

# Authenticity and *Verfremdung* Öyvind Fahlström's performance *Kisses Sweeter than Wine* (1966)

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Résumé de l'article

Depuis longtemps, on considérait l'art de la performance comme étant enraciné dans le « Hier und Jetzt », qui est, comme l'affirme par Walter Benjamin, la seule condition restante pour l'Aura. Cependant, Philip Auslander constate qu'aujourd'hui toute représentation est toujours déjà médiatisée d'une manière ou d'une autre ; et pourtant, nous pourrions encore ressentir de la vivacité et également de l'authenticité. La médiatisation est donc une condition (nécessaire) de l'authenticité. Dans cette étude consacrée à la performance de l'artiste suédois Öyvind Fahlström (1928-1976), intitulée *Kisses Sweeter than Wine* (1966), j'affirme toutefois que même l'utilisation de *Verfremdungseffekts* dans la performance avant-gardiste ne perturbe pas la construction de l'authenticité, même si cet effet est employé afin d'attaquer à la transparence médiatique (présupposée), jugée comme fondamentale pour une expérience « authentique ». Dans son emploi des nouvelles technologies et des divers médias audiovisuels, Fahlström était un précurseur dans le champ de l'art médiatique. La subtilité intermédiaire peut donc être comprise à fond et discutée par le seul prisme de notre propre ère de l'information. D'autres exemples comparables durant les années 1960 créent des liens importants avec la généalogie de notre société contemporaine en réseau et à plusieurs écrans, car elles constituent les premières confluences de la cybernétique, de l'art et des médias. Ce phénomène est surtout perceptible dans la performance de Fahlström, qui faisait partie de *9 Soirées* (9 Evenings). *Théâtre et Ingénierie* est arrangé, en 1966, par Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) au 69<sup>th</sup> Regiment Armory à New York. Fahlström mélange la performance sur scène avec une pléthore d'événements médiatisés, ce qui donne lieu à un spectacle caractérisé par de forts *Verfremdungseffekts*, tout en créant une expérience d'authenticité.

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Authenticity and *Verfremdung*  
Öyvind Fahlström's performance  
*Kisses Sweeter than Wine* (1966)

Per Bäckström

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## Abstract

Performance art has been regarded as solidly rooted in the “Hier und Jetzt”, asserted by Walter Benjamin as the only remaining condition for the Aura. However, as Philip Auslander observes, every performance today is always already mediatized in one way or another, and still we might experience *liveness* and then also authenticity. Mediatization is, therefore, a (necessary) condition for authenticity. In my discussion on the Swedish artist Öyvind Fahlström’s (1928–76) performance *Kisses Sweeter than Wine* 1966, I nonetheless argue that not even the use of *Verfremdungseffekts* in avant-garde performance disrupts the construction of authenticity, even though this effect is used to attack the (presupposed) media-transparency believed to be necessary for an “authentic” experience. In his use of new technology and different broadcasting media, Fahlström was a forerunner for media art. The intermedial intricacy can be fully understood and discussed only in our own information age. His and other similar 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. This is best seen in his performance, which was part of *9 Evenings. Theatre and Engineering* arranged, in 1966, by Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) at the 69<sup>th</sup> Regiment Armory in New York. Fahlström mixes performance on stage with a plethora of mediated and mediatized events, which results in a show that is characterized by strong *Verfremdungseffekts*, yet still gives rise to an experience of authenticity.

## Résumé

Depuis longtemps, on considérait l’art de la performance comme étant enraciné dans le « Hier und Jetzt », qui est, comme l’affirme par Walter Benjamin, la seule condition restante pour l’Aura. Cependant, Philip Auslander constate qu’aujourd’hui toute représentation est toujours déjà médiatisée d’une manière ou d’une autre ; et pourtant, nous pourrions encore ressentir de la vivacité et également de l’authenticité. La médiatisation est donc une condition (nécessaire) de l’authenticité. Dans cette étude consacrée à la performance de l’artiste suédois Öyvind Fahlström (1928-1976), intitulée *Kisses Sweeter than Wine* (1966), j’affirme toutefois que même l’utilisation de *Verfremdungseffekts* dans la performance avant-gardiste ne perturbe pas la construction de l’authenticité, même si cet effet est employé afin

d'attaquer à la transparence médiatique (présupposée), jugée comme fondamentale pour une expérience « authentique ». Dans son emploi des nouvelles technologies et des divers médias audiovisuels, Fahlström était un précurseur dans le champ de l'art médiatique. La subtilité intermédiaire peut donc être comprise à fond et discutée par le seul prisme de notre propre ère de l'information. D'autres exemples comparables durant les années 1960 créent des liens importants avec la généalogie de notre société contemporaine en réseau et à plusieurs écrans, car elles constituent les premières confluences de la cybernétique, de l'art et des médias. Ce phénomène est surtout perceptible dans la performance de Fahlström, qui faisait partie de *9 Soirées* (9 Evenings). *Théâtre et Ingénierie* est arrangé, en 1966, par Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) au 69<sup>th</sup> Regiment Armory à New York. Fahlström mélange la performance sur scène avec une pléthore d'événements médiatisés, ce qui donne lieu à un spectacle caractérisé par de forts *Verfremdungseffekts*, tout en créant une expérience d'authenticité.

