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Richard Berengarten

The Cambridge Poetry Festival: 35 years after

In setting up the biennial Cambridge Poetry Festival (CPF), I wanted it to be diverse, innovative and international. The first CPF took place in 1975 and the last in 1985. In that decade, there were six large events, as well as a Fringe in 1983.[1] Here I focus on some of the factors that went into making and shaping of the first event, including its mechanics, followed by a tentative appraisal of its achievements and limitations.[2] My own needs for self-distance and self-criticism are salient in writing this short account. When I conceived the first festival in 1973, I was 29 years old. Apart from the fact that hindsight may be spurious and its claims to insight fallible, as the founder of CPF I may not be the best person to evaluate it.

The CPF grew out of the expansiveness and fluidity in the Anglophone intellectual and artistic world, specifically in poetry

1 Coordinators of the CPF were Richard Berengarten (1975), Paul Johnstone (1977), Peter Robinson (1979), Mick Gowar (1981), Alison Rimmer (later Blair-Underwood) and Anne Grubb (1983), and John Alexander (1985). The first four of these were poets, the last three were not. The 1983 Fringe was organised by poet Steve Spence, who was then a student at the Cambridgeshire College of Arts and Technology (CCAT), commonly known as 'The Tech', and successively renamed Anglia Higher Education College (AHEC), Anglia Polytechnic University (APU), and now Anglia Ruskin University. I worked there from 1969 to 1979.

2 So far as I know, this is the first published attempt to document the CPF retrospectively in any detail. It draws extensively on an essay by Mick Gowar, 'Richard Berengarten and the Cambridge Poetry Festival: A Vision of Community,' in Norman Jope, Paul S. Derrick and Catherine E. Byfield (eds.), *The Salt Companion to Richard Berengarten* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, forthcoming, 2010). I know of three other short commentaries: John Alexander, 'The Cambridge Poetry Festival,' *The Cambridge Review*, Vol. 106, No. 2287 (June, 1985), p. 100; John Matthias, 'Of publishers, readings, and festivals, circa 1986,' in *Reading Old Friends* (Albany, New York: SUNY, 1992), pp. 243–244; and Peter Robinson, *Talk About Poetry* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2007), pp. 56–7.

publishing, through the 1960s and early 1970s. The first four CPFs were marked by a spirit of energy and excitement, hospitality and magnanimity, and a buzz of innovation and discovery. In Cambridge, all this communicated itself to many people outside and inside the University. Peter Robinson writes that, arriving as a graduate student: "[t]he 1975 [festival], which took place in April, was already legendary by the time I reached Cambridge in mid-October."[3] So the first CPF became a replicable, adaptable model for a large, ambitious poetry event that was both 'inclusive' and 'experimental'. The 1975 event achieved this combined feat with little if any offence to exclusivist groups.

In Cambridge itself, in terms of magnitude, ambition and complexity, I do not think anything quite like these early CPFs had happened before or has happened since, although various aspects of their content and structure had been anticipated in previous one-off events,[4] and many elements of the CPF resurfaced in the course of later one-offs and regular series, for example, the annual Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetry (CCCP).[5] The main element that differentiated the CPF from previous large poetry events and some later ones in Cambridge was its consistent and dedicated internationalism.

I was born and brought up a Londoner, and London in the 1960s and

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3 Peter Robinson, *Talk About Poetry*, p. 56.

4 One precursor in Cambridge, also called 'Cambridge Poetry Festival' by its organisers Nick Totton and Ian Patterson, was a two-day event in June 1969 at the Chemistry Labs on Lensfield Road, as the culmination of their series of readings in King's Cellars. Arriving back in Cambridge from London in September that year, I missed that event. Another one-off jamboree that I did attend was a single-evening marathon reading, buzzing with energy and excitement, at Fitzwilliam College in 1970, organised by Gordon Hann, David Punter and others. Both were all-British events, with marked leanings towards American poetics, but no other evident international perspectives and no participants writing in languages other than English, Scots (Robert Garioch) and Geordie (Tom Pickard). Stuart Montgomery, founder of the brilliant and pioneering Fulcrum Press, was the non-British exception: he was born in Rhodesia.

