.

Their starting principle was that we must meet the contemporary moment on its terms–not in ignorance of history but in informed composition of it.[2]

McCaffery writes of reformulating the poem as 'a manifestation of unpremeditated ephemeral community'[3] and cheek refers to 'Cobbing's longing for anarchic community.'[4] Community was Cobbing's means of connecting to the character of his times. The research I have conducted can lead us to intuit guidelines for genuine, sustainable and effective social and political composition, rather than mere opposition, through the various contexts we have identified over the lifetime of Cobbing's experimental adventure. This is composing the world in the Cagean sense, rather than the more shallow idea of unity proposed by DeKoven. Retallack pushes at some effective fusion of the polarities:

> One side happily thinks everything is simple; the other side unhappily thinks everything is complex. In this chronic bifurcation a potentially collaborative "we" is missing the fact that complex dynamics aren't monsters lurking in forests, threatening the simple pleasures of blue skies. They are the forest. They are the blue skies. They are our entire natural-cultural environment.[5]

It is admittedly irrefutable that without a degree of conservatism there is no stability, as much as that a failure to oppose and break out of conservatism mummifies our social doings and our consciousnesses.

I provide here a summary of the environmental contexts for Cobbing's poetry. Firstly, the post-war decline in the prominence of avant-gardist activity as mainstream art was dominated by both cautious, conservative work and bold but self-serving (loosely identified as postmodern) offerings; in either case the emphasis is on art as commodity, not as explorative (Larkin's self-pitying rejection of *jouissance* being as marketable as Koons's kitsch indulgences). Jeff Nuttall lays the blame at the door of the postmodernists:

> before either Bauhaus or Basic Design, Dada, in its crazy anguish, had seen that all things are beautiful. What they did not see is that if a bottle rack may accrue

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2 Retallack, p. 18.
3 McCaffery, 'Voice', p. 169.
4 cheek, 'Bob Cobbing' (para. 17 of 43).
5 Retallack, p. 91.

the same value as a Rodin, not only does it make a small explosion in the pomp-and-ceremony of art-as-refined taste, it also enables the entrepreneur to buy a toasting fork at Lewis's, stick it on a plinth in a gallery and sell it for the price of a Rodin maquette.[6]

In fact Nuttall contends an alliance existed between the forces of Mammon – the capitalists – and the postmodernists:

> By 1980 the cultivation of the global consciousness had turned into the cultivation of the self by fashion, lifestyle and diet, while nobody knew what was good any more as opposed to bad, or vital as opposed to feeble. Nobody knew who the artists were any more unless they were told, so there was no-one to whom to turn when Mammon invaded and destroyed both the diseased forces of revolution and out-dated forces of oppression.[7]

The apparent decline of avant-gardism in Europe undoubtedly arose in part from nations trying to re-establish some certainty after the horrors committed in the 1930s and '40s and a sense that the radical activity in the earlier Modernist period, itself in some part a reaction to the far-reaching, mindless annihilation of the 1910s and empire, had yielded no successful replacement for the reactionary artistic hegemony. It was also a result of the radical being co-opted by the mainstream seen in such forms as surrealism in advertising and reproductions of Mondrian and Monet appearing on key rings and tea towels. Nuttall has commented on the spread of this tendency: 'The bitter surrender to the capitalist environment had involved an ethical and aesthetic abandonment which quickly fed and was nourished by the free interchangeability of attitudes.'[8] The co-opting of elements of oppositional art may have been superficial, but it has been very powerful. In contrast to the prevalent art in the latter part of the twentieth century, Cobbing's work firmly places the still critically and socially imperative questions of form and perception at the heart of an exploratory inquiry. As a creative figure he was always pushing at boundaries against the dominant forces of conservatism, in so doing engaging in a spirited dialogue with them.

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[6] Nuttall, *Degradation*, p. 92.

[7] Nuttall, *Degradation*, p. 45.

