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Kisses Sweeter than Wine. Öyvind Fahlström and Billy Klüver: The Swedish Neo-Avant-Garde in New York

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Abstract

The Swedish artist Öyvind Fahlström moved to New York in 1961, where he meet the Swedish engineer Billy Klüver, and became part of the international neo-avant-garde movement. Fahlström's performance, New York 1966, part of Klüver’s performance series 9 Evenings, is my point of departure for an analysis of the role of migration for the neo-avant-gardes in the 1960s. As intermediaries, Fahlström and Klüver brought new ideas both to New York and Stockholm, thus challenging the established view that American art was exported to the periphery. In reality, the New York art scene grew out of ideas and experiences arriving with immigrating artists, who in turn often exchanged ideas developed in the New York melting pot with actors in their original artistic and cultural contexts.

Résumé


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The migration of artists and craftsmen is not a new phenomenon; on the contrary, it has been a continuous feature of human civilisation. In the Middle Ages, craftsmen migrated across Europe to participate in the building and decoration of churches. This migration most often occurred centrifugally, spreading out from the main building sites on the continent and the British Isles to the peripheries, bringing new ideas and techniques to remote areas of Western Christendom.1 During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, and all the way through to the 19th century, the scene largely remained the same. So, how did the migrations of 20th-century’s avant-gardes differ?2

As I see it, the centrifugalism originating in a few centres was turned into a centripetal influx of artists and ideas, which kept the centre a centre, and without which it would not have been a centre any more. While adherence to an established repertoire of decorative forms was the dominant force for earlier craftsmen travelling out of the centres, the direction of the movement started to turn inwards in the wake of Romanticism’s ideas about originality, and the centres thrived and grew from this. In the 20th century, another phenomenon appeared, namely the creation of parallel avant-garde movements independently of each other, often creating new centres on the map out of former “peripheries.”3 The alleged transfer

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1 Of course, towns growing into cities have always attracted craftsmen, but on the general map of migration the end result is of a centrifugal character, until the situation changed during the 19th century.
4 The migration of artists and craftsmen to the periphery, for example, did not actually occur in, for example, Denmark, but started independently as the Danish researcher Max Ipsen convincingly has showed, putting Copenhagen on the map as a centre in its own right. The avant-garde movement of concrete poetry started independently as well, in at least three places at roughly the same time (1953–54), with the poetas concretistas in Saõ Paolo, Brazil; the konkreta poeter in Sweden, initiated by Öyvind Fahlström in Stockholm; and the Konkreten Poeten in Switzerland, founded by Eugen Gomringer in Zürich—adding three more centres on the map. What is even more important is that all these new movements not only changed the map, but also provided new artists and ideas to the alleged “centres,” since often main artists moved from a position at the forefront of national movements, to become one of many leading figures in the centre. These cities became focal points as catalysts for the avant-garde, since they could provide socio-economical means for the artistic influx, but not necessarily because of a pre-existent artistic population. This migration often came about when the different independent movements got to know each other, with an exchange of ideas and art following, as Max Ipsen describes the process of Minimal Art in Denmark. The same thing happened with concrete poetry, when Gomringer met his Brazilian counterpart Décio Pignatari in a mutual brainstorming, laying an international ground for the movement in 1956. From ‘peripheral centres,’ the movements augmented and became international, often with a transfer of leading members to the ‘central periphery,’ as with Paris and New York in the 1960s. The flux of ideas was no longer from a centre, but different
movements got to know each other through intermediaries, after which an exchange of ideas and performances took place.

In the following pages, I will examine how two Swedes who had migrated to New York—a city that has been attracting a growing number of artists since the 1950s, but with comparatively little home-grown talent—, the artist Öyvind Fahlström and the engineer Billy Klüver participated, transformed, and in many ways, revolutionised the art scene in New York through their work and collaboration.