5 Founded by students of John James at AHEC (see footnote 1), this event ran annually from 1991 to 2007. It had various organisers and co-organisers over the years, including Rod Mengham, Peter Riley, Ian Patterson and Kevin Nolan. CCCP became increasingly international.

early 1970s had a lot going on: especially, Poetry International at the Festival Hall, founded by Eric Walter White[6] with advice from Ted Hughes, in 1967; the two huge Albert Hall readings, the first, entitled the International Poetry Incarnation, organised by Michael Horovitz *et al* on June 11, 1965,[7] and the second by Jonathan Boulting on June 18, 1966; Elizabeth Thomas's regular *Tribune* series at the Regent's Park Library;[8] Bob Cobbing's events as manager of Better Books in Charing Cross Road; and the brilliantly stimulating and innovative conferences put on by Roger Guedella and Chris Brookeman between 1973 and 1974 at the Polytechnic of Central London. These all helped to form perspectives and formulate approaches.

Aside from events like these, there were three individual poets who 'influenced' me towards founding the CPF in 1973. The first was Ezra Pound. After graduating from Cambridge in 1964, Kim Landers and I lived in Venice in 1965-6, where we briefly met Pound.[9] His oeuvre both as poet and as translator—especially of the *Dolce Stil Novo*, and of Provençal and Chinese poets—was significant to many poets of our generation. His *Drafts and Fragments*, published in 1970, had a powerful effect on me, especially in such lines as: "but the light sings eternal"; "i.e. it coheres all right / even if my notes do

6 In the 1960s, Eric Walter White was director of the Arts Council, and he became a valued adviser to the first CPF.

7 Peter Whitehead's film of this famous poetry reading, held before an audience that was reputed to have consisted of "seven thousand people", was called Wholly Communion. See Jonathon Green, s120937152.websitehome.co.uk/pw/html/wholly.html [accessed August 18, 2009]. See also Alexis Lykiard (ed.), *Wholly Communion* (London: Lorrimer Films, 1965).

8 Elizabeth Thomas, then literary editor of *Tribune*, became the first chairperson of the Cambridge Poetry Festival Society.

9 Kim Landers, 'Venice 1965–1966,' in James Hogg (ed.), *The Road to Parnassus: Homage to Peter Russell on his Seventy-Fifth Birthday* (Salzburg: Salzburg Studies in English Literature, 1996), pp. 124–126; and Richard Burns, 'With Peter Russell in Venice, 1965-66,' *Notre Dame Review* 4 (Summer, 1997), pp. 117–132.

not cohere," and "To be men not destroyers."[10] I have always had an inevitable and necessary ambivalence towards Pound because of his Fascism and his virulent anti-Semitism. Even so, for me, his death in November 1972 marked the end of an era in world poetry and I sensed, almost viscerally, that this was a defining moment, and it was time to move forward, do something new. Two months later the idea to launch a poetry festival in Cambridge fired and kept firing inside me.

The two other poets were George Seferis and Octavio Paz. In 1966–67, Kim and I had lived for a year in Greece. Modern Greek poetry, particularly that of Seferis, widened my European perspectives even more radically than my previous two years in Italy had done. Then, in 1970–71, Octavio Paz spent a year in Cambridge, and Kim and I were lucky enough to spend some time with him and his wife Marie-Jo.[11] Octavio's influence on my thinking is summed up in one of his sentences, which became a kind of hidden motto underlying my work for the 1975 CPF, and the cornerstone of an entire poetics: "For the first time in our history, we are contemporaries of all mankind."[12]

As this summary suggests, in setting up the CPF, I was reaching towards recreating a polyglot, multicultural energy, a crossfire of 'risk-ideas' and 'edge-talk' that to me was (and still is) the stuff of poetry. And I was drawn more southwards than westwards, and across and through language-frontiers, rather than to movements happening anywhere inside the citadel of hegemonic English.

