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Manifesto for Concrete Poetry (1952-55)
Öyvind Fahlström: Sweden

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1. Starting Point

The literary fashion for 1953 was dictated by Sigtuna [where a literary conference was held]. One rejected the psychoanalytically marked bust line and hop line, pulled down the skirt length and lowered the neck line. Since fantasy is to be stressed this year, flounces and butterflies in the hair, everyone Sings with Setterlind (Swedish "court" poet).

All this is well-known. But what lies behind these general recommendations, how shall we realize them? It has been said that we should interpret modern myths (at the same time that Freud has been accused of myth-making); and that we should not bury ourselves in the situation of our time, but should concern ourselves with timeless symbols.

Myths: does this mean to construct a complicated apparatus of symbolic and mythological contacts a la Joyce, Gösta Oswald [Swedish novelist], etc. "who did the same thing with Shakespeare or Virgil"?

Or to give up the precise complexion and to be satisfied with single ideas, most often only single words, floating around without definite contexts? The risk is that the impression will be less timeless and less related to our timeless humanity, quite simply that it will be looser and more general; since the eternally valid word-symbols (if there are such animals) have become faded by much rubbing on the washboard. To some, Lorca, for example, they have been quite useful in new contexts. Also for the surrealists, but on another level, for them it has been valid not to create eternal myths, but myths useful for the future.

At Sigtuna they also talked about the structural analysis of the new criticism. But no one claimed freedom from preoccupation with the self in connection with the claim of interest

in poetical structure.

Poetry can be not only analysed but also created as structure. Not only as structure emphasizing the expression of idea content but also as concrete structure. Say good-bye to all kinds of arranged or unarranged private, psychological, contemporary, cultural or universal problematics. It is certain that words are symbols, but there is no reason why poetry couldn't be experienced and created on the basis of language as concrete material.

That the word has symbol value is no more remarkable than that in art representative forms have symbol value over and above their Superficial representational value, and that non-figurative forms, even if it is the white square on the white tablecloth, also have symbolic value and further suggest associations over and above the experience of the play of proportions.

The Situation: since the war a long beer housesad-doomsday-mood, the feeling that all the experimental extremes have been arrived at. For the person who refuses to soar in the worlds of vodka and ambrosia, it remains only to analyze

analyze

analyze the misery with the given means.

Today when the rough symbolic cryptogram, "beautiful" romantic jargon, or desperate grimaces outside the church gate appear to be the current alternatives, the concrete alternative must also be presented.

Starting Point: Everything that can be expressed with language and every linguistic expression on an equal basis with another in a given context that heightens its value.

Therefore Dostoyevsky problematics do not appear to me as anything more essential and human than to consider whether the voices of men are more beautiful in värder [host] or in världar [worlds-pronounced the same as värder]. Motive for drama can be for the poet, as well as for the dictator situated in time, the fixed fact that a certain sound can never be

repeated. Experimental psychological results can be taken as starting points for a novel as well as for psychoanalysis. I describe certain people: Bobb, Torsten, Sten, Minna, Pi, without the slightest interest in them as people. Literature won't be inhuman for all that. Ants should only write books about ants, but man, who has the ability to look around himself and objectify, need not be that one-sided.

2. Material and Means

What is going to happen to the new material? It can be shaken up as you like, and after that it is always unassailable from the "concrete" point of view?

This can always be said at the beginning. But the circumstance that the new means of expression have not found their norms of value ready-made, does not prevent us from testing them, if their value is ever to be clarified.

One way is that as often as possible we must break against the path of least resistance, *Mimömolan* [*minsta mötståndens lag*]. This is no guarantee for success, but it is a way to avoid sitting in the same spot. To use the system as well as automatism, mostly to use them in combination, but not in such a way that the system becomes other than an auxiliary means. So no ambition whatsoever to reach the purest "poetry" with automatism; even the surrealists do not pay homage to that any more. But do not criticise the systems: if you choose them yourselves and do not follow the rules. Therefore the question is not whether or not the system is in itself The Only Right One. It will become so because you have chosen it and if it gives you a good result.

In that case I can construct, I say construct, for example, a series of 12 vowels in a certain succession and make tables accordingly, even though a twelve vowel series as such does not make the same sense as the series of the twelve-tone chromatic- scale.

It is said that our time longs for stable norms. It is clear: when we tire of regular meter and at last tire also of rhyme, we must find something else that will give the poem that general effect. Nowadays the connecting element has a tendency to be content, both

descriptive and ideational content. But it is best if form and content are one.