My argument is that the centripetal force from the centre draws artists to it from all over the world, at the same time as it feeds on them to remain a centre; while these artists in their turn often introduce new ideas to their old countries and gain new ideas from the often disparate art scenes there. In this case, the creative exchange involved an engineer, who was a driving force in his own right. The claim has been that American art was exported to other countries, while in reality new ideas came centripetally from migrating artists who contributed both to the local art scene (here New York) as well as at the different scenes at home (here Stockholm). To show how this exchange made them into intermediary artists igniting the art scene in ‘centres’ like Stockholm and New York, I will present Fahlström and Klüver, before I discuss one of the decisive moments in the development of performance art: 9 Evenings. Theatre and Engineering in New York, 1966.

Öyvind Fahlström

The Swedish concrete poet and artist Öyvind Fahlström (1928–76) is one of few internationally renowned Swedish painters of the 20th Century, due to his migration to New York in 1961 where he soon became one of the key figures among the rising avant-gardes in the 1960s. He worked within the fields of most art forms, and was prominent not only in concrete poetry, but even more so in visual art and performance. He wrote what seems to be the world’s first manifesto for concrete poetry in 1953: “HÄTILA RAGULPR PÅ FÅTSKLIABEN” (Hipy papy bthuthdth thuthda bthuthdy), and at the same time tried out the different aesthetic strategies promoted in the manifesto in poems written at the same time, but not published until concrete poetry in Sweden peaked more than ten years later, as Bord – dikter 1952–55 (Table – poems, 1966). In Sweden, Fahlström therefore was an early, if not the first, forerunner of the neo-avant-garde, and his manifesto inspired the founding of the Swedish concrete poetry movement several years later, a movement that started independently of the German-speaking (Swiss) and Brazilian counterparts. This demonstrates how the periphery has a central role in the development of different avant-gardes, since these countries are not considered avant-garde centres in a traditional understanding of the centre–periphery dichotomy.

Fahlström moved to New York in 1961 together with his wife, the well-known Swedish artist Barbro Östlihn, where they took part in international avant-garde activities. He soon acquired a central position together with Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg (another Swede), John Cage, and others. He maintained contact with Sweden, and continued to be a strong stimulus for neo-avant-garde activities in Stockholm as well. Fahlström among others introduced performance art and happenings in Sweden, events that took place at Moderna museet (the Museum of Modern Art), Pistolteatern (the pistol theatre), the experimental music association Fylkingen and other venues in Stockholm, and his knowledgeable articles in newspapers, journals and magazines...
promoted the new art, as well. This clearly shows how a receptive artist like Fahlström in the ‘periphery’ can start a movement, which is a counterpart to similar international ones, and also how ideas from the ‘centre’ are exchanged with the ‘periphery’ with the help of his intermediary position.

As a promoter of the Swedish neo-avant-gardes in the 1950s and 1960s, Fahlström transgressed the borders of different arts and genres, as well as different media, when, for example, he put together two radio compositions in the early-mid 1960s— “Fåglar i Sverige” (Birds in Sweden), transmitted in 1963, and “Den helige Torsten Nilsson” (The Holy Torsten Nilsson) in five parts, broadcast in 1966.9 These two radio compositions are complex media collages, where recorded sounds from reality, radio, and TV in his flat in New York, are mixed into an acoustic narrative tied together with the use of a voice-over performed by himself in the studio. By this Fahlström placed himself as one of the early forerunners of today's digital mixed media world, a position that he achieved due to his migration, since it was the multichannel universe of American TV that gave him both the inspiration and the means.10 These radio compositions laid the ground for the genre text-sound composition (a.k.a. sound poetry, poésie sonore), which was an international movement whose name was coined by two Swedish artists in 1967: the concrete poet Bengt Emil Johnson and the composer Lars-Gunnar Bodin. This genre was manifested as a text-sound composition festival in Stockholm during the years 1968–77,11 and included members mainly from the Nordic countries, France, and the UK. Through this, Fahlström laid the ground for a movement clearly different from the art scene in New York, although he picked up a lot of impulses here for the creation of his radio compositions. This demonstrates that the old centrifugal model is outdated, with its reduction of artistic form as influence from a “centre,” and that one instead has to focus on a centripetal model based on exchange, cooperation, and mutuality.

