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## WORDS AS THINGS

### CONCRETE POETRY IN SCANDINAVIA

Det är givet att orden är symboler, men det är inte  
något skäl för att poesin inte ska kunna  
upplevas och *skapas* med utgångspunkt från  
*språket som konkret materia*.<sup>1</sup>

The traditional view in aesthetics on the act of creation in general, and poetry in particular, is that it is part of the divine power: the work of art comes to the human being in an inspirational ecstasy, the epiphany that Plato called *mania* – a state of being comparable to insanity: the poet is out of his body, for a moment part of *lux aeterna*.<sup>2</sup> Poetry takes place in the creational act, and the meaning of the poem is formed in inspiration. This view on poetry has been commonly expressed through the ages, and is given its purest form in Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* 1821:

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present, the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire: the influence which is moved not, but moves.<sup>3</sup>

Shelley takes his extreme point of departure in *poiesis*, and has a correspondingly negative appreciation of *techne* in poetry: “when composition begins inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet”.<sup>4</sup> This is an attitude which his follower Samuel Taylor

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<sup>1</sup> Öyvind Fahlström, “Hättila ragulpr på fåtskliaben. Manifest för konkret poesi”, *Ord&Bild*, 1998, 1–2+CD. “Words are symbols, of course, but that’s no reason why poetry shouldn’t be experienced and written on the basis of *language as concrete matter*”, Öyvind Fahlström, “Hipy papy bthuthdththuthda bthuthdy – Manifesto for Concrete Poetry”, in Teddy Hultberg, *Öyvind Fahlström i etern – manipulera världen. Fåglar i Sverige, Den helige Torsten Nilsson/Öyvind Fahlström on the Air – Manipulating the World. Birds in Sweden, The Holy Torsten Nilsson*, Stockholm, Sveriges Radio/Fylkingen, 1999, 110. Hereafter FM.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Ashton Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany. Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Moment*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1977, 505.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 504.

Coleridge also expresses in his note on the poem “Kubla Khan”<sup>5</sup>, which by many is taken as an example of the extreme emphasis on the first pole of the dichotomy *poiesis–techne*, where the other extreme is represented by Edgar Allan Poe in his article “The Philosophy of Composition”, where he describes the creation of the poem “The Raven”.<sup>6</sup> Poe takes his point of departure in *techne*, and describes the whole process of planning the poem.<sup>7</sup> He argues for the standpoint that poetical creation is a nearly mechanical *mise-en-place* for the poetical work, where everything is carefully planned, and where the inspirational part can be described as ‘the filling in of words’.<sup>8</sup>

This was the situation until the romantic accent on inspiration finally faded, as it were, with the historical avant-garde and the concrete poets of the 1960s. Not surprisingly, these poets did not only react against the Shellyean promotion of inspiration but also against Poe’s accent on *techne* since this was not mechanical enough but seemed to retain a place, albeit minimal, for inspiration. In the age of mechanical reproduction, this left too much space for the human part of the creative act. The concrete poets therefore purified Poe’s accent on *techne* even more when they started to incorporate found words into their poetry. They valued the actual process of the poetic creation higher, while putting a lot less emphasis on the resulting *œuvre*, thus making the poem into a linguistic event.<sup>9</sup> When the poetic effect is seen as taking place in language, the poem becomes in some sense dehumanised as it is turned into language that is engaged in the making of the poem instead of the human being, or as the Swedish poet Bengt Emil Johnson describes it: “‘scribe’ instead of ‘describe’: accept that poetic experiences can be developed by *linguistic* events and facts”.<sup>10</sup> My article explores the concrete poet’s use of words as things in their creation of poems, similar to the way visual artists use the *objet trouvé* in their art, and more specifically I focus on the (re-)creation of the poem through which these poets also put a late modern accent on the creational capability of the reader and/or listener. To analyse this (mechanical) process behind the creation of concrete poetry, I will begin with a discussion of the aesthetics of two Scandinavian poets, Öyvind Fahlström from Sweden and Per Højholt from Denmark, and then illustrate my discussion by selected examples from their praxis.

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<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Carl Fehrman, *Diktaren och de skapande ögonblicken*, Stockholm, Norstedt, 1974, 62–80.

<sup>6</sup> “The Philosophy of Composition”, in Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, Vol XIV, James A. Harrison (ed.), New York, AMS Press, 1965, 193–208.

<sup>7</sup> Carl Fehrman calls this “arbetets estetik” (the aesthetics of work), Fehrman 1974, *op. cit.*, 81–91.

<sup>8</sup> I want to connect to Heidegger’s discussion on *poiesis* as a bringing forth, a revealing of something that was concealed, and therefore connected to *aletheia*, while *techne* refers to both fabrication and to the arts. This makes the distinction between *poiesis* and *techne* somewhat complicated, however, since *techne* in such a view is actually a natural part of *poiesis* – as it was seen in Antiquity. It is this impossibility of separation that is overlooked in Shelley’s and Poe’s views, even though the latter does make a better case since he actually allows (minimal) room for inspiration.

