

# **Poetry and Dance?**

**Lawrence Upton**

## Dance?

I went pear-shaped a long time ago, though I still treasure Chris Goode's remark on a listserv that, in performance, I am "as deft as a weather-girl". However, my intended meaning here of "dance" is wide, wide enough for me, including (and much influenced by) the late Bob Cobbing's favourite Shlovsky quotation, that poetry is "a ballet of the speech organs". It is part of my assertion of the physicality of poetry, both in the initiating inscription of media (often, but not necessarily, pen on paper) and in the recursive realisation and remaking of the text in public performance. I recall that, in **Digital Poetics**, Loss Pequeño Glazier speaks of a text coming into existence as it is read, which is potentially very useful. But let's step back.

The poet in performance is seen as much as heard; and it follows that they should pay attention to how they look in the same way that one hopes they will pay attention to how they sound. This may induce behavioural correctness or flamboyance - dressing up. That's o.k., but it is not what greatly interests me. That is not what I meant at all, any more than I would suggest they should seek to change their accents.

I am more concerned that they look at the audience, all of the audience; and are organised and prepared; and, where appropriate, rehearsed; and that they sit or stand well so that they can breathe fully. This is far from widespread practice.

One hopes they'll be relaxed enough to be able to get their voice around the poems' demands. This may mean no more than being able to move with the rhythms of the poem, rather than wasting physical and mental control trying to stand still; but, in the case of some texts that some of us make, it can involve body movement to get the sound one wants or to further explicate the verse - the body as readable poetic figure.

## Leap of the I off the page

Some time in the later 90s I realised that, if I wanted to perform shattered letter shapes - and I did and I do! then the best thing I could do would be to shake one or both of my arms hard and rapidly while I was giving voice. It may have looked peculiar, but it worked. Later, as so often with machine modification of the recorded voice, I found that, having heard recordings of myself making those noises, I could repeat them without or with less violent bodily movement.

I paid attention to the effects of disability on voice and gesture.<sup>(1)</sup>

Some of my earlier ideas on these matters - not superseded, but possibly expanded - are in my own contributions to **Word Score Utterance Choreography in verbal and visual poetry**<sup>(2)</sup> and in **How do we perform that**?<sup>(3)</sup>

Such inquiries arose from a long term active consideration of the performance of what is generally called visual poetry which involved both actual practice and discussion. I remember a substantial chunk of an afternoon at a *Writers Forum Workshop* in the mid 90s being taken up with an ad hoc debate on where best to position a text whilst one performed it, especially in a multi-voice piece.

Cobbing liked to hold his text at arm's length. That suited his vision and it went well with the slow progress around a space which he adopted sometimes. I preferred dropping the text on the floor. That suited my vision and left my arms free!

As long as we had more than one copy of the text, it was OK to each do our own thing, though it looked unconstructively odd. But often we performed with Jennifer Pike, and my text then might be right where she would dance. She herself complained that both our solutions left her without decent sight of the text; and that the audience might like to see the text throughout the performance.

Out of that discussion, of which I have quoted only a small part, came our late practice of projecting the text from slides whenever we could. Jennifer and Bob had used slides many times, but I think this was the first time that the printed text was abandoned and that the only copy of the score available was the slide.

My slide projector, a Kodak carousel from an era when projectors were projectors and complete with a remote switch, fell apart at an SVP evening in 1996, just before Basil King was about to use it. (I thought he took it quite well.) Therefore, we used Jennifer's slide

projector. This came from an era when projectors were giants. It was heavy and was covered in body armour; and Jennifer had built a strong wire cage around it so that she could swing it by one hand as she danced in *Birdyak*.

The slides were hand-advanced, a limitation which became a compositional element. In a trio, Jennifer and I took turns to operate the slides while the other danced (Jennifer) or vocalised (Upton). Jennifer was also adept at modifying the image as it was projected, not just tilting the machine or changing the focus, but passing the projected image through glass prisms.

Because the projector was fed a slide at a time, the order often went "wrong". Thus, in a number of ways, the person at the slide machine was rewriting a part of the text that was being performed.

