

# Writing Through the Data Banks: A Note on Poetry and Technology in the Swedish 1960s

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## Abstract

This essay deals with literary experiments from the Swedish 1960s - by artists and writers such as Öyvind Fahlström, Åke Hodell, and others - that elaborate and differentiate the interface of poetry through the use of various media (book, performance, gramophone, etc). Apart from presenting a challenge to the traditionally assigned roles of writers and readers, these texts can be seen as articulating a threshold between a 'culture of expression' and a 'culture of information', where the forms of poetry are shaped, not by the search for the perfect expression of an experience as much as by an attempt to write through the databanks that inform and form (ideological) ensembles of knowledge at a certain historical juncture. The main example in the essay is Åke Hodell's book, performance, record, TV-film, etc. *Lågsniff*, from 1966, which, through its use of technical codes and data, connects literature to the discourse of information theory, technology, and war. A problematic question to be raised is also, if, and in what way, one can relate these poetic forms to a digital poetics today.

"Art is a non-informational phenomenon. But to a high degree it comments on and points to the factors that determine our informational communication. Not by *talking about* (and advising on) this form of communication, but through elaboration / emphasis / combination of the forms that we communicate with."<sup>1</sup>

These reflections by poet and artist Mats G. Bengtsson – excerpted from an article on art in the wake of Marshall McLuhan – can be considered symptomatic for a new approach to media and aesthetics in the Swedish mid-sixties. Not that his stance was to become the commonly acknowledged one, embraced by all and everyone. On the contrary.<sup>2</sup> But Bengtsson, who a couple of years earlier had published his first book of visual poetry, was a typical exponent of a development

that came out of a surge of linguistic experiments in Sweden at that time; an experimentation that was captured by the concept of 'concrete poetry'.

These poetic elaborations had its by now well-known starting point in the first manifesto for concrete poetry, "Hätila ragulpr på fåtskliaben", published in the magazine *Odyssé* in 1954, by artist and poet Öyvind Fahlström.<sup>3</sup> Through a slow reception process his manifesto paved the way for an explosion of innovative writing in the early years of the 1960s. Fahlström himself had by that time moved to New York, and was devoting his work to the visual arts. On the other hand, a new group of writers, such as Jarl Hammarberg, Åke Hodell, and Bengt Emil Johnson, were there to develop his ideas.<sup>4</sup>

Fahlström's proposal for a playful research into the materiality of language became the basis for a richly differentiated 'verbivocovisual' poetry that explored a variety of techniques, forms, and media. Even though there are points of convergence between the poetry that took shape in Sweden in those days, and the concrete poetry that was explored by Eugen Gomringer, the Brazilian Noigandres group, and others, in the 1950s, one must be aware of a number of differences.

Instead of insisting on a stricter analysis of the linguistic signifier, Fahlström and his peers engaged in a more carnivalistic play with poetry's plastique. Of course there was the common agenda of focusing upon the surface of writing, on different substitutive and deforming operations on sentences, words, and letters. But the resulting poems were usually long (contradicting the ideas of Gomringer); the vocabulary was expansive and heterogeneous rather than reduced; and more often than aiming at a convergence between visuality, sonority, and verballity in the poem (the peircean 'iconicity'), the use of graphics and sounds manifests collisions and contradictions.<sup>5</sup>

Partly this 'impurity' in Swedish concrete can be explained by turning to one of the main sources for Fahlström's manifesto, the French composer Pierre Schaeffer. The *musique concrète* invented by Schaeffer, and which Fahlström distinguished as the most important influence on his poetics, made techniques like the collage, the cut-up, or the cut n'splice, important methodical devices for Swedish concrete poets. Schaeffer's idea of recording and storing sounds, and then technologically elaborating them, helped Fahlström to imagine a displacement in poetry: from an expressionist paradigm to what one might call an *informatic* one, from poetry as personal utterance to poetry as manipulation of data.<sup>6</sup>

Poets don't have to dig deep into their souls or personal experiences – and then enrich them with metaphorical epiphanies – to write good poetry. They can consult the dictionary, or turn their ears to the half-forgotten lingos that circulate in social spheres. Here they find an available stock of language to 'knead', as Fahlström would phrase it; a language open for combination and recombination. It was a

question of 'manipulating the world', and 'taking care of the world', as he was later to characterize his work with visual art.<sup>7</sup>

