

**BERLIN AND THE SWEDISH AVANT-GARDE –
GAN, NELL WALDEN, VIKING EGGELING,
AXEL OLSON AND BENGT ÖSTERBLOM**

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In the 1910s Berlin was the fastest-growing major city in Europe. From the unification of Germany in 1871 until 1910 the population of Berlin grew from 827,000 to 2,076,000. It was no wonder the capital of the German Reich acquired the reputation of being “the biggest tenement city in the world”. Berlin also became the most important railway node in Europe, with no less than 22 railway stations. Before 1914, around 100 daily newspapers and a wealth of periodicals were published in Berlin. The world of theatre, entertainment and the cafés flourished, and film was making rapid strides. During the Wilhelmine era Berlin was a great city with growing pains, typified by huge, growing political differences. Not even the Great War of 1914-1918 was able to stall its expansion – production was kept going by the war. During the 1920s Berlin, alongside Paris, became a European centre of the continued development of modernism in various arts. But while Paris, with interruptions caused by the world war, attracted a never-ending flow of Swedish artists during these years, only five Swedish modernist artists of major significance went to Berlin in the years 1910-1925.

Gösta Adrian-Nilsson, GAN (1884-1965) was the only Swedish modernist artist of importance who studied in Berlin *before* the World War of 1914-1918. He was born in Lund in 1884 and grew up in a new workers’ neighbourhood where his parents had a market stall. In 1907 he made his debut both as a poet and an artist. The

dual debut was in the spirit of Romantic, decadent turn-of-the-century Symbolism with the Jugend/Art Nouveau style as its artistic idiom. Having written three books and following two exhibitions, a career as a journalist and studies at Zahrtmann's independent school in Copenhagen, he travelled to Berlin, the continental city that was within closest reach of the Lund academics. GAN's mentor in Lund, the radical botanist and publicist Bengt Lidforss, was a prominent habitué of the German capital. Lidforss was able to tell him about the Zum schwarzen Ferkel circle of the 1890s in Berlin that he had frequented along with August Strindberg and Edvard Munch among others. GAN's friends in Lund also included the art historian Gregor Paulsson and the medical student Knut Ljunggren, both related to the parson's daughter Nelly Roslund from Landskrona, who in November 1912 married Herwarth Walden in Berlin and became known as Nell Walden. In 1910 Herwarth Walden had founded the artistically radical journal *Der Sturm*, and two years later he opened a gallery with the same name. *Der Sturm* quickly became one of Europe's leading avant-garde galleries, with exhibitions by the group *Der blaue Reiter*, Kokoschka, Chagall, Italian futurism and French cubism.

At the beginning of 1913 GAN arrived in Berlin by train. On 13 February the Swedish legation in Berlin issued a certificate of his Swedish citizenship in which he is described as *Schriftsteller* (author). Through his friends in Lund GAN had a dual introduction to Herwarth Walden, who received him at the beginning of spring at his regular haunt, Café Josty on Potsdamer Platz. The Walden couple had been travelling during March-April 1913, and in May-June they moved to *Der Sturm*'s new premises at Potsdamer Strasse 134 A. The first exhibitor in the new gallery was Gino Severini, who had already been on the Italian futurist group's scandalous tour during the spring of 1912 to a number of cities, including Paris and Berlin, where they exhibited at *Der Sturm*.

His encounter with city life in Berlin and the avant-garde art at *Der Sturm* was a turning-point in GAN's life. In the *Sturm-Archiv* in the Berlin City Library there is a large collection of letters and postcards from GAN to Herwarth Walden from the years 1913-1922. In his first letter, dated 10th October 1913 and written in Swedish (all the subsequent letters are in German), GAN thanks Walden in humble terms for the *Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon*, which was shown

during the autumn of 1913 in temporarily rented premises at Potsdamer Strasse 75: “Never before in my life [...] have I experienced the sense of being in contact with the pulse of life itself. The hours which I spent up there gave me my courage back. And let it be to your unassailable credit that you have opened the doors to this radiantly fresh world of beauty, which in its midst conceals the very pulse of life”.⁰

Prior to the outbreak of the First World War, *Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon* (the First German Autumn Salon) was the most important expression of modernism. According to the exhibition catalogue, 85 artists from 12 different countries contributed with a total of 366 works. GAN was able, at that exhibition, simultaneously to study the *Blaue Reiter* group’s intensely coloured expressionism, Italian futurism’s emotive tributes to the city and modern technology, French cubism’s formative paintings, and orphism with its rainbow colours. The exhibitors included artists like Archipenko, Arp, Balla, Boccioni, Carrà, Chagall, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Max Ernst, Feininger, Gleizes, Jawlensky, Kandinsky, Klee, Kozlovskaya, Léger, Macke, Franz Marc, Metzinger, Mondrian, Münter, Picabia, Russolo, Severini and Wexler. Concurrently, an “anti-exhibition” was held at the art dealer Paul Cassirer’s gallery on the Kurfürstendamm with several of the names that were missing in the *Herbstsalon*, including Munch, Picasso and the *Die Brücke* group. The autumn of 1913 in Berlin therefore offered a unique opportunity for an overview of new modernist painting in Europe.

Herwarth Walden bridged the gap between the Italian futurists’ cult of the city and technology and the unworldly spirituality of Kandinsky and Franz Marc by paralleling the concepts of “expressionism”, “futurism” and “cubism”, while at the same time making “expressionism” the inclusive concept. This seems something of a logical contradiction, but for Walden expressionism was far more than a style; it was a new spiritual and intellectual movement with ramifications for visual art, literature, theatre and music. According to Walden, expressionism was “eine Kunstwende” – a turning-point in art. In the preface to the *Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon* he wrote: “Art means to present, not to represent [...] The painter paints what he sees with his innermost mind’s eye [...] every impression from the outside for him becomes an expression from the inside” (Walden 1913: 6).