It remains, therefore, to give form its own norms again. This is already being done in punktmusik. The possibilities are uncountable. In the case of poetry strophes can be broken up into vertical parallelisms in such a way that content determines form by placing the word exactly below the word above it, which it repeats, or vice versa so that when you have a fragment of line vertically parallel with the one above, it brings with it the content of the line above. Identical strophes aided by filling out a line with rhyme on the last word in the line, or with agreed syllables, words, etc. Marginal strophes beside the principal strophes. Framed-form strophes with a kernel strophe within: the possibility for more readings corresponding to the free movement of sight when you look at abstract art. Thus the strophes can be read not only from left to right and from above to below but vice versa and vertically: all the first words in every line, then all the second, the third, etc. Mirroring, diagonal reading. Change of lines, particularly of short lines. Free emphasis and free word order as in classical literature (that we don't have the same linguistic conditions is no reason not to make these experiments).

Therefore a richness of possibilities for reaching greater complexity and functional differentiation so that the different elements of content in a work of art can assume their own shape.

The simplest of all systematizations of formless material is, as always, the change between the contrasts, the contrasts within all thinkable aspects of the work of art. The play between difficult and easy sentences (respectively texts or words), rich and poor, normally syntactic and primitively added, such with and such without context in the environment, lofty, porridgy, knotty, gliding, sounding, and representing.

Not only simple changes but also augmentations -and rhythms. Everything except the lazy stumbling forward according to Mimömolan [the law of least resistance]. (It is something else, of course, if amorphous pieces are put in with intended, directed effect.)

Above all I think that the rhythmic aspect contains unimagined possibilities. Not only in

music is rhythm the most elementary, directly physically grasping means for effect; which is the joy of recognizing something known before, the importance of repeating; which has a connection with the pulsation of breathing, the blood, ejaculation. It is wrong that jazz bands have the monopoly of giving collective rhythmic ecstasy. The drama and poetry can also give it. Even in art with its limited time dimension it can be done, Capogrossi has shown that.

It is only to break loose from the grinding of the new, new, new; not to leave behind oneself a kitchen mess of ideas for every step in the work one takes: instead of biting oneself to stick with the motifs, to let them repeat themselves and form new rhythms; for example one works at filling out rhythmic words as a background for principle meanings, which can be bound or unbound by the background rhythm. Independent onomatopoeic rhythmic phrases, like those which the African or East Indian drummer forms to represent his melodies of rhythm. Simultaneous reading and above all-readings of several lines of which at least one has rhythmic words. Of course metrical rhythms also; rhythms of word order, rhythms of space.

Another way to have unit and connection is to widen the logic by forming new agreements and contrasts. The simplest way is to go to the logic of primitive people, children and the mentally ill, the intuitive logic of likeness, of sympathetic magic.

This logic applied to language: - words which sound alike belong together, the fun comes from that. Rhyme has had a similar effect. Myths have been explained like this: when Deukalion and Pyrrha had to create new people after the deluge, they threw stones and people grew up: the name for stone is *lithos*, for people *laos*.

When the fire has gone out [*släckts*], I am less sure that it has stopped burning than that the family [*släckt*] have gone on their way. The fire can both burn and be extinguished [*släckt*] and be related [*släkt*] to the family [*släkten*] or be extinguished [*släckt*] with the family [*släkten*]. *Laxar* [*salmon*] has to do with *laxering* [*laxatives*], and *taxar* [*dachshund*] with *taxering* [*tax assessment*], and not vice versa. Homonyms provide great

possibilities. Zeugmabinding also belongs here: to connect words, meanings and fragments, for example, poetry is poetry is poetry, where the middle poetry is both end and beginning. And the whole work may be valued for the word put in here and there, always inflexible, a binding cord for structure as realized thought motive. Always the precious repetition for the joy of recognition.

It is valid, particularly in the larger forms, epic,

drama, the film, also, to create happenings of the same

firmness of structure as that of reality. To give the

elements new functions and then certainly, to make

use of them instead of the comfortable improvisations of floating inspiration. To knit the net of relations tightly and clearly. To be bound by conventions you develop yourself but not by those of others.

With such possibilities for richness, ordinary, interpretations and antitheses such as tragically- and comically must be oversimplifications. The whole value in the connection tax-taxering [dachshund-tax assessment] does not lie in the humorous effect which can result from the unexpected connecting.

Another form of magic with linguistic means is the conventionally seen arbitrary dictation of new meanings for letters, words, sentences or fragments: let us say that in this table all the "I's" represent "sickness," the more "I's" the more difficult-or in this fragment the word "sickness" represents "all sounds, prize stones"-or all words devoid of their own meanings represent "coldness."

You can also go one step in this direction by putting well-known words in such realized strange connections that you undermine the reader's security in the holy context between the word and its meaning and make him feel that conventional meanings are quite as much or quite as little arbitrary as the dictated new meanings. This is no more remarkable

than is the case with Povel Ramel Swedish actor: the man who suffered from stage fright among other things and told us that his temperature taken rectally was from the stage of himself [rampen/rumpan], so that-hearing both through the situation and the similarity between the words-we discover a new meaning for the word ramp [stage].

