

## Regarding Speculative Scores

### Lawrence Upton

The title reflects how I felt about this work, the visual work, when I first made it.

Could these drawings ever be scores? and If these drawings were scores, what kind of work would be the result?

Also, and at the same time, there was the sense of carrying out a thought experiment rather than moving towards a practical conclusion.

I finished working on them as drawings in July 2010, about the time that I began my collaborations with Guy Begbie. I sent them to him in the spirit in which we started working together: yes, I want to work with you so... what do you make of this?

Guy responded with a book work of the text in an edition of one. I hope that we can include that in our exhibition at UWE Bristol in autumn 2011. His presentation of my text had an influence on the development of the text-sound composition from the text which I have made with John Drever.

Like all the scores that John Drever and I have used, **Speculative Scores** is indicative, loosely determining what the composers will do, albeit improvisatorially.

But, as with most of our collaborations, the primary vocal improvisation is time-shifted. In performance, there will be live sound-singing by Lawrence Upton in duet with one or more recordings of Lawrence Upton sound-singing the same thing, some time before, treated and recomposed by John Drever. The real time "duet" will also be treated and recomposed by John Drever in real time at the public performance.

Thus, the earlier, studio performance tends to constrain the later live performance to some extent. And we can also say that there are two separate artists composing improvisatorially.

The score is projected for the audience to see in time with the progression of the performance.

The pre-recorded element of the text-sound composition was composed across 4 channels for playback with the live voice making a fifth channel. The intention was to present the total output via 5 speakers, three in front of the audience and two

behind.

In the event, we had four speakers, above the audience, and the voice, the fifth channel, was output across the four.

Five channels; four speakers.

Recently, a number of people have inquired of me, trying to pin down what it is that's going on in our performances, and not necessarily antagonistically.

The trouble is in finding a vocabulary which is shared and which isn't too problematic. Is it concrete poetry? I don't find any real precision in the term except when it is used historically or specific situations and practitioners. Is it sound poetry? Same problem.

I remember agreeing with Cobbing that neither of us liked "sound poetry" as a term – or "visual poetry" for that matter – although we would both respond to an editorial call for some!

There is the term "dirty concrete", coined, I believe, by Öyvind Fahlström, popular among a number of British practitioners. That is probably near to a good description of what I do than is the classic concrete poetry.

Whether it helps elucidate the vocal and other performance of text is another matter.

If one thinks of musical graphical scores such as Cardew's *Treatise*, for instance, there is clearly a divergence. It is a hard to define difference; but it is there. It may be the linguistic asserting itself with its boisterous approach to contradictoriness of meaning. Fahlström, of course, was painter, poet and sound artist..

Since 2004, I have made many text-sound compositions with John Levack Drever; and with some others.

John Drever is my main collaborator in sound pieces, in any kind of work. That is a quantitative statement and is not intended to put my other current collaborators (including Richard Tipping, Guy Begbie, Tina Bass and Wilton Azevedo) in any lesser light.

**Speculative Scores** is our latest work.

John is a major composer in my opinion and I can only begin to indicate the range of his work. I am very lucky to work with him. He is Senior Lecturer in Composition at Goldsmiths, University of London- – where I have just completed three years as a Research Fellow – and is Head of the *Unit for Sound Practice Research* there.

But I knew him and worked with him before I worked at Goldsmiths. Human vocal utterance is one of his areas of great interest; as is the sound landscape. It suits me.

We've been working together for 7 or 8 years, depending how you count it, because we put in a lot of planning and preparation before we performed in public.

In most of our text-sound compositions, we use graphical scores of my making. However, I would have it known – if not, now, explained! that the process of vocalisation from my reading and utterance of the scores, the main source of our audio material, is grounded in the sound poetry tradition rather than in music. John, however, is fundamentally a musician; but he has great empathy for and knowledge of the work of poets. It makes a difference although we are working, I believe, at an intermedia point between music and poetry.

Leaving aside any further discussion of what it is we do, let me say that we try not to do the same thing twice. That is my main point today. I tell you now I am going to make this point; I shall make it; and then I shall tell you that I have made it. It's what I hope to persuade you of.

If you look at the full listing of our work together, on my website, you will find that we version pieces quite often, often a number of times; and a new piece is tending to last us about a year. That reflects the length of time that each new piece takes and also the pressure of time upon us.

Nevertheless, each item has its differences, often in the number of channels output; and that of course changes it considerably; there is no great point in adding a few speakers to a work which uses fewer.

Whenever possible, we start a new work, using a score which makes different demands upon us than any of the scores we have used before.

