

Gertrude Stein and the Sixties in Denmark – fluxus and performance

By Tania Ørum

The two large figures behind the art of the 1960s are undoubtedly Marcel Duchamp and Gertrude Stein:

The American art historian Rosalind Krauss has noted that minimal art shares a common source with pop art: the Duchampian readymade. Both exploit cultural readymades, but whereas pop art uses pictorial elements which are already heavily culturally marked, minimalists use elements with a less specific content functioning as abstract components. (Krauss 1993: 249)

- Pop art makes use of cultural clichés like comics, icons of the mass media and the entertainment industry (think of Lichtenstein's paintings or Warhol's Marilyn Monroes in many colours)
- Minimalism makes use of standardised industrial units as anonymous building blocks.

Gertrude Stein anticipates both kinds of readymades in her writing: she uses single words or phrases as readymades to build up her texts – that could be called minimalism in literature

- An example of the minimalist use of a single word as a readymade could be the text called "Play", in which the word is used again and again to bring out its many aspects and meanings, but which may also be looked at as a minimalist word sculpture on the page.
- An example of the use of more culturally marked elements (like pop-art) or readymade phrases could be the portrait of "Mrs Whitehead", which builds up the text from a number of conventional phrases.

This legacy of verbal readymades is definitely picked up by writers in the 1960, for instance in concrete poetry.

Gertrude Stein also anticipates **the performative turn, which has been seen as characteristic of all the arts since the 1960s.**

Stein's language is performative: it does not only speak *about* things, it performs what it talks about in many ways: as patterns of letters and words and lines on the page, as sound patterns and as probings of the multiple meaning of single words, lines and paragraphs.

The American art historian Michael Fried has argued in a well-known essay ("Art and Objecthood" 1967) that the minimalism of the 1960s turns art into theatre. Fried sees this as a fatal flaw, but his description is an accurate analysis of the performative turn which takes place with the introduction of minimalism:

By treating sculpture as composed of readymade elements, minimalism turns sculpture into an anonymous object, and no longer a transcendent expression of the artist's feelings. This constitutes a break with modernism, since it takes the aesthetic reduction to the media-specific minimum of each art form quite literally and thus "confuses the transcendental 'presentness' of art (which modernist theorists like Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried insist on) with the mundane 'presence' of

things". (Foster 1996: 50) This is why minimalist literalism is, in Michael Fried's terms, "antithetical to art" and "incurably theatrical". If the artwork is a mere object, it cannot be separated from the space it is placed in. And objects in space invite the audience to walk around, i.e. they include the physical presence and movements of the viewer. Open works of art – whether minimalist sculpture or Gertrude Stein's texts – are not closed and finished autonomous works, they need the participation of an audience to acquire meaning. By taking things literally, minimalism introduces the body of the spectator, actual space and time into the experience of art, and thus include in the art sphere a whole context deemed irrelevant by modernist critics like Greenberg and Fried. This spatial, temporal, phenomenological and potentially social context draws on what Fried diagnoses as "theatricality"– the performative and material dimensions which are central to all of the arts of this period.

Gertrude Stein is also called a literalist

The American art historian Barbara Rose, one of the earliest American art critics to analyse minimalism (she called it "ABC Art") points out minimalist tendencies in dance, music, performance and film. And as predecessors of the minimalist current of the 1960s she indicates: Malevich and Duchamp, Gertrude Stein and Henri Satie. (Rose 1965)

as Foster has argued, minimalism is no less a break with modernism, since it takes the aesthetic reduction to the media-specific minimum of each art form quite literally and thus "confuses the transcendental 'presentness' of art (which modernist theorists like Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried insist on) with the mundane 'presence' of things". (Foster 1996: 50) This, as Foster suggests, is why minimalist literalism is in Michael Fried's famous terms in "Art and Objecthood" "antithetical to art" and "incurably theatrical". (Fried 1967 quoted in Foster 1996: 51) By taking things literally, minimalism introduces the body of the spectator, actual space and time into the experience of art, and thus reduces artworks to mere objects as well as including in the art sphere a whole context deemed irrelevant by Greenberg and Fried. This spatial, temporal, phenomenological and potentially social context draws on what Fried diagnoses as "theatricality"– the performative and material dimensions which are central to all of the arts of this period.

Concrete poetry thus emphasises the materiality and the performative acts of language: the ways in which the sound of words, the visual shape of letters and their distribution on the page perform elementary effects often overlooked in the conventional literary focus on the content and the communicative functions of language. And these performative dimensions of language are often stressed by the actual performances of texts as sound compositions or visual choreographies.

Happenings concentrate on the actual physical movements of the performers and the material qualities of their tools, objects and actions – thus drawing attention to the material elements and physical conditions underlying the narrative and the characters of conventional plays. Many happenings by the Ex-School circle can be seen as performative versions of visual art, poetry or music or cross-aesthetic versions of all of these, while also feeding into the performative dimensions of the individual arts or new cross-aesthetic experiments.