<sup>9</sup> For an extended view on the processuality of concrete poetry, see e.g. Per Bäckström, “Krama språkmateria – manipulera världen. Det nordiska 60-talsavantgardets gränsöverskridanden”, in Hadle Oftedal Andersen and Idar Stegane (eds.), *Modernisme i nordisk lyrikk 1*, Helsingfors, Institutionen för nordiska språk och nordisk litteratur vid Helsingfors universitet, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> “‘Skriva’ istället för ‘beskriva’: acceptera att poetiska upplevelser kan framkallas av *språkliga* händelser och fakta”, Bengt Emil Johnson, “Poesins position. Enkät II”, *Rondo* 1963, 2. Trad. by P. B.

## 1 Doing different things at once

The obvious way to get an insight into the aesthetics of concrete poetry is to go to the poets themselves. The two poets, the Swede Öyvind Fahlström and the Dane Per Højholt have, in contrast to many other poets, developed their own aesthetics as well as performative praxis, and I will use them as examples for my study. Fahlström was – according to many researchers – first in the world to formulate a manifesto for concrete poetry in 1954: “Hättila ragulpr på fåtskliaben” (“Hipy papy bthuthdththuthda bthuthdy – Manifesto for Concrete Poetry”), and he is therefore a forerunner of the neo-avant-garde of the sixties in Sweden.<sup>11</sup> In Denmark the concrete poetry was represented in the little magazine *ta'*, but after Steffen Hejlskov-Larsen's *Systemdigtningen* (1971), it was often called “systemic poetry” instead, which in many ways might be considered as a Danish counterpart. Per Højholt distanced himself from these poets, however, since they were largely connected with Copenhagen, and he was centred in Århus.<sup>12</sup> Fahlström and Højholt were, in other words, forerunners and at the same time in the geographic periphery of the development.

The main document of the Swedish concrete poetry is Öyvind Fahlström's manifesto (1954), which is a manifesto on traditional form, and – more unusual – an aesthetics at the same time. He takes his point of departure in the French composer Pierre Schaeffer's *À la recherche d'une musique concrète* (1952)<sup>13</sup> as the contemporary Brazilian concrete poets did, but, unlike them, his main focus stayed on music while they were inclined to see concrete painting as an ideal for their writings.<sup>14</sup> In the manifesto, which is divided into two parts, there is the by now obligatory revolt against the tradition, as represented by the writers' meeting in Sigtuna, and the main Swedish “neo-romantic” poet Bo Setterlind:

Literary tastes in the spring of 1953 were dictated in Sigtuna. The psychoanalytically correct bust and hip lines were discarded, skirt lengths fell and cleavages rose. Why? To emphasize imaginative creativity; frills and coiffured butterflies; sing along, Setterlind. [...]

The situation is this: *ever since the War* [...] *a long, abject, doomsday mood*, a feeling that all experimental extremes have been exhausted. For those of us unwilling to drift into the world of alcoholic or heavenly sustenance, all that remains is to use what means we have at our disposal to

analyse

analyse

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<sup>11</sup> Öyvind Fahlström, “HÄTILÄ RAGULPR PÅ FÅTSKLIABEN”, *Odyssé* 1954, 2/3. The nonsensical title of the manifesto is taken from *Nalle Puh* – the Swedish translation of A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*. I call it a manifesto, since this is the standard description of the text, but it was not published until 1966 with the subtitle “manifesto for concrete poetry”, in Öyvind Fahlström, *Bord – dikter 1952–55*, Stockholm, Bonniers, 1966. In another article, where some formulations from the manifesto were reiterated, it was rather described as a program, see Öyvind Fahlström, “Lyriken kan skapa kollektiv rytmisk extas liksom jazzen. En konkret diktare skriver ett program”, *Expressen*, July 19, 1954.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Morten Søndergaard, *Rumpunkteringer. Show-Bix og Per Højholts mediebevindste praksis 1967 @*, Roskilde, Roskilde Universitetscenter, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Schaeffer, *À la recherche d'une musique concrète*, Paris, Seuil, 1952.

<sup>14</sup> “[T]here are grounds for likening Fahlström's poetic approach to that of a composer”, Hultberg 1999, *op. cit.*, 33.

analyse our wretched predicament. (FM)

Although part one is mainly an attack on the contemporary literary scene, the epigraph at the head of the present article is also to be found there: “Words are symbols, of course, but that’s no reason why poetry shouldn’t be experienced and *written* on the basis of *language as concrete matter*” (FM). In this concise sentence, the main ideal for Fahlström can be identified, namely the use of language as the concern of poetry: in a very “concrete” way he wants to use the words as objects to create the poetic effect through them. The Swedish poet Sandro Key-Åberg has aptly described this strategy as “words as things”.<sup>15</sup>

Fahlström’s point of departure is an urge to establish a concrete alternative, where “everything expressible in language and every linguistic expression has equal status in a given context if it enriches that context” (FM). In part two of the manifesto he describes different techniques to create this new poetry, different ways to frustrate the expectations of the reader, and to create new poetic effects. He also puts a certain stress on *techne* when he writes that one should not avoid the part of poetry writing that consists of hard work:

One approach is to refrain from taking the line of least resistance – Lileresta – as often as possible. Though no guarantee of success, it is one way of avoiding stagnation. Systems or automatism, make use of either – combine them even – but only as an aid, a means to an end. (FM)<sup>16</sup>

These words are formulated both in opposition to easily won poetic effects, as if he has considered the neo-romantic poetry of the fifties, and as a description of his own tradition: here we meet the automatism of Surrealism and a contemporary interest in systems. Fahlström does take his standpoint in a reflection upon these two notions, since he insists on a moderate use of them in combination, where working with the poems must follow on automatism.<sup>17</sup> Fahlström therefore proposes systems that can be imposed upon the result of the automatic writing. He also wants to revive the combination of content and form to escape the emphasis on content that he saw as predominant in contemporary poetry, and he suggests many different ways to work with a poem:

ideally, form and content should function as a whole.