In his poetry this was perhaps most efficiently exposed in his *Minneslista (till Dr. Schweitzers sista uppdrag)* (Memorandum (to Dr. Schweitzer's Last Mission)), from 1964, a work, which consists of four large sheets with differently colored map-like shapes filled with writing. *Minneslista* was a memorandum for a variable painting that Fahlström was to show at the Biennale in Venice in 1966, but also a visual and concrete poem (with kneaded language) as well as a parlour game, like Monopoly, but with a geopolitical twist. The strategy was to conquer the other player's continents by manipulative use of language. Here Fahlström uses information and data from 20<sup>th</sup> century (names, and descriptions of objects and forms from history, science, technology, and popular culture), which are deformed through funny verbal operations.<sup>8</sup> Nonsense words are inserted into the writing on the maps, a tactics that at once ridicules and complicates the politics of representation and the ideologically dominating narratives of contemporary society.<sup>9</sup>

The change in perspective that Fahlström's poetics and a work like *Minneslista* suggests, can be described as an exteriorizing force on language and writing, a force that runs along several vectors. Firstly, there is the familiar materialization of the linguistic sign. Secondly, this materialization also includes an investigation of the technical media that determine the practice of poetry; the book, of course, but also other storage devices and transmitters that were to be used by poets, such as the tape recorder, and radio. Thirdly, there is a shift of focus from the inner life of an identifiable subject of enunciation (the poem's I) to the outer world of objects and bodies. And fourthly, poetry is no longer considered the verbal emanation of a personal experience (in principle out of reach for others), but as a handling of linguistic, visual, and sonorous data.

As we read in the article from Bengtsson – and his examples run from Jorge Luis Borges, William S. Burroughs, Andy Warhol, and pop artist Roy Lichtenstein to the Swedish writers mentioned above – art is "non-informational", but it works upon the means and forms of information.

If one browse through the books of poetry that was produced in the early 1960s, this change or displacement can also be experienced in a multitude of works: in typewriter landscapes composed by Bengt Emil Johnson and Lars Norén, where letters and words are layered in topographical forms; in technical manipulations of drawings and handwritings by Mats G. Bengtsson; in the radiophonic poetry in Fahlström's *Birds in Sweden*, which samples elements from tracts on parapsychology, Edgar Allan Poe, Verdi, pop music, machine guns, aircrafts, and mixes it with sound poetry and invented languages. And so on.

What I would like to do here, however, is to approach one specific work from the Swedish mid-sixties; a work that in a distinctive and illustrative way incorporates

some of the features of the shift sketched above. It is a work that was embodied in different media, as a book, as a record, as a film, and as a performance, a performance for which there is also a manuscript, which might then be considered version number five of Åke Hodell's *Lågsniff*.

Åke Hodell was one of the poets in Sweden turning to concrete in the early 1960s. He had published his first book of poetry, *Flyende pilot* (Escaping Pilot) in 1953, a book which situated itself neatly on the field of Angst-ridden modernist poetry in Sweden; a poetry devoted to existentialist themes that were molded into fitting metaphors. Also, his second collection, *Ikaros död* (The Death of Icarus), from 1962, was a growth from the same tree, even though one can find elements in it that complicates the picture. And consequently, next year's book, *igevår* (Presentarms) exposed a radical transformation. The book is an aural/visual *tour de force*, based on the single word that is the title: twelve pages completely filled with lines of the letter 'i' is followed by a 'gev' – the text's sonorous joint – and then thirtyfive pages of the letter 'ä', before an 'r' closes the performance, which parodically deconstructs the military command.

This was the first in a series of provocative and politically charged visual/sound/concrete poems that Hodell was to write during the decade. He tried out different techniques and media, such as handwriting and collage, text-sound art and manipulated text.<sup>10</sup> In a duchampian move he even published a novel consisting of an old manual for a sewing machine, with the author's name and the generic mark 'novel' inserted on the title page.