Minimal music aims at simplifying the structure of the music so that listeners can actually hear the score and follow the gradual unfolding of the composition (as in the

Danish composer Henning Christiansen's ultra-simplified compositions of the mid 1960s), or it explores the mental and physical effects of repetition, single notes kept for a long time or sounds played out of phase (as in Terry Riley's early compositions) – thus testing the minimal requirements of a musical composition. Minimal music also investigates the performative capacities of everyday sounds, found phrases or snatches of spoken language which are substituted for musical instruments (as does Steve Reich), or it tries out the effect of combining a cello and an ordinary car horn (like the Danish composer Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen), thus testing or crossing the borders between music and other art forms.

Painting reduces the complexity of the visual composition on the canvas to anonymous stripes of industrial colour on huge walls to be experienced as you climb the stairs (as in Paul Gernes' *Striped wall*, 1966), thus turning interest away from the feelings of the artist towards the movements of the spectator's body. Sculpture turns into single, non-symbolic objects or repeated forms, often big enough to make the passage through the room the performative point, or bland enough to require an effort from the spectators to make sense of the work.

The minimalist current in the arts thus shifts the emphasis from interior meaning to external movement, from depth to surface, and from the individual artist to the social space inhabited by the art work and the spectators. All the arts share the seeming "artlessness" of anonymous or everyday objects, "found" elements, readymades and clichés; they share the emphasis on materiality and the appeal to the audience to make sense of these non-expressive works by performing their own passage through the work – whether by turning the leaves of the book to make the letters come alive, by walking around boxes or through "anti-tank formations" (as the sculptural work of the Danish artist Peter Louis-Jensen "Structure 16 elements" was dubbed when first exhibited in 1966) or by generally forming their own interpretation of what the point of such reduced forms could be.

In the 1960s especially, references to Stein are everywhere. There is a veritable Gertrude Stein revival. Some of her works are re-printed by the *Something Else Press*, run by the *Fluxus* artists, Dick Higgins. - *Fluxus*, incidentally, is another example of how an avant-garde movement initiated by Americans is first launched in Europe and grows into a major European movement with members in most countries. - The volumes published by the Something Else Press make Stein's texts available again, and along with other forebears like Mallarmé, Kurt Schwitters, and the rest of the so-called "historical avant-garde" in Europe, Stein is appropriated by the experimental artists, composers and writers of the 1960s.

It is not hard to see why the European avant-garde of the 60s recognised a kindred spirit in Gertrude Stein. Like Stein the avant-garde of the 60s were interested in the play and materiality of language, in open texts (and other works) which undermine stable meaning and traditional focus on content, in terms of psychology, narrative or hidden depths. Gertrude Stein herself said that she "never had a subconscious reaction" (AABT.87), and this rejection of the expressive, interiorised, psychological interpretation of art is entirely in accordance with the effort of the 1960s artists to concentrate on the constructive dimension and the material surface of the artwork: to look at the letters, meanings, visual forms or sounds which are actually there, and not beyond to the spiritual meaning or inner feelings of the artist. A traditional psychological interpretation strategy like that hardly makes sense in relation to either

Stein or the concrete poetry of the 1960s.¹ Like Stein, but unlike much art of the 1940s and 1950s, the experimental artists of the 60s tend to see meaning not as something springing from the unique, private, inaccessible experience of the artist, but as something emerging in a public and social space and requiring the active participation of the reader or audience.

It is no coincidence that the first volume of concrete poetry published by the Danish writer and critic Hans-Jørgen Nielsen (*at det at, to/that it to/that* 1965) has a motto by “miss stein/part of poetry a part of poetry part from poetry partly with poetry ... partly poetry part poetry a part poetry”, and that several of the poems in the volume echo her preference for the most insignificant word categories: adverbs, articles and conjunctions. Nor is it a coincidence that Nielsen’s programmatic book of essays *Nielsen og den hvide verden* (1968) contains an analysis of Stein’s poem “a rose is a rose is a rose”. Nielsen’s friend the Danish avant-garde composer Henning Christiansen, who belonged to the early *Fluxus* movement, has composed a piece based on Stein’s rose-poem and orchestrated for 28 string instruments, whose notes are determined by the form of the letters, played one by one, “like an electric newspaper”, the composer says. And a painter from the same experimental circles, John Davidsen, spent the entire year 1969-1970 on a series centered on roses, with reference to Gertrude Stein – ranging from posters of roses /to exhibitions of living roses in varying stages of freshness and fading/ to the marketing of rose jelly.