It remains, in short, to re-endow form with its own set of criteria. [...] The possibilities are unbounded. In poetry we may have fractured stanzas with vertical parallelism; here content dictates form. [...]

As always, the simplest of all methods for systematizing formless material is to alternate between antitheses – antitheses involving all conceivable aspects of a work of art; [...]

Not just simple alternation, but also intensification – and *rhythms*. Anything but the indolent predictability of Lileresta. [...]

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<sup>15</sup> Sandro Key-Åberg, “Ord som ting”, *Bonniers Litterära Magasin*, 1963, 6.

<sup>16</sup> With another *portmanteau* of his: “Mimömola” (Lileresta). The translation “Lileresta” does not catch Fahlström’s work with words, since the Swedish original – “Mimömola” – is made out of the first two letters of each word of the phrase “the line of least resistance”: “*M*nsta *m*öjliga *m*otståndets *l*ag”.

<sup>17</sup> This is necessary work that the surrealists did not do, according to Fahlström.

Above all, I believe that the creation of rhythmic form offers unimagined possibilities. Rhythm is not just music's most fundamental, physically immediate element; it is the joy of recognition; it is the essence of repetition; it is intimately related to the body's own cadences: breathing, heartbeats and ejaculation. [...]

It's a matter of tearing oneself free from the compulsion to churn out the new, new, new: of not leaving behind a midden behind you heaped with designs for every step taken in the creation of a work; of sticking instead to your motifs, letting them repeat themselves, form rhythms; (FM)

Fahlström thus superimposes mechanical systems on poetry and the words through which the poems are made, and in that way he employs them as things rather than as symbolic signs. This is even more evident in the continuation of the manifesto, where he introduces more extreme *Verfremdungs* effects: here we meet other techniques, related to the importance of giving words new meanings or significations by redefining certain words and phonemes to mean something totally different in a poem, or by using well-known words in a wholly alienating context etc. Like the Russian futurists, he wants to use words that are considered unsuitable to serve as poetic building blocks, and he also introduces a way for language to mean nothing by deconstructing the syntax and the structure of the language. One way of doing this is to use performative structures in the poems by exploring "the language produced with a view to determining what elements we can make use of in purely mechanical terms, by choosing new directions in which to read, or by arranging words and sentences according to a serial scheme" (FM). His instructions for a new creation of poetry, ends – before the manifesto actually ends – with the famous wording that can be seen as the *credo* for concrete poetry in Sweden:

KNEAD the linguistic material; this is what justifies the label concrete. Don't just manipulate the whole structure; begin rather with the smallest elements – letters, words. Recast the letters as in anagrams. Repeat letters within words; throw in alien words, *plea – vroog – se – do*; interpose letters that don't belong, *aacatioaanniya* for action; explore children's secret code languages and other private languages; vocal glides: *gliaouedly*. (FM)

In a few lines he demonstrates the methods of concrete poetry and identifies the way towards development for the following generation of poets. The manifesto was rather unnoticed when it was published in 1954, however, even if it was also published in a rewritten variant in the leading tabloid *Expressen* besides the appearance in the Swedish magazine *Odyssé*.<sup>18</sup> It did not have any impact until nearly ten years later, when – in the first years of the sixties – a new generation of poets labelled themselves concrete, and started the magazine *Rondo* with a cover drawing by Öyvind Fahlström, titled "Sixties intelligentsia caught in a dialectical quandary".<sup>19</sup> Jesper Olsson describes the full impact of Fahlström:

The central point of Fahlström's proposition, and the point, which was to be most persistently worked on by concrete poets in Sweden during the 1960s, is thus formulated with the help of tactile imagery. In addition to the visual and aural perspective, Fahlström writes about an approach to the language as a

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<sup>18</sup> See note 11.

<sup>19</sup> "En ögonblicksbild av 60-talistiska intelligentian fångad i dialektisk klämma", English shorter translation from Hultberg 1999, *op. cit.*, 43. *Rondo* 1961–1964.

physical, tangible object, of “kneading” or “squeezing” its constituent parts: [...]

This working on characters, words and clauses is, without doubt, the most important methodical tool that Fahlström presents in his article. It contributes to a great extent to the artefactual character so prominent in concrete poetry, in the same way as the materialization of the language, which moves the poetry in a threefold way along three different vectors: semiologically – from the signified to the signifier; topologically – from the depths to the surface; and ontologically – from representation to presentation, or from representation to being.<sup>20</sup>

Inspired by Fahlström, it was the following generation that realized many of his ideas, and who in turn made it possible for him to get published and to develop his performative strategies. This generation consisted of Mats G. Bengtsson, Jarl Hammarberg, Åke Hodell, Bengt Emil Johnson, Leif Nylén and others, and they that made contact with the other Nordic countries and invited the international avant-garde scene to Sweden. For a while Stockholm was one of the centres of the avant-garde in the world, with international stars such as Nam June Paik, John Cage, Ken Dewey, Allen Kaprow, Robert Rauschenberg, and Swedish poets such as Öyvind Fahlström and Carl-Fredrik Reuterswärd in their turn became internationally renowned.