Walden's idealistic view of art and his polemical skills appealed to GAN, who was himself fond of writing polemical articles. The aggressive tone was also much in evidence in the futurist Manifesto, which GAN had read in the catalogue of the futurist exhibition at Der Sturm in 1912. When he came home to Lund after his time in Germany in 1913-1914, he published two articles under the heading "On new art" in the socialist newspaper *Arbetet* (Labour). "Our age is the era of speed, motion, flaming action", GAN wrote in a typically futurist tone. In both articles he perceived the emergence of a new type of artist who differed radically from the romantic bohemian artist:

They wore no slouch hats or billowing coats and their mouths were not constantly full of colour adjectives [...] This was the new type, a product of the modern age with his heart rooted in it. For him the beauty of decadence, the richness of sentiment, do not exist. He loves power and light – the rapid motion of life around him. He loves the flight of the aeroplane when it rises above the ground and slices through the sunbeams – he loves the singing automobile that flashes forth over the shiny asphalt, and the flying, invisible words of the wireless telegraph pole. He loves the beauty of the mighty bridges, bridges of steel and human genius, the threateningly elevated giant cranes that bear loads heavy as mountains, the electric floodlights that suddenly turn night into dazzling day (Adrian-Nielsson 1914).

The two articles in *Arbetet* were GAN's modernist manifesto. The formerly elegiac symbolist had turned into a technology-worshipping futurist. It may seem like a giant step from the futurist rhetoric in GAN's articles to Kandinsky's spiritual artistic philosophy. But in fact it was Kandinsky's ideas that were to be most important to GAN. In the articles he referred several times to Kandinsky and his "spiritual, artistic book" *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (On the Spiritual in Art). GAN built a bridge between the futurists and Kandinsky by describing the symbols of industrial and urban civilisation as products of "human spiritual greatness". The innovations of art and technology were both spiritually based, according to GAN.

One of the largest paintings at the *Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon*

was Kandinsky's "deluge vision" *Composition 6*, which made a strong impression on GAN, although in his painting he did not adopt Kandinsky's free, abstract forms. Franz Marc's large painting *Tierschicksale* (Animal Fates) also made a strong impression. In the painting *Indians on the Warpath* (1916), depicting Indians on horseback, GAN created a synthesis of visual impressions from the futurists and Marc and his own fascination with his re-reading of Fenimore Cooper's Indian books. The July issue of *Der Sturm* in 1916 published an emotive defence by GAN of Franz Marc, who had fallen at Verdun the same year. GAN's article addressed a very negative critique of Marc in an occasional Swedish publication called *Nya konstgalleriet* (The New Art Gallery). The review had been written by a certain Felix Bryk and was about an exhibition Marc had shown in Stockholm the preceding autumn. GAN wrote:

The boldness of Mr. Bryk is such that he demands that we Swedes should unhesitatingly accept his false gold as the genuine article. We hear the jingle – we see the glitter. You, Franz Marc, this jingling cannot reach. You live among the stars. Which guide us. You gave the animals human – nay, *divine* – life upon earth. You gave them your voice, radiant with inwardness, wild with power. *Their* cry reaches the stars. (Gösta Adrian-Nielsson 1916).

During his stay in Stockholm in the winter of 1915-1916 Kandinsky exhibited at Gummesson's gallery, where his friend Franz Marc had exhibited a few months earlier. For the exhibition GAN wrote an article that was printed as a separate appendix to the catalogue. One of the things he said was:

In principle – in Kandinsky's words – there is no question of form. The form that is true, that is artistic, springs from an inner compulsion, an inner striving to make the bridge between feeling and expression as short as possible. It may then be called Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Passéism – or whatever name you like [...] A beautiful picture is the one that in itself, in the greatest perfection, unites the two elements – the internal abstract, the external material. Where these two elements fully harmonize – there is beauty. (Adrian-Nielsson 1916)



GAN, who never met Kandinsky in person, received a letter of thanks from the admired master with a small etching. "A living, radiant flower of beauty! Suddenly life flows over me. I am no longer alone," GAN noted with delight in his diary of 11 March 1916.¹

At first the impressions from the *Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon* can be traced in GAN's drawings of athletes and sailors in a futurist-cubist style and in the expressionist painting *The Electrician*, probably painted during GAN's Christmas visit to Lund in 1913. The indigent GAN had his hands full supporting himself during his time in Berlin in 1913-1914, and the documented works from this important period are few in number. However, his time in Germany was to end happily when he was employed as an artistic manager ("künstlerische Erklärer") for the architect Bruno Taut's *Glashaus* (Glass House) at the *Deutscher Werkbund's* exhibition in Cologne in the summer of 1914. In the lower apartment of the glass house there was a giant motorised kaleidoscope with the brand name 'Liesegang', which projected images on a frosted-glass disc. GAN became fascinated with these facet-broken images in unceasing motion, a film-like synthesis of futurism and cubism.

The great exhibition in Cologne was closed down abruptly as a result of the outbreak of war and the mobilisation of Germany at the beginning of August 1914. GAN did not return to Berlin as planned, but returned home via Hamburg.

