

WRITING

"Close to the literal"

[by Lawrence Upton and John Drever]

Lawrence Upton / John Drever

Close to the literal by Lawrence Upton and John Drever has four elements. A digital slide show of 120 images, made by Lawrence Upton, advancing every 10 seconds; and an 8 channel treated studio recording, composed and made by John Drever from two studio recordings of Lawrence Upton reading the slide show as a score; live vocal intervention during performance by Lawrence Upton; live treatment during performance by John Drever.

Close to the literal is deeply collaborative.

The piece has two makers, not one. It has two performers, not one. It is not just the sum of two people's efforts: those efforts are not separable within the piece, and are symbiotic.

The visual text, and we do not say "libretto", is also the primary visual element of the piece. There is no libretto, not as that term is generally used.

No words are contained in the text, though it may suggest or imply many words.

It is a graphic text. In poetry, there is a broad and well-established tradition which could be argued to include such material.

Yet it is not a graphic score in the usual sense of the term “graphic score”.

There is a score implied in the piece; but it has been developed conversationally, out of considerations of the integrated text, and by experiment.

A short paragraph of instructions could have been produced which could then have been said to be the score.

However, we were not aiming to produce a score for other people. The procedures we were to follow to make the prepared aspects of the piece remain, on the one hand, agreed - and, to the extent that much has been done which is now digitally-recorded and so permanently available - no longer of operational interest. On the other hand, the procedures relating to the live aspect of the performance remain known to us and are readily changeable.

What we are doing is not poetry and music. Both elements are there and neither is subservient to the other. We seek a mode of creative working whereby the supposed boundaries between two art domains usually thought to be discrete, Poetry and Music, do not exist, as we find where the similarities between our creative processes are; and we compose at those conceptual points.

This leaves the differences active and functioning, of course, and that is part of the way the piece works.

Both of us have considerable relevant experience, Drever working with a range of poets and musicians and Upton with a range of musicians and poets, over the years. Both of those ranges have encompassed a variety of aesthetic and procedural approaches, making it easier than it might otherwise have been for each to work easily with the other, had we been hampered by more rigid notions of what art is and how it should be made.

The starting point of the piece is the electronic text, called **Close**. It is from a subset of a superset of images, about 400 in all; and that superset could be broken many different ways into sets and subsets. One might distinguish between those which are predominantly monochrome and those which are polychrome. More interestingly, perhaps, one might sort them by the kinds of texture the surfaces possess or according to the degree of apparent abstraction involved.

The basic concept is of three-dimensional monumental letters seen from very close up, forming a lettery landscape, as rocks form a rocky landscape.

The selected images are projected in a slide show. Thus, the slide show displays stages in a progress through this lettery landscape; and the utterance is the vocalic response of the mind sensing its way. It is largely vocalic, though much of the material is consonantal in written terms.

Framing transforms one's understanding of the representation, often limiting it as well.

One builds up from the framed images into an imaginary whole. Many a photographer has realised, though some have not, that they can't properly remember seeing where they were when they took their photographs, being so busy taking photographs that they end up dissecting what they have not surveyed fully. (And fewer, perhaps, are aware of human sight as a framed sense operating along a time line.)

Two main questions arise. How would the images be ordered? How long would each be displayed?

The starting point of the set of stills used in **Close to the literal** was the arrangement of images so that each was preceded by and followed by a graphically dissimilar image. The intention then was to use animation software to connect them into a movie.

Such software is rule-based and often quite simplistic. It is predicated on the assumption that its starting and ending points will be similar.

By using it to link dissimilarities, one would achieve quite complex visual syncopation.

In the resulting movie, the original nodes would be sustained as periods of visual sonority between rapidly changing noisy variation.

That aspect has not yet been developed but may be returned to in later versions.

On the abandonment of the use of animation software, the slides were reselected and reordered, so that the nature of the transitions is not just one of dissimilarity.

The duration of each display was a matter of some discussion.

In a previous (solo) piece, **Textscapes**, Upton had chosen a three second duration for each image in order to disrupt any tendency in himself during performance to reinforce or repeat successful vocal strategies - the utterance being improvised with little forethought so that the performer is (as far as possible) in constant surprise - but to maintain the concentration of the performer on what is actually to be seen.

Three seconds proved to be so short that it created new problems; and, for this piece, we felt a longer duration was needed.

The first performance was allocated 25 minutes in total; and we settled on 20 minutes for the actual piece as an appropriate duration.

10 seconds seemed a workable image duration, allowing considerable development but still making demands which created what one might call interference.

And thus we chose 120 images: 20 multiplied by 60 divided by 10.

There is a certain arbitrariness to it; but it is about right as a duration, an experiential rather than a reasoned judgement. Nevertheless, it puts a considerable burden in the preparation of prerecorded material; and the audience may experience some sense of visual overload. That is deliberate on our part.

The final selection was made almost entirely on visual grounds; but the aim has not been just to show you pretty pictures - just as the ordering has been made partly to disrupt simple visual satisfaction.