This curiosity and flexibility is also exposed in *Lågsniff*, which in its different shapes and forms were implemented in the years of 1964 to 1966.<sup>11</sup> The title of the work signifies a kind of low-range flying; 'sniffing' the ground, so to speak. And the connection to aviary practice is very important. In the first place, on a biographical level, since Hodell himself had worked as a pilot during World War II and suffered difficult injuries while crashing his plane in the southern part of Sweden in 1941. He had to spend two years in hospital, and the accident was to be crucial in his choice of becoming a writer. Secondly, the situation of the pilot in the cockpit – the technology he uses, the codes, and the discourse that regulates his practice – is very much the stuff that *Lågsniff* is made of. Especially if one considers the book version. But also, from another aspect, if we approach the performance.

And the performance was, actually, the first embodiment of the piece. In the fall of 1964, the concrete poets in Sweden held a huge manifestation at the Museum of Modern Art (*Moderna museet*) in Stockholm. The title of their exhibition, which included poetry, prints, paintings, and performances, was 'Svisch', and about a dozen of writers and artists participated. Åke Hodell contributed to the exhibition with poetry that was shown on the walls of the museum. But he was also to arrange a happening or play.

The piece he presented was framed like a holiday trip, a charter flight from Stockholm to Spain. The audience was to act as passengers, and the actors (Hodell and some friends of his) played the crew: the pilot, the telegraphist, the mechanic, the poet and two nurses! The play begins with the nurses entering the performance space, distributing chewing gum to the audience. From the loud speakers sounds of engines can be heard, and the pilot instructing the passengers to chew, chew, chew – an instruction that turns into a repetitive sound poem. Then the plane departs, and the events on the trip are juxtaposed with the appearance of Hodell, acting as the Spanish poet Carlos Alvarez, distributing his poetry on an illegal radio transmitter (this was, of course, during Franco's dictatorship in Spain).

The mix of airplanes, tourism, poetry, war, political dictatorship, and fascism (ironically 'poem' in Swedish is homonymic with the first part of 'dictatorship': '*dikt*' – '*diktatur*') is then elaborated verbally, acoustically, and visually through the whole performance. But other things are intermingled with it. Strands of foreign language such as Russian, morse code, a recipe for cookies, isolated letters on drift, and rhyming words ('erotics', 'ethics', 'panic') are sounded, and blends with the chant of the poet and the simulation of the flight. The dramatic curve of the piece reaches its climax when it seems, for a moment, the aircraft is to crash. But in the end it arrives safely in Mallorca.

Hodell's most privileged method as a writer and artist during the 1960s was probably the collage.<sup>12</sup> And even if this piece revolves around a narrative that organizes the events, the collage technique is, in a certain way, activated as well. Material from different contexts are layered or placed side by side, which makes for interesting collisions and contrasts. One of these is the conflict between the language of the poet and the language of the pilot. Actually, the two figures have been grafted onto each other. The poet is transmitting some poetry as morse code, and, ironically enough, the words that are uttered by him are: "scratch their words" and "break their words", followed by the sound-technological meta-commentary: "got stuck", repeated several times – the words announcing that a record has been damaged (and repeats the same thing all over again) does in fact perform the same feat all over again.

What is one to make, then, of this mix of poetry and technology, tourism and war? Well, first of all, one can see in this work traces of Fahlström's idea of appropriating, manipulating, and subverting different discourses or language games in contemporary society. And even if one can relate the thematics of the work to a personal experience of the writer, it is not a poetics of self-expressiveness that is being executed. The disruptive use of language, the collision of different contexts, and the playfulness of the piece, displaces every possibility of reducing it to the idea of personal voice. And this also holds true, if one turns to the book *Lågsniff*, published two years later, in 1966.

In the book version, one is confronted with a sequence of pages dominated by different kinds of tables and graphs with numbers, letters, and visual shapes. There are also fragments of maps, construction designs for engines, flow charts, and morse code. On the front cover there is a photograph of the pilot and his companion in the cockpit, surrounded by different switches, gauges, and levers. But, what one doesn't find in the book, is the kind of language one usually encounters in collections of poetry; except for a few scraps inserted into a couple of pages, such as "enemy forces attacks", "we're falling", "OUT-A-SPACE" (the last one in English in the original).