Billy Klüver

To explain the impact of Fahlström in New York, it is necessary to present another Swedish expat: the engineer Billy Klüver (1927-2004) who migrated to the US in 1954. He introduced Fahlström in New York, and helped him and his wife to get somewhere to live, which happened to be Robert Rauschenberg’s old loft in lower Manhattan. Klüver was involved in performances and happenings in New York, and all over the US, since the neo-avant-gardes were keen on exploring new technology, and therefore in need of engineers and technicians. Even more than Fahlström he took part in the introduction of the New York and American neo-avant-gardes in Sweden, and vice versa.12 Due to the fact that he was an engineer he has not been dealt with extensively in art history, but his impact was without doubt decisive, and he has even been called “The Godfather of Technology and Art.”13 He acted as one of the masterminds in the American–Swedish exchange, in cooperation with institutional representatives, such as Pontus Hultén at the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm, where American artists came to Stockholm and Swedish artists visited New York. He developed close relationships with many of the most famous North American artists—especially Robert Rauschenberg—and he also frequently visited Andy Warhol’s Factory and helped him with technical solutions. Klüver’s fundamental idea was to connect artists and engineers, to explore new techniques for the art world and for engineering. He therefore terminated his employment at the Bell Laboratories in New Jersey (1958–1968), to start the company Experiments in Art and

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10 In Sweden at the time (until 1969), there was only one government run TV channel.
Technology (E.A.T.) together with Rauschenberg and others in 1966. His premise was that engineers should not create art, but provide the technical means for the artists, who in their turn should not work directly with technology. It is in the meeting between the engineer and the artist something can happen that is creative for both partakers. Many of the inventions that were necessary in the arts later became commercial successes as well, like for example a fog machine used for The Pepsi Pavilion at Expo 70 in Tokyo, which led to a solution for irrigation: from chemicals to an ecological way to irrigate farmland.

Klüver was a driving force behind and curator of many exhibitions in New York and Stockholm, and he even took part in performances and happenings, but when he was asked if he was an artist he resolutely answered “absolutely not!”.

This demonstrates how strictly he separated engineers from artists, since he saw artists as the driving force in the development of new technology. The engineer should only provide the necessary solutions that would enable the artists’ creativity. The creative energy in his different aesthetical projects, thus, grew out of this joint-venture between artists and engineers, no part of which can be removed from an understanding of the art scene of New York in the 1960s.

9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering

In 1966 Fahlström, Klüver and Rauschenberg were asked if they could bring together prominent American artists to perform at a festival arranged by Fylkingen (as mentioned, the Swedish experimental music association in Stockholm). When the invitation was cancelled by its leader Knut Wiggen, due to a lack of financial funding, Fahlström, Klüver and Rauschenberg organized the seminal series of performances and happenings entitled 9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering 1966 at The 69th Regiment Armory at 68 Lexington avenue in New York.

The nine evenings consisted of different performances organised by Robert Whitman, David Tudor, John Cage, Steve Paxton, Öyvind Fahlström, Alex Hay, Deborah Hay, Lucinda Childs, Robert Rauschenberg, and Yvonne Rainer, who arranged the following ten performances:

- David Tudor, USA, 1926–1996: Bandoneon! (a combine); 14 and 18 October, 1966.

Figure 1: 9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering poster © Courtesy Experiments in Art and Technology / Robert Rauschenberg foundation.

