

Summary

The title of this thesis is *Alfabetets användning. Konkret poesi och poetisk artefaktion i det svenska 1960-talet* (*The Use of the Alphabet. Concrete Poetry and Poetic Artifice in the Swedish 1960s*). While the first half of the title suggests the linguistic territory playfully investigated and transgressed by the poetry discussed in the book, the second half specifies the subject of the study: the so called *concrete poetry* that was written in Sweden in the 1960s, a concrete poetry that in many ways differ from the poetry that was written under this name in other parts of the world (Brazil, Germany, Switzerland, etc.) during the decades after World War II.

One of the reasons for this, is the importance of poet and painter Öyvind Fahlström in a Swedish context. Fahlström, who in 1954 published the article 'Hätila regelpr på fåskliaben', the first 'manifesto for concrete poetry' – even though the subtitle to his text was not added until 1966 – was to become a major influence on as well as part of 'Swedish concrete'. The aim of the dissertation, however, is not to document and present the *history* of this 'movement', 'tendency', or 'phenomenon'; neither to produce a comparative study between Swedish and other forms of concrete poetry (even though some comparisons are inevitable). The driving force of the investigation is rather to pose certain questions, and to analyze certain problems, raised by the forms, the methods, the materials, and the media used in this poetry, and to connect these to a specific historical and cultural situation.

Chapter I

This chapter begins – after a brief presentation of Swedish concrete poetry – with a discussion of some proposed definitions of concrete poetry (by Dick Higgins and Richard Kostelanetz). There are, however, difficulties in using these here. One reason is the emphasis put on linguistic reduction, by Higgins and Kostelanetz, which cannot be seen as a defining trait in this context. Here, then, a more pragmatic stance is taken. The material discussed is poetry produced in the 1960s, that adheres to the tenet proposed by Fahlström – poetry that treats *language as concrete matter* – and that was received as 'concrete' in its contemporary context. This means that work by a handful of poets will be emphasized: Öyvind Fahlström, Jarl Hammarberg, Åke Hodell, Bengt Emil Johnson, and Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd (even though some writings by others are discussed as well).

As the title of the book indicates, the investigation is calibrated by a specific concept: 'artifice', here (artificially) translated into Swedish as 'artefaktion', and not as 'konstgrepp', as the dictionary suggests. This concept will be an important device in the descriptions and analyses. On the one hand it recognizes the defamiliarizing force of the poetic operations – syntactical displacements, morphological and orthographical deviations, visual layerings, sound play, etc. – which distance these texts from a restricted idea of poetry as transcribed language (or voice, emotion, thought). And it underlines poetry as something *made*. On the other hand, the term brings to the fore a deconstructive problematics in the study, that focuses on destabilizations in a binary economy of concepts, such as surface and depth, body and mind, outer and inner, artificial and natural, writing and voice.

If 'artifice' is one of the key concepts, the other is 'materiality', which is considered from different perspectives in the book: as an *aesthetic* or *linguistic* materiality (the physicality of the signifier); as a *media technological* materiality (the role played by machines and materials of poetry); and as a *social* materiality (poetry as social practice). The questions of artifice and materiality are then, not only, raised in more formalistic readings – they are also related to a cultural context, which can be designated as 'the age of media'. This context is articulated in different ways, as a period of accelerated production of information, as a period of increasing importance of (new) media technologies, and as a period in which

the concept of writing will expand and differentiate. Special attention is also paid to cybernetics and information theory (and to the advent of digital media). Here, the work of scholars and critics such as N. Katherine Hayles, Friedrich A. Kittler, and Marjorie Perloff, among others, is important.

From an overall perspective, the investigation can be said to proceed on two levels. On the one hand, on a historiographical level; on the other, on an analytical-critical level. In the readings, the limits of traditional 'close readings' are discussed, as well as the possibility of exploring 'networks of signification not accessible through normal reading habits' (Leon Roudiez), as the poetry itself calls upon strategies of this kind. In the comparisons between poetic forms and other discourses (cybernetics, for example), the 'discourse analysis' of Michel Foucault is considered as a heurctic device, although the 'archaeology' of his, is not followed in any strict way.