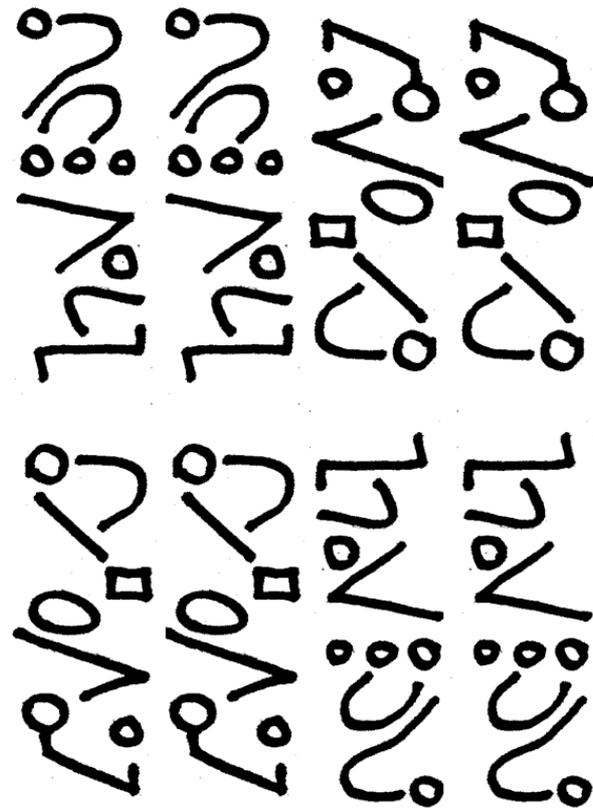
Let me make and illustrate that point by taking you back from our current work, with some images from our graphic scores. The differences will be self-evident.

Here are two images from our work on **Speculative Scores** from 2011.

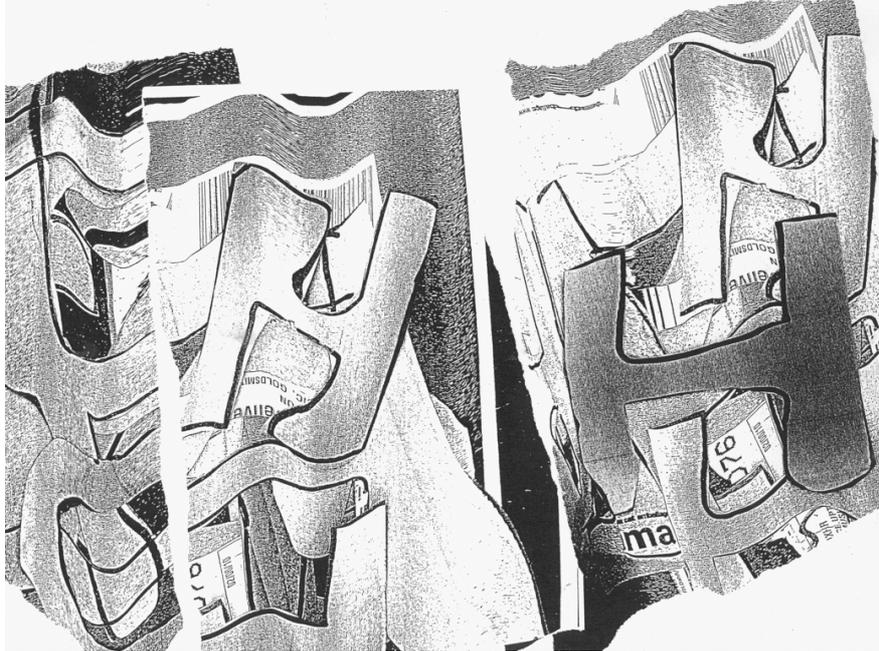
These two images are from the score; and I think that you can see that two quite different approaches exist side by side:

urs".  
ties to refuse  
ie far-right  
ial and the  
and the  
conservative  
ur France.  
he crisis on  
ation.  
se new year  
nation, Pres-  
ordered his  
to prepare  
ion to make

tion, private apartments  
and houses to provide per-  
manent homes for SDFs.  
The success of M. Le  
grand's campaign has in-  
flamed some charities  
which have worked with the  
homeless in France for  
years. Yves Fomet, presi-  
dent of Notre-Dame-Sans  
Abri, a homeless support  
group in Lyons, said the  
campaign was "indecenti-



And here is an image from **Study 19** from 2010:



The next image is not part of the score as such, but a maquette I made to help me “think” through some difficulties with the score as I was preparing to record the studio element of the text-sound composition.

Not needing it for the performance itself gave me greater freedom to use materials that elude digitization and this picture just gives you a vague idea, I believe. There is acrylic on board but also thick baking foil and heavy cardboard packing from an Amazon packet. I used it for ad hoc exercises to prepare me for the demands of our score.