**Keywords:** Billy Klüver, Öyvind Fahlström, 9 Evenings, mediatization, *Verfremdungseffekt*, authenticity

**Mot-clés :** Billy Klüver, Öyvind Fahlström, 9 Evenings, médiatisation, effet de distanciation, authenticité

# Authenticity and *Verfremdung*

Per Bäckström

## Introduction

Performance art is believed to be firmly rooted in the “Hier und Jetzt” (here and now) asserted by Walter Benjamin as the only remaining condition for the Aura (2003).<sup>1</sup> But, as Philip Auslander observes, every performance is always already mediatized in one 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. (2008, 25)

Still, the audience often does experience authenticity when they visit a live performance; the question is, therefore, what does this authenticity actually derive from? When we discuss rock music, it is obvious that the experience of authenticity is performative, in the way Auslander points out:

Rock authenticity is performative, in Judith Butler’s sense of that term: rock musicians achieve and maintain the effect of authenticity by continuously citing in their music and performance styles the norms of authenticity for their particular rock subgenre and historical moment, and these norms change along with changes in the prevailing discourse of authenticity. (2008, 84)

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When it comes to avant-garde performance, though, there might not even a tradition to cite, or any earlier genres or subgenres to lean on, which makes the question of authenticity more problematic.<sup>2</sup> Performance has been tied to Benjamin's claim of the "Hier und Jetzt" for the Aura, but at the same time live performances most often are not only her and now. Peggy Phelan points out: "The wish to hear an authentic, single voice is very strong, but representation is never transparent" (1993, 104), every performance is always a result of mediation and, nowadays, also mediatization. Avant-garde performance even more so, since it does not rely (heavily) on earlier traditions for its authenticity, but are required to 'perform' this authenticity by means other than "citing" earlier traditions and genres, since an avant-gardist is supposed to break with tradition. Why, then, would a certain audience want to see avant-garde performance at all,<sup>3</sup> and why would they even testify that they experience something that can be interpreted as authenticity while doing this? This is a circumstance that seems paradoxical, but that can be explained by our (extreme) attentiveness to the construction of the artwork, which makes us neglect the obvious, as Gerald Bruns points out:

art is not a *work* of something (a construction or an artifact) but rather [...] "the act of putting it there" – an event rather than (strictly) an object, which is what characterizes so much of the American art world since the 1950s, where, in the spirit of Duchamp and John Cage, *performance trumps composition*. (2006, 109, last emphasis added)

This means that the experience of authenticity in a performance is performative, that is, the experience of authenticity among the audience derives from the performance *per se*, and not from the construction of it. Since a performance today is heavily mediated, and most often mediatized as well, it has been argued that a performance will not remain a performance if it is doc-

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<sup>2</sup>I do not imply that avant-garde art has no tradition. On the contrary, they of course connect to earlier traditions, and yet, firstly, most often not for the actual time preferred tradition but consciously chosen other traditions, in the same way that New Criticism disregarded Romanticism and promoted Metaphysical poetry to profile themselves, and secondly, they do not claim that their authenticity derives from any tradition. If the audience experiences authenticity when they watch an avant-garde performance, then the means for the construction of authenticity comes from the performance *per se*, since, contrary to rock music, the experience each and every time should be new.

<sup>3</sup>I use the word "certain" because many do not want to see any avant-garde performance at all, rejecting it with the by now age-old question: "Is this art?"

umented and displayed in another medium, by, for example, Peggy Phelan (1993, 146). Eddie Paterson and Lara Stevens point out that traditionally: “The term ‘live’ is associated with presence, immediacy, authenticity, community, ephemerality and unpredictability” (2013, 156). But, as Auslander has argued, mediatization is a prerequisite for the experience of liveness. The problem is, though, that the material means for the mediation and/or mediatization has traditionally been regarded as transparent, that is to say that different media on stage have been seen as transparent. What the avant-garde does is to question this belief in transparency, as we shall see in the following, which also means that an experience of authenticity should not really be possible. Contrary to a rock concert where the band, the record company etc. acts as if the different media on stage are transparent, the avant-garde performance instead makes everything to make its “devices” discernible in their use of *Verfremdung*.<sup>4</sup>

Media and technology has been part of the development of the human species since the first hominid grabbed a stone or stick and used it as “an extension of man”, as Marshall McLuhan phrases it (2002). We are so used to media and technology that we do not even see it, not even with our glasses on. Therefore, it is not strange that researchers, when they start to notice that books are printed with ink on paper, live performances take place on stage with amplifiers etc., can’t evade their new obsession with media and technology and comprehend that these fields do not necessarily constitute a dichotomy to authenticity, but might be co-producers of it.