There was a lively exchange between the Nordic countries, where close friendships were developed between the main avant-garde artists, one of which being Per Højholt. It is possible to observe a slight temporal dislocation when it comes to the reception of avant-garde ideas in the Nordic countries, however, a fact that can be illustrated by the main magazines of the Nordic avant-gardes: the Swedish magazine *Rondo* was published in 1961–64, the Danish magazine *ta'* in 1967–1968, and at roughly the same time the avant-garde period of the Norwegian magazine *Profil* occurred, in 1966–1968.<sup>21</sup> In the case of Højholt, the avant-garde episode can be said to mark the interval between his two aesthetic essays *Cézannes metode* (The Method of Cézanne, 1967) and *Intethedens grimasser* (The Grimace of Nothingness, 1972)<sup>22</sup>, because this is the time when he developed the “media consciousness” of late modernity.<sup>23</sup> This media consciousness is a defining feature of the avant-garde in the sixties in general, and was very prominent in the Swedish contemporary avant-garde as well. There are therefore many similarities between the Nordic avant-gardes, while the aesthetics of Højholt also took a different turn in his individual acting out of it.

Højholt, more than Fahlström, took his point of departure in the human being, nature and time, and his two books developed an aesthetics with a more ontological urge, according to Jesper Olsson when commenting on Fahlström, who

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<sup>20</sup> Jesper Olsson, *Alfabetets användning. Konkret poesi och poetisk artefaktion i svenskt 1960-tal*, Stockholm, OEL editör, 2005, 63–65.

<sup>21</sup> *ta'*, Copenhagen, H.M. Bergs forlag; *Profil*, Department of the History of Art and Ideas, University of Oslo. *Profil* was published for a longer period, but was taken over from students in 1966 by authors inspired by the avant-garde. Before this period it was a student magazine and then turned into a political periodical. See Per Bäckström and Bodil Børset (eds.), *Norsk avantgarde*, Oslo, Novus forlag, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Both books are republished in one volume: Per Højholt, *Cézannes metode/Intethedens grimasser*, Copenhagen, Schönberg, 1985. Hereafter CM and IG.

<sup>23</sup> See Søndergaard 2006, *op. cit.*

could not – in the presence of the neo-romanticism of the fifties – be as explicit about ideas like this. Højholt explores his main factors in the first aesthetic *Cézannes metode* in 1967, from which we get more insight into the ontological status of experimental poetry:

Choosing to comprehend nature and life as closely related, as manifestations of time, and thus comprehending time as a substance, material that is its own expression, is the only form of consciousness of this that we can now reach, since it forms conceptions through a medium that has time as its metre, for example through language, the linguistic work of art that can certainly be described as, amongst other things, an audible/readable progression of time. (CM, 7)

The aesthetics of Højholt more explicitly deals with performed poetry, and only implicitly does he discuss poetry as experiment, and therefore we have to resort to his printed and performed poetry to see what these experiments really look like.<sup>24</sup> This more aesthetic view on poetry derives from the Danish tradition of writing poetics, a tradition that started with Paul la Cour and his *Fragmenter af en Dagbog* (Fragments of a diary, 1948).<sup>25</sup> He probably drew up the explicitly ontological tradition. His influence can still be seen by the frequency of words as “unsayable”, “nothingness” etc. in Højholt’s books, and by a striking formulation of the “goal” at the beginning of *Cézannes metode*: “nor in this writing is the unsayable said” (CM, 6). Højholt is active fifteen years after Fahlström, and instead of the notion of “system” the contemporary notion of “structure” colours his text, and his attention is also more explicitly geared towards the reader:

Language is not the total sum of words, but of the fact that words may be conveyed to make connections, to appear in context, to be bearers of assertion or to represent the unsayable by specifying the indeterminate. Everyday language, the address, is arbitrary as an example of language. Language that is pure communication is unconditional mediation of facts and information. The linguistic work of art, which has its existence as its primary aim and which, in contrast to the other two, may be experienced as a thing, a person, a situation, a reflection, is the only one to represent entries and approaches that first upon encounter with the reader become realizable and to which value may be assigned. (CM, 37–38)

It would be wrong, however, to imply that Højholt only finds interest in performing his poems, even though the citation above makes outlines the role of the poet as virtually impersonal: the author and performer are mediators of the poem, nothing else. Højholt, a poet living in what Walter Ong calls the secondary orality, plans his poems and his performances of them extremely carefully.<sup>26</sup> He actually sees improvisation as an obstacle to the experimentality of a poem:

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<sup>24</sup> One of his theoretical influences is clearly Wolfgang Kayser, *Das sprachliche Kunstwerk. Eine Einführung in die Literaturwissenschaft*, Bern/München, Francke, 1948.

<sup>25</sup> Paul la Cour, *Fragmenter af en Dagbog*, Copenhagen, Gyldendal, 1948.

<sup>26</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*, London, Methuen, 1982. In primary orality, speech was not yet controlled by the structures of written language, according to Ong, but after the invention of different alphabets, spoken language is always already structured by written language. Poets – among others – living today therefore cannot perform according to an ‘original’ and ‘authentic’ orality, but have to adapt to the fact that they live in secondary orality, which is characterized by the explosion of poetry readings and performances in the last century.



