

Clasp

SAMPLER

*And the years pass until one generation dies
and their knowledge with them*

(Lee Harwood, 'One, Two, Three')

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CLASP

late-modernist poetry in London in the 1970s

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Introduction

ROBERT HAMPSON

This collection of reminiscences owes an immense debt to Geraldine Monk's *Cusp*, which constructs a "collective autobiography" of poets "living and writing in England and Wales" in the 1960s and 1970s "away from those two strongholds of poetic power", Cambridge and London.¹ It was also prompted by an interview (involving Ken Edwards and myself) with Sophie Seita about *Alembic*, which made us realise just how much we had forgotten since Wolfgang Görtzschacher's interviews with us in the 1990s.² In the background also is *The Grand Piano*, the multivolume "experiment in collective autobiography", published serially between 2006 and 2010 about San Francisco poetry.³ *CLASP* is an exercise in collective remembering – with, as Lawrence Upton's essay suggests, a consciousness of memory work as also a process of selecting, forgetting and inventing. The original plan had been to focus on the 1970s, the decade during which we had co-edited *Alembic* with Peter Barry. Some of those we approached felt they could not usefully remember enough of their poetry activities in this period; some were reluctant to return to the past.⁴ Also, as the project developed, it became clear that the original plan wouldn't work: the history did not fit neatly into the limits of the decade. We would have to start earlier to understand the roots of 1970s London poetry, and we would have to stray into the 1980s to see how some of the debates and actions of the 1970s played out.

We might as well begin here, then, with London in the late 1960s as viewed from the Strand. The US is engaged in war in Vietnam, and there are massive anti-war demonstrations world-wide. In London, there are battles outside the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square, and Fleet Street is still boarded up on Monday mornings after the weekend demonstrations.⁵ At this time, Fleet Street was still the centre of the newspaper industry: the battle of Wapping, when News International would take on the print unions, had to wait for the election of the Thatcher government at the end of the following decade. There are pubs in Fleet Street and off the Strand where women are not allowed to buy a drink. Third-year male students in the Skeat Library are clean-cut,

clean-shaven, dressed in sports jackets and grey flannel trousers; first-years are long-haired and moustachioed, wearing army-surplus great-coats. Meanwhile, elsewhere, students are occupying the Sorbonne and, much closer to home, the LSE; while visiting students bring news of the SDS's struggles in Germany.

As Robert Hewison has argued, the cultural revolution of the Sixties in London was the product of two ideologies developing in parallel: "the affluent and hedonistic Sixties of 'Swinging London', and the oppositional culture of the underground".⁶ There were various signs of this developing oppositional culture throughout the sixties. Hewison dates the start from the contributions made by William Burroughs and Alexander Trocchi to the 1962 Edinburgh Writers Conference organised by John Calder.⁷ In London, the public emergence of this culture was at the first International Festival of Poetry held at the Albert Hall in June 1965 – organised at a week's notice, in response to Allen Ginsberg's presence in London, with Trocchi as MC – which brought in 7,000 people for a four-hour poetry reading.⁸ However, this legendary event was not created *ex nihilo*, but can rather be seen as the outcome of some years of public poetry readings by Michael Horovitz, and other London-based British poets such as Pete Brown and Spike Hawkins.⁹ In September 1966, *The Destruction in Art Symposium* brought event-art to London: Gustav Metzger's auto-destructive art; Herman Nitsch and the Viennese Institute for Direct Art; Wolf Vostell and other Fluxus artists; and sound poetry from Bob Cobbing and Henri Chopin.¹⁰ Gustav Metzger's student, Pete Townsend, was to take destructive art to a wider audience, while the Fluxus artist Yoko Ono, who came over to London to perform her 'Cut Piece' at the Symposium, was also to have an impact on popular culture. Perhaps most important, during July 1967, *The Dialectics of Liberation* conference took place at the Round House, Chalk Farm. This was a coming together of artists, anti-psychiatrists, activists and philosophers, including Julian Beck of the New York Living Theatre, Allen Ginsberg, R.D. Laing and David Cooper, Stokely Carmichael and Black Power, John Gerassi and Ernest Mandel, Paul Goodman and Lucien Goldman, Herbert Marcuse and Gregory Bateson. As Miles suggests, this event, organised by Laing, could be seen as "a prototype for the occupations and teach-ins that occurred during the Events of May in Paris in 1968", but its more