Safely back in Lund, GAN rented a room on Idrottsgatan, right next to the sports grounds from which the street takes its name, and where he was able to study athletic young men engaging in sporting activities. His studies produced results in the form of futurist

Gösta Adrian-Nilsson (GAN), *Katarinahissen II* (The Katarina Lift II), oil on canvas, 1915, 82.5×51 cm. Private collection. Photo: Stockholms Auktionsverk. *Katarinahissen II* is one of GAN's first modernist sailor paintings. The Katarina Lift at Slussen in Stockholm was a popular symbol of modernity in the 1910s, and GAN painted two versions of it even before he moved from Lund to Stockholm in 1916, where he did a third version. Above the black iron of the Katarina Lift, is a group of sailors in a futuristic pattern of movement and another symbol of modernity: a yellow zeppelin against the dark blue night sky.

paintings of high-jumpers, footballers and shot-putters. In April-May 1915, at the invitation of Walden, he participated in the exhibition *Schwedische Expressionisten* (Swedish Expressionists) at *Der Sturm*. The other four exhibitors, Isaac Grünewald, Sigrid Hjertén, Edward Hald and Einar Jolin, were all from Stockholm and had been pupils of Matisse in Paris. The couple Grünewald and Hjertén had the largest number of works, twelve items each, while the other three exhibitors had to be content with half that number. GAN exhibited four paintings and two drawings. One of these paintings tellingly had the title *Kaleidoscope*, while another was called *Train*. The critic M(ax) O(sborn) ended his review in *Vossische Zeitung* with the following acerbic comment regarding GAN: “With Gösta Adrian-Nilsson it is once more the cubist system with its doctrinaire tiresomeness that keeps an undoubtedly powerful painterly talent in chains. In this way nothing but a new ‘Academicism’ appears instead of what one longs for: an art of individual expression” (O(sborn) M(ax) 1915). The reviewer’s negative attitude to cubism prevented him from seeing that GAN’s futurist and expressionist cubism was distinctively his own, and that GAN’s painting differed greatly from the Matisse-inspired style of the other, French-trained, participants.

Presumably it was Walden’s terminology, in which the concept of “expressionism” is equated with both “futurism” and “cubism” and at the same time is an inclusive term for both, that enabled GAN in the autumn of 1915 to present his new modernist painting in Lund under the heading “Expressionist exhibition”. His fellow exhibitor was the former Matisse pupil Einar Jolin. In many of the titles, GAN’s 49-piece exhibition already demonstrated his new futurist orientation: *Footballers in Motion*, *Shot-Putter*, *Javelin Thrower*, *Railway Crossing*, *The Blue Engine*, *Express Train*, *Electric Car*, *Telephone Box*, etc. The Katarina Lift in Stockholm, with its iron construction, was at that time a symbol of modernity, and GAN completed two paintings entitled *The Katarina Lift*. The sailors who were to become his most popular motifs over the next few years had also made their entry into his paintings with titles like *The White and the Blue Sailor* and *Sailors in Motion*. In paintings like *The Katarina Lift* and *Torpedo Boat*, *Sailors*. *Harbour* his interest in the sailors is combined with symbols of modernity.²

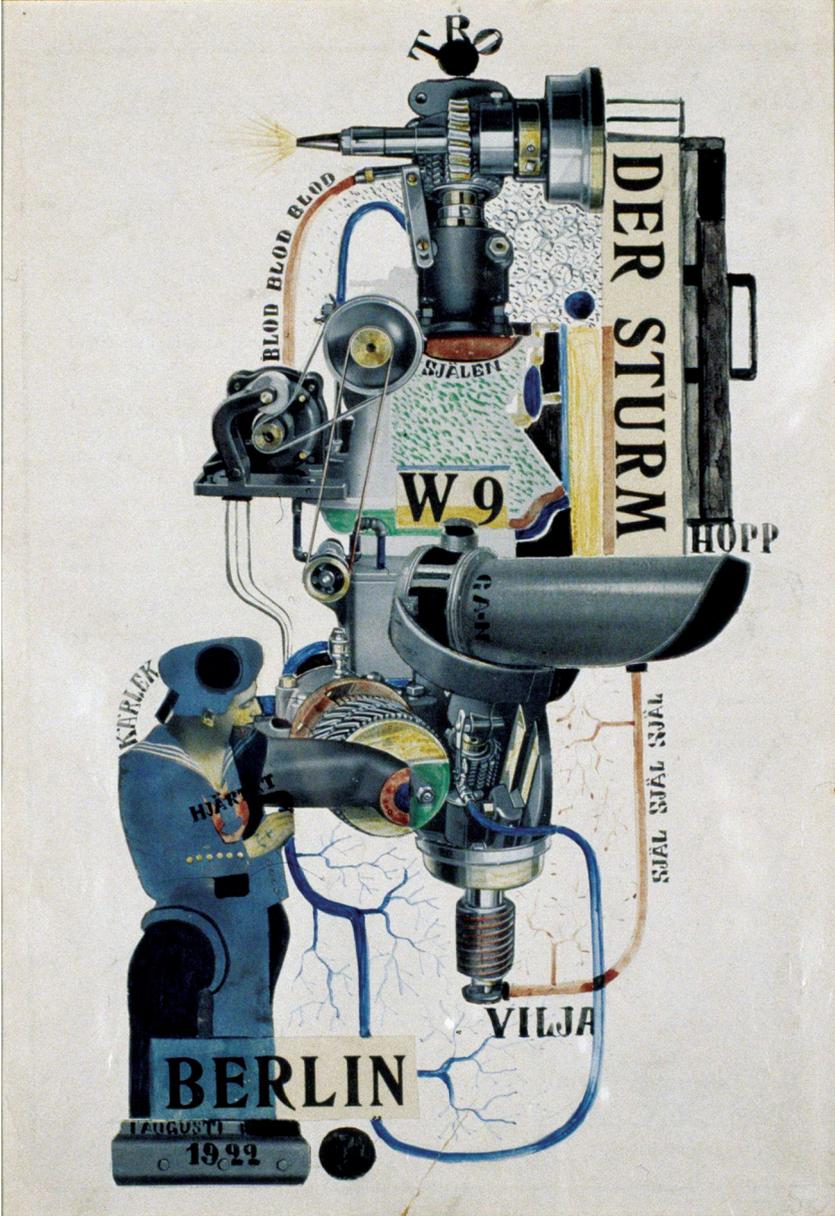
The idea for GAN’s express train pictures came from a black-and-