International concrete poetry has been the subject of a lot of studies by now, but this is the first book-length study of Swedish concrete poetry. However, there are other studies of Swedish literature in the 1960s that are important, and the investigation also draws upon the findings and comments in essays and papers on Swedish concrete, by Amelie Björck, Teddy Hultberg, Bengt Höglund, Bernt Olsson, and others. Sergio Bessa has also written a doctoral thesis (not yet published) on Öyvind Fahlström's poetry and art, that was presented when this work was almost finished. However, references to this study have been inserted into the text retrospectively.

Chapter II

Even though the idea of writing a history of concrete poetry was denounced, this specific chapter touches upon such an approach. It begins by situating the article of Fahlström – 'Hätila ragulpr på fåtskliaben' – was published in the mimeo magazine *Odyssé* 2–3, 1954, together with the poem 'MOA (1)' – in its literary context of the Swedish 1950s. Fahlström's text is read as a manifesto, and compared to the *arte di manifesti* of the early avant garde. The problematization of a certain humanism (or anthropocentrism) is foregrounded, as well as the problematic issue of repetition and the avant garde (cf. Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avant-Garde*, and Hal Foster, "Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avantgarde?"). After this, the poetics articulated by Fahlström is outlined, i.e. how he conceives of the idea of treating 'language as concrete matter'. Fahlström emphasizes the need for new forms in poetry ('after free verse'), and points out how these can be implemented by a heightened awareness of the sonority of language, of the viscosity of writing, and, most importantly, by treating the linguistic material as something tactile, as something to be 'kneaded', as he says – an example of which, is his own designation of his poems as 'bord, that is 'bokstäver' ('letters') and 'ord' ('words') contracted into one *portmanteau* word. 'Kneading' will be the umbrella term for a set of poetic operations – substitutions and displacements of letters, words, and phrases – that will be explored in Swedish concrete poetry in the 1960s.

The discussion of the manifesto leads to a comparison of Fahlström's 'concretism' with other poetic 'concretisms' in the 20th century, and especially with other concrete poetry from the 1950s (i.e. Eugen Gomringer, and the Brazilian Noigandres group: Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari). The difference between Fahlström (Swedish concrete in general) and the others, can partly be captured by the opposition 'dirty' and 'clean' (cf. Steve McCaffery, Marjorie Perloff, Stephen Scobie on 'dirty' concrete).

After this, follows an account of how Fahlström's ideas were finally received, after seven years, and how they came to influence younger Swedish poets. The debate that was stirred by the breakthrough of concrete poetry is addressed, as well as the new aesthetic conditions, that paved the way for this belated reception: serial and concrete music, happenings, the assemblage oriented art of Robert Rauschenberg, and, not the least, the

interest in artists such as Marcel Duchamp and John Cage. A lot of this can be recognized in Fahlström's second important article on poetics, 'Bris', published in the magazine *Rondo* (3, 1961).

The chapter closes, with an analysis of the concept of 'materiality', which is discussed in relation to Derrida's *Of grammatology* ('linguistic materiality'), in relation to media technologies, and, more briefly, to 'social' questions regarding the writing and reading of poetry. The analysis is supplemented with a second look on 'artifice', this time towards a background of 'cratylism', i.e. the idea of finding a truer or an essential relation between word and world (or between signifier and signified). The 'cratylan' idea (from Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*) can be discovered in some concrete poetry, but its position in a Swedish context has to be considered as ambiguous and complex.