14 Technology för livet, 38–42.
16 Ibid., 9.
17 Ibid., 67–81.
• Steve Paxton, USA, 1933: *Physical Things*; 13 and 19 October, 1966.
• Alex Hay, USA, 1930: *Grass Field*; 13 and 22 October, 1966
• Deborah Hay, USA, 1941: *Solo*; 13 and 23 October, 1966.
• Lucinda Childs, USA, 1940: *Vehicle*; 16 and 23 October, 1966.
• Yvonne Rainer, USA, 1934: *Carriage Discreteness*; 15 and 21 October, 1966.18

The performance series was not an immediate success, to put it mildly. It might have been too far ahead of its time even for the experienced New York audience and also for the technology that it was possible to develop and use at the time. *9 Evenings* has therefore only retrospectively gained appreciation, as one of the landmarks of performance art. Without the neo-avant-garde migration from Sweden it would not have been possible at all, though, since the overall theme was conceived by Klüver: “theatre and engineering.” This was an amalgamation which turned out to be extremely productive, and, as the German researcher Malte Hagener has expressed it, “these and other experiments in the 1960s are important links in the genealogy of today’s networked, global and multiscreen world, since they constitute early confluences of cybernetics, art and media.”19

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18 This list is compiled from the printed program: *9 Evenings. Theatre and Engineering* (1966). An on-line version of the program is available at <http://www.fondation-langlois.org/flash/c/index.php?NumPage=571> (read 01/03/17). There is a lot of information about and documentation of *9 Evenings. Theatre and Engineering* at this homepage, which belongs to La fondation Daniel Langlois. I am curious about the name *9 evenings*, though, since it is obvious that it was ten artists who performed during 20 evenings, but I have not yet found the answer to this inconsistency. Even though *9 Evenings* was a celebration of the Armory Show 1913, this fact does not explain the title, since no mention of “nine evenings” can be found in the earlier exhibition.
19 E-mail from Malte Hagener, 26 October 2015, copy in the possession of the author.

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*Kisses Sweeter than Wine*

I will focus on one of the nine performances, Öyvind Fahlström’s *Kisses Sweeter than Wine* on October 21 and 22 1966, and touch upon its importance for the neo-avant-garde. *Kisses Sweeter than Wine* was, like the other performances, filmed. It was made available on a DVD edited by Barbro Schultz Lundestam in 2006.20 The performance, as it is edited in the DVD-film, goes on for roughly one hour, but the timing of the actual performance was a lot longer; according to Maibritt Borgen it lasted one hundred minutes.21
Fahlström’s performance took its name, and its Leitmotif, from The Weaver’s hit “Kisses Sweeter than Wine” (1950).\textsuperscript{22} Kisses Sweeter than Wine was a nine-part piece, which was made up of various sketches, films, sound, and live performances, joined together without any narrative continuity. To give a rough idea of the heterogeneity of the performance, here is a brief list of the different parts:

- Part one: Frog-man – performers in cotton-snow, a frog-man shot with an arrow etc.
- Part two: Buxton, Demonstration, Johnson Head – the autistic Jedediah Buxton (Rauschenberg) repeats huge numbers, posters of Mao and Bob Hope, Lyndon Johnson’s head etc.
- Part three: Charles and George – autistic twins etc.
- Part four: Demonstration, Safford – the Mao-Hope march, a performer played the autistic and talented Truman Henry Safford etc.
- Part five: Chinese sparrows – a Xenakis-piece was played, the sparrows killed in China etc.
- Part six: Jell-O Girl, Missile – a girl in bikini in a pool with pink jell-O, a missile floated around, Fahlström pointed a laser beam at the genitals of one in the audience etc.
- Part seven: Speech – Fahlström delivered a monologue about the status of the world
- Part eight: Humanoids – a screening of the movie The Creation of the Humanoids (1962) etc.
- Part nine: Space Girl – a half-naked female performer was lowered slowly unto the floor, where all the rest of them were etc.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} This song became an even larger success for Jimmy Rogers in 1957, but the version used in Kisses Sweeter than Wine is performed by The New Christy Minstrels, from the album Chim Chim Cher-ee and Other Happy Songs, Columbia CS 9169, 1965. This was a fairly recent cover version when Fahlström wrote the performance, and must have been aired frequently during this period. See e.g. Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kisses_Sweeter_than_Wine_(song)> (read 01/03/17).