white postcard of the futurist Luigi Russolo's painting *Train at Full Speed* of a train rushing through a landscape, casting off cascades of light. GAN had not seen the painting itself, but the little postcard inspired him to create some expressionist and futurist paintings of trains rushing through the night, paintings that differ significantly from Russolo's *Train*. The Florentine futurist Ardengo Soffici's *Painterly Synthesis of the City of Prato*, which GAN had seen at the *Herbstsalon* in Berlin, gave GAN the actual idea for the well-known painting *Synthesis of a City* (1915), which can be seen as a futurist-cubist 'portrait' of Lund with the cathedral at the centre and other recognisable fragments of his home city.³

Despite the ongoing war, 1917 was an important year for GAN in his continued contacts with *Der Sturm*. On 4 July of that year, Herwarth Walden visited him in his studio apartment in Stockholm (where GAN had moved the preceding year), just when GAN was represented for the first time at *Der Sturm*'s *Gesamtschau* in Berlin. The August issue of *Der Sturm* that year contained a reproduction of a drawing by GAN, with a cubistically fragmented city motif with a gasometer; in the same issue he had the pleasure of seeing his name among the artists *Der Sturm* represented in Germany. His success was crowned in December 1917 when he contributed eleven items to an exhibition at *Der Sturm*, alongside Paul Klee and Gabriele Münter. A reviewer in *Berliner Börsen-Courier* wrote aptly about GAN:

Fewer works have been exhibited by Gösta Adrian-Nilsson. His colours are lively, and he sees the world so to speak in rotation. In front of his water-colours, most of which have something to do with sailors, my thoughts turn easily to helms, limbs, streamers, harbour equipment; everything in some way becomes a spoke in the wheel of his conception of the picture.⁴

It was to be 1922 before GAN saw Berlin again. In June 1920 he had moved to Paris and got to know Fernand Léger, the French cubist he most appreciated. But Herwarth Walden had not forgotten his friend from Lund. GAN was invited to hold a solo exhibition at *Der Sturm* in July-August 1922, and as a result he passed through Berlin in June 1922 on his way from Paris to Lund. In Berlin he stayed for a few days to prepare his exhibition and attend a meeting at *Der Sturm*, where he saw an exhibition of Kurt Schwitters' collages that



filled him with enthusiasm (GAN had by then himself made a series of dadaist collages in Paris, inspired by Max Ernst). During his short stay in Berlin, GAN might have met Viking Eggeling, who was also a native of Lund. But GAN did not know his four-year-older fellow countryman, who had already moved abroad in 1897, and neither, at that time, did GAN know of Eggeling's sophisticated visual experiments with scroll drawings and film. For his part, Eggeling does not seem to have had any close contacts with Herwarth Walden and *Der Sturm*, the circle in Berlin in which GAN had moved, and it is uncertain whether he knew of GAN. When GAN visited Berlin for the last time, in November 1930, Eggeling had been dead for more than five years, and the glory days of *Der Sturm* had long since passed. Herwarth Walden himself was in Moscow, to where he emigrated in 1932, the same year that *Der Sturm* definitively ceased to exist.⁵

Nell Walden (1887-1975) began studying painting during the First World War at the *Der Sturm* art school. Inspired by Kandinsky, she made stained-glass works and a number of non-figurative paintings in a quite amateurish style. Herwarth Walden naturally wished to promote his wife, who meant a great deal for the survival of *Der Sturm* during the war years, and in 1917 Nell Walden made her debut at *Der Sturm* in an exhibition with Arnold Topp. She appeared for several successive years at exhibitions in the gallery. It has sometimes

Gösta Adrian-Nilsson (GAN), *Der Sturm*, collage, watercolour, ink on paper, 1922, 27×18.5 cm. Private collection. Photo: Kent Belenius. Inspired by an exhibition by Max Ernst in May 1921, GAN worked intensively on his collages in Paris. They are more dadaist than cubist and anticipate surrealism. As part of his solo exhibition at *Der Sturm* in Berlin in August 1922, GAN made the collage *Der Sturm*, in which he combines machine shapes with organic forms, including a sailor. The words BLOD (blood) and SJÄL (soul) are repeated rhythmically, the words VILJA (will) and TRO (faith) are at the bottom and top, and significantly the words HJÄRTAT (the heart), HOPP (hope), KÄRLEK (love) appear next to the sailor.

been said that both Hilma af Klint and Nell Walden, separately and with no knowledge of each other, made non-figurative paintings before GAN, who was the first Swedish artist to paint entirely abstract pictures. (At the same time Viking Eggeling was making entirely abstract drawings in Zürich and Berlin – see below). But both Hilma af Klint's and Nell Walden's non-figurative paintings were unknown in Sweden at this time, and played no role at all in Swedish modernism, while in 1919 GAN became the first Swedish artist to exhibit non-figurative paintings in Sweden. Nell Walden's foremost contribution to the history of art therefore lies in her activity as a close collaborator with Herwarth Walden in the years 1912-24 and in the books she published after World War II about Walden and *Der Sturm* (Walden and Schreyer 1954 and Walden 1963).