Other parts of the text were what one could see and what one could hear, that is what was visible of the space and of one's co-performers. There were bits of it bopping around. The written text, from which the slides had been made, was a jumping off point for improvisation and not a full notation.

Jennifer made costumes for herself which, being light-coloured with a light-coloured mask, made her a moving screen; and she was able to walk into and out of the space of the main screen, whether it was a standard screen or a white wall or a sheet hanging in folds. It brought unpredictable complex movement into and out of the text. It blurred the distinction of the dancer and the text she was dancing.

At the fourth Sub Voicive Colloquium, Cobbing and I performed that way briefly from our **Domestic Ambient Noise**, wearing white shirts so that we were in part our own projection screen as we performed the text moving on us, behind us and around us. Some reading this article may well have seen that.

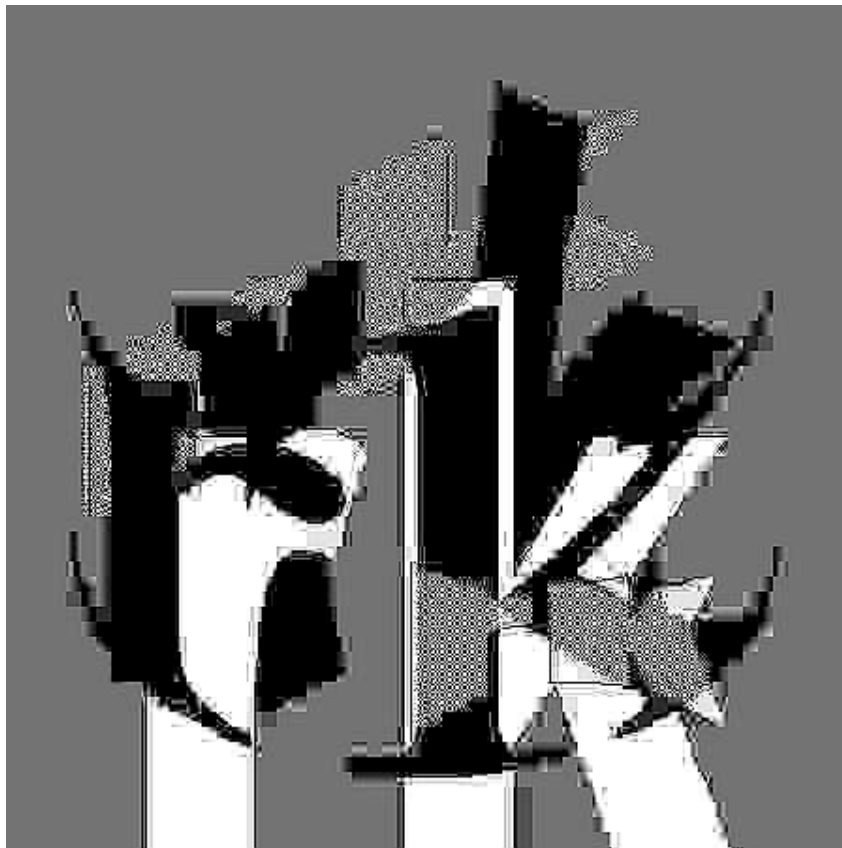
## Words which dance

In early 2000, I was beginning to approach the making of a performance or two of my text **Stone Head**. It is an entirely lexical text, but assumes a spatially-based vocal performance method which is to be devised. That was left unresolved by the sudden unexpected death of my collaborator...

I have an extended series of poems called **Naming**. One of the series is a series itself, called **Initial Dance**<sup>(4)</sup> - initial as in first, as in Adam putting labels on everything, and initial as in the first letters of a person's name. I was naming a good friend by making visual texts of the initial letters of his name.

He's a bouncy sort of a chap, in a pleasant way, and he seems to enjoy a dance; so my conceit was to make the initials of his forename and surname, R and K, appear to dance energetically.

It occurred to me that it would be fun to see those poems performed by dancers. I have some notions of what that might look



like which claim to be quite clear until I examine them closely in an attempt to imagine them more clearly; and then they turn out to be rather like those stop-frame memory tableaux of our early childhood - a sketch of a situation, movements made when one is looking elsewhere, suggestions rather than details...

So little information that I would need remarkable dancers.