\textsuperscript{23} This short list is extracted from information on the La fondation Daniel Langlois’ homepage: <http://www.fondation-langlois.org/flash/e/index.php?NumPage=571> (read 03/01/17).
This list reveals that the plot is extremely complex, and one therefore has to have in mente that the event was even more intricate and chaotic than can be understood from it: what is listed is only a small part of what took place on stage. What the audience saw was multiple images, movies, objects, and live performances at the same time; it was a split screen performance avant-la-lettre, where the events only slowed down somewhat when the main characters performed. Even then it must have been hard to get an overview of the events on stage.

For example, Robert Rauschenberg played the 18th century autistic man Jedediah Buxton, who despite his handicap could remember and repeat the most complex numbers. Rauschenberg was never seen on stage, though. He was filmed head-on with a close-circuit camera and screened on the stage background.
This exemplifies the overall use of different media and technologies in the performance, but also, as Philip Auslander has shown, how performed authenticity is always mediatized in some way or another:

Live performance now often incorporates mediatization to the degree that the live event itself is a product of media technologies. This has been the case to some degree for a long time, of course: as soon as electric amplification is used, one might say that an event is mediatized.

*Kisses Sweeter than Wine* involves modern technology (for its time), and juxtaposes live and filmed events, pictures, and movie excerpts, among other media, to create an overwhelming experience for the audience.

To understand the way in which Fahlström worked when he created his pieces, it is necessary to scrutinise the variety of material sources for his show, where the performers on stage are only a small if important part. Fahlström made use of video, audio tape, film and slide projectors to create a disjointed theatrical narrative. The pictures displayed, and the different technologies used, give rise to the heterogeneity of impressions.

For example, a frog man was hit by an arrow shot by an archer and winched up to the ceiling in the first part, and in the second a giant head of president Lyndon Johnson was revealed when an artist unwrapped it, while in the sixth a remotely controlled rocket was seemingly floating around on its own in the saloon.

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26 I have not yet found any reports from the audience, but if there are any they will be important for the analysis of the subversive effect of the performance.

Figure 8. Man Shooting Frogman, photograph © Adelaide de Menil.

Figure 9. Lyndon Johnson unwrapped, frames from documentary film footage. Courtesy Experiments in Art and Technology.
There were also movies and images displayed on large screens, which in the edited DVD are seen full screen, but which the audience must have seen in the background of the performance. In a small scale, Fahlström had already tried out these new techniques in his happenings, radio compositions and theatre in Sweden, where the avant-garde worked closely with engineers and also cooperated with Swedish mass media, such as the government-run radio and TV.28 His experimentation in Sweden in this way contributed to the performance in New York, where he got full technical support from Billy Klüver and E.A.T.

Fahlström primarily thematises and criticizes two contemporaneous issues for the performance: the Vietnam War and the atom bomb, i.e. the atrocities of war and the impending extinction of humankind. To produce the political force of the performance, Fahlström always selected his material carefully, so in this case it could uncover the evils of war. For example, he screened scenes from Ditta Agrippa’s educational film Aqua sangemini and Wesley Barry’s The Creation of the Humanoids from 1962.29 The synopsis in the IMDb database of the latter B-movie is very short: “In a post holocaust society, robots take it on their own to help the dying human race by giving them android bodies.”30 The beginning is of particular interest, since it illustrates the absurdity of the Cold War, and contrasts strongly with the Leitmotif of the performance: the title screens are juxtaposed upon documentary films depicting a number of atom bomb explosions, one for each title screen. It is easy to understand that the performance is written in the wake of the Cold War climax: the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