There are two instantiations of the scores. I am sampling from the graphical score itself, which is just images. I may and often do exhibit and / or publish that as a separate sequence of work – call it *visual poetry* if you wish. Then there is another score, which is the graphical score and notes and directives derived from it: details of what we actually know we are going to do. These might be timings and transitional decisions encoded in the Powerpoint file – Powerpoint is fine for this purpose. They might be notes written on the score – that's rather rare. Other decisions will be encoded in John's software files. We may just remember them.

Our first work together was trying to reconstruct a 1995 multi-media piece by Alaric Sumner based almost entirely on other people's recollections. It is entirely possible that Sumner kept all the scoring in his head; certainly I never found anything written down. You'd think we would have learned.

I term my approach to performing my texts *sound singing* which is one I appropriated from the Canadian artist Paul Dutton. In my voice, it owes a lot to the late Bob Cobbing; but also to Henri Chopin as well as to Dutton, and to those I worked with in my youth, particularly cris cheek. It is, I suppose, an extended voice technique, but it is not extended voice technique as that is meant

by musicians.

I am not trying for repeatability. We are not trying for repeatability. Although performances of the same score do tend to be rather similar to each other. If they weren't, I wonder if it would be worth doing. Cobbing referred to it as *family resemblance* and that's good enough for me.

My reading of the score is idiolectual.

It is our method to make one or two, usually two, studio recordings of the score; and, from those recordings, John composes a pre-made element of the final output. This can be two track often. In our most recent performance, it was four track. It may be made for the same number of output tracks or more. Some of our work, especially in the early days of our collaboration, has been 8 track output.

In performance, this prerecorded material is played back while I perform the score again, this time, that is, I am accompanied by my prerecorded voice. Thus, in Buffalo, we had 4 prerecorded tracks and one live. (The intention was to have that broadcast to the audience from 3 speakers at the front and 2 at the rear, but we had to settle for a square of 4 discreet speakers due to technical difficulties. It was not to the benefit of the piece because the realization ran counter to its design.

The prerecorded tracks are subject to live treatment, as is the live vocal track. Thus, at the prerecorded stage, there are two composers at work; but they are time-separated; in performance, there are two composers at work simultaneously, risking contention which they avoid not just cooperatively but collaboratively.

The graphical score of **Study 19** itself is a set of visual variations on the word Chihuahua.

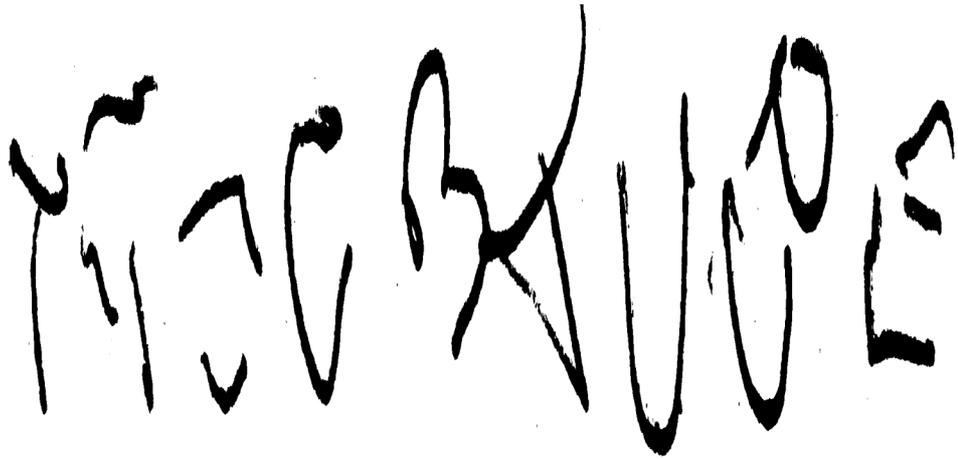
It is also in our working notes – along with data on durations etc – that some recorded telephone messages informing Dr Drever of the availability of Chihuahua puppies should be played.

Now you know where we got the idea for the piece!

Next, this is from **Hypothetical**, 2009. It's fairly typical of the kind of images used throughout that piece.

There are no words at all in **Hypothetical**.

There are superficial similarities with some of the imagery in **Speculative Scores**; but that is superficial.



and this from **NAMELY** for Peter Manson:



The score here is a series of variations on the string of letters spelling the name Peter Manson, who is a fine Scottish poet. It originated in an invitation from Alec Finlay to contribute a page to a hand made book for Peter's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday.

I was trying out many ideas when John and I received the commission for what became **NAMELY for Peter Manson** and those ideas were subsumed into the new project also.