Viking Eggeling (1880-1925) was born in 1880 in Lund, where he grew up in a very musical family. His father was a German immigrant, a music and song teacher, who opened a music shop on Stortorget in Lund in 1881. Following the death of both his parents, by 1897, Eggeling, just under 17 years old, emigrated to Germany, where he studied commerce in Flensburg. He later lived a peripatetic life in Germany, Italy and Switzerland, earning his living as a bookkeeper and later as a drawing teacher and skating instructor. While living and working in Milan, around 1901-1907, he attended evening courses in art and art history at the Brera Academy and began painting. Around 1911 he moved to Paris, where he got to know Modigliani, Hans Arp and the Swedish artist John Sten, who at that time was strongly influenced by cubism. During the war years 1915-1919, Eggeling lived in Ascona in Switzerland, where he began working on his musically-inspired non-figurative drawings. Through Arp and Tristan Tzara, he came into contact with Zürich Dada and participated in the group's activities during its final year, 1918-19. It was Tzara who, in Zürich in 1918, introduced Eggeling to Hans Richter, who was to play such a fateful role in Eggeling's life. In a memoir 46 years later, Richter wrote:

Eggeling showed me a drawing. It was as if someone had consulted the Sibylline books for me. I 'understood' on the spot what it was all about. Here was a higher order, comparable to counterpoint in music, indeed the full perfection of a kind of bound freedom or



Viking Eggeling, still from *Symphonie Diagonale*, completed in Berlin 1924. The film was screened for an invited audience in Berlin twice in November 1924 and in the same month for an invited circle in Paris. On 3 May 1925 Eggeling's pioneering work was shown publicly for the first time in the UFA Palast on Kurfürstendamm, where the screening was repeated one week later. On the opening night Eggeling was admitted to a hospital in Berlin, where he died on 19 May 1925.

freest discipline, an order in which one could give the random a comprehensible meaning. This was exactly what I was prepared for. While for the surface I could only demonstrate a small number of binary opposites, he offered inexhaustibly many in the area of the line. Whether art or anti-art, here lay a path for me that enabled insights into the domain of intellectual as much as spiritual expression, the attainment of that balance ‘between Heaven and Hell’. (Richter 1964: 63)

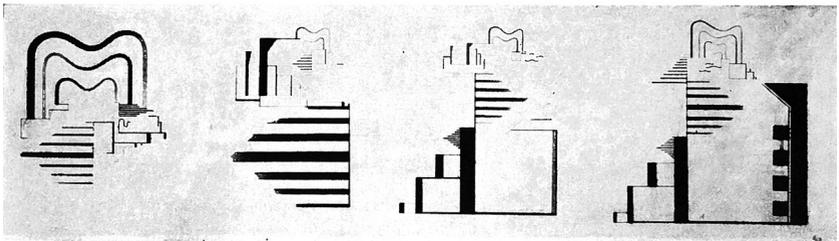
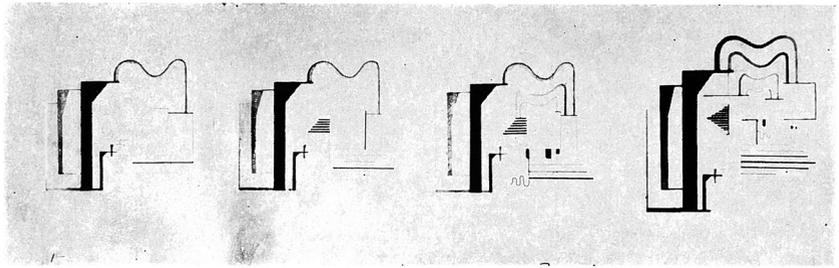
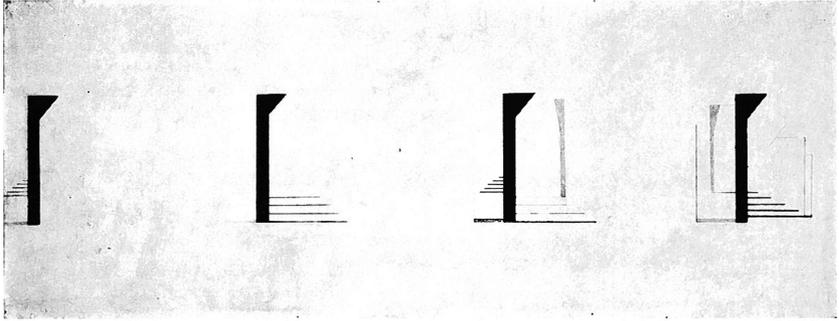
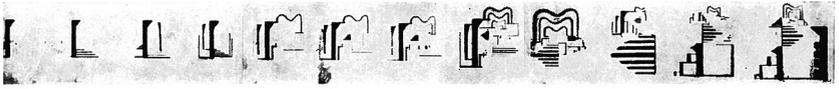
Eggeling, who was at this time deeply involved in creating a musical-abstract visual language, gave Richter a pencil drawing themed *Horizontal-Vertical Orchestra*, with horizontal and vertical lines in contrapuntal interplay. The dadaist Marcel Janco wrote many years later, in a long letter to Eggeling’s biographer Louise O’Konor, that Eggeling had met the composer Ferruccio Busoni in Zürich and discussed with him “the laws and the parallelism that can be traced between musical composition and plastic art”. According to Janco, Eggeling devoted himself to creating a new basis for “a plastic counterpoint”, and it was probably already at this time that the dimension of time entered his conceptual world (O’Konor 1971: 39).