I WANTED THE CPF to demystify poetry and poets as well as their relationships with readers and audiences. I believed (and believe) that

10 Ezra Pound, *Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX–CXVII* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), pp. 24, 27 & 32.
11 Richard Burns, 'A poet in Cambridge: on the achievement of Octavio Paz,' *The Times Educational Supplement* (January 1, 1997), pp. 13–14.
12 Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, translated by Lysander Kemp (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1967), p. 162.

the act of reading is itself necessarily a kind of writing or rewriting. Receiving a poem, which means fully entering the spirit of its making, involves a re-making. The fact that Cambridge is brimming with readers who themselves are poets, or who may become poets, to my mind made the town perfectly suited to the kind of informal, blurry-bordered, and easy flow between poem-makers and recipients—which I envisaged happening at a poetry festival. Then, as now, I was a pluralist, and I had consistently opposed hierarchical and hegemonic models that interpret cultural transmission in terms of patterns emanating outward and, as it were, downward from an established 'higher centre': for example, according to the kind of lordly, towering, monolithic structures implicit in T.S. Eliot's writings. I was also especially suspicious of such notional 'centres' whenever advocacy of them was couched in national or nationalistic terms, or tied to any kind of political or religious ideology. Another key idea was that 'good' ('serious', 'exciting', 'vital' etc.) poetry is multiform, diverse, usually oppositional and transgressive, and sometimes necessarily reclusive and exilic; all of which meant that an effective poetry festival should go out of its way to be as inclusive and hospitable as possible, and so present the outcome of a dedicated and concerted attempt to incorporate *many different* currents, even if some groups or individuals were to self-exclude. Two further beliefs were that there is no necessary correlation between quality and popularity, and that the *loci* of vibrant and interesting new poetry are far more likely to be found emerging among small presses and magazines up and down the country than from big London publishers.

If you are involved in contemporary poetry, you never quite know from which quarter something is going to hit you between the eyes or shoulder blades. In retrospect, my mind was relatively open in 1973, though not entirely so, because I did have some clear ideas about what I wanted the CPF *not* to be—and not to do. Some of the axes I intended to grind and whet were against the dull millstones of 'Englishness', rolled by the Movement, the Group, and their heirs. All of which is to say: there were (and are) limits to my eclecticism.

While the CPF should be hospitable to innovative styles and experiment,

and ambitious in scope, range, and depth, I also wanted it to reflect a contemporary version of the 'high' and passionate seriousness of the Cambridge tradition, from Spenser and Marlowe to the present day. This is to say: I hoped that a sense of the 'presence' of some of the inspirational poets associated with Cambridge in the past should somehow brood actively over the Festival, residing in us, and as it were, presiding over us—including their adventurousness, courage, iconoclasms, excesses, and humours.[13] And to cap all this, I entertained an unclearly delineated vision of "community",[14] grounded, like that of many of my contemporaries, in readings of William Blake.

Early in 1973, I started discussing my idea for the festival with friends and colleagues in Cambridge and London. These included: Sydney Bolt, brother of the dramatist Robert Bolt, and my Head of Department at CCAT; Elizabeth Thomas, at that time assistant literary editor of *The New Statesman*; Anthony Rudolf, poet, translator and publisher of Menard Press; and Martin Booth, poet and publisher of Sceptre Press. On March 24, 1973, some of us held an informal meeting, hosted by J.H. Prynne at his room at Gonville & Caius College, and we set up a steering group. The idea was to focus energy and gather a working team. Prynne also invited the poet Veronica Forrest-Thomson, then a research student, and, if I remember correctly, Andrew Crozier, poet and editor of Ferry Press, and the poet John Wilkinson, then an undergraduate.[15] So, from the start, a personal idea was transformed into a communal effort.

13 "[T]he historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence[…]" T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays, 1917–1932* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), p. 14. *The Festival Souvenir Programme* was designed by Gordon Shaw. It had a beautiful photograph of the marble statue of Byron from Trinity College Library on its cover, which Gordon had taken. The complex and many-faceted figure of Byron perfectly represented the spirit of the first CPF.

14 John Kelleher, 'Poet's personal vision now a festival reality,' *Cambridge Evening News* (March 21, 1975), p. 4.

15 Andrew Crozier, J.H. Prynne and Anthony Rudolf did not join the co-ordinating committee. Crozier and Rudolf took part in successive CPFs.