Every poem that is an improvisation is the ultimate. In itself, it cannot represent any attitude or standpoint and thereby create a continuation or withdraw from the indeterminacy. This would result in a structural or linguistic defect that would render mastery of the poem more difficult and at the same time rob it of its character of total experiment. (CM, 34–35)

What Højholt means with experiment is not very clear, but further on in the text it becomes obvious that he emphasises the poem as a hybrid form: “The creation of hybrid forms thus presupposes a disintegration of the genres” (CM, 76). This refers to the performed poem, but also poems where the words are used as objects for the poet to create a poetic effect and to empty the words of meaning, and where the reader is part of the (re-)creation of the effect. This is why Højholt puts such stress on the performance of the poem since it is the most exemplary way to include the reader as a partner in the creation of the poem. This is made clear in Per Højholt’s second poetic *Intethedens grimasser* in 1972, where he explicitly talks about the “show” instead of the poem: “While the show is a communication of nothingness, the artistic text is a writing (with)in nothingness, of which it is at the same time a description” (IG, 54). This citation gives the impression that Højholt and Fahlström express contrary positions in their poetics, but this is a chimaera produced by a lack of contextualisation. Højholt is actually describing very much the same as Fahlström, even though he is not as explicit about the means, but twenty years later this is obscured by the fact that he cannot any longer use the same words as Fahlström did:

The nothingness of the text (its being nothing) is realized in its games, its system. To refer to a text as a language game harbours the possibility of misunderstanding in the form of analogical inferences with regard to other games such as draughts, monopoly, etc. The designation “system” harbours other and unfortunately equally close possibilities of misunderstanding. For this reason, the designation used here is “show”. (IG, 69)

In 1954 the time was not ripe to start elaborating on different media as a means for creating and performing poems, but at the beginning of the sixties, also Fahlström experimented with different media: he wrote and directed experimental radio plays, text-sound compositions, happenings and performances. He takes the lead in the development of new media strategies, at the same time as he exemplifies the shift of focus from the author to the public in a newly written aesthetic article “Bris” (Breeze, 1961), an article that supplements the manifesto written eight years before:

the spectator, the reader, the listener are able in certain respects to determine a work of art’s form and presentation. [...]

the performance, the method of working, and this in the context of the creator’s or executor’s spiritual preparation, are of great significance; formal perfectionism is opposed, as are l’art pour l’art mentality and a general relativity of worth.<sup>27</sup>

This text shows the same media consciousness that Højholt displayed five to ten years later when he toured Denmark with different “shows”. Where Fahlström in his manifesto attacks the words, deconstructs and contorts them to make for a new

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<sup>27</sup> Öyvind Fahlström, “Bris”, *Rondo* 1961, 3, 26.

kind of poetry, Højholt rather takes his departure in a similar understanding as that of Fahlström in 1954, and adds new ways to realize similar ideals. To alienate the words and his poetry, he performs his texts as shows, a “show” that is just another name for system or structure, but for which the established understanding no longer suffices when he wants to explain his model. To understand Fahlström’s experiments of concrete poetry and of Højholt’s shows, it is necessary to delve into their praxes to reach a conclusion as to how the two poets used words as things.

## 2 Bord – dikter 1952–55

The strategies of Öyvind Fahlström have been aptly summarized by the Swedish poet Jörgen Gassilewski in a description of the poetical techniques in one of Fahlström’s poems – “Det stora och det lilla” (The large and the small):

The theme, small word groups, perhaps collected from the same extraneous text, is presented, modulated, permuted with an exchange of letters, repetition and conversion, and contrasted with other word groups using a kind of *stretto*.<sup>28</sup>

This description does not only centre on Fahlström’s use of words as things, but also on his focus on music in his *œuvre*, an observation which is important for the overall understanding of his poetry.

Fahlström hardly published anything in the fifties, except for some single poems printed here and there in insignificant magazines, and it is not until his first and only collection of poems from the fifties *Bord – dikter 1952–55* (Table – poems), published in 1966 more than ten years after their creation, that we are acquainted with his poetical techniques in more depth.<sup>29</sup> This poetry book has an illustrated cover with what seems like an ink drawing by Fahlström, a mandala-formed abstract black-and-white figure, which matches both the manifesto and his poetry with its typically repetitive character. The title has a strange hyphenation: The first line says “Öyvind Fahlström Bord-d”, and the rest of the title plus the editor – “dikter 1952–55 Bonniers” – is printed on the next line, which clearly shows how disruption, e.g. misspelling of words, as described in the manifesto, was one of Fahlström’s techniques of *Verfremdung*.

According to the “Note 1964” at the end of the book, written by the artist himself, the poems were written after a surrealist period in 1948–52 and before he started painting and making other experiments in 1955. This means that we can here read and take part of early concrete poetry, still only manipulating language, according to the game rules he put forward in his manifesto. He therefore works mainly with words, which he uses as structural objects to employ the effects he

<sup>28</sup> Jörgen Gassilewski, “Efterord”, in Öyvind Fahlström, *Bord – dikter 1952–1955*, Stockholm, Lejd, 1999, 69.