To react to something demands that it is, or has become, visible. This occurred when the historical avant-garde was born from the revelation that art had become disconnected from both life and society with the advent of *l’art pour l’art* in the 19th century (Bürger 1984). The same holds true with the rise of the neo-avant-gardes in the 1950s and their elaborate use of new media, which occurred at the same time as media theory started to develop. The focus on media has only increased since then, and – as is well known – in the wake of this boom, the field of Intermedial Studies was recently born.

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<sup>4</sup>A *Verfremdungseffekt* is a *successful Verfremdung* (“Verfremdung is a process which means to make the familiar strange”), see professor David Barnett: <http://brechtinpractice.org/theory/verfremdung-or-verfremdungseffekt/> (read 19/08/28). I use Bertold Brecht’s German notion of “Verfremdungseffekt” (Brecht 2000), although his thoughts are deeply based in Viktor Šklovskij’s earlier notion “ostranenie” (2008), since, I believe, Brecht’s notion is the better known of the two in performance studies.

But, at the same time, this focus might obscure the relation between media, technology and the demand for authenticity in live performance. The fact that neo-avant-gardes, in a continuation of the praxis of the historical avant-garde, included media in their performances to create *Verfremdungseffekts* that laid bare their devices to an even higher degree than their precursors did, in a refusal to accept the belief that life and performance are totally un-mediated and -mediatized phenomena and therefore transparent. This insistence on *Verfremdung* further aggravates attempts to recognize the role of authenticity in avant-garde performances, since at first sight this kind of strategy undermines authenticity *per se*, since the use of *Verfremdung* ought to make the experience of the actual performance inauthentic, since it make the audience see the performance's material and technological preconditions. This article is, therefore, guided by the question: Does *Verfremdung* prevent the experience of authenticity, or is it of no impediment for the construction of authenticity?

I will in my discussion focus on the Swedish artist Öyvind Fahlström's (1928–1976) performance *Kisses Sweeter than Wine*, which was staged October 21 and 22 in 1966. It has been lauded as the most ambitious and technologically advanced of all the acts in the performance series *9 Evenings* – a multimedia show *avant la lettre*: “The most narratively complex of the works performed, Fahlström's *Kisses Sweeter than Wine* was also the most thematically overt” (Morris 2006, 11).<sup>5</sup> The complexity of this performance makes it ideal for an analysis of *Verfremdungseffekts*, since Fahlström uses both live performance, mediated and mediatized parts this way, in a performance that has been described by audience members as both chaotic and rewarding. I interpret these statements as testimonies about an experience that the *Verfremdungseffekts* in the show did not constitute an obstacle for the experience of authenticity.<sup>6</sup> The different performances that constituted *9 Evenings* were filmed,

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<sup>5</sup>The Intermedial complexity and heterogeneity of this performance is so great, that I, in this article, can only point out a few instances where mediation and mediatization functions as *Verfremdungseffekts*, or are used to create such effects, since *Kisses* would need at least a whole book to be analyzed *in toto*. I hope, however, that my argument will be understood, until a more extensive research project is realized.

<sup>6</sup>For public response see e.g. (Bryan 1967); (Loewen 1975); the catalogue (2006); (Openheimer 2011). The reports from the performance are few. Therefore, I can only conclude based on reading and my own experience of the DVD. The experience is influenced by the rapid development of media since 1966, which makes it necessary to (hermeneutically) imagine the media impact at a time when more or less all of the media and technology-