This lonesome, pathetic voice that flows through the technical grid in the book can be read from a certain humanist point of view. Our living world is taken over by technology, and technology is here as always a byproduct of war. All we can hear when the brave new world of sophisticated machinery is put to practice is the whimper that accompanies the end ("we're falling"). On the other hand, this might be too an anthropomorphic reading of Hodell's work. One can also read the book version as the necessary supplement, and consequent revision, of the performance. If the latter took place within more established frames of aesthetic representation in its staging of a post-war experience – the enhanced and complex relationship between humans and technology. If so, then the book version can be read as a manifestation of how this relationship to technology also affects and changes our language.

In a way, one might claim that Hodell's book makes us aware of a change in the medial ecology, of how the alphabet's monopoly in the Gutenberg galaxy is confronted and blended with other means of representation and communication.<sup>13</sup> Instead of words and sentences that can be interpreted by human subjects, the book exposes technical data, that are preferably to be processed in computations or even by machines; graphs, figures, and aleatory strings of letters that to a human eye might seem stripped of semantic content, that could pass for nonsense, but for a machine might constitute the code that makes it operating and interacting through electronic circuits or airwaves.

From this point of view, Hodell's work connects poetry to the field of informatics and cybernetics that took shape in the decades following WW II; a field whose emergence was very much an effect of the war.<sup>14</sup> Here it's no longer just a shift in perspective that is at stake – from poetry as an expression of thought and feeling to poetry as a handling of data – but also an attempt to appropriate new modes of communication and put them to use in writing. One can perhaps describe *Lågsniff* as a 'machinic assemblage', an assemblage that turns its readers into operators of technical media.<sup>15</sup> This is a process that is always at work when it comes to literature. The book and writing are technologies. But their technicity is more easily exposed when a new medial paradigm challenges an old one.

This considered, it is also quite understandable why Hodell choose to call his own version of concrete poetry 'electronisms'. His work – as many others by Swedish poets from the period – disclose an intimate relationship between technology and poetry, a connection that at first glance might seem forced, but in reality shows us some of the technical and material conditions for writing and reading that were to coalesce during the post-war period; and which were, later on, to find their most well-known form through digital technology and computers. Concrete poetry, and especially a work like *Lågsniff*, can thus be situated within the theoretical/historical framework that N. Katherine Hayles have established in her discussions of literature and cybernetics – the "epistemic shift toward pattern / randomness and away from presence /absence", as she puts it in *How We Became Posthuman*.<sup>16</sup> And the change in the means of representation will of course affect our notions of thought, identity, and embodiment as well.

"Art is a non-informational phenomenon. But to a high degree it comments on and points to the factors that determine our informational communication." Said Bengtsson. And certainly a work like *Lågsniff* underwrites a proposition like this. But is poetry and writing then also subjected to the conditions that determine a new 'informatic' *episteme*? Is it always the case, as Friedrich Kittler puts it, that "media determines our situation"?<sup>17</sup>

In a way it probably is. It would be a major task to rise above history conceived of as the physical and technological hardware that sets the limit to what's thinkable and sayable, writable and readable at a given juncture. On the other hand, poetry can test these limits, not by transgression, perhaps, but through a pathetic, comical, and critical approach. "Do not forget that a poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information." Said Wittgenstein. In writing through the databanks, poetry can expose the cultural and material mechanisms that constitute this condition, and especially the ideological constructions ('the naturalizations') that every period produce as its own putative mirror image. As Hayles has shown in regard to a certain 'informationist' discourse, that in the end tends to transform everything to binary digits, literature can, not the least, remind us that embodiment is a necessary condition for every kind of informational exchange or representation.<sup>18</sup>

This is also the case with Hodell's *Lågsniff*. If it can't be completely recuperated as a last call from humanity in a thoroughly technified world, it isn't either, on the other hand, a pure and distortion free transposition of technical codes to the sphere of poetry. This transport will always instantiate deviations and blur. The graphs on the pages in *Lågsniff*, the book, are, by necessity, deformed and dysfunctionalized in their travel from one context to another. The arrangements disclose the interventions of the writer and the technologies at work; the hand that holds the scissors and glue, the typewriter and the xerox that cooperates with the body. If

poetry's voice, as a romantic remnant, is dissolved in this writing practice, the traces of bodies and time-bound activities are still inscribed into the corpus of the text.