Chapter III

This chapter contains the first actual readings of poems. After connecting the 'kneading' in concrete poetry to a long tradition of linguistic experiments and mannerisms (from Greek 'lipograms' to nonsense verse), the discussion begins by recognizing a set of operations performed on a textual microlevel. For example, the defamiliarizing use of numbers and certain graphemes. On the next level, the deformations of word and syntax are observed and analyzed, for example in a poem of Jarl Hammarberg's ('Till bords i stöten'), that manifests a 'sensual' or an 'aesthetic' materiality, but that also shows, how a specific media historical situation (and here it is the tape recorder that intervenes) can have an impact on how poetry is formed. After this, some other 'artificial' operations on word and syntax are brought up (neologisms and invented words, for example) – and all these deviations from a 'normal' or 'natural' language are put in relation to such things as cryptography, translation, and invented languages.

In the section 'Materia, kroppar, ting' ('Matter, Bodies, Objects') the reading switches to a thematic level. Fahlström's ambition to incorporate 'non-poetical' words (from the office, the household, etc.) into the vocabulary of his 'concrete alternative' is mentioned (an ambition which can be read in the light of his interest in the work of Gertrude Stein). The surrealistically influenced tendency to open up the human body to its environment, and connect it to animals and machines, is also discussed.

The latter is then developed in the next section, where it is related to Michail Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque as well as to Deleuze's and Guattari's 'body without organs', as well as to what is here called an 'aggregate' – a 'textual body' in which all kinds of 'things' and 'concepts' are mingled, without exhibiting any natural or logical relation. This aggregate shows how the fragmented body (on a thematical level) and the fragmented body of the text (the 'kneaded' language) can be seen as corresponding. The grotesque anatomy is then reframed as a 'cybernetic' anatomy, and discussed as a symptom of a period in which the individual was divided and connected to different discourses, practices, and technologies. The most famous instance being, perhaps, Marshall McLuhan's idea of media as an extension of the human nervous system. But the blurring of the border between human and environment, between inner and outer, between writing in a restricted and a general sense, can also be approached, as argued, via cybernetics. A line of thought, that puts the critique of anthropocentrism, in Fahlström's manifesto, in perspective.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the relationship between 'kneading' techniques and other methods such as cut-up, collage, and *détournement*. This is interesting, not the least, since the main influence on Fahlström was Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrète* – a kind of composition that used recorded material, which was elaborated with the help of sound technology. And this view of music is congruent with Fahlström's view on language: it is something external, that can be collected, and elaborated upon, not something that emanates

from the inner world or the soul of the writer. These ideas are explored in Fahlström's visual poem / geopolitical game / memorandum for a painting: *Minneslista (till "Dr. Schwitzers sista uppdrag)* from 1964, which is read as a late modernist allegory – where elements from the contemporary world are sampled, arranged, and even 'kneaded' by poet as well as by reader – and as a 'database', as this 'cultural form' is described by Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media*.

Chapter IV

The 'database' will be brought up again in this chapter, which deals with a number of issues related to what is called an 'algorithmic imagination' – manifested in an array of aesthetic practices in the 1950s and 1960s, such as serial music, minimalist art, and concrete poetry – and which can be connected to the 'cybernetic discourse' as well as to a broader concept of a 'media age', as described above. Even though Swedish concrete poetry was not as scientifically inclined, and formally puristic, as, for example, some German concrete poetry, the turn towards mathematics and science, can be recognized in its context as well.

The subject also of this chapter is a form of 'kneaded' language, but studied on a macropoetic level. Poems based on models that neglect syntagmatic linking of textual elements to each other, and/or poems that uses (pseudo)mathematical patterns in arranging the elements, are explored. That is: forms and methods such as the series, the grid, the procedure, the permutation etc. It is a way of writing, that can, on the one hand, open up the concept of 'form' (considered as a container for a content), and, on the other hand, let different rules govern the act of writing (as well as the act of reading).

After an initial discussion of the concept of 'open form', some poems where writing comes close to a *distribution* of signs on a page – for example by the use of a grid – are considered. Poetry by Leif Nylén is read, and, especially, the book *På samma gång* (1961), by Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd, in which the word is released from syntax and used as an atomistic entity in a long serial poem arranged in groups and columns.