¹ This rejection of psychology does not necessarily imply a traditional squirmishness about the sexual components of psychoanalysis or a simplistic belief in the transparency of consciousness, neither in the 1960s avant-garde nor in Gertrude Stein. Witness the following passage from *Everybody’s Autobiography*: “That is really the trouble with autobiography you do not of course you do not really believe yourself why should you, you know so well so very well tht it is not yourself it could not be yourself because you cannot remember right and if you do remember right it does not sound right and of coure it does not sound right because it is not right. You are of course never yourself.” (53)

Among the Fluxus-inspired compositions from these years is Henning Christiansen's *To Play To-Day* (a title borrowed from a text by Gertrude Stein), composed in 1963-64, but not performed until December 1966 – when the composer has moved on to more constructivist or minimalist ideas.² The score thus exists in 2 versions, an English version for the international Fluxus context and a Danish one for the performance on Radio Denmark, now called *To Play To-day –from my memories*, opus 25, duration 46' 3''.

The handwritten English score is dated "Dec. 64". It is a classic piece of instrumental theatre, instructing the pianist to read aloud bits of text (by Dick Higgins Alain Robbe-Grillet and Henning Christiansen) and perform various acts, such as counting, ringing an alarm clock etc. in between the short pieces of music (from 5 to 95 seconds) which constitute the composition.

The printed Danish version has Danish titles added and comprises the printed Danish texts from the radio broadcast.

The re-arranged radio version of *To Play To-day* is a charming, lively concert for piano, orchestra, one female voice and two male voices. In the radio version one of the male voices belongs to the composer while the other one is performed by the famous fast-talking barker, Professor Tribini, at Dyrehavsbakken, the Coney Island of Copenhagen – which ties in well with the fact that the composition is called "A Coney Island of the Mind" in the very last text, with reference to the volume of poems by the beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti (called *A Coney Island of the Mind*). It also fits the general character of the composition which keeps a balance between a systematic-constructivist approach and an informal-anarchistic spirit.

The radio piece also tries to balance between on the one hand an appeal to popular tastes – Professor Tribini, jokes and a general spirit of fun and games set against the "seriousness" of high art – and on the other hand the use of advanced/serious texts by T.S.Eliot, Robbe-Grillet, the philosopher Carnap and the poet Hans-Jørgen Nielsen as well as experimental/Fluxus procedures such as the composition by Henning Christiansen previously performed at happenings, in which the composer keeps counting throughout the entire piece, going "I am no. one – I am no. two – I am no. three...."

In the radio version, this counting composition can be layered underneath the music and text in the foreground, as can other recurring sound patterns such as bird song.

² Partituret til *To Play To-day – af mine memoier*, opus 25, varighed 46' 3'', findes i både en dansksproget og en engelsksproget udgave, der ikke er identiske. Den engelsksprogede håndskrevne og håndindbundne udgave er dateret "Dec. 64". Den trykte danske er optrykt efter det engelsksprogede håndskrevne partitur med tilføjelse af danske titler, og har i tillæg de danske maksinskrevne tekster fra radioopførelsen. Den danske udgave er udgivet af Samfundet til udgivelse af dansk musik, København: Dan Fog, 1974. I radioopførelsen i programmet "Vor tids musik" 1.2.1966 produceret af Helmer Nørgard og redigeret af Mogens Andersen medvirker Hanne Petri, Professor Tribini, Astrid Villaume og Henning Christiansen sammen med Sønderjyllands Symfoniorkester dirigeret af Peter Ernst Lassen. Radioudgaven følger ikke de to partiturer, men er bearbejdet til lejligheden af Henning Christiansen og Hans-Jørgen Nielsen.

The effect is one of many heterogeneous layers of sound, so that the foreground is sometimes so loud as to block out background layers, while at other times the foreground seems to recede and allow for instance counting to resurface as a distant or somewhat closer sound. The timing is much sharper than at live performances of instrumental theatre, and the rhythm of music, noise, counting, single words and longer texts or metareflections has been worked out much more closely.

The play of high and low is continued on many levels throughout the radio composition: A serious text by T.S. Eliot about time present and time past (from *Four Quartets*) is read aloud by the barking voice of Tribini, interrupted by counting and other sounds, but it still ties up with the reflections on music as a time-bound art form continuing in later parts of the composition. In contrast, some rather everyday pieces of correspondence between Dick Higgins and the composer about their cats and dogs are read out rhythmically, so as to make it part of the general rhythmical structure of the whole piece (and rather close to another common product by Christiansen and Nielsen from this period, the joint visual text/sound-composition *information/textures* which is a serious minimalist manifesto).

Each piece of music has a Gertrude Stein-like one-word title such as "How", "But", "Letter", "Coat" or "When". These are shouted by Professor Tribini. And at the beginning and the end of the composition all the titles are gathered up into a one-word piece resembling a text by Stein or concrete poetry of the kind written by Hans-Jørgen Nielsen and others in this period.

"Goodbye to all that" says the end of the last longer text in the composition, in the voice of Christiansen himself, thus leaving Fluxus behind as a Coney Island of the Mind in order to embrace the minimalism he adopts in the latter half of the 1960s. However, both the English and the Danish version ends not here, but with a thundering BUT followed by the last piece of music – thus opening a loop back to the beginning: The concert can begin again from the start; the doubt and reflections can start anew – in the same way that Henning Christiansen actually brings many Fluxus elements into his later minimalist works.