but these films have not been made freely available, although parts of them can be seen at La fondation Daniel Langlois in Montréal and on YouTube.<sup>7</sup> The film and the film sections of *Kisses Sweeter than Wine* on YouTube show a heterogeneous performance, which was staged with films and live footage screened in the background on three screens like a triptych (Borgen 2015). This means that both live and screened performance was seen at the same time, which indicates the level of mediation and mediatization on stage, at the same time as some action took part above or in the audience as well. Most of the different events in each setting therefore functioned as *Verfremdung*, since they were, firstly, parts of a disjointed narrative, and, secondly, revealed the material circumstances of the show. This is the more important as Fahlström “particularly through his use of ‘life material’, [...] distanced himself from the other performances in *9 Evenings* that attempted to *eradicate* the border between art and life by moving the spectator’s experiences as to new technology as possible” (Borgen 2015, 23, my italics).<sup>8</sup> To continue my analysis, I first want to introduce Fahlström, his main co-partner the Swedish engineer Billy Klöver, and Fahlström’s performance *Kisses Sweeter than Wine* that, as mentioned, constituted one part of the performance series *9 Evenings* in 1966. An analysis of a performance of any kind must, necessarily, be based on description, this even more so when the performance in question is not documented in a way that every reader has the possibility to access. This is especially important when it comes to *Kisses Sweeter than Wine*, since the short film extracts on YouTube, which are the *only* widely available documentation, are heavily mixed and unsynched with the soundtrack.

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based parts of the performance were completely new to the audience. In the following, the above references are inferred every time I comment on the impact of the show.

<sup>7</sup>See La fondation Daniel Langlois, <http://www.fondation-langlois.org/flash/e/index.php?NumPage=571> (03/05/18), and YouTube. Barbro Schultz Lundestam has made some of the performances available on limited DVD-productions, which is synched contrary to the films as they generally are on YouTube, for Fahlström: (2006). I have the filmed performance on DVD, as one of very few, and therefore my analysis is based on description.

<sup>8</sup>“Life material” is Fahlström’s name on the debris of life used in the creation of his art, e.g. recordings of TV and radio, commercials, comics etc.

## Öyvind Fahlström

The Swedish concrete poet and artist Öyvind Fahlström is one of few internationally renowned Swedish artists in the 20th century, as a result of his and his wife's, the artist Barbro Östlihn, relocation to New York in 1961, where they became part of the international neo-avant-garde. He almost immediately became a key figure of the movement together with Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, John Cage among others.<sup>9</sup> Fahlström preserved his ties with Sweden, which continued to be a strong stimulus for neo-avant-garde activities in Stockholm, and it is worth mentioning that both Stockholm and New York are among the most important avant-garde cities of the 1960s (see e.g. (Bäckström 2008), (2009), (2010), (2012) and (Nylén 1998)).

Fahlström published the world's first manifesto for concrete poetry in 1954: "HÄTILA RAGULPR PÅ FÅTSKLIABEN" (HIPY POPY BTHUTHDTH THUTHDA BTHUTHDY, Fahlström 1954),<sup>10</sup> 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 more than ten years later, as *Bord – dikter 1952–55* (Table – Poems, Fahlström 1966).<sup>11</sup> His main aesthetic in the manifesto is to use language in its material aspects, a strategy that endorses *Verfremdung*. As a promoter of the neo-avant-garde in Sweden in

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<sup>9</sup>For more about Öyvind Fahlström and Barbro Östlihn in New York, see (Öhrner 2010).

<sup>10</sup>The title is taken from *Winnie the Pooh* (A. A. Milne 1926, 1941). It is debatable if Öyvind Fahlström or Eugen Gomringer (or even the Brazilian *poetas concretistas*) wrote the first "manifesto" for concrete poetry, but my recent findings show that Fahlström's manifesto was published in the little magazine *Odyssé* between 22 January and 12 July 1954 (Bäckström 2019). Since these dates mark the start of the magazine and the review of issue four respectively ("Vem var den förste metamorfinisten?" 1954; "Dupliceringsmaskinerna" 1954). Eugen Gomringer wrote his text "vom vers zur konstellation" in 1953 like Fahlström, but it was published in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on the 1st of August 1954, which makes Fahlström's "HÄTILA RAGULPR PÅ FÅTSKLIABEN" the first to be published. Fahlström's manifesto is most likely written directly after an author conference in Sigtuna from the 10th to the 12th of April, 1953, since critical articles about the event, such as by the German-Swedish author Peter Weiss in the Swedish tabloid *Expressen* (1953), functioned as impetus for Fahlström to write his manifesto. Fahlström furthermore wrote a program for concrete poetry, loosely based on the manifesto, which was also published before Gomringer's text (1969) in the tabloid *Expressen* 19 July 1954 (Fahlström 1954a). Gomringer's manifesto is reprinted in: (1969, 277–88).