There could and may well become other selections and orderings.

The personal idea of a written slide show, written in the broadest sense of "writing", goes back to the mid 70s. Upton's **Views of Lyonnaise Book 1 and Books 2 and 3**, published by Writers Forum in 1977 and 1978, used brief verse fragments to emulate the effects of framing from a larger whole, as cameras do. The fragments were linguistically disjunctive, both to reinforce the sense of the frame's cutting out and cutting through what might have been seen, and being part of the verse's method.

The personal idea of a single line or constellation of written marks goes back two or three decades. Upton was writing multivoice poems, semantic and non-semantic, in the 70s, including some work in (analog) quadraphonic sound; but, at the start of the 80s, his sequence **Tongues** was written to be simultaneously single voice and multi voice, a chorus - though not in the Kristevan sense - a method he has returned to in his ongoing set **Speech**

The utterance as response referred to is at the crux of the single / multi voice. One responds as an individual and as a member of a cultural group. We react similarly to each other. Furthermore, it can be argued that the artist responds on others' behalf, though care is needed with such an assertion.

It is not meant here in the sense that the political figure claims to speak for us, but in a less transient and less goal-oriented way. It is in this non-hegemonic sense of speaking that one might read Shelley's famous claim for poets as "unacknowledged legislators". By poets, he meant, of course, artists in general.

In this context, the artists' processes are Adamic. They name the universe by responding to it. Where the politician labels and catalogues entities and processes, the artist builds systems, and systems of systems, of response, which may function as labels and catalogues, but remain potentially far more.

As a sort of comparison, there is so much more to Wagner's **Lohengren** or Mendelssohn's **A Midsummer Night's Dream** than tunes to play at weddings.

This naming is clearly dynamic, because the poetic is time-based. The world is dynamic; and the individual contains, if not Whitman's multitudes, at least many versions of itself.

We change our minds, literally, as we move through time, choosing and determining at every moment; and we are in inner debate much of that time.

In such debates, there is no arbiter, only internal consensus and / or compromise.

Working with another artist provides an analogue. Drever takes Upton's utterance and patterns it anew according to his naming of the worlds. So where are we?

The title is deliberately ambiguous.

There is the meaning of “literal” as referring to letters.

There is the colloquial meaning of actual and therefore true. But what is there here which could be called true?

The title may mean close to the elements of language and close to truth as in statements of fact.

And there is the joke, too, that one is close to the literal by being close up to monumental letters.

It might be a claim to be really near the heart of things, the way we have electronic monitors close to comets, sending back data as electronic stills, seeing what used to be wonders for large dirty snowballs. Yet, it is all a poetic conceit.

Now the relationship between what you see, as the audience of **Close to the Literal**, and the sounds that you hear *are* problematic; but that needn't be a problem in the colloquial sense.

To what extent he believed it or not is unclear, but the late Bob Cobbing, from whom Upton has learned a great deal, asserted that every sign had its own sound; and, by implication, that every perceivable mark was a sign. Therefore, he would endeavour to perform, for instance, the sound of overprinted text as a unique sign, not just saying the same word twice. At a functional level that would not have done anyway because sometimes one can no longer ascertain what the overlaid words are.

He took that further and used not just transformations of letter forms but also signs / marks which never had been letter forms.

Upton does not believe that particular marks have particular sounds innately associated with them. And he argued with Cobbing. But it did not stop them working together over an extensive collaboration, producing eventually twelve works, the largest **Domestic Ambient Noise**, consisting of 300 parts.

Thus, our text is not a score as a conventional score is understood. It is not read that way although readings may often be consistent with each other without being identical. One improvises from the score and at different levels, rather as one zooms into and out of a computer based map; and that provides the opportunity to switch levels of detail - a curve at one level may be jagged at another - rapidly

While others may use the texts to perform, that is not the primary intention. They are made to be viewed by all. Thus, questions of faithfulness in the face of indeterminacy do not actually arise. The artist does what he does. Sometimes it is more satisfactory than others.

Yet it is not self-expression. It arises from the text, which one approaches as selflessly as possible, and seriously.

The question of how it arises from the text remains open to debate.

It might be that every graphic text, if it is to be performed, has a notional "Make an utterance" attached to it, like a computer action script using onmouseover. What that utterance will be is

conditioned by the text. That image therefore is a starting point and a catalyst.

In a collaborative performance, there will be a response to whatever is uttered; and that must be taken into account. Thus, the response becomes part of the text. It will be interwoven with the utterance, not entirely separable from it even for the utterer, so that the initial utterance itself will be part of the text, feeding back as its own input.

What is being performed then, the text, is no longer just the image on the paper or projected on to the screen. In the utterer / performer's mental space, the text is now extensive and expanding. The physical or projected text remains a starting point because one is constantly at a starting point, deciding what is to come next, but it is also changing with one; it remains catalytic; and it might be thought of as a limitation, but it never feels like that because there is so much to be done - at this point the matter of seriousness and relative selflessness may be seen to be relevant

The showing of the visuals is not intended to be a way of allowing you to follow them as a score; and we are content for the relationship to be somewhat inexplicable.

