

curators to give a particular inflection to the works they have assembled. The Institute of Anti-Formalism, for instance, shows Wladyslaw Streminsky's puzzling attempts to adapt the formalist language of Unism to the representation of the collectivity of human labour, and includes two remarkable films by the Norwegian artist Ane Hjort Guttu in which she brings an art researcher's cool gaze to bear on the set-ups her young son makes with the objects in his environment (*How to Become a Non-Artist*, 2007) or discusses the art production of a woman artist who has decided to withdraw completely from the art system *Untitled (The City at Night)*, 2013. These and other works in this section of the exhibition question the expectations and conventions of the professional art world and undermine notions of progress enshrined in the narratives of 20th-century art history.

The curators of the first Bergen Assembly have used the Strugatsky novel as a mirror to look back to the underground virtues of the old communist system and to test the values of Norway's social democratic Utopia. This tension is played out most tellingly in a new film by art collective Chto Delat?, aptly set on Norway's Arctic border with Russia. *A Border Musical* uses Brechtian *songspiel* to cut close to the knuckle of cultural and ideological difference with a story about a cross-border marriage that ends in disaster when Norway's social services intervene in the parenting of the bride's Russian son.

'Monday Starts on Saturday' includes other fine moving-image works – Josef Dabernig's *Hypercrisis*, 2011, Jan Peter Hammer's *Tilikun* and Christian von Borries's *I'm M*, both 2013, most memorable among them – but perhaps its greatest achievement is its overall tone, evident in the quality of writing in the catalogue and exhibition guide. The curators have approached their task with an impressive lightness of touch, constructing a world of critical fantasy just below the surface of Bergen's orderly reality. The 'institutes' sit quietly within their host institutions, discreetly framed, effectively but modestly presented: a series of portals through which – as in the Strugatsky novel – one gains access to radically different worlds. ■

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Bob Cobbing: ABC in Sound

Exhibition Research Centre Liverpool

9 October to 22 November

'Adventure, Aventure, Aventereure, Adventure' – the iconic opening words of Bob Cobbing's *Sound Poem*, 1965, otherwise known as *ABC in Sound*. Over 22 minutes, beginning with A and ending with Z, Cobbing recombines letters, words and sounds to effectively rewrite the linguistic institution of the English language. It is a mythic rebeginning – there are, I suppose, parallels with the Darmstadt School – a razing of language before the rebuilding. But often rebeginnings are not the clean breaks we imagine them to be: Cobbing had precedents in the continental Avant Garde of Guillaume Apollinaire, FT Marinetti and Kurt Schwitters; and was of a milieu that included, among many others, Henri Chopin, Eric Mottram, Dom Sylvester Houédard, John Latham, Jeff Nuttall and Ernst Jandl. The other myth associated with *ABC in Sound* is that it was written during a delirious bout of flu, a flu Cobbing met with a concoction of medication and generous slugs of whiskey.

It is entirely apt, therefore, that William Cobbing and Rosie Cooper, curators of the most thorough exhibition of Bob Cobbing's life and work to date, should call it 'Bob Cobbing: ABC in Sound'. The 1965 recording sounds out across the pan-media assemblage of printed matter, paintings, documents, films, sound works, objects and artefacts at the Exhibition Research Centre in Liverpool. The show's title announces the curators' authoritative intention to begin again; but, as we know, there is no beginning again. After all, it was only a couple of years ago that Lawrence Upton curated 'Some Variations on a Theme of Bob' at Space, London and, shortly after that, 'Bob Cobbing and the Book' at the University of West England. In 2005 David Toop assembled Cobbing's recorded work as part of Text Festival at Bury Art Gallery. So why do we need another exhibition?

Cobbing's oeuvre is voluminous and incomplete. His output across media was prodigious and often ad hoc. Many publications were produced in small editions, often without regard for longevity. There has also been a tendency to disentangle the various aspects of his practice, which seems best described, paradoxically, as a kind of fracturous *Gesamtwerk*. The British Library's part in this – it mainly holds tape works, but curiously enough also Cobbing's divorce papers – seems like a value judgement where Cobbing

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himself didn't pronounce one. There is no singularly exhaustive cataloguing and holding of Cobbing's work.

William Cobbing is the poet's grandson. Indeed, most of the works come from the Cobbing family's personal archive, with additional material borrowed from Jennifer Pike (Cobbing's spouse), Jasia Reichardt (guardian of Gaberbocchus Press, a publishing house founded in 1948 by filmmakers Stefan and Franciszka Themerson to make the likes of Alfred Jarry and Kurt Schwitters available to English-speaking audiences), and Marvin and Ruth Sackner (owners of the most comprehensive archive of sound and concrete poetry). 'ABC in Sound' initiates what the curators call Bob Jubilé, a year-long series of events and exhibitions devoted to his legacy, which will culminate in a book published by Occasional Papers.