The second half of the chapter is devoted to poetry as game and rule based activity. Such ideas were latent in Fahlström's manifesto from 1954, and he would become explicit about the subject in the next decade, when it is addressed in a number of articles. But the idea of 'game' circulated widely in the culture of the 1960s. After a short presentation of this circulation (for example, through the French Oulipo-group), poetry by Bengt Emil Johnson and Öyvind Fahlström is discussed, poetry that uses reader oriented rules as well as rules that govern and/or generate form and content. What is emphasized is the destabilization, in the texts, of the relation between organism and construction, between improvisation and rule, between human and machine. There is a constant *contamination* of conceptual economies, which can be related to the hybrid (textual) bodies that were discussed in chapter III. The chapter ends with a reading of Fahlström's 'MOA (1)' – the poem that was published to illustrate his manifesto for concrete poetry – towards this specific background.

Chapter V

If the forms of 'kneading' discussed in the preceeding chapters are considered as 'artefactual', the same can be said of the operations explored in this chapter. Here, however, what is at stake is an intersemiotic move, or a method of 'mixing material', that gains its 'artifice', as well as its textually materializing force, through the confrontation of different media within the same poem. The two media are *word* and *image* – a discussion of which becomes the starting point for the chapter. After a short presentation of the long tradition of *paragone* and the 'sisterhood of the arts', an overview of the tradition of visual poetry is given: from early Greek pattern poems to the 20th century experiments within the different avant gardes

(Mallarmé, Apollinaire, futurism, dada, etc.). The visually oriented Swedish concrete poetry is considered as a subset to this broader phenomenon of 'visual poetry'.

By turning to the book *Svisch*, published in 1964 (by Åke Hodell's small press Kerberos), which includes works by a number of the poets and artists discussed, an outline of the verbivisual impulse in poetic writing in Sweden, during this period, is drawn. This book also gives the opportunity to discuss some of the specific features of the verbivisual text: the tension between seeing and reading, the displacements in the 'phono/graphy' of the poem, the different ways of mixing or integrating media, and so on.

The rest of the chapter, however, focuses on different techniques, or different technologies used in exploring the visuality of the poetic text. It starts out with a discussion of the typewriter as an instrument of 'spacing' (cf. Friedrich Kittler, *Aufschreibesysteme 1800 1900*). The book *Prix Nobel* (1966) by Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd is mentioned – a book based on punctuation marks. But the most thorough reading is devoted to Bengt Emil Johnson's *Essäer om Bror Bors och andra dikter* (1964), in which the typewriter is used for a dynamic form of poetic mapping or 'composition by field' (Charles Olson), in which 'organic' forms are explored in a writing, that nonetheless, from a linguistic point of view, must be considered as 'artefactual'. These poems of Johnson forces the reader to acknowledge him- or herself as an embodied creature. They make the reader aware of the embodied eye, and of the motoric aspects of reading. But Johnson's book is also an example of how the scriptural logic of a media technology (the typewriter) can be both employed and subverted in poetry of this kind.

After this, some examples of typographic variations are presented, but the discussion, rather quickly, turns to a consideration of the use of hand writing, and the pencil, in this context. A reading of hand written poetry by Jarl Hammarberg is offered, poetry that comes close to glyphs or graffiti. Also a book by Mats G. Bengtsson from 1965 (*Det är bara en kvar*) is discussed, a book in which hand written words and drawings are juxtaposed in a way that deconstructs the 'cratyllic' wish to find the perfect sign in which verbal and visual are melted together as one.

The chapter ends with a discussion of the visually oriented poetry of Åke Hodell. More than earlier, one will find here a reading with narrative qualities, a reading that oscillates between the image of the human being, within the capitalist economy and the technological systems of the late 20th century, and different forms of writing and visual representation. The collage plays an important role in these texts, but Hodell also uses hand writing, typing, and different forms of code to explore a politically charged situation, that, once again, exposes a relation between poetry and cybernetics, information theory, and new media technologies. The poetry of Hodell also raises questions about subjectivity, embodiment, and identity – for example, by evoking a verbivisual regime that has obliterated the actual observer (cf. Jonathan Crary, *Technologies of the Observer*). And these questions will be addressed again in chapter VI.