Following that meeting, by May 1973 I had written a proposal, which Sydney Bolt and I took to the Eastern Arts Association (EAA, now Arts Council East). They gave us £100 to print leaflets and raise further funds, and we launched a publicity campaign and appeal for support. Donations started raining in. These suggested that poetry might be actually *wanted*. The EAA put more money in. Our meetings took place in various private houses—including that of the American poet John Matthias in Little Shelford, visiting on a year's sabbatical—and later at Pembroke College. The steering group evolved into a committee, chaired by Elizabeth Thomas, which had a crucial role in making decisions. So our choices of poets for the CPF represented a diversity of tastes and interests. Student poets were involved right from the start, and as keenly as possible.[16]

We timed the 1975 CPF for the last weekend of the Easter Vacation. CCAT and University students lined up to volunteer as stewards, which meant free entry to events and the chance to escort visiting poets. I issued press releases and John Kelleher, a local journalist, fed a stream of stories into the *Cambridge Evening News*, ensuring a steady publicity build-up.[17] The paper launched a children's poetry competition. The knock-on effect was national. A piece in the *Guardian* summed up the anticipatory buzz:

> A poetry festival of vast proportions takes place in Cambridge next month. The event's coordinator, the poet Richard Burns [Berengarten], hopes that the weekend programme may help to put some energy back into British poetry, and that it may break down some of the cliche-ridden formulas such as the alleged gulf between British polite poetry and American verse.

16 Members included Elizabeth Thomas, Sydney Bolt, Veronica Forrest-Thomson, John Matthias, Martin Booth, John Skelton, and students Mick Gowar from CCAT and Jo Hugh-Jones, Paul Johnstone, William Peskett and John Wilkinson from the University.
17 e.g. John Kelleher, 'Poet's personal vision now a festival reality'.

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> [T]he list of poets is certainly remarkable for its catholicity. No doubt most interest will centre on the appearance of the Czechoslovak poet Miroslav Holub[18] and the American poet John Ashbery.[19] Among others appearing will be Lee Harwood, Sorley MacLean, Roy Fisher, Ted Hughes and Charles Tomlinson.[20]

More than 100 participants were listed in the programme: poets, artists, musicians, literary critics, and dancers.[21] The CPF centre was the Cambridge Union Society building. Other venues included bookshops, Kettle's Yard gallery and some Colleges for exhibitions. We published a series of poster poems by 18 Cambridge poets, designed and illustrated by local artists and CCAT art students. Six young Cambridge poets gave the opening reading. After this, each of the large evening events was designed to combine poets from the UK and abroad, which meant the sounds of other languages being heard, as well as English—Scots Gaelic, Greek, German, Czech and Italian. Four consecutive evening readings packed the Union debating chamber. They were scheduled from 7.30 to 10.15, and lasted longer. Four poets read each evening: on Friday April 18, Roy Fisher, David Gascoyne, Sorley MacLean and Takis Sinopoulos; on Saturday April 19, John Ashbery, Rolf Dieter Brinkman, Lee Harwood and John James; and on Monday April 21, Miroslav Holub, Ted Hughes, Roberto Sanesi and Charles Tomlinson. MacLean, reading his work in English and Gaelic to a large audience outside Scotland for the first time ever, received tumultuous applause. Perhaps the audience's

18 In 1975, it was still hard to get travel permits out of Communist Czechoslovakia. The same applied to Reiner Kunze, who attended from East Germany. The appearance of Russian poets Vyachslav Kuprianov and Yunna Morits in later Festivals was an achievement for us for the same reasons.

19 See also Raymond Gardner, 'John Ashbery […] a poet of genius,' *The Guardian* (April 19, 1975), p. 8.

20 *The Guardian* (March 8, 1975).