Eggeling had been artistically isolated in Ascona. In Zürich he made the acquaintance of an international circle of young and rebellious artists and writers who questioned everything and wanted to create something entirely new. Eggeling’s ambitions certainly transcended those of the dadaists, but he was able to experience the stimulus of entering into an avant-garde circle of comrades where his ideas aroused interest. He participated in Zürich Dada’s eighth soirée in April 1919 with a lecture on “elementary figuration and abstract art” and published two lithographs, *Basse générale de la peinture* (The basso continuo of painting) and *Orchestration de la ligne* (Orchestration of the line) in the periodical *Dada* no. 4/5. A drawing by Eggeling, a study for *Diagonal Symphony*, was reproduced in *Dada*’s last publication in Zürich, *Der Zeltweg* (1919), Eggeling was also one of the founders of the association *Radikale Künstler* (Radical Artists) in Zürich, and according to Janco it was he who wrote its manifesto, which was published in *Neue Züricher Zeitung* in April 1919 with Arp, Eggeling, Janco, Richter and others among the signatories. The artists in the new group had tired of dada’s nihilism and wanted art to have a social function: “The

spirituality of an abstract art means the immense expansion of the human sense of freedom. Our ideal is brotherly art: a new common mission for mankind” (Ibidem).

In the early summer of 1919 Eggeling and Hans Richter moved to Berlin. In the autumn of the same year both friends continued to Klein-Kölzig, a small town near Cottbus, about 140 km south east of Berlin. There Richter’s parents had an estate to which Eggeling and his wife were invited. The idea was that Eggeling and Richter, undisturbed by material worries, would be able to work together on their pictorial ideas. The collaboration lasted just under two years, 1919-21, but ended in a schism that led to Eggeling leaving and moving back to Berlin. During these two years Eggeling continued to work on his scroll drawings and his ideas on the orchestration of the line and on a visual counterpoint. The aim was to use purely abstract forms to create a new ‘language’ of a universal nature, a kind of musical ideogram. The work on the scroll drawings involved an extension in space, while music involved an extension in time. The ambition to combine the two art forms inevitably led to film, which involved space and time united in a synthesis, in an integrated space-time dimension. Among the people in Berlin to whom Eggeling and Richter turned for support for their ideas was the physicist Albert Einstein, the creator of the theory of relativity. For help with the film techniques that neither of them mastered, they turned to Universum Film AG (UFA) in Berlin and were allowed to borrow an effects studio with access to a film technician. But the difficulties of translating the theoretical pictorial ideas into practical, concrete film turned out to be unexpectedly great.

“We were at the time convinced that we were entering a completely new field, where support for anything comparable could only be found in musical counterpoint,” Richter wrote much later in his dada anthology (Richter 1964: 65). In 1920-21 Eggeling’s and Richter’s ideas began to be noticed more and more in avant-garde circles. In May 1921, Theo van Doesburg, who had visited them in Klein-Kölzig, published an article with the heading “Abstracte Filmbeelding” (Abstract film composition) in his periodical *De Stijl*, and in the same month Ludwig Hilbersheimer published the article “Bewegungskunst” (Art of motion) in the journal *Sozialistische Monatshefte* (Socialist Monthly) in Berlin. Then at the end of the same year the art historian Adolf Behne contributed an article to



Viking Eggeling, *Horizontal-vertical Orchestra I*. Copy from Eggeling's original. Pencil and black wax crayon, 51.5×465 cm. Eggeling's first animated film has never been found, and it is not known whether he completed it.

the same periodical showing that Eggeling had by that time made some progress with his first abstract film.

But the most important of these first articles on Eggeling's film experiments was his own manifesto in the Hungarian avant-garde periodical *MA (Today)* in August 1921, illustrated by four drawings from Eggeling's first scroll drawing *Horizontal-Vertical Orchestra I*. Around the same time an identical article was published in German in *De Stijl* authored by Hans Richter, but with a small historical appendix. Louise O'Konor believes that Eggeling was the author of both the Hungarian and the German version and that he had himself written the article in German. According to O'Konor, Richter's contribution was restricted to the supplement in the *De Stijl* article. This has the heading "Prinzipielles zur Bewegungskunst" (Principles of the art of motion). Eggeling (Richter) writes:

Declaration. The drawings reproduced represent the major elements of processes conceived of as in motion. The works will achieve their realization in film. The process itself: formative evolutions and revolutions in the sphere of the purely artistic (abstract form); rather analogous to the events in music familiar to our ears [...]

Basso continuo. The "language" (language of form), which is "spoken" is based on an "alphabet", which has arisen from an elementary principle of perception: polarity. Polarity as a general principle of life = composition method for any formal utterance. Proportion, rhythm, quantity, intensity, pitch, timbre, measure, etc.⁶

The quotation is enough to demonstrate the far-reaching ambitions Eggeling associated with his abstract formal language: to create a new universal pictorial language for a new age. There can be little doubt that Eggeling, with his decidedly theoretical mentality and his innovative, sophisticated formal language, was the pace-setter in the collaboration with Richter. This was how their relationship was perceived by contemporary critics, and Richter later confirmed this himself in an article in his periodical *G*: "... major elements, for knowledge of which I am indebted to Viking Eggeling, *on whose basic research my work is dependent* [my italics] ...".⁷

At the end of 1921, after the break with Richter, Eggeling moved back to Berlin, where for his remaining years he had a primitive

studio on Wormser Strasse near the Wittenberg Platz. He continued his work on the film *Horizontal-Vertical Orchestra* with his scroll drawings as a synopsis. There, in the spring of 1922, he was visited by a young Swedish art student and journalist, Birger Brinck-E:son, who was the first to present Eggeling's film experiments to the Swedish public. The article "Line music on the white screen" was published in *Filmjournalen* in January 1923. Brinck-E:son had seen a film in progress and noted that for just these ten minutes of animated film more than 2000 drawings were needed. He did not mention the name of the film, but it was undoubtedly *Horizontal-Vertical Orchestra*, since the article is illustrated by drawings from this scroll. In the spring of 1922 Eggeling participated in the *November Group's* exhibition in Berlin, and it is likely that Brinck-E:son got to see the legendary film *Horizontal-Vertical Orchestra* in connection with this exhibition.