<sup>29</sup> Fahlström 1999, *op. cit.* “Bord” (table) is a *port-manteau*-word created by Fahlström, put together by the Swedish words for letters and word/s (“bokstäver” and “ord”). It is an overall problem in the study of Fahlström that his literary work is scattered all over the world, and that many manuscripts were lost until recently. Today we are in the fortunate situation that the main part of the manuscripts is either at the Royal library, Stockholm, or at The Öyvind Fahlström Foundation, at Museu d’art contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). At the homepage of the foundation, there are texts of and about Fahlström, and also a facsimile of *Bord-dikter 1952–55* <<http://www.fahlstrom.com/>> (read 120501).

wants to achieve. He often sticks to the content of the words, but later on – as we shall see – also the words are imploded in the concrete poetry of the next generation.<sup>30</sup> In *Bord – dikter*, though, there is also work on the word, phoneme and letter levels, and since the poems are printed chronologically we can actually see how Fahlström is trying out the different strategies in the manifesto. Here is the so significant repetition technique; present from the very start in the first poem “Hattar som (2)” (“Hats as (2)”), which begins:

call me whatever  
that's why I do everything that comes my way  
him  
next slowest makes the winndow that  
    him and him  
    begins furthest down and rakes  
And Rakes as hips through up the whole house joining with everything in its  
way and  
pieces  
    him and his  
        some of the ways to slough off light and branch off humming  
    him and his  
through the furnishings  
        through the furnishings  
    looks further up and there are the same words as his  
    sloughing through the furnishings spun together by window  
hand over hand  
his word and his word<sup>31</sup>

It here becomes clear how Fahlström employs words as things, since he repeatedly reuses the same words, in new combinations, or as the same phrase, which is permuted, e.g. “him and him”, which become “him and his”, and which in the last cited line has been expanded into “his word and his word”. He also misspells a word as “winndow”, and works deliberately with the layout as we can see from the variation of the left margin and how he italicizes the word “*rakes*”, and the well-known word from the line before is suddenly integrated with a context that makes it stand out as unintelligible. Repetition is characteristic of the secondary orality, which indicates that this poem is really made to be performed, as is clear in the following lines:

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<sup>30</sup> In some sense the poems of Fahlström later on become things used in his experiments when he starts to perform the poems as objects for text-sound poetry, radio plays and music. It is important to understand that the printed poems were often not enough for the concrete poets since they put such a stress on them as processual units: the poems begged to be performed.

<sup>31</sup> Fahlström 1999, *op. cit.*, 5. Transl. by P. B.

|               |                                  |            |
|---------------|----------------------------------|------------|
|               | even whatever is clean and quiet |            |
|               |                                  | to call me |
| double codger |                                  | to call me |
| double codger |                                  | to call me |
| double codger |                                  | to call me |

This kind of performative technique will become more accentuated in some of his later works, such as the poem “B O B B” which has been translated into English:

from Bobb everything came he was at the same time human and firm  
son of a Pope he always sat with his nets  
he grew fatter and fatter we that had brothers liked him best  
one day and another in the south he didn't know how his gong  
sounded  
one day there came a train with potatoes the air swarmed with larks he  
saw nothing  
the evening comes “the earliest” to the sitting-holes he used to say the  
evening confirmed it<sup>32</sup>

Through the way Fahlström groups the words by means of a strange spacing, we can see that the poem demands to be performed, since the grouping of one or two words makes us read in a varied rhythm throughout the poem. The syntax and structure of language are deliberately deconstructed, ordinary words are made hard to understand since they do not have any relation to the words in its vicinity, even though – as Fahlström explicitly stated in the manifesto – the poem has both content and form. According to Swedish grammar the name “Bobb” is misspelled, even though there is no problem to understand that the name “Bob” is meant.<sup>33</sup> This way of using the words as objects or things can also be seen in one of his most experimental poems – “MOA (1)”. The last part of the poem is here copied in facsimile:<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Cited from Hultberg 1999, *op. cit.*, 107. I have used the same font (Helvetica) as in *Bord-dikter* since I believe this font was chosen deliberately because of its unpoetic character – traditionally serif-fonts are used for poetry. See the same page in Hultberg for a transcription of “Bobb” into “birdo”, a language based on the sounds of birds: “as birds would speak Swedish if they sounded the way we transcribe their song”.

<sup>33</sup> This seems to be one of Fahlström’s *portmanteau* words.

<sup>34</sup> Fahlström 1966, *op. cit.*, 47.



Here we can see how “MOA (1)” looks more like a score in music than traditional poetry. In the left margin there is a list of the abbreviations in the text with translations, and below the poem there is a – nonsensical – scene instruction and an explanation of the underscored words in the text. The words in the poem itself are distributed by way of layout, which is more like a table than a poem, and where some words are printed from the bottom up. What is most striking, however, is the fact that most of the words are out of context or even meaningless, without the instructions in the left margin and below. This strengthens my argument that this kind of poetry is processual and meant to be performed, while the fact that Fahlström redefines some words and uses the rest of them as in a puzzle or game regardless of their meaning clearly shows his use of words as things.