immediate and undeniable outcome was the founding of the short-lived Anti-University of London in Rivington Street, Shoreditch.¹¹ The steering committee for the Anti-University included the poetry publishers Asa Benveniste and Stuart Montgomery, and the poet Ed Dorn; while the course-leaders included Bob Cobbing, Jeff Nuttall, Barry Miles, Lee Harwood and Cornelius Cardew. However, from this distance, what is remarkable about the conference is the bringing into dialogue of Black Power, revolutionary Marxism, ecology, performance art and poetry.¹² What is also noticeable is the absence of feminism: the Women's Movement was to develop more fully in the 1970s.¹³ Nevertheless, here were clear signs of a politically radical, intellectually curious counter-culture.

The institutions which supported this developing counter-culture included the Institute for Contemporary Arts in Dover Street, where Horowitz's *Live New Departures* appeared regularly from 1964 to 1966, and where Anne Lauterbach subsequently set up a lecture series, *Poetry Information*, and the Arts Lab in Drury Lane, established by Jim Haynes, which ran from 1967 to 1969.¹⁴ For the poets in this volume, the other significant phenomenon was a number of independent bookshops such as Indica Books on Kingsway, Better Books in Charing Cross Road, Bernard Stone's Turret Books in Kensington and Compendium in Camden Town, which not only provided access to books and magazines, but also acted as centres for information-exchange and making contacts. In addition, there were certain key individuals from the 1960s who had a major impact on London poetry of the 1970s. The most important of these was Bob Cobbing – founder of the Hendon Experimental Art Club in 1951 and Writers Forum and the Association of Little Presses during the 1960s – who was manager of Better Books in the late 1960s.¹⁵ Another was Jeff Nuttall. Inspired by William Burroughs's work with cut-ups and fold-ins, Nuttall had begun publishing *My Own Mag: A Superabsorbent Periodical* in November 1963. ("The message was: if you want to exist you must accept the flesh and the moment.")¹⁶ In 1964, he received a copy of Alexander Trocchi's *Sigma Portfolio* and linked up with Trocchi's situationist-inspired project of cultural revolution.¹⁷ In 1966, he also began to work with the *People Show*, a kind of Dada cabaret, which he stayed with till he moved to Bradford at the end of 1968. Both Sigma and the People Show staged events in the Better

Books basement. Nuttall's *Bomb Culture* (1968) provided an essential guide to post-war culture for those coming of age in the 1970s through its linkage of radical art and radical politics.¹⁸

The standard story of London innovative poetry of the 1970s is dominated by events at the Poetry Society between 1971 and 1977. This was the period when the mainstream of modernist poetries reached a higher public visibility through readings at the Poetry Society and in the pages of *Poetry Review* under Eric Mottram's editorship. Peter Barry has written about these events in his book *Poetry Wars*, and, inevitably, the Poetry Society features in a number of the reminiscences in this volume – primarily as a hub of activities, a congenial meeting place and a source of information about contemporary poetries.¹⁹ However, that narrative conceals other areas of poetic activity in London in the 1970s. Mottram, for example, besides editing *Poetry Review* and teaching full-time at King's College, London, was also involved in a series of large-scale conferences on contemporary poetry at the Polytechnic of Central London, as well as organising smaller-scale one-day conferences on contemporary US poetry at the Institute for United States Studies. Bob Cobbing's Writers Forum ran continuously through this period – either in the Poetry Society or outside it. In addition, Cobbing, who had been involved in setting up the Association of Little Presses, whose annual meetings became an important event in the innovative poet's social calendar, established the Poets Conference, a trade union for poets, dedicated to setting a minimum wage for poetry readings.²⁰ He was also involved with founding the Film-makers Co-op and the London Musicians Collective, both of which had porous boundaries with the London experimental poetry groupings.