'ABC in Sound' tacitly acknowledges the myth of Cobbing's delirium in composing the eponymous poem. Indeed, there is a delirium in all of Cobbing's work which is reflected in the sheer quantity of information in this exhibition. The complex floorplan is encyclopedic, but has mercifully been separated into artefacts and reproductions of poems. The curators worked with graphic designer Sara de Bondt in the exhibition and publication design. The relationship between them is intriguing, not least because it graciously – refreshingly – concedes limitations to the curators' competencies. What separates curating from designing? If a sensibility analogous to the disposition of text at the heart of Cobbing's visual poems is desired, what does it mean to outsource this to a professional and thus divorce it from poetry practice?

Behind a beguiling arrangement of poetry-gig posters, black vinyl lettering, upper and lower case, elongated, lopped, inverted and overlapped, scatter the wall. These words and non-words in motion, transposed from the page, defy architecture, travel round corners and tattoo the gallery window, invading everyday life. Cobbing would have welcomed impromptu performances of any material on display here, but the words writ large, 'song signals', are an invitation to incantation. What they also convey are principles of freedom and public space that ledger Cobbing's entire body of work. As he explains in a filmed interview with Judy Merryman, shot at the Sackners' home in 1982 and on display here, concrete poetry doesn't lay down laws; it is concerned with freedom, and the signals on the page are just indications of possibilities for performance. And, we learn in a number of documents on display, poetry must be heard to exist: 'The poem exists when it is spoken or performed,' he writes in *What the tape-recorder teaches the poet*, 1985. 'Performances may vary widely according to the environment, the audience, the performer's perception of these, and the performer's

response to these perceptions. A poem must be heard.' Elsewhere, in a document titled *Poetry for a new age*, 1969 – this personal copy sheathed in biro-scribbled editorial notes and typewriter overwritten – Cobbing writes of the movements and spatial rhythms that activate sound and visual poetry as 'steps to the arena'. The arena, it seems, is a communitarian space, provisional, in-process, evolving over time.

Some of the great pleasures of 'ABC in Sound' are the many-layered micro-histories it contains. For example, Cobbing's publications span a 60-year range of printing techniques, including letaset, photocopying, ink duplication, litho and desktop inkjet. There is also a micro-history of exhibition display. Head-height grid frames constructed of light pine are configured to hold white panels printed with visual scores and poems. The design is a copy of structures used for the 1971 exhibition 'konkrete poëzie' at the Stedelijk in Amsterdam – to date the single most comprehensive exhibition of concrete poetry. But these elegant 'frame structures' don't simply display configurations of poems, they allow the curators to neatly differentiate this matter from other diverse media on display – not a false typological distinction, anathema to Cobbing's output, but just to help the audience catch its breath. The frame structures' effects are also spatial: they balance the gallery space and provide framed vistas on to works. The exhibition's flirtation with fuggy 1970s-style county council pinboard display – showing a chronological timeline of Cobbing's life – is justified when we learn it is the same set-up the poet used in his studio. Cobbing was keen on revisiting and recycling aspects of his work, which would seem to defy this chronological sequencing. But where the rest of the exhibition swirls, the chronology runs in wonderful tension like a spine along the length of one of the walls. From previously unseen documents and correspondence we learn of Cobbing's catalytic involvement in activities ranging from the establishment of the Hendon Experimental Arts Club in 1950 to the initiation of an illustrated literary magazine for the boys of Ashmole School, where he taught in the early 1960s, to his meeting with Stephen Dwoskin and the formation of the London Film-Makers' Co-op in 1966. There are press clippings and personal correspondence on, for example, the infamous Destruction in Art Symposium and seminal alternative venue Better Books. And never-before-seen architectural plans and details for a bookshop which would have housed the LFMC, that Cobbing and two colleagues fundraised for but which was denied planning permission when one of these colleagues hosted a drunken party in the existing site building.

'ABC in Sound' plays a vital role in gathering and making available a life and body of work that for various reasons can feel difficult to grasp. Where, for example, John Latham's Flat Time House in south London has enabled a new generation of artists and producers to respond to his work, the absence even of a coherent collection of Cobbing's work has limited his important legacy. Cobbing's varied output and collaboration mean that 'ABC in Sound' will interest not only poets but also sound designers, ethnomusicologists, visual artists, graphic designers, filmmakers, children of the UK counter-culture and so on. Hopefully the Bob Jubilé year-long series of events will serve to reaffirm Cobbing's inspired ethics and output. London-based artist Holly Antrum's newly commissioned 16mm film, *Catalogue*, featuring Jennifer Pike and screened at 'ABC in Sound', is an important start. Historically, wives of poets have been overshadowed and Antrum's film is a reassertion of Pike in the creative marriage. ■

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Bob Cobbing
installation view

