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Booooook: The Life and Work of Bob Cobbing by William Cobbing and Rosie Cooper (eds.), London: Occasional Papers, 208 pp., 2015

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Booooook is a beautifully presented survey of the life and work of Bob Cobbing, edited by the artist William Cobbing (the poet's grandson) and the curator Rosie Cooper, which consolidates the programme of exhibitions and events organised by the two since 2013 under the title of *Bob Jubile*. Like that larger project, the book developed substantially out of research into Cobbing's personal archive, split, as the editors' introduction notes, between the British Library and the Cobbing family. Although *Booooook* is presented as a 'sort of companion' to the BL papers, only an editorial team also working with the latter, less accessible collection – gradually salvaged from Cobbing and the artist Jennifer Pike's former home in Petherton Road, North London, and still being collated – could have pulled together such a meticulously detailed and illuminating set of materials (p. 7). The introduction also implies something of the difficulty of distinguishing between the 'Life' and the 'Work' in Cobbing's case, his 'devotion to the production of other people's work' often meaning that 'he ended up erasing himself in the process' (ibid.). Indeed one of the conceptual quandaries to which the editors respond is the extent to which Cobbing's poetic output – presumably indicated by the word 'work', if we take poetry to have been his primary occupation – became overshadowed by his publishing and organisational activities – more likely, by that logic, to be covered by the term 'life' – even while such activities became integrated into his creative practice.

Before expanding on that point, it is worth emphasising the value of this book simply as a repository of facts, images, documents and reminiscences. The editors' biggest find is a folder of materials about Boooooooks, the book-shop which Cobbing had planned to set up with Pike, William MacLellan and John Collins after the closure of the Better Books paperback department in 1967, after which this book is of course

named. The new shop never opened because Collins held a raucous, impromptu party at the site shortly before the lease was due to be signed. But reproduced here are advertisements and flyers, floorplans, and a letter from Cobbing to one Mr. Spagnoletti, of E.A. Shaw & Partners, chartered auctioneers and estate agents: '[f]urther to our meeting on Friday 28th August, I have pleasure in submitting full particulars of the proposed use of the above premises' (p. 137). This cache of materials reveals an organisational nous and a flair for professional language implying some of the qualities – pragmatism, linguistic adaptiveness – behind Cobbing's success in negotiating the alien worlds of innovative poetry communities and public and professional bodies of various kinds.

There are similar document and image-based sections on Cobbing's prolific Writers Forum press; on Hendon Arts Together, the multi-arts organisation which he set up in suburban North London in 1952; on the Association of Little Presses, which he co-founded in 1966; on the various imprints and recordings of his breakthrough sound and concrete sequence *An ABC in Sound*; on the London Film-makers' Cooperative, and several other topics. One set of photographs shows Cobbing and George Macbeth visiting Downing Street in 1973 'to present views on the role of the Poet Laureate'. According to the editors' annotation, 'these views emerged as part of the Poets Conference, an informal trade union for poets, and an arena for the radical wing of the Poetry Society to discuss their opinions and strategies' (p. 172). The photographs remind us of the power which that wing briefly held, during the radical takeover of the Society documented by Peter Barry in *Poetry Wars* (2006). Though the 'work' as defined above might seem submerged in all this, there are also accounts of Cobbing's music groups, abAna, Konkrete Canticle and Birdyak, and a full-colour 'selected works' section. The non-chronological arrangement of this section means that pieces are grouped together by common motifs and means of production, emphasising Cobbing's huge range of mark-making and graphic techniques. It also includes reproductions of rarely seen early monoprints, sculptures and assemblages.

Strewn amongst the documents and images, and amongst a number of short, factual introductions by Cobbing and Cooper, are contributions from various

collaborators and critics. These range from further short, factual pieces, such as Robert Sheppard's introduction to *An ABC in Sound*, to less easily definable additions, like Andrew Wilson's notes on Better Books, reproduced verbatim from a 1965 issue of *Poetmeat*, but with appended footnotes compiled by Wilson which run to twelve pages. Will Holder's 'N156NT' is an excerpt from the expanding inventory for the Petherton Road collection, named after the postcode of William Cobbing's house, where the materials are currently being housed and processed. The hook is that the inventory is compiled by the visitors themselves in exchange for access to the items in question, essentially constituting a collaborative art and/or research project conceived and overseen by Holder. Its textual manifestation here (see the full version at n156nt.uk) shifts between sublime Goldsmith-esque banality and disarmingly comic or moving sections, notably documenting Cobbing and Pike's relocation to Petherton Road in 1984 from another Greater London Council property in Randolph Avenue, West London, where they had lived for twenty years. The dispute is mediated on the council's side by Ken Livingstone, one of whose letters to Pike is reproduced (pp. 198–99).

There are also more discursive pieces, such as Steve Willey's on the textual and sonic reincarnations of the poem 'Worm' between 1954 and 2002, and Sanne Krogh Groth's on the relationship between British, French and Swedish sound poetics. Some of these feel slightly cramped in their assigned space, particularly Willey's, which provides in truncated form the book's most insightful account of the life-work crossovers which make Cobbing's practice so tricky to pin down. The article employs a version of Herbert Read's definition of romanticism, whereby an artwork is understood as an unfolding process, each of its iterations involving a formative relationship with its context and suggesting the possibilities of the next. On this basis Willey reads both the symbiosis of poem and performance in Cobbing's 'dirty concrete' practice and his organisational activities as expressions of the same creative impulse. Restlessly moving from one host institution to another for financial and ideological support, Willey suggests, Cobbing was a kind of organisational romantic, whose approach to the presentation and circulation of his work evolved to fit each

new context, even as that context suggested its own limitations, and the need to move on to another (p. 16).