[8] Nuttall, *Degradation*, p. 97.

Another of Cobbing's interfaces was the 'bomb culture', as Nuttall termed the period in the '60s of political protest and social unrest, under the constant threat of nuclear annihilation, which pushed against the membranes of lifestyle boundaries. The domestic unrest in the UK in the mid-'70s and Thatcherism (to include the early years of Blairism) are further social intersections. More local frameworks, not least the events at the Poetry Society in the '70s, as Steve Willey (in dialogue with Peter Barry) so effectively works out, cannot be ignored. Even longer term contexts, especially artistic ones, are crucial: we think here of inquiries into form and perception, Modernist literature, poetry and visual art, and phenomenology. The central channels that can link Cobbing's work to all these contexts, and themselves overlap and interrelate, are threefold: the idea of the democratisation of creative acts, a position championed by Olson, Mottram and Retallack; that artwork reasonably defined as (to paraphrase Retallack, whichever term you find least offensive) radical, innovative or avant-gardist is inherently and immediately political; and unprecedented form, a profound and generative engagement with perception as experiential and the deployment of multiplicities of space shatter boundaries and cross-pollinate. Cobbing's work truly composes a world with new orientations of space, form and perception. His most extreme sound and visual poetry disperses material into multiple directions in space and suspends social time; it bears the various characteristics of abstraction detailed in chapter 3 through its innovative form, thereby provoking a radical and new engagement with perception. All of which is fine, but it is toothless unless we understand how it can inform models or ideals of social change.

In an attempt to provide an alternative to late capitalism, countless movements and communities in Europe, the States and beyond have been created since the time of the New Left, the student riots, the Civil Rights Movement, the Bomb Culture and the permissive society in the 1960s. Few have been able to offer a viable model as the social and political climate has significantly shifted from the idealism prevalent in Situationism and the Paris student demands of '68. More recent forms of protest and resistance have included The Seattle Protests outside the World Trade Organisation talks in 1999 which mobilised within a day 1,700 groups to sign a petition against the WTO's handling of the talks. Yet the voicing of such collective action has borne no sustained progressive moves in the treatment of developing countries by the wealthy

ones or in the continued exclusion of the vulnerable and the marginalised. Occupy in the UK campaigns for what it describes as 'structural change towards authentic global equality' and its methods of protest, occupying well-known and symbolic landmarks and premises, raise authentic questions about freedom of movement and expression;[9] yet it is having little success impacting on the nation's consciousness as there are few national editors who consider its voice worth publicising and the police make political judgements in arresting and moving protesters. This situation looks unlikely to change as long as Occupy uses forms of action so familiar to and so easily quelled by the authorities. Online forums such as 38 Degrees and Change.org campaign on single issues and are accessible to anyone who wishes to start a petition or raise awareness of a specific cause, yet their fundamental principles incorporate an acceptance of the legitimacy of parliamentary 'democracy' in its present form. Protest articulates the concerns and the desires of transfiguration but, and we are reminded here of Sean Bonney's critique of protest as staying within the limits of the already known, cannot provide that transformation as long it does not question society's forms.[10]

I have touched on the notion of creativity as a cornerstone of an ideal model as advocated by Retallack, Olson and Mottram, and I fully subscribe to this principle as a starting point, but it is not yet fully worked through as it fails to take into account the practicalities of living (food, clothing, accommodation), as Nuttall has warned: 'Ideas will not keep us warm, keep us fed, reproduce us, cure our physical afflictions nor fuel our electrical services unless ideas are compelled by real instincts and have real materials with which to work.'[11] To move beyond the suggestion that creativity is a form of resistance in itself and offers possibilities for integration of different social groups requires a more thorough agenda. Creativity is available to everyone, but it has shortcomings if Maslow's basic needs are not met. I am inclined to see the creative dialogue between form and perception in the Event as one which can be applied to practices within communities. The autonomous community of Christiania in Copenhagen offers a model that starts to embrace this dialogue. Set up on a squatted military site in 1971, its occupants have built their own sustainable housing, have designed architectural structures as art, use living areas as exhibition spaces and

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[9] Occupy, Initial Statement point 7, *Occupy London* <http://occupylondon.org.uk/about-2/> [accessed 14 November 2014].

