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BOOK REVIEW

Book Review

The Text Festivals: Language Art and Material Poetry
by Tony Lopez (ed.), University of Plymouth Press,
164 pages, 2013

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Meaning (if by this is meant semantic meaning) has been grossly over-rated as an element in poetry. The visual appearance and therefore the visual meaning; the sound and therefore the aural meaning are also important, the latter probably more so than the semantic meaning. (*The Text Festivals*, p. 58)

This superb benediction of visual text comes from Bob Cobbing. Cobbing's words touch on a number of prescient themes explored in *The Text Festivals* (both the Festivals themselves and *The Text Festivals: Language Art and Material Poetry*, the subject of this review: a celebratory collection of writings by Festival participants – artists and poets; academics and publishers). The book, *The Text Festivals* (as distinct from the live 2005, 2009 and 2011 Festivals, hereafter referred to as The Text Festivals, distinguished visually by their non-italicised state), is an archive of process: like exhibits in a gallery, style|content|length|approach all vary|collide|contradict from chapter to chapter to comprise a fascinating snapshot of activity and process in visual text. As the book forms a retrospective catalogue, to write about or review it is inevitably to discuss the Festivals themselves.

The live Text Festivals are the brainchild of Bury Art Gallery director|curator, Tony Trehy. In *The Text Festivals*, he records their genesis. Fuelled by changing uses and misuses of text in the last century, he notes how 'the textual has become furniture text, text seen but not consciously read' and asks '[i]n what gap can it be used without it being appropriated to sell something?' For him, the Festivals 'set out to

ask: how can poets and text artists work with language now?' (p. 31). They offer generous opportunities for poets to explore and expand their work in spaces usually intended for visual artists. Works even spill out of the physical borders of the Art Gallery onto the streets of Bury and, in some cases, across time and distance to other eras and continents, far away from the physical page. Poets are given permission to work with|alongside|as visual artists, extending physically into and out of space. Poetry turns into visual artefact. The visual artists' work similarly pushes past textual borders: art as text|text art as poetry – although this review will focus on poetry.

The immediate commercial implications of taking poets' work into the spaces used by artists are feelingly picked up by James Davies of poetry press *if p then q*: 'factors such as limited financial resources, limited distribution networks and marketing are the norm for most poetry publishers. Art galleries have far larger resources and audiences [. . . with] huge implications on [the works'] exposure and market value' (pp. 90–91).

In a separate chapter, Alan Halsey records the experience of translating visual work from page to large framed triptychs: 'the making of those threw up ideas and material for the then still unmade last quarter of the work' (p. 107). Change in location, adoption of different medium, alterations of size, shift from page to canvas all have creative ramifications.

Movement is at the core, as textual and visual works shift into each other's arenas. derek beaulieu offers a tiny but hilarious account of attempts to send his (empty) box from Canada to Bury – nearly foiled by the very bureaucratic restrictions that end up enabling and making the piece:

UPS then instructed me that they would not ship an 'empty box' and that they needed the contents of the box to fit within one of their predetermined categories. After negotiations, we agreed to enclose within the box a single sheet of blank A4 paper. With this content – unwritten as it was – UPS could now categorize the contents of the box as 'documents' and could continue to process the application for transportation. (p. 37)

As beaulieu articulates through the words of John Cage, 'we are beginning to get nowhere'.

The significance of the Text Festival invitation is acknowledged many times in *The Text Festivals*. It is also reflected in early writings on the initial 2005 Festival, preserved online in what could be read as a tongue-in-cheek countdown:

It is finally time to announce a major event in the world of verbo-visual art (which world is itself conceptual, rather than concrete). Starting on the 18th of March and lasting until the 30th of October 2005, the Text Festival will take place across Bury, Lancashire, in the United Kingdom.¹

A 2005 press release mirrors the excitement: The 'Text Festival challenges the boundaries between art and poetry, with a combination of text art and visual poetry'.² As the wording implies, the Text Festivals are not 'about' poetry. Tony Trehy states this unequivocally:

in 2011 it was interesting to observe how a number of poets identified the Festival taking a direction or a position in relation to poetry. The Festival isn't about poetry; it's not a poetry festival. The festival is always to do with a question. (p. 32)

Trehy emphasises the two-|multi-fold, open nature of the Festivals: 'the stated aim of the first Text Festival [is] that art can be read as poetry and poetry can be viewed as art' and it 'was to be the space where artists and writers from all over the world could meet, share and show the increasingly important possibilities of language in art [. . .] it would not be predictable' (p. 27; p. 32). Trehy contrasts this with the more usual dull interactions between text and art – witness Caroline Bergvall's lugubrious assessment of the 2009 Serpentine Marathon event: 'the debates between art and poetry remain superficial and usually kept on a back foot' (p. 36). Phil Davenport also acknowledges both the shared material of poets and text artists and the lack of

interplay between them, but then informs us that “*Artists as poets/artists as poets*” was the gambit of the first Text Festival in 2005’ (p. 67). A slip of the pen? Shouldn’t it be ‘*Poets as artists/artists as poets*’?

Certainly there are interesting collisions. Tony Lopez celebrates Liz Collini’s ‘The Agency of Words’ (exhibited at the 2009 Text Festival):

The remarkable thing about the installation is that Collini draws her letters and words showing all the normally hidden work that goes into the design and preparation of printed letterforms, shapes that we habitually look through and barely register when we read. (p. 18)

Collini on Collini, however, writes contrastingly of her relief at ‘not needing to explain that my work is not driven by typography. Typography may be the means of expression, but it is not the end’ (p. 137).