It is **NOT**, however, random in any sense. The prerecorded element of the piece is made from more than one performance of the texts, along the same time line and in the same order, to facilitate studio composition, implying a degree at least of consistency. There is, in fact, a high level of consistency.

Though we are using the text as a way of determining the content of responsive utterance, it is also part of what we offer you as our compositional output.

To quote the composer Richard Barrett on his **Unter Wasser**, the text is "an experience in time, for both ear and eye, the words on paper "invisibly" embodied by a performer, sublimated into a new form."

Barrett's remarks on **Unter Wasser**, though referring to an entirely different kind of piece, are rather useful with regard to **Close to the Literal** in connection with the relationship between individual voices and the totality formed by their interaction; and also through Barrett's expressed determination that the text retain its integrity within the final composition.

As he says, "twists and turns in the text / music relationship are among [the composition's] materials"

There is a separateness - an otherness, to use a now too often over-used concept - between the utterance and the processing. We are both composing, both improvising individually.

Close to the Literal has a number of possible speaker and microphone circuits, some of which allow for what is uttered by Upton in real time to be heard directly by the audience without any intervention, while Drever may also be taking that sound and altering it quite drastically.

In that sense, then, we are both originating, if one allows a person using found or otherwise pre-existing material to be an originator.

Barrett, speaking of the original text of **Unter Wasser**, the German of Margret Kreidl, says "I found myself responding to it in terms of sound as much as in terms of its meaning"; and in **Close to the Literal**, it is quite likely that there will not be uttered a complete word at all, though, that does not mean the utterance is without linguistic meaning.

Barrett clearly means semantic meaning and you will find little semantic meaning in **Close to the literal**.

However, a great deal of vocal communication - and communication implies meaning - is non-semantic, especially in extremis.

The process of learning to speak our mother tongue is, in part, a lessening of our ability to utter a wide repertoire of our sounds. Seemingly, we are sacrificing part of our vocal ability to strengthen our ability to utter the shared but ever-changing set of sounds which are part of our language.

Yet, there is no evidence that the sacrifice is necessary. Perhaps we just forget the mechanics of the ability because we don't practice.

The relationship between a word's sound and its meaning is arbitrary. There is, for instance, no arithmetical progression. You cannot infer from a fruit being called an apple in English, that an English speaker will call any other fruit a pear. Each word has to be learned separately.

On the other hand, there are reasons why each language is as it is even if the totality of such reasons might be too great for any one person to know.... Even if there were such a totality available to be learned: our vocabularies can be traced back so far, and then it becomes conjecture. However long it is that we have been a truly speaking species, most of our linguistic history is unknown. We are born into a wordy – and now lettery - environment of language which we must learn to explore.

And, as we have indicated, to some extent, the use of visual texts provides a kind of interference to the tendency to make familiar and comforting utterance.

Though the relations between meaning and sound of words are arbitrary, some word sounds seem more appropriate to their semantic meaning than others.

There are the onomatopoeic relationships, for example drip drop. Isolated, onomatopoeic effects may not be so impressive, but structured into a set of word sounds (that is, a poem), the effects take on greater significance for the attentive auditor.

So in performing **Close to the literal** we are aware of the whole as well as the parts. We are communicating with you but the language has not yet been fully acquired. Has any of us ever fully acquired even our first language?

There is a story behind, a long way behind, the making of the text. It was inferred and invented from hints in various parts of Plato where he speaks of the creation of the world. It facilitates the performance as did and does Cobbing's asserted theory of reading the world, by triggering a

"permission to continue", quoting Rachel Blau DuPlessis' useful term for a function of poetics.

It is not the creation of an omnipotent god saying "Let there be light"; but it might well have been the creation of a god for whom the word was present - but the word as word, Λογος, and not god's human instantiation as St John's Gospel asserts it.

Plato's creation seems to be a rearrangement of what had previously existed in other form - as architecture will traditionally reflect the geology of its location, by altering it locally; and its social purpose by altering that location's socio-economics. Some element of the form of things is pre-existent; and, as a performer, one is in such a dynamic system - things are greater than one, and one can barely read off the data to understand it.

Out of some recent investigations into non-manual computer control, and a desire for something quieter than voice control, has come a research awareness that we are sub-vocalising all the time. An attempt to read a user's instruction when spoken soundlessly leads to the discovery that the user is emitting an endless string of readable language, soundless utterances, as the mouth organs shape inaudible words. One imagines this speech as being rather like the scene in *Red Dwarf* when Cat went round the freighter saying "That's mine, that's mine, that's mine"

A person wandering, whether in a landscape of whatever provenance, a built environment or a set of drawings, responds sub-vocally, or so it seems; and they do it involuntarily - something which has

got the spooks rather excited, though surely they know what we are saying about them under our breaths already.

In **Close to the Literal**, we utilise something of this tendency for more consciously directed and aesthetically composed utterance