And I wonder how that would turn out, especially as I was not at all sure that I could say what is going on in the book and therefore what I want. (W S Graham says in a letter<sup>(5)</sup> that the poet writes of what they don't know.)

What was I trying to achieve by involving dancers? Next I'd be making *Initial Dance* merchandise!

Bob Cobbing had a doubtful phrase which he first applied to making visual versions of linear text (his eye version and ear version of **Are your children safe in the sea?**, for instance): it is, he said, making the poem more like itself. Later he applied the phrase to the performance of a poem.

I don't know about more like itself... more concrete perhaps. Certainly, making into existence multiple valid versions of the text.

Anyway, in a state(s) of mind something like that, whatever that is, I formulated the idea of investigating how one could enhance the performance of a text, the images that the audience experienced, by borrowing and adapting the techniques and usual facilities of dancers.

I talked to people. I did little jigs when I thought no one was looking. I read books on dance. In due course, when I put my case, Chisenhale Dance Space agreed to back research into these matters during the autumn of 2001.

## The research

It seemed undemanding. I projected a series of 5 workshops, to which all were welcome. We found the investigation so rich in possibilities that I extended the programme to 7. It went according to plan while the plans went out of the window. Let me tell you about it.

One of the most interesting things was the necessity of having to rethink relations with one's collaborators. It hadn't occurred to me this might be a problem.

There were a number of people involved with whom, over the years, I had developed ways of making productively which largely obviated personal and creative conflicts and unwilling compromise.

And there we were, as so often before, together in a room to originate poetry or what might lead to poetry, but with temporary slight changes in relationship. Because we were using other people's resources, we were accountable. That never became onerous, but it was there. There was a direction to what we were doing which was other than the desire to end up with a publishable or performable text.

On the one hand I felt at first an implicit group "What are we doing?" and often another "Why would we want to do that?!" And I felt a need to direct and a need to do no such thing at the same time.

I doubt that I made things any easier by going back over all our learned assumptions, including the question "Where do we put the text while we are performing?", and asking that we consider whether or not we still supported projection.

(As the research proposal was predicated on the need to project the image, there was something a little suicidal about questioning that; but we again agreed that projection served our purposes. In addition, early on I noted the feeling that to put the text on the floor "is not gesturally neutral"; and, a week later, that to project the image "is not a universal solution".)

The project disrupted familiarity. We were not composing in the context of a forthcoming performance nor starting either from a blank sheet or from tentative ideas. We were just there. Or so I felt.

The project challenged many working assumptions, especially those that I / we had not even noticed as being assumptions!

And I found that I had become stuck in my behavioural ways. I observed far less comfortable traits, too, like taking people for granted. These weren't insights I had hoped for! because I think I would have assumed it was ridiculous to expect them had it occurred to me to think about it; but retrospectively I am grateful. (And, nowadays, as a result, I am perfect.)

Not only was it good to try to examine and strengthen friendships with collaborators; but the new situation revitalised my own practice. Activities in the Chisenhale workshops spilled over productively into Writers Forum Workshops and created the need to meet up at other times with my collaborators, to phone, to write letters. My blithe assumption that we could meet up at Chisenhale on the dates assigned and then do other things in between proved glib and shallow.

I had made my plans for each session with what I thought was flexible language, learned in the writing and approval of schemes of work in school and college. It soon became clear that the plans were too rigid. That's not surprising when one consider that schemes of work are often applied to what is held to be factually true beyond contest.

Each session threw up such unexpected perspectives that it was necessary to make considerable efforts to achieve definable and summarisable results whilst following our own creative inclinations.

To generalise...

It was exciting to engage with the texts of other poets, but it did not go as smoothly as at WF Workshops, as inquiry pushed into relatively unfamiliar ground.

I recall, in particular, that one night we looked at a text by Sean Bonney, of which some lines are set at a variety of angles to the horizontal. Sean had offered it as an example of a text it is probably inappropriate to try to voice, about a week before<sup>(6)</sup>. Nevertheless, at Chisenhale, we tried it solo and in groups, trying to move ourselves locationally (rather than gesturally) using the page as a map... It didn't work and I doubt it ever would, though in our context that is what the poem seemed to invite. We were trying to make it work in ways inimical to its structures and it wouldn't have it.