<sup>11</sup>"Bord", although an ordinary Swedish word, here functions as a portmanteau for "bokstäver-ord" (letters-words).

the 1950s and -60s, Fahlström transgressed the boundaries of different arts and genres, as well as different media, when he for example put together two “radio compositions” in the early 1960s: “Fåglar i Sverige” (Birds in Sweden), transmitted in 1963, and “Den helige Torsten Nilsson” (The Holy Torsten Nilsson) in five parts, broadcasted in 1966 (Hultberg 1999).<sup>12</sup> These two radio compositions are complex media collages that included recorded sounds from reality, radio and TV, mixed into an acoustic narrative that was tied together using a voice-over performed by himself in the studio with the “explicit focus on manipulating mediated reality” (Borgen 2015, 30). Furthermore, they are prime examples of the way that Fahlström’s use of *Verfremdung* did not hinder the experience of authenticity; on the contrary, “Den helige Torsten Nilsson” became a minor success in Sweden, despite the fact *Verfremdung* was used (Hultberg 1999). With these two plays Fahlström was an early forerunner of today’s digital mixed media world, and they are prime examples of the process of mediatization.

## The Swedish engineer Billy Klüver

The mastermind behind the performance series: *9 Evenings. Theatre and Engineering* was the engineer Billy Klüver. Early on, he became a friend of Fahlström, introduced him and Barbro Östlihn to the neo-avant-gardists in New York in 1961, also helping them to get somewhere to live. This occurred to be Robert Rauschenberg’s old loft in lower Manhattan. Klüver had for a long time been involved with performances and happenings all over the US, since the neo-avant-gardes were eager to explore new technology and therefore were in need of engineers and technicians. He acted as an intermediary in the American–Swedish exchange in close contact with art institutions in both countries, which resulted in American artists travelling to Stockholm and Swedish artists visiting New York (Schultz Lundestam 2004). Besides helping artists all over America, he frequented the Factory and helped Andy Warhol with technical solutions as the famous “Silver Clouds”. Since Klüver was an engineer, Art History tends to overlook his involvement, and yet his impact was, indeed, decisive (Hertz 1995). His fundamental idea was to connect artists and engineers, to explore new ways for the art world and

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<sup>12</sup>Torsten Nilsson was the Swedish minister for defence 1951–57, and minister for foreign affairs 1962–71.

for engineering. He therefore started the company Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) together with Rauschenberg and others after the performance series *9 Evenings* in 1966,<sup>13</sup> terminating his employment at the Bell laboratories in New Jersey (Schultz Lundestam 2004, 38–42). His premises were that engineers should not create art, but provide the technical means for artists, who in their turn should not work directly with technology. It is crucial to understand that this should be realized via the collaboration of two equal partners that mutually learn from one another.<sup>14</sup> Like Lautréamont’s famous statement: “beau comme [...] la rencontre fortuite d’un parapluie et d’une machine à coudre sur une table d’opération” (“beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella”, (???)), Klüver meant that the random meeting between an artist and an engineer could produce unseen marvels, which would be creative for both of them: “The artist would see, as the result of this work *through* and *on* materials, new possibilities for society’s use of technology that the engineer could not identify alone” (Morse 2007).

## 9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering

Fahlström and Klüver planned to bring prominent American artists together with engineers to perform at a festival arranged by the experimental music association, Fylkingen, in Stockholm 1966. Due to a lack of means and their disagreement about how to organize the festival, Fylkingen’s leader Knut Wiggen cancelled it. Klüver and Rauschenberg then, together with Fahlström, organized the seminal series of performances and happenings entitled *9 Evenings. Theatre and Engineering* in New York 1966, at the 69th Regiment Armory at 68, Lexington avenue (Schultz Lundestam 2004, 67–81). These nine evenings were organised as different performances by the following artists:

- Robert Whitman, USA: *Two Holes of Water – 3*, 18 and 19 October.

<sup>13</sup>Robin Oppenheimer claims E.A.T. was founded one month before *9 Evenings*, but Billy Klüver himself states it happened one month after in November 1966, see (2007, 5); (1994). Norma Loewen gives them both right when she writes that E.A.T. was registered as a nonprofit organization in New York 26 September 1966, so then the first meeting might very well have been in November as Klüver remembers (1975, 91).

<sup>14</sup>Robin Oppenheimer, in particular, focuses explicitly on the collaboration in several publications: (2005), (2007), (2011).