### 3 Turbo & +1

When it comes to Per Højholt, he worked as a poet and author most of his life and his *Samlede digte* (Collected Poems), which was published in 2005, comprises 656 pages.<sup>35</sup> Like Öyvind Fahlström, he started as a more or less traditional poet with a romantic poetry book: *Hesten og solen* (The Horse and the Sun, 1949). He published another rather conventional book in the fifties, and then started to write more continuously in the sixties. It is at this time that he begins to alter his poems, influenced by the different media that had evolved at this time: TV, video and tape recorder etc. Based on his theories about the “show” in his two sets of aesthetics, a word that in Danish also sounds like “sjov” (fun), he published a great number of humoristic poems, a quality that is never really missing in his poetry. However, it is with the two poetry books *Turbo* (1968) and *+1* (1969) that he published poems at a correspondingly experimental level as that of Fahlström’s concrete poetry.<sup>36</sup>

With an aesthetics like Højholt’s it seems likely that the resulting poetry should take an analogously ontological, nearly metaphysical, form, but when we move to his poetry – especially in these two poetry books – it is clear that he instead in many ways uses similar means as Fahlström. In *Turbo* he uses repetition, disrupted syntax and misspelled words to break up the language, deeming it

<sup>35</sup> Per Højholt, *Samlede digte*, Copenhagen, Gyldendal, 2005. Hereafter SD.

<sup>36</sup> *Turbo* 1968; *+1* 1969; both in Højholt 2005, *op. cit.*, 183–196 and 197–216 respectively.

meaningless by the repetitive draining of the words. *Turbo* is characterized by the same urge to keep content in balance with form, though, while he at the same time tries to empty the words from meaning in a way that should really be understood as a recharging of meaning. The content, as for Fahlström, is something to use to build poems out of, as objects that are given new meanings or evoke comical effects when the word is repeated over and over again.<sup>37</sup> The fourth untitled text starts like this:

henry in the scenery he bows and thanks and goes off again  
in the scenery henry he bows and thanks and goes off again  
in the scenery he bows henry and thanks and goes off again  
in the scenery he bows and thanks henry and goes off again  
in the scenery he bows and thanks and henry goes off again  
in the scenery he bows and thanks and goes off henry again  
in the scenery he bows and thanks and goes off again henry  
in the scenery again he receives flowers and bows and tips  
over and hangs sideways in the air with his tootsies topmost and cheek  
t'ground half half-hung pendant to the mother globe half (SD, 189)

Here we can see similar techniques that Fahlström used, and also other concrete poets, but the comical effect in Højholt's case of is more accentuated. He drains language of its meaning, by using the words as objects, which can be permuted, contorted and moved according to preference. It is instructive to see him in relation to other concrete poets, especially Fahlström, who was the "father" of concrete poetry in Sweden, and therefore indirectly also for the whole region, because of the cooperation of the Nordic poets in the sixties. Højholt does not play with the typography and layout in this poem, as in some other of his texts and as many other concrete poets did, but at the same time there is a distinct visual effect when "henry" is walking across the poetical landscape of the poem until he disappears at the end of the line "tipping / over" in a very illustrative way. Even though there is a strong emphasis on the performance of the poem, the effect cannot be produced without a printed (or projected) version of it. Where other concrete poets seem to leave the printed page once and for all, Højholt seems "concretely" rooted in it, and this gives rise to the reflection that in contrast to Fahlström he is more of a visual artist. Whereas Fahlström's poetry mainly consists of score-like texts, even though he works a great deal with the visuality of the poem as well, Højholt's poems are as firmly fixed to the paper as the painters' work is to the canvas. This can clearly be seen in the second last text, which ends this way:

Here openeth the die in the side gets the edge and background and  
1/4 swarms of pupils to turn to yes and so it's  
done oh yeah now it can all begin OK mind out mind out  
goeogoeGoeGOeGOEgOeGOEgOEGOGON (SD, 195)

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<sup>37</sup> Repetition actually becomes a trade mark for Højholt, who – soon after – in the 70s became famous all over Denmark for his "Gitte's Monologues", which are more comical than concrete experiments.

The pupils of the dice suddenly turn into an accumulative number of g, o and e, a final line which is characterised by its mix of capitals and lower case letters in a way that, while reading aloud, both turn the phonetic level into a mythical Gorgon and – when we arrive at the final lonely n – Danish for eyes: “øgon”. Here we can see how the visual and the phonetic levels combine to produce an effect that could not have been created out of one of these strata alone.

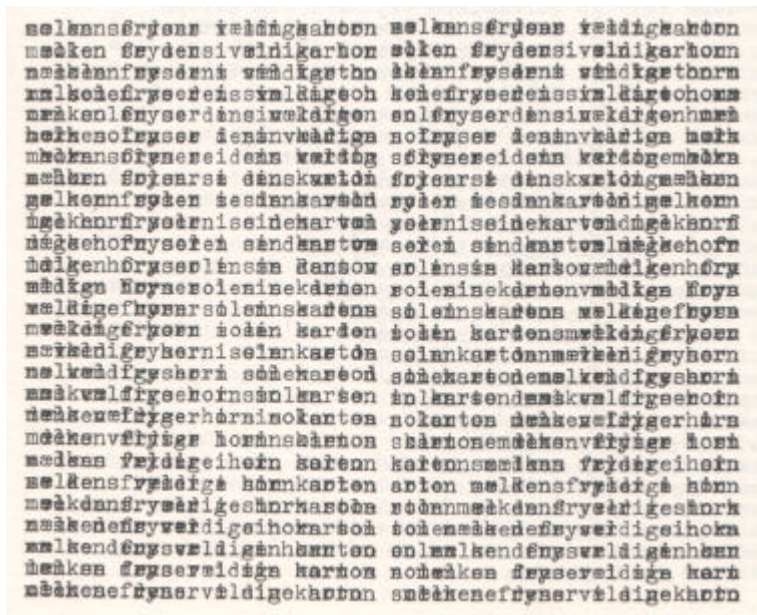
+1 is quite different from what we have seen so far, since this book consists of typewritten poems, but if we go to the context – concrete poetry in the Nordic countries – this is close to a defining feature of concrete poetry.<sup>38</sup> As far as I know, Fahlström did not publish any poems like this, even though there are typewritten experimental poems in his estate, which show that even he tried it out. The development of typewriters and printing techniques in the fifties and sixties is of course one of many plausible explanations for all these experiments, and a further explanation is the fact that the poets themselves often wrote about the urge to free the words and letters in poetry. This is a phenomenon that draws on the aesthetics of Stéphane Mallarmé, and his experiments with this technique in his famous manuscript *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (1897)<sup>39</sup>, developed by Guillaume Apollinaire, the futurists, Kurt Schwitters and other avant-gardists. The concrete poets developed his experiment further as they could make the typography on the typewriter themselves, and the printers could now print the poem as a facsimile without any problems. There are fine examples in Per Højholt's tiny poetry book +1, where this poem starts the collection:<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> There are obvious similarities to the concrete poets in Germany and Brazil in terms of the typewritten poems and the stress on visuality.

