

“LAB BOOK”

research into

Notation for Sound Art involving live presence

Lawrence Upton

AHRC Fellowship in the Creative and Performing Arts

Goldsmiths, University of London

2008 - 2011

continuing work freelance

2011 +

currently in revision March 2016

a new list of contents will continue below very shortly

NB These materials are not published but are made available to specific interested parties, particularly AHRC. Please respect my copyright and check with me before making quotation.

All materials © Lawrence Upton 2011, 2016 except where otherwise stated.

*

LAB-Book

Introduction

The collection of writings I call “Lab-Book” was conceived in the period 2008 – 2011 as a means to a specific end: how to present incomplete and tentative conjectures and experiments and make them available to others particularly interested in what I was doing, but without formally publishing.

Publishing would come later when I had done more work, when I had had more time to think, experiment further, and so on.

I did not want to present it as the equivalent of an experimental scientist's *Lab Book*, but I did want that association. However, I also wanted the idea that the act of making a book might be, in itself, something of a laboratory experiment.

It is a way of asserting the primacy of practice over theory.

I realise that many will object to that position. So be it.

I experimented mentally with a range of titles and *Lab-Book* is my currently favoured version.

Many of my fellows seem to fetishise the idea of *innovation* in art though they seem unable or perhaps are unwilling to attempt a convincing justification of how they feel. Perhaps it is something that is justified by faith alone. Certainly I am suspicious of it.

Among a number of my own London-based contemporaries, the late Bob Cobbing is sometimes held up as an example of an indefatigable innovator, from whom, if I follow their utterances correctly, they take their line; but recently I turned to page ? Of “Concerning Bob Cobbing” where, in interview, he is asked outright how much of an innovator he is; and his answer is intriguing. It genuinely supports innovation, but does not see it as anything particularly modern; implicit in what he says is a belief that we forget perhaps as much as we can learn.

The nature and content of that answer is something that I intend to return to shortly; but for now, here, today, I offer “innovation” as it is often used as an example of weak-minded ideology given privilege in our discourse over practice but without the case for that having been made.

I want to avoid all that.

On the other hand, I also wish to avoid appeals to woolly ideas about, for example, inspiration, either by use of the term or the kind of arguments, if they can be called that, advanced under cover of the term.

The answer that I gave violist “Benedict Taylor” to his questioning on the subject, in his film about me <TITLE> may suffice. I hope so because I do not propose anything else just now, although I know that a lot more would be

possible, if I chose to sidetrack myself.

I wish to work as a practice-led artist, deriving my critical perspective from that practice and its outcomes, but leaving the claim of authority for practice to fend for itself.

However, I would remind the reader that my objection to an approach which asks, first and foremost, “Is it innovative?” is that I have yet to see any justification for that line of questioning with its implicit belief that innovative work is somehow superior to non-innovative work. And yet it obviously is – the risk is in newfangledness.

(Recently I heard someone say that innovation has allowed us to modernise; and that is about as muddle-headed as it is possible to be.)

In fact, my position is not very far from that although there is a dangerous and threatening gulf between them.

My concern is in the definition of “innovation”. It is possible to 'prove' almost anything with a weak or sloppy definition. Those who wish to hunt for the snark of a good definition of innovation are welcome to do so; but until they are prepared to submit it for consideration without a reliance on subjectivity and arbitrariness, I am not greatly interested.

I've been waiting for approximately 40 years, since the late Jeff Nuttall, proposed innovation as the thing we should attend to, to know how we spot genuine innovation from the cheap copy.

(My first paid employment was as a clerk in the governmental purchase of technology and it was there that I learned the phrase “commercial equivalent”. If I give in to my prejudice against what I see as the predation of commerce upon artistic activity, and I do so not only easily but with confidence that it is an illuminating and penetrating approach, then everything I have seen so far fails to convince me that I can always rely on it as a definition; although it may well function efficaciously as a justification for behaviour that, finally, does not bear too much scrutiny.)

I do realise the frustration of trying to evaluate what does not explain and justify itself; but the bad workperson is not more justified in blaming its tools in this matter than in any other.

The lovely thing about art is that, although we may attribute meaning to a work, the work itself is not primarily aimed at meaning. To reduce a poem, say, to what it means is probably worse than reducing a complex novel to its story.

Not quite being able to define what it means during the course of experimentation makes the interpretation of that experimentation harder than it might otherwise be; but I see no alternative.

In so many fields, the cry goes up “We must do something!” which is, so often, a prelude to doing something whether it works or not.

Then there is the retrospective justification: “Well what was I supposed to do?”

That is not worth answering.

One of the excitements of making art, in whichever domains one works, is that everything is on the move, subject to change and so on. Few of the working definitions in use are adequate or at all reliable.

I can think of one fellow worker at least who has expressed frustration that, basically, we are still working with an Aristotelian apparatus, without having any clear idea why that apparatus might need replacement.

The argument seems to be that it must need replacement because it is over 2000 years old, which takes us back to the modernisation fallacy.

What most of us might see as Aristotelian, would not match Aristotle's way of seeing things, because we have slowly attributed new meanings to the words we use, especially as they have been translated and then inherited over the centuries and across continents.

I have used before an image from the third Indiana Jones film, that where there is no way forward, we must just behave as though there is one, and that is where I am when I propose practice-based research. All I mean by that is: we should not pretend to know what we only expect or perhaps want to be true.

I shall return to this matter in due course.

For all these reasons, in mid 2011, when I presented documentation of my work as funded by AHRC in the period 5/2008 – 4/2011, I did so by offering a sort of loose leaf LAB-BOOK as a set of web pages, as well as the papers I had written, the talks I had given and the work that I had made which might be illustrative of or inquire into my concerns.

Of course, a piece of writing which does not come to a conclusion as such may be considered less rewarding than those which do. Some sections of LAB-BOOK have described inquiries which lead nowhere; and that may be valued poorly.

And there is implicit rewriting or revision of Lab-Book activity as I move in what we might suggest is a forward motion. What is in Lab-Book today, may not be in it tomorrow, usually because what is there has been reworked and reused elsewhere.

Perhaps these possibilities explain why, according to the software, so little of what I published in draft as LAB-BOOK was accessed. In terms of the effort involved it was a pointless exercise and I am disappointed that my funders

were not interested.

(More than 15 years ago, an undergraduate interviewed me after a performance I gave of a complex piece of writing and asked a number of questions which did not lend themselves to simple answers. Nevertheless, I did my best, only to be cut off in mid sentence by “Can't you say it any simpler?” I replied in the negative.

The student then informed me that she only needed 100 words and would ask someone else who would perhaps give her a shorter answer.

So much, as Beckett's Winnie reminded us, to be grateful for.)

Believing that my continuing practice-based research is important, and strapped for finance, I abandoned the update of LAB-BOOK. No one seemed to notice. No one seemed to care.

However, now that RCUK has asked that I not only update what I said in 2011, but also repeat everything from scratch, there is an opportunity to see again if there is any real interest in the less complete areas of my work.

Therefore, I shall reinstate LAB-BOOK.

Version 2 10th March 2016

work currently in progress:

- DRAFT Maintaining collaborative artistic association [commenced March 2016]