21 Contemporary dance events were organised by Liebe Klug.

response arose out of the discovery of a passionate lyrical presence that was *other* vis-à-vis the assumptions of an Anglophone tradition, while belonging inextricably *inside* the UK. George MacBeth, editor of BBC Radio 3's *Poetry Now*, went on to devote an entire programme to Sorley MacLean. Every event was recorded, and the recordings are now housed in the British Library's National Sound Archive.[22]

The morning and afternoon *Poetry Forums* were key parts of the CPF. At any one time, in separate rooms in the Union Building, three *Forums* were going on. They combined four elements: poetry from other countries, French, German, Greek, Italian and Swedish; perspectives from Scotland, Wales and Ireland; topic-based sessions, for example: concrete, sound and visual poetry, poetry and anthropology, and children and creativity; and sessions organised by editors of some of the more interesting English magazines and presses, each representing a different dynamic in the contemporary mix. Each editor or key person was invited to present a title, organise a reading and/or discussion, and choose other participants. Elaine Feinstein led a session on translation; Eric Mottram, editor of *Poetry Review*, chose the title 'Imagination and Invention in Contemporary British Poetry'; William Cookson, editor of the neo-Poundian *Agenda*, chose 'No Act of Uniformity'; Bob Cobbing's session on sound and concrete poetry was called 'All Borders Blur'; and Jon Silkin's, 'Defining Commitment'.[23]

Women poets were in a minority, but that was typical of the times, and during the decade of the CPF increasing numbers of women poets and writers appeared. Over the six biennial CPF events, more than 500 poets, writers, translators, scholars, artists and musicians were involved in readings, discussions or performances.

I stood down as coordinator as soon as the first CPF was over, hoping that the first event would model others and believing that future

22 See bl.uk/nsa [accessed August 18, 2009].
23 See Jon Silkin (ed.), *Poetry of the Committed Individual: A Stand Anthology of Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973).

festivals would be healthier if each had a different coordinator. Running the CPF was demanding to the point of being all-consuming, as other coordinators also discovered. I also needed to retrieve my own personal and family life, and get back to writing my own poems. The first CPF had made a profit and, from that position of strength, plus an assurance of future backing from the EAA, Paul Johnstone took over to coordinate the 1977 event. After 1975, five more CPFs followed. The story of each of them deserves to be written separately.

In the first two days after the 1975 festival, those of us who had worked on it basked in a kind of euphoric haze. But then the sudden deaths of two fine young poets immediately brought whatever elation we might have started to feel down with a crash. The CPF ended on Monday April 21, and the German poet Rolf Dieter Brinkmann died on Wednesday, April 23, aged 35. He had gone to London after the Festival, and had been hit by a car while attempting to cross the road outside the Shakespeare pub in Notting Hill. I can't speak for the effect of his poems on anyone else, but he had made an extraordinary impression on me at the festival, especially in delivering his mesmerising, long chant-poem 'Panic'.

During the night of April 25–26, Veronica Forrest-Thomson died in her sleep, aged 28. She stopped breathing, having mixed alcohol and medication. There has been speculation that her death was a suicide. I do not believe this was so. She was a good friend and a complex and intricate poet, nowhere near the height of her potential, who possessed one of the finest critical minds of her generation in Scotland or England. As an engaged member of the CPF committee, she had set her mark on the shape of the entire Festival, in her sense of fun, repartee, intellectual speed and bite, refusal to tolerate fools, and her advocacy of John Ashbery.

We were devastated. Two fine young poets had died in the shadow of the Festival.

In the 1980s, Thatcherite policies and attitudes began to spread through British culture, vitiating and corroding the poetry world. After 1985, the CPF collapsed. No one among the circle of people associated with the CPF had the energy or will to devote two years of time to putting another Festival together. Poets out of sympathy with the new-old version of the conservative Anglopoetic Establishment had little choice but withdraw, retrench and re-cluster.

In 1987, I went to live in Yugoslavia.

How, then, do the CPF's achievements and limitations appear in 2009, 35 years later? And what, if any, is its relevance for poetry and poetics in the very different context of today?

