

## BOB COBBING: IN MEMORIAM

Bob Cobbing, who has died at age of 82, was the major exponent of concrete, visual and sound poetry in Britain. Long after its international heyday in the 1960s, he continued to produce visual texts that were also scores for performance, many of them published as booklets by his Writers' Forum press, and launched at its associated workshop, which has been meeting in private houses and rooms above pubs since 1954. His work appears in many anthologies.

Born in Enfield, Cobbing was brought up within that close religious group, the Plymouth Brethren. His family ran a sign-writing business. It is tempting to see this as presaging his later work, but it was probably the Brethren's work ethic and single-mindedness that left a lasting impact. During the second world war he was a conscientious objector.

Educated at Enfield Grammar School, he trained as an accountant, and then as a schoolteacher at Bognor Training College. He began his life-long engagement with arts organising in the mid-1950s, with Group H and *And* magazine in Hendon, which grew into Writers Forum. After leaving teaching in the early 1960s, he managed the famous underground shop Better Books in London's Charing Cross Road, venue of many readings and happenings of the "bomb culture", as his colleague and early Writers Forum poet Jeff Nuttall called those heady days.

He was a founding member and vice president of the Association of Little Presses, a self-help organisation for poet-publishers like himself. In the 1970s, he convened Poets Conference, which campaigned for the modernization of the post of Laureate. He served on the council of the Poetry Society, during a turbulent period in its history marked by poetry wars between the mainstream and experimentalists like himself. Cobbing was awarded a Civil List pension, a fact he never publicised, and which might be a surprise to both of the warring factions.

Between 1963 and 2002 Writers' Forum published more than 1,000 pamphlets and books, many of them his own work, but he was also generous as a publisher to younger writers, such as Lee Harwood and Maggie O'Sullivan. He issued texts by John Cage and Allen Ginsberg, and by fellow concrete poets, such as Frenchman Pierre Garnier and Italian Arrigo Lora-Totino, both of whom were guests at the workshop in the 1990s.

Cobbing's entry into the world of concrete poetry came in 1964, with the writing of his alphabetical sequence ABC In Sound. Although he claimed the texts derived from auditory hallucinations during a bout of 'flu, its use of puns, foreign languages, palindromes and technical jargon suggests elaborate craftsmanship. The text beginning: "Tan tandinanan tandinane/Tanan tandina tandinane" already suggests a chanting performance, which it received when Cobbing was given access to the BBC Radiophonic Workshop with its battery of special effects. Owning the means of production (the office duplicator, the photocopier) meant that Cobbing could conflate the processes of writing,

design and printing. Performing regularly meant that he could heal the split in concrete poetry between those who presented silent icons, most famously Ian Hamilton Finlay, and those who developed the art of pure sound, such as Henri Chopin. Cobbing's anagrammatic title *Sonic Icons* was emblematic.

As his texts became progressively freer, any mark - whether letter-shape, lip imprint, or inkblot - was readable as a sign on the page. Shape and texture suggested vocalisation and sound to Cobbing and the performers he increasingly worked with during the 1970s, such as musicians Paul Burwell and David Toop, and poets Paula Claire and Bill Griffiths.

Moaning, sighing, shouting, even sneezing, became as common as words or phonetics. In recent years, new collaborators became crucial to his work: the anarchic thrash noise ensemble of Bird Yak (Hugh Metcalfe on guitar and amplified gas mask, veteran improviser Lol Coxhill on saxophone, and his wife Jennifer, dancing); or the extraordinary series of 300 booklets written with Lawrence Upton, *Domestic Ambient Noise*, across which the two writers processed and re-arranged the other's work.

Aesthetically uncompromising, and repellent to some, Cobbing's language experiments could also be fun - as his work with schoolchildren testified. He remained alert to the weird linguistic detritus he found everywhere. A late text plays changes upon Liz Lockhead's contention that "A good fuck makes me feel like custard". Who could resist Cobbing's rejoinders that "a good screw makes me feel like wet blancmange" or "a little lechery makes me feel like spotted dick"?

From his hospital bed, he was still issuing instructions about the latest edition of *And*. There are plans to continue the press and the workshop. He is survived by his wife, Jennifer Pike, and three sons and two daughters from previous marriages.

Bob Cobbing, poet and publisher, born July 30 1920; died September 29 2002.

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