Indeed, as this collection of reminiscences makes clear, there were various poetry groupings that could be included under the heading of London experimental or innovative poetry. There were not just divisions between page-based, sound, visual and performance poetries – although some poets, like Allen Fisher or Ulli McCarthy, covered all these areas. There were also outliers like Bernard Kelly's Dadaist group around the Enterprise pub in Chalk Farm, Carlyle Reedy in Notting Hill or Jeremy Reed. The attempt to present a "London School" of innovative poetry is also complicated by the fact that London was (and is) a place of transit.

As many of these reminiscences show, few of the poets (with the striking exception of Allen Fisher) were actually born in London. Many of the reminiscences are stories of arrival and, often, passing through. The Paladin Re/Active Anthology of “3 London Poets”, which published work by Allen Fisher, Bill Griffiths and Brian Catling, was, significantly and prophetically, entitled *future exiles*.²¹ An anthology of “new poets from London”, *Floating Capital* (1991), began with work by Cobbing and Fisher to acknowledge their importance for the younger poets included, but, though the collection accurately represents the London poetry of the 1980s, it is interesting that neither of the editors and none of the younger contributors now live in London.²² The “London School” turns out to be diasporic. However, there were various reading series (of varying longevity) that provided a focus during the 1970s: short-run series like Zero Events and Future Events; longer running reading series like King’s Readings and Sub-Voicive. In addition, there were also workshops – such as the Translation Workshop at King’s College, RASP (run collectively by Paul Brown, Ken Edwards and Allen Fisher), and Robert Shoppard’s Thursday evening meetings at his home in Tooting Bec – which functioned as assembly points and growth points for London poets.

London poetry of the 1970s was rhizomatic in its organisation. It grew out of a 1960s spirit of self-determination that included both a form-breaking freedom and a concern for ownership of the means of production. Publication through small presses and little magazines was a conscious choice: self-publishing included greater control over both content and presentation. There were also interactions with other art forms: an openness to poetic experimentation was combined with an interest in performance, sound and visual poetics. There was also an engagement with poetry at an international level. At the same time, there was an awareness of other related practices more locally: the Essex School around Wivenhoe Park, for example, or activities in Cambridge such as the publications of Rod Mengham’s Equipage Press and the annual CCCP. Larry Lynch has written that “The idea of practice... as the object of sustained critical attention, was an informal proposition at Cambridge”.²³ In London, by comparison, there was an interest in a mapping of the field of poetic practices but without “sustained critical attention”. Indeed, there was, rather, a marked reluctance to voice critical positions.

In his book *In the Sixties*, Miles observes that art college was, for him, “a stepping stone out of the... working-class”.²⁴ For some of the contributors to the present volume, university had the same function. After the 1963 Robbins Report, which accepted the principle that higher education was the right of anyone whose ability merited it, the population of the universities doubled in the 1960s. At the same time, there was a brief window when the working-classes could escape from the idea that certain areas of culture were banned to them. Instead, the field of culture was open and, as many of these reminiscences show, the boundaries were porous. The later concern with “elitism” has had the effect of closing off those areas from the working-class again. The disappearance of independent bookshops and the closure of public libraries has removed important points of access to a wider culture. On the other hand, the internet and digital media have made documentation and communication faster and easier.

NOTES

¹ Geraldine Monk (ed.), *Cusp: Recollections of Poetry in Transition* (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2012). I am also personally indebted to Geraldine for her advice about handling such a volume of “recollections”.

² Sophie Seita, ‘Interview with Ken Edwards and Robert Hampson’, *Mimeo Mimeo* 9 (April 2014), pp. 45-65; Wolfgang Görtzschacher, ‘Interview with Ken Edwards: From *Alembic* to Reality Street Editions’ and ‘Interview with Robert Hampson: Exploring Different Forms and Formats’ in Wolfgang Görtzschacher, *Contemporary Views on the Little Magazine Scene* (Salzburg: Poetry Salzburg, 2000), pp. 233-264 and 388-426.

³ Rae Armantrout, Steve Benson, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Tom Mandel, Ted Pearson, Kit Robinson, Ron Silliman, Bob Perelman, Barrett Watten, *The Grand Piano* (Detroit, mode A, 2006-10).

⁴ Allen Fisher had already engaged in an act of remembering his entry into poetry in the 1960s. See ‘Skipping across the pond: interactions between American and British poetries 1964-1970’ in David Nowell Smith and Abigail Lang (eds), *The Legacy of Modernism* (2015).