The CPF served for a decade as a vigorously varied, convivial, relatively 'open', 'eclectic', 'inclusivist' forum. It attracted large audiences and adherents, and more or less maintained its innovative and experimental character. As far as local Anglopoetic configurations were concerned, I think the fact that I worked outside the University was an advantage and that such a standpoint was conducive to inventiveness. Conversely, and contradictorily, the conceptual models informing the CPF were also developed from within the university tradition of 'high literary seriousness'—while at the same time being linked with contemporary anti-hierarchical and radical modes, both of writing poetry and of receiving and interpreting it, that were equally operative and active outside and inside the University. At least for a while, then, these multiple and variable positionings enabled the CPF to confront, counterbalance and, to a considerable extent combine elements of both purism and populism. Which is also to say that, on the one hand, CPF drew on the energies of groups rejecting various aspects and forms of both 'hierarchical' culture and pop-culture, including the latter's emphasis on 'personality', in favour of commitment to literary,

linguistic and political counter-ideologies; while, on the other, CPF was inevitably influenced by the conditions, actual and potential, of poetry as one among many forms of marketable commodity, entertainment, etc. Fishing both ponds, CPF stood with a boot in each, and for a while was able to balance and move between both without getting too waterlogged or falling into either.

As long as the CPF lasted, it was also evident that at least some of the issues in Anglopoetics that tend to be framed in terms of oppositional dialectics were illusory. For example, it is clear that many contemporary poets may be just as soundly inserted into events that postulate poetry as entertainment and those that claim poetry as radical critique. To make this point, of course, is not to belittle or deny the fact that irreducible differences exist between one poet and another, especially vis-à-vis political ideology. My argument is rather that what constitutes the 'identity' of a poet's oeuvre is a garnered complexity, a unique, subtle and caringly made system consisting of multiple nuances,[24] and that this individuality is not remotely approachable by any kind of crude labelling system involving categorisation into oppositional schools or groups.

These days, poetry has irreversibly pluralised, and our discourses and narratives are necessarily about poetries, not just poems. Ideas and visions of a 'Great Tradition', Leavisite or not, hardly seem especially pertinent to our current conditions, even though they held sway as late as the mid-1960s. Criteria for what constitutes literary 'value' are more hotly debated than ever. The call that Yeats made in 1919: "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold,"[25] was effectively answered by Octavio Paz in the quotation on p. 151 above. In the wake of Paz, I have argued since 1971 that single monolithic 'centres',[26] especially

24 See Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999 [1947]), p. 326.

25 Dated by Jon Stallworthy, in *Between the Lines: W. B. Yeats's Poetry in the Making* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1963), p. 17.

26 In *Avebury* (London: Anvil Press Poetry with Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972); see Richard Berengarten, *For the Living: Longer Poems 1965–2000, Selected Writings*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2008), pp. 49–50.

national and nationalistic ones, are anathema, that difference is a cause for happiness, multiplicity a cue for celebration, and pluralism a prospect for hope.[27] The CPF was born out of that belief and argument and I think it makes sense now. Culturally today, the UK is polyglot and multi-ethnic. Its semiotics are complex and multivalent. Its notional edges and borders are porous. All of which suggests: most if not all claims to literary hegemony or centrality are incorrigibly spurious.

Thanks to its participants, supporters and organisers, for a decade the CPF countered perennial tendencies to puritanism and Little-Englandism from all quarters, and explored new fields of possibility well into the years of the Thatcher regime. That in itself was an achievement against the odds and for these reasons I think it deserves at least a footnote in the literary and intellectual histories of the UK of the last half-century, especially in contemporary Cambridge. Overall, the most salient legacy of the Cambridge Poetry Festival today is probably its openness, variety and cosmopolitanism, and that is why the story of its formation and background may be relevant to at least some of the aims and future directions of the *Cambridge Literary Review*, and why I welcome the chance to put forward these notes here, in its first issue.

27 See also the postscript to the 2nd edition of Richard Berengarten, *The Manager, Selected Writings*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2008), p. 162, para. 1.

Author Info

Richard Berengarten (formerly known as Burns) has published more than 25 books and his poems have been translated into more than 50 languages. He has lived in Greece, Italy, former Yugoslsavia and the USA. Originally a Londoner, he read English at Pembroke College (1961–4) and is now a Bye-Fellow at Downing. In 1973 he founded the international Cambridge Poetry Festival. His latest books are *For the Living*, *The Manager*, *The Blue Butterfly*, *In a Drought* and *Under Balkan Light*, all published by Salt, 2008.