- David Tudor, USA: *Bandoneon! (a combine)*, 14 and 18 October.
- John Cage, USA: *Variations VII*, 15 and 16 October.
- Steve Paxton, USA: *Physical Things*, 13 and 19 October.
- Öyvind Fahlström, Brazil/Sweden: *Kisses Sweeter Than Wine*, 21 and 22 October.
- Alex Hay, USA: *Grass Field*, 13 and 22 October.
- Deborah Hay, USA: *Solo*, 13 and 23 October.
- Lucinda Childs, USA: *Vehicle*, 16 and 23 October.
- Robert Rauschenberg, USA: *Open Score*, 14 and 23 October.
- Yvonne Rainer, USA: *Carriage Discreteness*, 15 and 21 October.<sup>15</sup>

Even for the experienced New York audience, the performance series was too far ahead of its time. The technology that was possible to develop and use at the time was not really adequate, so the artists and engineers experienced a lot of mishaps that clouded the immediate experience. Klüver's original idea was that the ingenuity of the engineers would sustain the transparency of different media and technologies, an intention that was challenged by the mishaps, but at the same time the artists use of technology was not necessarily meant to be transparent: They were very aware of the fact that the inclusion of media and technologies actually *opposed* transparency, and therefore rather used them as *Verfremdungseffekts*. Billy Klüver and the other engineers' visions were too advanced for their time; it would be years before the technology caught up with his inventiveness, while a few problems still have not been adequately resolved until the 21st Century. *9 Evenings* has therefore retrospectively gained the fame it deserves, as one of the landmarks of performance art, in Klüver's own words:

The impact was far greater than we anticipated. *9 Evenings* was one of the major art events of the 1960's, because of the

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<sup>15</sup>This list is compiled from the printed program: *9 Evenings. Theatre and Engineering* (1966). An on-line version of the program is available at La fondation Daniel Langlois <http://www.fondation-langlois.org/flash/e/index.php?NumPage=571> (read 16/10/19). There is a lot of information and documentation relating to *9 evenings. Theatre and Engineering* at this homepage. The title of the performance series comes from the fact that ten artists performed 20 times over the course of nine evenings.

aesthetic quality of the works themselves and the success of the collaborative situation that produced the works. (1980)

Klüver's statement has been elaborated upon by, for example, Robert Rauschenberg: "It ('9 Evenings') couldn't be done today [1997]. It was done before its time, and it's too late now. That's a rare moment" (cited from Oppenheimer 2005, 142). In the large retrospective exhibition *9 Evenings Reconsidered* at MIT 2006, Michelle Kuo summons it up:

*9 Evenings* forced signature devices of chance, participation, and abstraction to confront the fully technocratic world around them. Indeterminacy translated into technological breakdown. Machine behavior trumped compositional scores. Audience and performer interaction became increasingly mediated. The structural inversion of these tactics represented not simply an end, then, but a transformation: *9 Evenings* inaugurated a shift in the meaning of key postwar aesthetic strategies – and offered a way through and beyond their technological arbitration. (2006, 31)

## Kisses Sweeter than Wine

Fahlström's performance took its name and *leitmotif* from The Weaver's hit "Kisses Sweeter than Wine" (1950), which became an even larger success for Jimmy Rogers in 1957, even though Fahlström used the by then newer cover version by The New Christy Minstrels in 1965.<sup>16</sup> This song was only one of many mediatized pieces in the performance that worked as a *Verfremdungseffekt*, since it was a naïve love song whose meaning was sharply contrasted by the overall critique of militarism and extinction of mankind by nuclear warfare, a situation which was established precisely during the so called "innocent" 1950s.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>This cover version was fairly recent when Fahlström wrote the performance and must have been aired frequently during the mid-60s. See also Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kisses/\\_Sweeter/\\_than/\\_Wine/\\_\(song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kisses/_Sweeter/_than/_Wine/_(song)) (read 11/10/19). grotes

<sup>17</sup>The Cuba Crisis in 1962 is usually regarded as a brutal wakeup from ignorance, and the time when people in general realized the threat of the Cold War. The situation is of course much more complex, but in general the 1950s are thematized in culture as a period of innocence before the loss of naivety, even though something *Unheimlich* might be lurking beneath the surface. This is a sentiment explored in films such as David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* 1986 and Sam Mendes's *American Beauty* 1999.

*Kisses Sweeter than Wine* was a nine-part piece, which was made up of various sketches and performances and joined together without any narrative continuity. A brief list of the different parts gives a rough idea of the heterogeneity of the performance, a heterogeneity that, in itself, worked as a *Verfremdungseffekt*:

- 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 someone 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.<sup>18</sup>

The show was even more intricate and chaotic than the list reveals. The above is but a hint of the bizarre stagings that took place: the audience saw “combined live action with film, slides, closed circuit television projection, and elaborate props and objects” (Klüver 1980); it was a split screen performance *avant-la-lettre*, where the events only slowed down somewhat when

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<sup>18</sup>This short list is extracted from information on La fondation Daniel Langlois’ homepage: <http://www.fondation-langlois.org/flash/e/index.php?NumPage=571> (read 06/09/16).

the main characters performed. Even then it must have been hard to get an overview of the whole performance on stage, since nearly all the different live performances, media and technologies functioned as *Verfremdungseffekts*, as Billy Klüver's (post-)description indicates:

Among the live action: "Chinese Sparrow" swung in the space, the "Jello Girl" bathed in red Jello; the "Invisible Man" covered with smoke and the "Frog Man" performed; and "Space Girl" descended from the ceiling and walked a tightrope carrying a large head of President Johnson and a large rat. George and Charles, two 'idiot savants' who could match days with dates in any year, fought, drove around in a golf cart and threw around a pillow case containing a ball made of wire springs that emitted the sounds of heartbeats. Starting from the theme, "Are you Happy?" Fahlström delivered political harangue which was drowned out by rock and roll music. A guided missile of silver mylar flew in controlled flight around the Armory; and there were snow flakes that flew upward. The slides were of his previous paintings, and statistics of atrocities and the war in Vietnam. [...] Other tape recorded material included a telephone call to the British Consulate in Shanghai, China, conversations with 'British spiritualists', a dope addict and soldier in Korea, Jedidiah Buxton, who carried complicated mathematical calculations in his head for months, Truman Safford who could multiply huge numbers in his head; Beethoven Symphonies, and the song "Kisses Sweeter than Wine". (1980)

Robert Rauschenberg for example played the 18th century autistic man Jedidiah Buxton who, despite his impediment, could remember and repeat the most complex numbers, but at the same time he was hard to discern on stage. He was, namely, filmed head on with a closed-circuit camera and screened at the background of the stage, and since he performed more or less independently of the other events on stage; both his live performance and the screening of it turned into one of the *Verfremdungseffekts*. This exemplifies the overall use of media in the performance, and how performed authenticity is always already mediated and/or mediatized in some way or



another.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, Fahlström “drew increased attention to the ways that the mass media’s technological operations of transmission and reception guided image flow”, which means that he laid bare the devices for mass media as *Verfremdung*, in an attempt to manipulate images and social reality: “manipulation of distance via transmission, manipulation of content via editing, manipulation of context by presenting images on an individual screen” (Borgen 2015, 30).

*Kisses Sweeter than Wine* made use of technology that was very modern for the time, and in the performance Fahlström displayed live and filmed events, movies, and more, to create the overwhelming experience the audience testified to afterwards.<sup>20</sup> The technology was advanced, and actually Fahlström’s piece was most demanding for the technicians, as Herb Schneider describes it: “the more than 100 cued effects that kept three of us, Robby, Ralph and myself, completely busy during the 100 minute piece” (n.d.). It is necessary to scrutinise the variety of material sources for his show, where the performers on stage are only a small, albeit important, means of understanding the way Fahlström worked when he created his pieces. Fahlström made use of video, audio tape, film and slide projectors to create a disjointed theatrical narrative, which means he used media and technology to create *Verfremdung*. For example, a frog man was hit by arrows, 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 by an artist unwrapping it, while in the sixth a remotely controlled rocket was floating around on its own in the saloon, all this at the same occasion as other live performances and mediated and/or mediatized events took place in stage.<sup>21</sup>

To better understand Fahlström’s use of media to create *Verfremdung*, I will finally discuss the happening *Mao-Hope March* 1966, which was originally filmed for *Kisses Sweeter than Wine*, but in 1973 presented as an independent work of art (Borgen 2015). In this film Fahlström and *compañeros* carry large posters with Bob Hope and chairman Mao, while “Bob Fass of radio station WBAI” asked bystanders the question: “Are you happy?” (Klüver

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<sup>19</sup>“ ‘Mediatized performance’ is performance that is circulated on television, as audio or video recordings, and in other forms based in technologies of reproduction”, (Auslander 2008, 4).

<sup>20</sup>An extensive description of the collaborative work with *9 Evenings* is found in (Loewen 1975).

<sup>21</sup>Fahlström reports from his own work with the performance: (1970, 84–99).

1980). This means that, already in the filmed happening, we have different layers of intermediality. Photos are enlarged and held up as demonstration placards, interviews are recorded and made part of the film as an independent sound track, and even the demonstration itself is given new meaning in the mediatization process to create an art event. When this film is included *in* the performance *Kisses Sweeter than Wine*, mediation and mediatization as *Verfremdungseffekts* reaches another level, since then this art film partakes in the narrative of the much longer performance. The filmed happening *Mao-Hope March* in this way becomes an integral part of the performance *Kisses*, but since for example the placards that were central in the happening are physically present in the performance as well, the situation becomes rather complex. Through Fass' interview, Fahlström shifts the focus from the "pseudo-event" of the demonstration and the messages on the posters, to the reaction of the bystanders in order to produce a critical feedback. In the performance *Kisses* this is turned into a feedback loop, since performers repeat the demonstration on stage at the same time as *Mao-Hope March* is displayed on one of the screens (2015, 31–33), but at the same time the soundtrack to the filmed happening is replaced by a speaker's voice that talks about something completely different, while the screening of the B-movie *The Creation of the Humanoids* also interfered with the sound from *Mao-Hope March* – strong *Verfremdungseffekts*, if any. The somewhat nonsensical happening therefore receives new meaning as part of the performance, since the general chaos in the latter paradoxically makes the rationale of *Mao-Hope March* clearer. And, before I conclude I want to remind you that *Mao-Hope March* is only one *single* instance of mediation and mediatization in *Kisses Sweeter than Wine*, out of a multitude.