You can't say that the well-known in the strange connection arouses fertile insecurity about the identity between word and apparition in everyone- it may arouse a quite fertile interest in the form itself, if the meanings for the reader are meaningless and he has such a great appetite that lie goes on looking for values. At first many meanings will sound meaningless, particularly amusing or touching, neither forbodingly meaningful nor diffusely sonorous.

Not least because they contain unfairly dealt with words. The unfairly, dealt with words are those which, despite the enormous expansion of the poetic vocabulary during the last century, are not yet considered able to keep themselves dry on the poet's copy sheets. "Salesmen," "excitement," "Clubs," "mine," "horribly," "whisk," "men," "dozen," "glands." These words can, of course, be found, but how often when compared with the old guard. Reading the dictionary is quite as exploratory for the language artist as is turning the pages of a handbook about insects, car motors, or tissues of the body is for the artist.

Meanings can also sound meaningless because they have been constructed in another way. It is valid not only to mix the word order, but to meet the necessities in terms of all the habitual mechanics of sentences or grammatical constructions; and as thinking is dependent upon language, every attack aimed at valid language form will be an enrichment of the worn-out paths of thought, a link in the evolution of language -of thinking, which always occurs on the every day, literary and scientific levels.

Ideas to renew grammatical structures are bound to emerge if you make comparisons with foreign languages, with Chinese, for instance, with its classless words and meaning derived from word order, or with the unexpected and shaded possibilities for expression in the languages of many primitive people. Perhaps it is more important and in any case

easier, because of its accessibility, to examine the language of the mentally ill. If, for example, you examine the tests of manic-depressives, you find effects-certainly not meant to be artistic-the connecting of logical resemblances (contaminations), pure soundlikeness associations, modeling with the material of words (neologisms) and more or less rhythmical repetitions (perseverances).

Another way is to see what there is to keep in language found purely mechanically without the use of reading directions or a series system of words and meanings. This will be to break through the frontiers, very slowly to that which means something to you. We can obtain unexpected values from-as we -now see it-the most amputated and kneaded (fragmentized) word elements and phrases.

SQUEEZE the language material: that is what can be titled concrete. Do not squeeze the whole structure only: as soon as possible begin with the smallest elements, letters and words. Throw the letters around as in anagrams. Repeat the letters in words; lard with foreign words, *gä-elva-rna* [*djävlar* = devils]; with foreign letters, *ahaanadalaianaga* for handling, compare with pig latin and other secret languages; vowel glissandos *gäaeiouuåwrna*. Of course also "lettered," newly--discovered words. Abbreviations as new word building, exactly as in everyday language, we certainly have *Mimömolan* [the law of least resistance]. Always it is a question of making new form of the material and not of being formed by it. This fundamental concrete principle can be most beautifully illustrated by Pierre Schaeffer's key experience during his search for concrete music: he had on tapes seconds of locomotive sounds, but he was not satisfied only to connect one sound to another, even if the connection itself was unusual. Instead he extracted a small fragment of the locomotive sound and repeated it with a change of musical pitch; he then went back to the first again and so to the second, etc. so there was a change. He had created an interference with the material itself by means of separation: the elements were not new: the newly-formed context yielded a new material.

From this it will be clear that what I have called literary concretion and non-figurative art is not a style-it is partly a way for the reader to experience word art, primarily poetry-

partly for the poet a release, a declaration of the right of all language material and working means. Literature created from this starting point stands neither in oppositional nor parallel relationship to lettrisme or dadaism or surrealism.

Lettrisme: usual "representing" and the "lettristic" words can be experienced as both form and content, "representing" giving a stronger experience of content and a weaker experience of form, "lettristic", vice versa; a difference of degree.

From the standpoint of the result itself, surrealist poetry can be seen to share certain resemblances with the tables. But there is a difference of starting point which must ultimately influence the results: the concrete reality of my tables does not stand in any kind of opposition to the reality of environment: neither as sublimation of dream or as myth for the future but as an organic part of the reality in which I live with its potentialities for life and evolution.

The coquettish or desperate grimace and even more dadaistic nihilism can be fertile if you see the artistic result, again it is the starting point that separates: I can find no reason to talk about grimace and denial, I have no feeling of fuss, of exceptional condition, that is the normal thing. A constructive dadaism and so none at all.

Having used the word concrete in these contexts, I have related it more to concrete music than to art concretism in its narrow meaning. In addition the concrete working poet is, of course, related to formalities and language-kneaders of all times, the Greeks, Rabelais, Gertrude Stein, Schwitters, Artaud and many others. And he considers as venerated portal figures not only the Owl in Winnie the Pooh but also Carroll's Humpty Dumpty who considers every question a riddle and dictates impenetrable meanings to the words.

Tr. Karen Loevgren, Mary Ellen Solt

From **Bord-Dikter** 1952-55