For Lopez, Concrete Poetry has served its time: ‘the movement labelled as Concrete Poetry was something that happened in the sixties and the seventies and then dissolved’ (p. 21). Bob Cobbing stirringly believed in its ongoing nature (both past and future): ‘This is nonsense because there has been this sort of poetry throughout history. There has been visual poetry, there has been sound poetry, and we are just the modern manifestation’ (pp. 57–58).

James Davies words his opinion carefully, ‘the chief preoccupation of the Text Festival has been the investigation into all forms of written, spoken and visual art that uses language or text as its basis; where text is interesting and meaningful’ (p. 89). This rather broad, generous definition nears Edwin Morgan’s thoughts, as documented in Cobbing and Lawrence Upton’s *Word Score Utterance, Choreography, in Verbal and Visual Poetry*, that ‘[w]hat “visual poetry” does is foreground and specialise and extend and sharpen something which has always been there’.³ Does poetry on the page|vellum|parchment, even in the most conventional form, work visually through line-endings|stanza-division|page-positioning|indentation, and is therefore its translation to visual presentation on a wall|screen merely a continuation of

previous manipulations of its visual qualities? When semantic restraints are loosened and when cross-currents flow between syntax|metre|accent|punctuation (i.e. visual indicators of speed or pauses), what poetry is not playing visually?

However, this does not alter the problematic, shocking impact visual textual effects can have. In his 1992 publication, *Silence and Sound: Theories of Poetics from the Eighteenth Century*, Richard Bradford has written on the difficulties eighteenth-century readers encountered when first introduced to blank verse: the visual|aural confusion of enjambment and of syntax|rhyme|metre created conflicting sound and visual effects which forced the uncomfortable recognition that poetry's visual effects exist separately from the aural. Lord Kames records his recognition, in his 1762 *Elements of Criticism*, of 'the spatial, typographic separation of words as a kind of metagrammar that is unique to the printed poem; a system, moreover, that is capable of challenging the conventional relationship between individual units of meaning'.⁴ It is disappointing therefore and surprising that, with the notable exception of Robert Grenier, there is little visually experimental use of text in the text of *The Text Festivals*, an omission that, it must be admitted, is replicated in this review apart from a tentative indulgence in '|'. Grenier stands out for his coded use of capitals, spaces, exclamation marks, italics, obliging the reader to revisit|reimagine|re-see|re-hear what they read: 'I had finally come with/*realized* a public "alternative" to The Spoken Word (not "better" but *another* place of presence for a poet's language: Drawn Letters in Space)' (p. 100).

The Text Festivals feed into the visual|aural|semantic poetic tradition. When Cobbing 'cut his page adrift from the left-right imperatives of Western linear reading [. . . and] substituted something that was just as strong, the organising visual principles of shape and tone, directed with great power' (p. 64), he was continuing in a history of visual textual work. The power of Cobbing's work seems linked to movement. Davenport bears witness to Cobbing's physical dance of creativity: 'There are many reports of Cobbing's own gestural repertoire and dance-like making process as he leapt around his copier, moving the pages as they were scanned: "When I'm working round the copier I'm dancing"' (Cobbing interviewed by W. Mark

Sutherland, p. 64). Movement is appropriate. Text art|visual text|visual poetry hovers on borders, between disciplines, and, underneath the prose of *The Text Festivals*, it is possible to detect polite disagreements as to the nature|position|definition of the creative work being celebrated. There is also a nervous preponderance of lists|cataloguing|naming. Is this fear of oblivion, need for recognition, and if so, whose? It seems counterproductive. Thankfully, it is counterpointed by the cheerful non-chronology of the Text Festivals themselves, best expressed in the non-existent legendary 2007 Festival, as Trehy notes: 'people assume it took place and regret missing it' (p. 32).

This relaxed detachment, letting go of the desire to name and label, or indeed to be named and labelled, is echoed in the laughter of Cobbing, faithfully recorded by Davenport. Laughter when the 'British Library [. . .] had rejected his early publications for archiving "because they weren't language" and then later had been obliged to buy Writers Forum material at a high price' (p. 55). Laughter '[w]hen Buffalo University complained that Bob had only sent them copies not originals for their manuscript collection (he reported, grinning) they missed the point. Bob's means of both publishing and writing poetry was the copier' (p. 56).

With such laughter comes freedom: freedom from the need for approbation and freedom also from the need to list. References to 'happy accident' occur more than once in the book (by Davenport and Collini, for example), and Cobbing's focus on difference is discussed: 'As publisher he embraced anything' (p. 56). Collini values absence, '[a]s I see the word as a signifier of absence for something which is elsewhere, so the work itself is eventually displaced and becomes absent, a memory of something elsewhere in time and space' (p. 137). The visual focus of the texts seems to lead to a sensual approach. As Davenport puts it, 'words have ceased to be signifiers. They become instead a kind of sensual counterpoint to making language and finding understanding, or losing it' (p. 63). Maybe this is where the Text Festivals are travelling, reaching into the physical senses and into movement, into the elsewhere-ness of text, combining and throwing into the light effects such as Grenier's curious and relentless sprinklings of capitals|exclamation marks|italics etc. The best of these

works, as reflected in this writing about them, as reflected in Davenport's words, 'remain at the very outer edge of the poem, a leaky non-border that shades into text art, sound score, abstraction, performance and dance' (p. 64).

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Notes

- ¹ 'The Text Festival Begins in Ten Days', <<http://dbqp.blogspot.co.uk/2005/03/text-festival-begins-in-ten-days.html>> [accessed 23 November 2014].
- ² *ibid.*
- ³ Bob Cobbing and Lawrence Upton, *Word Score Utterance, Choreography, in Verbal and Visual Poetry* (London: Writers Forum, 1998), p. 125.
- ⁴ Richard Bradford, *Silence and Sound: Theories of Poetics from the Eighteenth Century* (London: Associated University Presses, 1992), p. 95.

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