## Conclusion

*9 Evenings. Theatre and Technology* was far ahead of its time both politically and aesthetically, but, as mentioned, a lot of problems also occurred due to this highly innovative atmosphere, since the ideas of the engineers were too far ahead of their time. Like many of Klüver's projects, the technology did not always work perfectly and some parts of the show became rather chaotic, but as a whole, retrospectively, the show is seen as a success, not least since *9 Evenings* were visited by over 10.000 people, therefore having a significant impact (Hertz 1995). When the first impressions settled during the years

that followed, and technology and aesthetics caught up with Fahlström and Klüver, a massive reevaluation of *9 Evenings* in art and performance history took place. Klüver's amalgamation of "theatre and engineering" turned out to be extremely productive, and "these and other experiments in the 60s are important links in the genealogy of today's networked, global and multi-screen world, since they constitute early confluences of cybernetics, art and media."<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, *Kisses* shows that technology does not necessarily eliminate the authenticity of a performance. Fahlström's performance rather insists on its authenticity, despite heavy mediation and mediatization that was used to create *Verfremdung*, in this way conforming to the observation of Walter Ong about the function of spontaneity in secondary orality, here articulated by Auslander: "Paradoxically, the most successfully spontaneous forms of performance may be those in which spontaneity is relatively planned and predictable" (Auslander 2008, 64). Fahlström's performance was highly planned, and, even though the technology did not work perfectly, this was – according to some visitors – the best working performance of all in the *9 Evenings* series (see e.g. Borgen 2015). The mediatized footage of Robert Rauschenberg for example, in which he repeats extremely high numbers, works contradictorily to the seemingly spontaneous live acts and other screenings as a *Verfremdungseffekt*. But, both the mediatized and live performances constitute, in themselves, *Verfremdungseffekte*, since both kind of events in Fahlström's staging reveal the devices of the performance, but at the same time level out differences between the many events on stage, to such an extent that it becomes hard to recognize what is live and what is mediated and mediatized in this multimedia performance.

The audience described the chaotic nature of the performance, which I think concern the amount of *Verfremdungseffekte* in the performance *per se*.<sup>23</sup> In this way *Kisses* questions the very possibility of authenticity without media, since everything that goes on is mediated and/or mediatized in one way or another, but it also shows that, even though media and techniques are used to create *Verfremdungseffekte*, this does not inhibit the experience of

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<sup>22</sup>E-mail from Malte Hagener, 26 October 2015, copy in possession of the author.

<sup>23</sup>The use of *Verfremdungseffekte* in Fahlström's performance merits a deeper analysis, which will require a large number of archive research, since the number of first hand reports remain limited.

authenticity. As Maibritt Borgen rightly notes, Fahlström's use of media and technology reveals this as requirements for an audience:

When *9 Evenings* was relocated to New York, Fahlström kept the screens, but rather than using them merely to transmit the performers' appearance, by collapsing screen space and stage space through a closed circuit of transmission, he used them to emphasize how transmission acts as a precondition for spectatorship.

The main point of this reframing was to emphasize the presumed participatory potential of media networks, an investigation that was undertaken by surprisingly few other artists in *9 Evenings*. (2015, 32)

The only live element that the audience therefore could be sure of was their own function as live partners watching the spectacle, and therefore it lies in the interaction between the performance itself and the audience, as Auslander points out:

Understood in this way, the experience of liveness is not limited to specific performer–audience interactions but to a sense of always being connected to other people, of continuous, technologically mediated co-presence with others known and unknown. (2008, 61)

In today's world with the Internet, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other social media, which have replaced the need for authenticity with exactly this "continuous, technologically mediatized co-presence with others known and unknown", Fahlström's *Kisses Sweeter than Wine* can be seen as a precursor demonstrating that both the mediated, mediatized and live events function at the same level as *Verfremdungseffekts* in themselves, or to create such effects – and that this *Verfremdung* was of no hindrance for the construction of authenticity.

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