Eggeling was a member of the radical artists' association called the *November Group* and participated in its exhibitions. He became a well-known name among the constructivist avant-garde in Berlin and associated with several of the leading artists. Hilbersheimer's article "Bewegungskunst" was published in May 1922 in Russian in a revised form in El Lissitzky's and Ilya Ehrenburg's periodical *Gegenstand. Objet. Vesch.* In this he also reviewed the above-mentioned *November Group* exhibition and described Eggeling's picture scroll *Horizontal-Vertical Orchestra I*, which he called a "film composition". In the autumn of 1922 Galerie van Diemen in Berlin showed the first major exhibition outside Soviet Russia of Russian constructivism, organised by El Lissitzky. In the spring of 1923 Eggeling attended the constructivist Congress in Berlin. The same year, with Raoul Hausmann, he published a manifesto, "Zweite präsentistische Deklaration" (Second Presentist Declaration), in the periodical *MA*, where both artists turned against the utilitarian and politicising aspect of Soviet constructivism (O'Konor 1971: 77).

No-one knows whether or not Eggeling completed his first film, *Horizontal-Vertical Orchestra*. It has disappeared without a trace, and remains a mystery in art and film history. In the summer of 1923 Eggeling, along with his assistant and lover Erna Niemeyer, began work on transforming the picture scrolls with the theme *Diagonal Symphony* into a new film. Niemeyer, who had been a pupil at the Bauhaus in Weimar, stayed with Eggeling until January 1925, when

the couple broke up. As was the case in the first film, the title indicates that this was once more a film inspired by music. For several years Eggeling had undertaken parallel work on the orchestration of the line and on counterpoint; the former was focused on a structure of mainly horizontal and vertical elements, the latter on diagonal forms. Before the collaboration with Niemeyer was broken off, he showed the new film twice, the first time on 4 November 1924 at Verband Deutscher Ingenieuren on the Pariser Platz, the second time the following day to an invited circle of friends and colleagues including Erich Buchholz, El Lissitzky, László Moholy-Nagy, Arthur Segal and Adolf Behne, who commented on Eggeling's new opus for the auditorium. The critic Paul F. Schmidt reviewed the film in *Das Kunstblatt*, and the critic B.G. Kawan included the following in an insightful review in *Film-Kurier*:

[...] the great merit of *Viking Eggeling* is the priority of literal motion in the formation of kinetic artworks. In the first place, in the film he achieves the dynamic as a real (not only illusionistic) element of visual art. In film Eggeling has discovered a new domain of visual art [...] He explores such fundamental regularities as the *basso continuo of art*, which are valid for all art forms, and as the absolutely primary principle has also discovered the art of polarity. Polarity unites in itself opposition *and* analogy.⁸

After these closed screenings of *Diagonal Symphony*, Eggeling presumably continued working on his film. He also paid a short visit to Paris to meet Fernand Léger, probably in connection with the premiere screening in the middle of November 1924 of Léger's and Dudley Murphy's film *Ballet mécanique*. On 21 April 1925 *Diagonal Symphony* was certified under the French title *Symphonie diagonale* by the German film censors. It was stated to have a length of 149 metres, which at a projection speed of 18 frames a second corresponds to exactly 7 minutes and 10 seconds.⁹ On 3 and 10 May it was shown for the first time in public at UFA Palast on the Kurfürstendamm. It formed part of a programme of seven avant-garde films under the heading *Der absolute Film* (Absolute Film), which had been organised by the *November Group* in collaboration with UFA. Tragically, Eggeling himself could not be present at the premiere showing of *Diagonal Symphony*. On 19 May 1925 he died,

44 years old, of an infectious disease in a hospital in Berlin. His health had been undermined by years of sacrifice in the attempt to realise his great idea of a synthesis of image and music with film as the medium. In a few succinct words Moholy-Nagy summed up Eggeling's significance for the history of art: "He was one of the clearest thinkers and creators among the young artists of today. His importance will be trumpeted in a few years by the somnambulistic historians" (O'Konor, 1971: 56, Moholy-Nagy 1925: 16).

Diagonal Symphony was made with a series of one-image shots on a rostrum camera for making animated films. Each frame was exposed separately. It was incredibly laborious work. As originals Eggeling used his drawings in black on white, which were manipulated in various ways to produce the desired effects of motion. In the film print the effect was reversed: the geometrical figures appear in white against black. Louise O'Konor writes in her analysis of the film: "In *Diagonal Symphony* movement meets with counter-movement. Through the conflict in this dialectical method of composition new forms and new movements are generated, elements which together form a unity. Expressed thematically: thesis, antithesis, synthesis" (O'Konor 1971: 133). In order to describe the film she divides it into 40 parts, but with no hypothesis about the overarching structure. O'Konor analyses *Diagonal Symphony* first and foremost from a theoretical perspective with particular reference, besides Eggeling himself, to Henri Bergson's *L'évolution créatrice*, Kandinsky's *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* and Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, to which Eggeling referred in his posthumous papers. O'Konor published these in her doctoral dissertation (1971) and later in Swedish translation in the book *Viking Eggeling. Modernist och filmpionjär* (Modernist and Pioneer) (2006). Among Eggeling's papers was a text with the heading "Film", which is almost entirely based on quotations from a German translation of Bergson's book. Central to Bergson's philosophy are the concepts of *durée* (duration) and *simultanéité* (simultaneity), and O'Konor shows that Eggeling had been influenced by Bergson's thinking: "In *Diagonal Symphony* the forms are generated when past and present interpenetrate and form a flow of the now, a synthesis. Motion and continuity are made visible. Bergson calls this 'la durée', the duration of the now, the flow of now" (O'Konor 2006: 71). Certain of Eggeling's aphoristic quotations from Bergson seem

directly applicable to his film, for example: “*Growth and decay* succeed one another endlessly. The realization of higher planes is achieved through the renunciation of part of one’s nature along the way”. And: “Form is only a snapshot of an ongoing transformation” (O’Konor 1971: 94; O’Konor 2006: 93).