⁵ The Vietnam Solidarity Committee, headed by Tariq Ali, organised a demonstration outside the US Embassy on 17 March 1968. The police sealed off the square and then attacked the crowds with repeated charges on horseback.

⁶ Robert Hewison, *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties 1960-75* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. xiii.

⁷ Burroughs was based in London from 1965 to 1974.

⁸ There have been many accounts of this event. See, for example, Barry Miles, *London Calling: a Countercultural History of London since 1945* (London: Atlantic Books, 2010), pp.144-53.

⁹ In 1959, Michael Horovitz had launched his magazine *New Departures* in Oxford with the first issue featuring work by Samuel Beckett, Burroughs and Kurt Schwitters. He subsequently teamed up with Pete Brown, and, from 1960 onwards, as *Live New Departures*, hitch-hiked around Britain giving readings in colleges, pubs and art-galleries in a jazz-and-poetry format, linking up with poets in Liverpool, Edinburgh and Newcastle. In Liverpool, Adrian Henri and Johnny Byrne started holding poetry readings in Streate's Coffee-Bar from 1961. Tom and Connie Pickard opened the Modern Tower Poetry Centre in Newcastle in 1964.

¹⁰ Miles, pp. 153-58. It was organised by Gustav Metzger and John Sharkey; the honorary committee included Bob Cobbing, Jim Haynes, Barry Miles, and Wolf Vostell.

¹¹ Miles, p. 257, p. 258. Cornelius Cardew taught experimental music; Bob Cobbing taught sound poetry. Lee Harwood and Ed Dorn were also involved.

¹² Stokely Carmichael was a dominant figure at the conference. Robin Bunce dates the 1970s explosion of black power within the UK to this event: within a week of the conference the United Coloured People's Association had expelled its white members and produced a new black-power oriented manifesto; within a year, there was a British Black Panther movement. See Robin Bunce and Paul Field, *Darcus Howe: A Political Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

¹³ Hewison notes that, in 1969, "a loose federation of women's groups had begun to evolve into the London Workshop" and that a conference at Ruskin College, Oxford, in February 1970, was "the first national conference of the women's liberation movement" (p. 217). Carolee Schneemann performed at DIAS and the feminist Juliet Mitchell was, however, a member of the steering committee of the Anti-University.

¹⁴ The ICA was set up in 1946 by Roland Penrose, Herbert Read and Geoffrey Grigson. Both Penrose and Read had backgrounds in surrealism: they had organised the London International Surrealist Exhibition of 1936.

¹⁵ Writers Forum's first publication, *Limbless Virtuoso*, by Keith Musgrave and Jeff Nuttall, appeared in 1963.

¹⁶ Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture* (London: Paladin, 1970), p. 141. As Nuttall ob-

serves, “we were in the same place but Burroughs was travelling in the opposite direction” (p.142).

¹⁷ Hewison, p.107-9. According to Miles, Nuttall subsequently did all the mimeograph printing for Trocchi, turning out 39 pamphlets over three years on the school duplicating machine he shared with Cobbing. Barry Miles, *London Calling*, pp. 137, 139.

¹⁸ Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture* (London: Paladin, 1970).

¹⁹ Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* (Cambridge: Salt, 2006).

²⁰ For a fuller account of Cobbing’s role and activities, See Stephen Willey, , ‘Bob Cobbing 1950-1978: Performance Poetry and the Institution’, Unpublished PhD Thesis (University of London, 2013).

²¹ *Future exiles: 3 London Poets* (London: Paladin, 1992).

²² Adrian Clarke & Robert Sheppard (eds), *Floating Capital: new poets from London* (Elmwood, Connecticut: Potes & Poets Press, 1991). Of the poets included, Gilbert Adair and cris cheek now live in the USA; Hazel Smith lives in Australia; Paul Brown, Adrian Clarke, and Ken Edwards have moved to the south coast; and Robert Sheppard and Maggie O’Sullivan have moved north.

²³ Larry Lynch, Foreword to John Hall, *On Performance Writing* (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2013), p.15.

²⁴ Barry Miles, *In the Sixties* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), 5.