## Notes

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1. Mats G. Bentsson, "Vårt externa nervsystem", in *Gorilla*, Stockholm 1966 (my transl. here and elsewhere, if not otherwise noted). *Gorilla* was a literary calendar that came out in two issues in the years 1966 to 1967 in Sweden, and it was very much devoted to the new relations between art and media. Among the contributors one finds names like Marshall McLuhan, William S. Burroughs, Timothy Leary, Reyner Banham, and Swedish writers and artists like Torsten Ekbohm, Åke Hodell, and Bengt Emil Johnson.
2. The publication of *Gorilla* caused a somewhat heated debate. For an account of this, see Jonas Ingvarsson, "Den cybernetiska gorillan och den multimediala utopin", in *Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap*, 3–4, 1996.
3. Fahlström's manifesto and his concrete poetry were later on collected in the book *Bord* (Tables), Stockholm 1966. For an English translation of Fahlström's manifesto, see Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, Bloomington 1968. The title of the manifesto is culled from A.A. Milne's stories about Winnie the Pooh, and the English version of the phrase is "Hipy papy bthuthdththuhda bthuthdy" (Owl's attempt to write down "Happy Birthday").
4. For an account of Swedish concrete poetry in English, see for example Amelie Björck, "Swedish Concrete Poetry in Focus", in *Experimental–Visual–Concrete*, Amsterdam 1996, ed. K. David Jackson, Johanna Drucker and Eric Vos. See also my "Typewriter, Tape Recorder, and Concrete Poetry", in *Cultural Functions of Intermedial Exploration*, Amsterdam 2002, ed. Erik Hedling and Ulla-Britta Lagerroth.
5. In some ways Swedish concrete is closer to the later phase of concrete poetry, sometimes named 'dirty', in contrast with an early phase characterized by purer forms. See for example, Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice. Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*, Chicago 1991, p. 114.
6. This change can be compared to Nicolas Bourriaud's notion of a turn in contemporary art toward 'postproduction' instead of production. The concept, as he uses it, refers to a tendency in art to appropriate and use, for different ends, already available forms. The artist or poet, then, is more of a manipulator than a creator, more of a DJ than a bard. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, New York 2002.



7. This double operation, which Fahlström returns to in essays and comments on his work in the 1960s, is also the title of an essay by Torsten Ekborn on Fahlström. See his *Bildstorm*, Stockholm 1995.
8. This use of information would be developed in his art in the early seventies, where statistics and economical figures, for example, were inserted into the paintings.
9. For a longer comment on this work, see my "Allegori och artefaktion. Formens politik i Öyvind Fahlströms poesi", in *Allegori, estetik, politik*, Stehag 2003 (forthcoming).
10. Hodell's text-sound works were recently collected and issued on the CD *Verbal Brainwash and Other Works*, Stockholm 2000.
11. The book came out in 1966. Last year a DVD which includes a filmed version of the performance, which was staged several times, was issued, *Lågsniff*, Stockholm 2002. Accounts of and comments on this work of Hodell can be found in the book *Cabaret Hodell*, Stockholm 1989, and in Torsten Ekborn's earlier mentioned *Bildstorm*, for example.
12. As can be seen in important works of his, like *General Bussig* (General Buddy-Buddy) 1964, and *Självbiografi* (Autobiography) 1967.
13. This was a tenet held by several artists and writers in the 1960s. The Swedish poet Bengt Emil Johnson, for example, discussed (with the help of John Cage) the technological challenges that poetry would meet at the end of the Gutenberg galaxy. Cf my "Typewriter, Tape Recorder, and Concrete Poetry".
14. For a history of cybernetics and informatics in relation to literature, see N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, Chicago 1998. For an investigation of cybernetics and literature in a Swedish context, see Jonas Ingvarsson, *En besynnerlig gemenskap*, Göteborg 2003.
15. The formulation is of course borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari.
16. See Hayles 1998, p. 29.
17. The latter formulation is from the preface, p. xxxix, in Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone Film Typewriter*, Stanford 1999, transl. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz.
18. See Hayles 1998. See also her recent *Writing Machines*, Cambridge 2002, where she develops the notion of a 'media specific analysis' (MSA), which takes into account how the materiality of the inscription technologies at use are incorporated into the text.