[10] See chapter 4.

[11] Nuttall, *Degradation*, p. 88.

welcome visits from the public. Though its future was for many years uncertain the residents purchased the site from the Danish government in 2011. In its use of innovative *forms* of living, Christiania contrasts with communities like Findhorn in Scotland which was set up during the '60s counter-culture but confuses sustainable living with New Age sentimentality.[12] Yet it is in Kurt Schwitters's utopian mode of existence, the Merzhaus, where we can identify potentially the most effective dialogue between form and perception. Schwitters's design combined the living space and the exhibition space, altering the form of the house through a radical arrangement of materials, thus redefining, through its demand that its occupants employ new techniques of perception, what a living space can be. It further acknowledged the need for a restless labouring that will result in the production of food, the manufacture of clothes and the construction and maintenance of shelter alongside the persistent, and persistently creative, artistic engagement with physical materials. In the Merzhaus, art became part of the infrastructure and part of living, as I advocate it should be within wider social structures. Walter Benjamin, with reference to the kind of art that Schwitters created and the materials used in the Merzhaus, noted how new techniques of perception can rupture time:

> The revolutionary strength of Dadaism consisted in testing art for its authenticity. A still life might have been put together from tickets, spools of cotton, and cigarette butts, all of which were combined with painted elements. The whole thing was put in a frame. And thereby the public was shown: Look, your picture frame ruptures time; the tiniest authentic fragment of daily life says more than painting.[13]

Such a disengagement from social time combined with a restless labouring, potentially reorganising social structures, as part of an unprecedented and creative community, is evident in Cobbing's life's work: there is that alignment with flow, invocation of the void and collaboration as dominant features of this radical, new poetics. Along with Schwitters's Merzhaus, it provides for us now a model that shifts towards engagement – with art, with the environment, with each other – and possibility, with the constant re-orientation of social and political boundaries, forms and spaces. Retallack summarises

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[12] A quick visit to Findhorn's website will validate this. See <www.findhorn.com>.

[13] Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard, 2008), pp. 79-95 (p. 86).

neatly the agenda as we move forward with the complexities, doubts and societal bodies of our contemporary life:

> Resist pressures to regress, deny, escape, transcend. Pop culture and religion do that well enough on their own. If we're going to continue to make meaningful, sensually nourishing forms in the twenty-first century, art must thrive as a mode of engaged living in *medias* mess.[14]

We need to see an emphasis on using public space for collective creative gestures with a range, and unrestricted possibilities, of materials; all types of artistic works need to be valued within the education system and other social institutions, alongside the breaking down of barriers, psychological and otherwise, between creators and other creators, and creators and perceivers, bearing in mind all the time that 'the work of any generation is adding to the initial conditions of generations to come'.[15] Regrettably the trend in late-Capitalism has been to accord corporate interests the privilege of public spaces. Advertising and commercial ventures are a disengagement from transfigurative perception.

In an echo of Rothenberg's Revolution of the Word Nuttall has identified the role of the artist as one which empowers the development of human sensibilities: 'As philosophers make heretofore unheard analyses of what existence is, as scientists reveal facts about matter and space not previously known, so artists perpetually explore and extend what is available to human sensibility, to the emotions and to the senses.'[16] I have made the case that Bob Cobbing acted as both inheritor and renewer of Modernism and this research has revealed how these human sensibilities are acted upon. I have highlighted the interfacing of multiple spaces with linear time as the process of flow, a process which simultaneously incorporates the features of abstraction and formal innovation. In the Event, these abstract characteristics and radical form encounter an engaged perception. From this process we may be able to find a potential model for progressive living in answer to the problems posed by communities ridden with the inequalities bred by the dominance of capital. I mentioned in chapter 1 that the long view of Cobbing's creative life could be to see it as a poem, following various paths with