I noted at the time:

"I like the poem when I read it on the page. It resonates then for me in a way that it does not when it is vocalised... Attempts to use the layout of the poem as a notation were largely unproductive in terms of gaining performance ground on the poem... Even what was satisfying in Wednesday's performance of the poem, for me, conflicted with what I enjoy in the poem when I look at it. My conclusion, therefore, is that we were doing some violence to the poem in trying to identify performance notation within it... Certainly, in some of my contributions, I was making the text more literary with my repetitions and pauses."

We spent some time looking at the layout of a page of my **Wire Sculptures**<sup>(7)</sup>. After that, I noted it "has confirmed my gut feeling that **Wire Sculptures** is to be read with minimal attention to environment and with minimal bodily gestures, almost all of the work being done by the voice: that's how it's written."

My conclusion then was "Not all linear poems present problems and opportunities appropriate to the brief... [It] could lead us into a Peter and the Wolf kind of thing... It ain't that kind of choreography which grabs me"; and soon we fell back on the use of **Initial Dance** as the default text to use. I'll say more about that choice at the end of this article.

By the time the research started, the housepress edition of **Initial Dance** had sold out. Anticipating that, Bob Cobbing had published

a Writers Forum edition<sup>(8)</sup> and subsequently the entire set has been included in **R & K**<sup>(9)</sup>

The final versions of the images (17 in all) were made with computer-assistance and existed primarily as jpg files. Instead of printing them out and saying that the prints were the originals, I sent the jpgs off to housepress, the publisher, and left him to determine the final appearance on the page.

I did the same with them when they were to be included in **R & K**, and I regard the differences between the images in the different books as part of one way **Initial Dance** operates - there is no one version of the image; and others than I have had a hand in determining aspects of the versions.

In the case of the *Writers Forum* edition, Bob Cobbing was not able to make his own prints from my jpgs. Instead, I reordered the sequence of images.

As we repeatedly worked on the same text, we began to develop approaches to extending them. There was no final outcome, and was never intended to be; but a long list of possibilities could be derived from the experience.

For instance, we projected the same and different images into the space, beside each other, across each other and so on, using at one point four projectors. (During that session, Jennifer's ancient projector, already described, caught fire with the stress of it all.)

Jennifer was, throughout, my main collaborator, while others came and went. I learned an immense amount from her and am extremely fortunate to have had such an opportunity.

cris cheek was able to put in quite a bit of time in the latter half of the project, and that was very useful. Years before, cris and I had performed together: in *jjggjjgj*; and in *Bang Crash Wallop*; as a duo; and we had written together. It seemed to me that cris understood what I was after and was in sympathy (though, I am pleased to say, not entirely!) with my investigation. He worked very hard and openly.

Others, too, made valuable contributions, and I don't underestimate that; but I am happy to acknowledge how much cris and Jennifer are responsible for a successful project.

To display the projected images, we constructed a large number of prototype screens, using a broad variety of materials, from the near transparent, where the image swayed on a ghostly flimsiness,

to the near opaque, where the projection was transformed into shattered and dazzling reflected light. These screens were all shapes and sizes, sometimes heaps of cloth, sometimes long sheets of paper.

Building on Jennifer's methods, we made many experiments with moving screens, carried or pulled by the dancers, and moving projectors. Hours and hours of it were: "What happens if...?"

By these and other methods, we were able to construct virtual spaces with images apparently hanging in the air away from and between the walls rather than on them. The performer was able to move in a multiple space with recursive and iterative versions of an image which might be unstated or might be shown only in small. Within such virtual spaces, the possibility of multiple divergent-convergent performances in movement and in voice was not only encouraged and increased but almost the only thing which could be done!

We had dark screens which did not display any of the broadcast projection upon them so that elements of the images were missing - in one case, in the outline of a human figure - but yet with the existence of that missing material presented by its absence. Such black screens could be moved during the projection, thereby moving the outline of absence.

In another experiment, we made a large scale (to match the size of the projected image) "mannekin" of part of the text, the whole of which was projected on to a screen of folded material. The dancer, dressed in the same material, stood in the screen, holding the mannekin in place in the whole projection, and neither could be discerned.