This is from **That the tongue is a whip**. That title's a couple of words lifted from an R S Thomas poem, although I doubt that knowledge'll help you much in engagement with this poem:



Yes, there are a few letters of the alphabet; and in some quantity; but there is no semantic meaning encoded in any way except that which you might wish to invent for yourself.

This next is from our performance in Plymouth in 2007 which was called **Verbal Iteration 3**. I mention that because it was witnessed by the musician Michael McInerney; and that led to the collaborative trio which performed **Hypothetical** which I have already illustrated, Michael performing on shakuhachi.

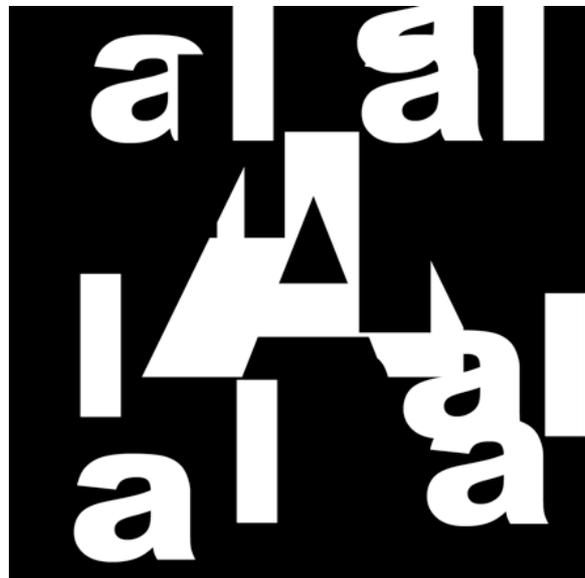




This work used 120 images each performed for ten seconds, to make an 8 channel piece lasting 20 minutes.

10 seconds was chosen because it is long enough that the constant changing does not become onerous to the performer – I have tried three second transitions in a solo work -- but short enough that it does not permit indulgent development of any particularly sonorous interpretation. It keeps the performer on their toes.

and this from **Crowded** early in 2005



The last would need a considerable length of time to contextualise adequately, so I'll just leave you with the images.

The work that John and I did before **Crowded** was based on scores by the late Alaric Sumner.

I have not included here most of the performances where we have used clearly semantically-based material where the projected

material was pre-determined to a great extent.

Nor have I mentioned the work using a Bob Cobbing image from his **kurrirurriri**. And so on.

What I have shown here is our main if various graphical approach when we have the freedom to indulge it.

A part of it uses computer generation and digital treatment; but, throughout, there is a reliance upon painting, drawing and collage. The images in **Close to the Literal**, for instance, were originated by non-digital means. It is, then, my visual practice.

Even though some of the images may be made by non-digital means, the aim is to digitize the result; to digitize my voice for recording and transformation; and to produce a set of digital files for storage, transformation and presentation.

We, humans, are, and may remain for some time, liminal cyborgs. That, to me, is not a big issue. We have been bipeds with tools for longer than we have records; this is the latest stage of that transformative realization.

The intention is to provide a variety of imagery from which to work.

Our, John's and my, *modi operandi* have not changed much, globally, in our years together; although each piece, most pieces, introduces something new. That's, I think, not so much a desire to do something new as a dissatisfaction with what we have done already; it isn't the same although they are related as motives.

We talk to each other a lot rather than rehearsing a lot. We're not trying to repeat, as I said, but to remake. We use prerecorded (studio) sound of my voice so that, as I have described, there is my live composition and then John's studio composition and then our dual live composition using, in part, that studio composition.

In performance, therefore, the two of us are composing simultaneously, both constrained by the other as the form we have chosen constrains us; and it is in working within that multiple constraint that, seemingly, we develop our ideas.

In recent months, I have been working with Guy Begbie to produce three dimensional paper structures which are potential scores for performance. Most recently, we have revisited and remade the score for **Namely** (realised sonically as **Namely for Peter Manson** by Upton and Drever), and, as I have said, exhibiting the result at *e-poetry 2011* in USA. The remaking included changing the images themselves; and they no longer have much connection

with Peter Manson in the Upton / Begbie product.

On the question of collaboration, which I intend seriously, not just an idea of two people doing their separate tasks, like a plumber and an electrician working individually on a building, I have already spoken and written, including.

Benign artistic trespass as method – a talk, in absentia, *University of Miami*, 2010. *Writers Forum*, 2010

Collaboration, not just cooperation -- a talk given at *Music Making: Pedagogy and Practice*; University of Surrey; web published by *Palatine*

On collaboration -- talk given at multi-disciplinary graduate seminar, *Goldsmiths College*, 12<sup>th</sup> February 2011. Published on Goldsmiths Graduate website.

Those texts will be linked to from my **Lab Book** due to be published by *Writers Forum* on 1st August 2011.

Thank you