This leads us back to the conundrum mentioned earlier. The editors acknowledge the extent to which Cobbing's efforts as an organiser and proselytiser for other poets and artists compromised the reception of his own practice to some extent; perhaps even its development. At the same time, they maintain that he is 'best known as a concrete, sound and visual poet' (p. 5). However, as their first point suggests, while there remains a husk of opinion of that kind about Cobbing, partly left behind from concrete and sound poetry's frothy reception in the 1960s–70s, this perception of his practice has not been backed up since by consistent critical engagement. What have been more common are fact, date and anecdote-based accounts emphasising Cobbing's importance in establishing and perpetuating certain creatively innovative and politically progressive cultural scenes: accounts which focus on his life, taking that term to incorporate aspects of his work which might be seen as 'non-creative'. This book performs that task better than any previous work that I know of. But as a critical account of his work (his 'creative' work) it is less obviously forthcoming. The 'selected works' section, for example, passes by without critical framing: in obedience to Cobbing's own wariness of academic analysis perhaps, but in a way which might seem to reinforce the frequent and too-hasty perception that his work doesn't merit such analysis.

However, the book is more subtly thought-provoking on these issues. The occasionally carping assessment which Cobbing's work has received from a literary-critical angle partly suggests that the boundaries which literary criticism places around its object are still frequently too inflexible to accommodate it. It can be hard to find value in Cobbing's work when it is sought within particular poems taken as discrete, bounded entities, on the page or in performance. The processes of vocal and graphic reproduction, of incremental degradation and redefinition, to which he subjected any given piece were often more interesting than the content of that piece at any one stage of the process. Or, the content of a particular poem often comes alive for us only when we start to see it as a temporary manifestation of a larger, endlessly

evolving and intangible entity which is itself the artwork. If the work is the process, not located on the page or in performance, it is much more bound up with the life – or at least with the ‘non-creative’ work – than an inflexible literary-critical approach would allow. As Willey implies, for example, the enabling of and unfolding context for particular compositions and performances becomes a much more creatively significant backdrop or adjunct than is usual of a poetic practice. We might even take the more extreme position that Cobbing’s was in fact a kind of ontological practice, a performative experiment in being connected to the imperatives of psychogeography and Situationism, of which his poems were simply the documentary evidence. In either case – and I’m inclined towards the more moderate proposal – only an account of Cobbing’s work which is simultaneously an account of his life, and especially of the many other kinds of work which encompassed his poetic labour, is poised to respond to that work in a sympathetic and insightful way.

This book doesn’t explicitly offer such an argument, but the method of presentation implicitly troubles the life-work, or creative work-non-creative work, distinction. Pages of selected works are given equal weighting with photographs of performances – notably of Birdyak’s 2002 set at the Royal College of Art, a few months before Cobbing’s death (p. 181) – and documents outlining Cobbing’s temporary romantic liaisons with institutions, implying a gradation of practices from the explicitly to the implicitly creative. In some cases, notably that of Arnaud Desjardin’s interview with Adrian Clarke about Writers Forum, the creative and attendant ideological connotations of a task which might be placed outside a writer or artist’s creative remit – running a press and reading series – are directly explored. Desjardin describes Cobbing as ‘somebody who was continually creating networks’, emphasising a restless sense of evolution and permutation which underpinned his circulation and exchange of other poets’ work, and his establishment of relationships between them, as much as the reformulation of his own poems across years and decades (p. 36).

Accepting this expanded definition of the work, I would still like to have encountered slightly more discussion of Cobbing’s work in the conventional sense. Those pages of selected poems and artworks, amongst other things, chart and respond to

the development and obsolescence of various methods of D.I.Y printing and reproduction, from duplicators to photocopiers to desktop computers. A more frontal engagement with the relationship between Cobbing's poetics, its means of production and its attendant politics, and more generally with the remarkable processual poetics just outlined, would have been one way of enhancing this book's significance. A closer negotiation of Cobbing's *work-work* might also have allowed the airing of more general questions about the relationship between late-twentieth-century modernist and avant-garde movements and their early-twentieth-century forebears: about the nature of their originality, how old techniques were made new. The answer to these questions partly relates to the spread of established avant-garde and modernist idioms to new geographical locations, new socio-economic contexts and new cultural groupings, in the process of which they were seamlessly but integrally altered. One of the most interesting phases of Cobbing's working life was surely during the 1940–50s, when he delighted in enforcing the belated infiltration of modern-art aesthetics into the leafy suburbs of north London: 'I seem to have shocked a few people (including Mrs. Bate of Milldon) by my remarks on Thursday at the opening of our show' (Cobbing, quoted in the 1955 *Hendon Press* article 'Mr. Cobbing Sticks to His Guns', p. 26). There is a kind of *arrière-garde* spirit at work here – borrowing Marjorie Perloff's term for concrete poetry – which has not been closely interrogated in Cobbing's case. To do so might bring analysis of his work into line with recent discussions around late and regional modernisms, and might be more interesting than unqualified assertions of Cobbing's status as an 'internationally significant avant-garde innovator' (or similar), which can sound brittle in a context where general literary-critical interest in his work remains fairly low.

These are perhaps pointers towards a future book on Cobbing: a more academic book, which starts from the work in a narrower sense, and from the assumption that Cobbing really *is* a significant poet, but not in ways which have yet been fully defined. This excellent text opens up space for discussion around Cobbing's mercurial practice to continue.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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