As the dance began, the dancer emerged, arm in arm with the mannekin... A random set of elements of the whole image emerged moving upon a white-draped figure, defined only by elements of the image; and a single element slowly diverged from itself, dancing away from itself and dancing with the figure, all around them framing darkness.

### The choice of default text

I would like to think that similar experiments could be successfully conducted with a range of poetries; but when I chose **Initial Dance** as my default workshop text, I did so because it has little or no lexical content.

The image and the text are one thing. It implies sound but does not enforce it. It implies movement and meaning, but you have to bring almost all of those to it.



Dancing to with or out of it, one would be hard-pressed to dance illustratively - for some reason I have *Cats* in mind as being the type of an outcome of dancing with poetry to be avoided.

However, I felt it important to use a text which was not non-figurative. I have been performing with and on the edge of quite abstract texts for many years; but they would have brought a further complicating layer to what was already somewhat difficult to get hold of.

A danger of **Initial Dance** was that one might finish up with participants trying to dance the letter shapes as such. Decorative alphabets of human figures, often engaged in acrobatic copulation, are long-established and remain surprisingly popular. I have even found a kind of it in William Gibson's **Burning Chrome**:

"The flame's core was glacial crystal, shards and facets flashing up, twisting and gone, leaving behind near-subliminal images so bright and sharp that they cut the eye. Deke winced. People mostly. Pretty little naked people, fucking. "How the hell did you do that?"<sup>(10)</sup>

Well, that's ok if one is trying to entertain or to show off - as is a character in the story quoted - but it is not what I am after.

The difficulty remains of trying to define what it is I am after... Something that yet does not have a name which can be found in a direction in which I have not yet been able to point... It is not asking dancers or utterers to take the text as fixed notation...

Asking what it sounds like or looks like in performance is missing the point. There is no one answer. The only answer is to perform it, and some will do that more satisfyingly and or challengingly than others; but the next day they may well do it differently.

They certainly will in so many years, as meanings of words and the very sounds of the language mutate, and with those basic elements of communication mutating the cultural meaning of all gestural activity.

The text is on the page and may be looked at, but in the looking, a kind of performance, and more so in the utterance and ensuing movement, it is lifted and lifts itself off the page, becoming textual. Of course, it was textual, but now it is differently textual - "Making the poem more like itself" perhaps.

## Footnotes

This essay was first published in **The Paper** (edited by David Kennedy) in 2003

1. Some years ago there was a book called "Speech Disorders" by Lord Brain, so that the cover could be read SPEECH DISORDERS LORD BRAIN. I'm all for that, but sometimes Speech needs a little help with Its Lordship.
2. **Word Score Utterance Choreography in verbal and visual poetry**; 156pp; ISBN 0 86162 750 4; eds Cobbing and Upton; Preface by Cobbing and introductions by Upton (+ statement by Upton in body of book) and Robert Sheppard Writers Forum, 1998
3. **Poetry as choreography** talk given at Fifth Sub Voicive Colloquium 29 September 2001, Birkbeck College, London; published as **HOW DO WE PERFORM THAT? POETRY AS CHOREOGRAPHY: an essay on the performance of visual poetry** by housepress, Canada, October 2001 o.p.
4. **Initial Dance**. (housepress. 2001, o.p.).
5. to Edwin Morgan 22 September 1943 in **The Nightfisherman: Selected letters of W S Graham**, eds Snow, M & M; Carcanet, 1999; page 14; ISBN 185754 445 5
6. At the fifth Sub Voicive Colloquium
- 7 **Wire Sculptures** by Lawrence Upton, Reality Street Editions, 2003; ISBN 1 874400 24 5
8. **Initial Dance** by Lawrence Upton, *Writers Forum*, UK, 2001; ISBN 1 84254 40 8
9. **R & K** by Lawrence Upton, *World Visual Poetry*, St Petersburg, Russia, 2003
10. **Burning Chrome** by William Gibson, Grafton Books, 1988 P174; ISBN 0 586 07461 9 - The story, **Dogfight**, was co-written with Michael Swanwick