Chapter VI

In this chapter the 'image' is exchanged for 'sound' as companion to the poetic word. The sound of language was as important as the visuality of the signifier in Swedish concrete poetry, and several of the poets discussed would come to explore the genre of 'text-sound composition'. This genre, however, is not analyzed here, since such an analysis would demand a thorough discussion of music of the post-war period (which cannot be offered). For the same reason, the chapter is not devoted to a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between concrete poetry and music. What is focused upon is a sound in – and on the threshold of – language; a sound that cannot, without resistance, be captured by concepts such as voice or music (in a traditional sense); a sound that opens up poetry to nonsense and noise.

The chapter begins, though, with a brief account of concrete poetry and music – it is impossible to avoid the relationship completely. In distinction to the literary modernist generation of the 1940s in Sweden, the concrete poets would turn to more contemporary music to find inspiration and models for their writing. For example, electronic music by Karlheinz Stockhausen, or the already mentioned *musique concrète* by Pierre Schaeffer. Other points of convergence between the two arts can also be found. In relation to this, two poems by Bengt Emil Johnson and Öyvind Fahlström are discussed; poems in which 'musical models' are explored, and in which sound figures play a prominent role. What is emphasized is a tendency towards 'sonorous abstraction' in these texts, a tendency that challenges the communication of meaning through language.

After this, something that might look like a digression, or counterpoint, follows. The section introduces a technological context which is partly responsible for the specific soundscape that is explored in avant garde poetry of the last century. An 'all-sound', as Douglas Kahn describes it (cf. *Noise Water Meat. A History of Sound in the Arts*), which challenges the 'significant' sounds of voice and music within an aesthetic context. One important example of this, that is important here, is 'sound poetry'.

The theme of 'sonorous abstraction' is then investigated further. First, in what would seem to be its opposite – in a language that tries to transcribe sounds and spoken words as faithfully as possible (onomatopoeia, for example), but that, in the end, will close in upon poetic 'artifice'. In the next stage follows a discussion of texts that could be seen as (almost) pure 'sound poetry', and that force the reader to reconsider the idea of a lyrical voice. The main example is Fahlström's poem 'Den svåra resan (för blandad talkör)' from the 1950s – a poem for several voices, which explores the poetic potential of cacaphony and noise.

In the final sections of the chapter, the question of how voice is supplanted by a *multiplicity* of vocings or soundings are further pursued, for example in relation to the actual reading and performance of the poem, which also adds another layer to the theme of 'materiality – through the work of lungs, larynx, and the whole body of the poet/reader. This multiplicity is also connected to certain writing methods (collectively written pieces, collage), and it leads to further reflection upon 'poetry as a media technological system'. The concluding remarks bring up, once again, the question of subjectivity in these texts. This time it is approached through Katherine Hayles' discussion of an 'epistemic shift' in late modernist writing – from the dichotomy 'presence/absence' (of a subject in the text) to 'pattern/randomness' – a shift that can be observed in the poetry discussed.

Chapter VII

This short chapter leaves the 1960s, and points toward a contemporary situation for poetry. Partly, it focuses on how concrete poetry is being reused and reformatted today, in different aesthetic contexts. For example, on the field of digital or cyber poetry – which is no accident, since the poetry from the 1960s, through its techniques and forms, had already tied out, albeit in other media, a certain textuality (non linear texts, layered writing, hypertextuality, etcetera) that is exposed in digital media today. And it had often done so, in contact with cybernetics and media theory.

But the chapter also tells the story of concrete poetry's seeming demise in a Swedish context in the late 1960s, and the reception of it among readers and other poets in the following decades, up until today, when one can witness, for the first time, how poets, in a more thorough way, return to and redirect this kind of writing for a contemporary situation. And maybe this is due to the fact, that the 'media age' that concrete poetry explored in its innovative work with different forms and materials, is something that cannot be overlooked in aesthetic practices today – practices that must find ways to reflect upon and dramatize our relationship with the flow of information.