There is another side to it. Firstly, the swiftness with which popular culture reflects upon the contemporary socio-political situation, and secondly that “high” art in the 1960s started to incorporate popular culture on a broad front. Fahlström is only one of many artists at the time who tore down the wall between high and low culture, a work begun by the historical avant-garde in the beginning of the 20th century. He did not only use images and movies from popular culture, though, but also reused his own art—and of course that of others too—as for example his filmed performance Mao-Hope March 1966, originally made for Kisses Sweeter than Wine, but in 1973 presented as an independent work of art.31 Fahlström’s own performance on stage places him in the middle of the political and aesthetic discussion at this time, especially a longer political speech against military draft and the voting system of democracy.32 This soliloquy was based upon his late manifestos “The Ecstatic Society” from 1965 and “Take Care of the World” in Manifestoes 1966, but the same ideas can be found in several earlier articles and manifestoes of his.33 In these two manifestoes he lines up arguments he also used in his Kisses-speech: drugs should be free, politicians removed from power and replaced by administrators, Sweden should disarm its military and pleasure houses should be built instead, where people can relax, take drugs, have sex and so forth. Here illustrated by an excerpt from “Take Care of the World,” are a few of his ideas:

6: Risk reforms - Attitude to society: not to take any of the existing systems for granted (capitalist, moderately socialized or thoroughly socialized) [...]
9. Utilities – Free basic food, transportation and housing paid through taxes. [...] 

10. Profits – Steer away from redundant, self-revolving production [...]. What to be produced thus will be decided centrally by the country; [...] 

11. Politics – Government by experts and administrators. [...] Abolish politicians, parties, voting. [...] 

12. Pleasure – “The ecstatic society”. Research and planning in order to develop and mass-produce “art” as well as “entertainment” and drugs for greater sensory experiences and ego-insight. New concepts for concert, theatre and exhibition buildings; but first of all pleasure houses for meditation, dance, fun, games and sexual relations [...]. Utilize teleprinter, closed circuit TV, computers, etc., to arrange contacts, sexual and other.34

In the performance, he expressed his own political agenda, which was radical in the conservative US, even though this was the era of political counter movements and anti-war demonstrations in which he took part. *Kisses Sweeter than Wine* was therefore far ahead of its time both politically and aesthetically, but, as mentioned, a fiasco. Like many of Klüver’s projects, the technology did not always behave and some parts of the show were rather chaotic. Yet, when the first impressions settled in the years that followed, and technology and aesthetics caught up with Fahlström and Klüver, a massive revaluation of *9 Evenings* in art and performance history has taken place. Nowadays E.A.T.’s performance series is considered a milestone in neo-avant-garde aesthetics, an artistic and technological breakthrough that contributed to paving the way for today’s “networked, global and multiscreen world.”

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Conclusion

As I have exemplified in my article, avant-garde migration often headed towards the large so-called “centres” of the avant-gardes, such as Berlin and Paris before the Second World War and New York in the 1960s, but at the same time the migrating avant-gardists brought with them knowledge and ideas from the peripheries, without which these cities would not have been dominant. The alleged export of American Art in the 1960s therefore, when scrutinised, rather seems to be an import of ideas in an exchange with similar movements all over the world, but due to a popular historical interpretation based on centrifugalism this has not been accepted before. The ‘centre’ provided the necessary means for the artists to develop, the multifaceted world of the big city worked as an inspiration, but at the same time the ‘periphery’ provided new ideas and concepts through the intermediary of migrated artists. In return the ‘periphery’ got to know of things happening in the big city, parts of which were incorporated in the local, disparate art scenes.

The engineer Billy Klüver and the artist Öyvind Fahlström are admirable examples of this process of mutuality and exchange: they partook in the laying of a basis not just for the technological and aesthetic experiments of the 1960s, but also for the digital and multimodal world of today, since the technique provided by E.A.T. made it possible to move the technological border in both the arts and society at large. Being part of the artistic scene in New York in the 1960s and 1970s, their ideas and inventions contributed to the formation of an exceptionally dynamic art world, a creative melting pot of such a degree that it is hard to envision today. Yet, they also turned in the opposite direction and introduced new ideas and

Figure 13. Posters from Mao-Hope march, carried on stage, photograph © Adelaide de Menil.
technologies to their homeland, Sweden, where—due to creative, imaginative and open-minded leaders at museums and broadcasting companies—Stockholm became another pole in the neo-avant-garde exchange of the time, in this way erasing the border between centre and periphery.