<sup>39</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes* 1, Paris, Gallimard Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1998, 363–87. It seems that this poem has not been published according to the instructions of the poet until recently. About Per Højholt and Mallarmean language, see Carsten Madsen, *Poesi, tanke & natur. Per Højholts filosofi og digtning*, Århus, Klim, 2004, especially 18.

<sup>40</sup> Højholt 2005, *op. cit.*, 199. There are also poems that have similarities with Fahlström's poem “MOA (1)”, which is interesting, but it is more fitting to finish with a poem that without doubt has the touch of Højholt.



Two phrases are superimposed on each other – “solen se dens vældige horn” (the sun sees its mighty horn) and “mælken fryser i sin karton” (the milk freezes in its carton), where the phrases under erasure establish a pattern where the words are no more visible.<sup>41</sup> In a very “concrete” way the words are used as things to shape a poetic effect that is without any symbolic meaning whatsoever.

**4 Conclusion**

The strategies of Per Højholt and Öyvind Fahlström put the focus even more on the human traces in the poem: the process behind it.<sup>42</sup> The poem is dehumanised in a very straightforward sense, since the mechanised techniques used for the creation render it a product almost purged of inspiration, as when Fahlström incorporates found words (even his own) into the poem, or creates new languages from e.g. books about birds, and when Højholt repeats the words until only the comical aspect is left for the reader or public. This process of dehumanisation brings to mind Herman Rapaport’s discussion of truth in art, where the truth cannot emerge without dehumanisation:

Again, it is as if the thing required the renunciation or self-cancellation or the human in order to stand forth in its truth [...]. Because art is temporal, it disrupts the closure in which Being would house it, because as temporality the work of art presences itself in a way that obliterates the circumstance of Being and opens, in its stead, a withdrawal, renunciation, or refusal of Being that comes to pass in the dis-closure of *Ab-grund* as Openness. That the human with all its motivations, purposes, and designs conceals or prohibits the

<sup>41</sup> These two phrases are used to construct all the poems, except for the long last poem, which describes a get-together by listing and repeating the typical Danish behaviour, drinks and food of the party.  
<sup>42</sup> This is even clearer if their performances of the poems were included in the analysis since these poets used various *Verfremdung*-effects, but it is quite obvious also from the printed poems *per se*.



disclosure of art in its grounded/ungrounded relation to being and truth is as crucial to Heidegger as the recognition that *essential for the truth in art to appear is the trait or trace of the human that ought to be thought of as otherwise-than-human because the trait is postmetaphysical and posthuman*.<sup>43</sup>

This posthuman aspect is present in both Fahlström's and Højholt's poetry, where everything about the creation of the poem is mechanized, and where at the same time they reveal the "true" human trace: its processuality. In their aesthetic and poetical praxis of the sixties, there is a shift of focus from the author to the reader and/or public, clearly seen in Højholt's naming of the performer as a "mediator", which situates the (re-)creational act in the space between author/performer and reader/public. The poem is turned into an independent structure, which exists in its own right. By reducing the impact of *poiesis* to almost zero and instead putting all the effort into the *techne* part of creation, the poets actually reintroduce the ontological dimension, although now purged of the metaphysical aspect of Romanticism, as Johanna Drucker has observed:

It was this insistence on autonomy, self-sufficiency, which allowed such emphasis on the poem as structure and form to be sustained; again this is a question of ontological status, the poem is to *be*, rather than to exist as a vessel of form conveying or holding a separate meaning.<sup>44</sup>

With the extreme emphasis on *techne* instead of *poiesis* bringing out the arbitrariness and exchangeability of words, the process behind the poem is carried out in the open. Through this mechanisation of the creative act and the insistence on the performer as a mediator between the poem and the public, everything poetic is cut out from the poem. In the choice between Coleridge and Poe they chose the latter, but at the same time they place themselves in the golden middle, since *poiesis* by this reduction to zero, actually returns in the (re-)creation of the poem exposed as the minimal trace of (post-)humanity: the process.

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<sup>43</sup> Herman Rapaport, *Is there Truth in Art?*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1997, 35, my italics.

<sup>44</sup> Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word. Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909–1923*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994, 72.