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[14] Retallack, pp. 27-28.
[15] Retallack, p. 45.
[16] Nuttall, *Degradation*, p. 25.

intersecting and overlapping lines, imbued with a natural rhythm and occupying space in creative and innovative ways – indeed cheek has observed that Cobbing's 'poems exist in multiple-multiple versions'.[17] Such an extensive metaphor can be useful if we see our potential composition of community in similar ways in relation to our understanding now of how Cobbing's work functions. If we compose community as we compose the artistic Event, with form and perception in creative dialogue, we can create the conditions for radical change. This requires a thorough consideration of community structure, how the collective individuals live in and push against the boundaries of the spaces within the community, their relationship to time and the 'rhythm' of their lives, and at the heart must be the principle of continually creative gestures, flowing through the perceptive and expressive body. Inevitably, a flattening of hierarchies will be imperative, not necessarily resulting in an absence of leaders or significant individuals, but that their contributions will not be considered of greater value than anyone else's; this draws on the democratic or anarchistic aspects evident in Bob Cobbing's practice. And, crucially, such communal behaviours can, and must, meet the contemporary moment on its own terms but in the spirit of undeniable and experimental adventure; to compose a new history, therefore, they should exist within and alongside the existing communities of late capitalism. Though struck by how neat and idealistic this all sounds, I resist the temptation to modify what can be learnt from avant-gardist gestures, even if the ideal is ultimately unobtainable in practice.

As an introduction to Cobbing's work, there is much else I have had to resist in this study. Notwithstanding his unparalleled output, many of his remarkable poetic achievements have received little or no attention in these pages and in particular I feel many of his rare and curious sound performances deserve exploration. There is always a regrettable limit to what one can cover in one academic examination but I do believe, in focusing on my interest in embedding his poetry within Modernist and late-Modernist concerns, I have laid the groundwork for a more detailed investigation into the relationship between the sonic and the visual. The scope remains now for post-doctoral work to explore, for example, the debt Cobbing's reading of the visual and its sonic manifestation owes to Cézanne's understanding of space, or to carry out a detailed study of the name poems, inquiring into how their lexical basis interfaces with shape

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[17] cheek, 'Discussion'.

and sounding. In particular, pursuing the line of inquiry into whether the visual material Cobbing performed was merely provocative to sounding or innately acoustic, I intend to research the social and scientific relationship between text or graphic material and verbal expression. In addition I now hope to have a little more time to resume my own poetic creativity which I anticipate will take the form of composing lexical and visual works, performance and various forms of collaboration.

My closing reflection is that a common ground in the theories of evolution, flow, abstraction, form and perception that I have explored in this thesis is the emphasis on selection. It is in selection – decision-making – that creativity for radical artists and for individuals in a community presents opportunities for genuine and lasting transfiguration. The notion of the void, where structure is absent and can therefore be made anew, presents a territory outside of the social and the political where this transfiguration can take place, should perceivers select to encounter it willingly. Stimulating new techniques of perception, the innovative arrangement of materials creating unprecedented forms, and generative and collaborative methods of creativity within a community, it was through Cobbing's specific exploration of selection – one that arises for the perceiver or community directly out of indeterminacy and abstraction, pushing us to the threshold of the void – where we can locate a world in composition. His peculiar brand of poetics, which I have presented as an important and genuinely new poetics, arose through such decision-making. The unsatisfactory outcomes of the Seattle Protests and Paris 1968 reveal the limitations of the social and the political, offering only very brief glimpses of transfigurative possibility. It is then poetics, and its family of radical artistic gestures, that can provide a sustainable model for change where the realms of the political and the social have not been able to.

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