In the book *Viking Eggeling Diagonalsymfonin: Spjutspets i återvändsgränd* (V. E. Diagonal Symphony: Spearhead in Cul de Sac) (1997) the film scholar Gösta Werner and the music scholar Bengt Edlund presented a new interpretation of *Diagonal Symphony*: the film has the structure of *a sonata*. That the film has a strong connection to music is evident from the title alone, and several writers had previously referred to the film as music. But none of these had proposed a coherent interpretation of the structure of the film, and Eggeling himself left no such guidelines. After very detailed studies of *Diagonal Symphony*, frame by frame, with its nine different sign shapes and their repeated variations, Edlund concludes in his section of the book:

The investigation of the film’s formal disposition on the large scale as well as its detailed structure shows that the course of *Diagonal Symphony* is very consciously formed. The flow of images has the imprint of a creative intelligence that is visual as much as musical, while at the same time the totality [...] appears as ordered and closed. It seems obvious that Eggeling had an ingeniously developed sonata form as the pattern for his film.
(Werner and Edlund 1997: 91)

Gösta Werner, who gives an account in the book of the genesis of *Diagonal Symphony* and of the restoration under his guidance of the copy in the Swedish Film Institute’s Cinemathèque, goes a step further and presents the hypothesis that *Diagonal Symphony* is in fact the first movement of a “film symphony” conceived by Eggeling in four parts, four movements as in a symphony, but that because of his untimely death Eggeling was never able to complete more than the first movement with its sonata structure:

The thought has been proposed that *Diagonal Symphony* is only a fragment and that Eggeling intended it as the first movement of a longer film which would then have more palpably justified the

designation 'symphony'. It is just seven minutes long – the normal duration of the first movement of a classical symphony is between five and ten minutes. It has an ingeniously developed imaginative sonata form with a wealth of imitative work. Diagonals and sharp angles play a visually dominant role and contrast with softer visual motifs.¹⁰

If it is true, as Edlund concludes, that the *Diagonal Symphony* has the structure of a sonata, then this interpretation by no means precludes the possibility that the theoretically-minded Eggeling also had other ideas of a more philosophical nature underlying his work. That Henri Bergson's ideas, for example, played an important role for him is clear, as Louise O'Konor has shown. Viking Eggeling was a visual artist, a connoisseur of music and a theoretician. In the pioneering work *Diagonal Symphony* his various ambitions are combined in an optical-musical totality.

Axel Olson (1899-1986) came from Halmstad to Berlin in November 1922 to study at Alexander Archipenko's independent school of painting. The patron of his studies in Berlin was Doctor Detlef Oelrich in Halmstad, married to Viking Eggeling's sister Sara. (Oelrich also supported his brother-in-law in Berlin financially.) It was therefore no coincidence that Eggeling was one of the first acquaintances Olson made in Berlin. In a letter of 27 November 1922 to his friend Egon Östlund in Halmstad he wrote:

I believe more in Eggeling, though. I have met him a couple of times. He is a truly interesting person, a fully modern artist – a visionary. He works with conviction on his invention – a film renaissance is his dream; on the basis of purely abstract speculations he is trying to work out a musical-cubistic film art – absolutely remote from the naturalistic, which he considers insane and scandalous [...] Derain is the only painter he is interested in. 'I would measure myself only against him,' he says. 'He is a genius'. However that may be, Eggeling has recommended to me two 'painting schools', those of Archipenko and Doesburg, a Dutchman – a good teacher and very well known and highly esteemed in Paris.¹¹

Axel Olson met Eggeling a few times during the seven months he stayed in Berlin, and he drew a couple of small portraits of his

fellow-countryman. In his last letter home to Östlund before returning to Halmstad, Olson, interestingly enough, compared Eggeling to GAN, whom he had got to know through Östlund as early as 1919. Olson was probably the only Swedish artist who knew both GAN and Eggeling. In the letter, which is dated 4 June 1923, he wrote:

Eggeling hardly counts himself one of the Swedes, but in fact he is probably one of the best. Recently I have seen things by him that have made me respect him more and more. He is on the extreme left wing – probably even more radical than GAN – if one can speak of different degrees of extremity in painters. He has introduced painting in a brand new way – i.e. it has ceased to be painting in the old sense. His composition drawings are extraordinarily assured and sensitively done, almost entirely musical and as remote from German equilibrium as the earth is from the sun.¹²

At Archipenko's painting school in the spring of 1923 the pupils included the Dane Franciska Clausen, of whom Axel Olson drew a portrait. The next year she became a pupil of Fernand Léger in Paris, alongside Olson's younger brother Erik and their cousin Waldemar Lorentzon. Despite inflation and disturbed conditions, the time at Archipenko's school was very fruitful for Axel Olson. From Berlin he brought home a series of powerful drawings from life as well as several high quality paintings from life in the spirit of synthetic cubism. In the painting *Grey Figure, Berlin* he painted letters beside the model as part of the composition in cubist fashion. The letters were not randomly chosen: P stands for both Picasso and Paris, to which Olson hoped to continue after Berlin; E and R probably play on Léger, and the letter N on (Adrian-) Nilsson. Olson also attended many exhibitions of contemporary modern art, for example at Der Sturm, and became acquainted with Herwarth Walden, of whom he knew in advance through GAN and Östlund. He also painted cubist still lifes, for example the sophisticated *Composition with Musical Instrument*, where he pasted in paper and sand as part of the rigorously structured composition. Inspired by Berlin dada, Olson also made several paper collages and participated in the *Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung* of 1923, organised by the *November Group*.

Six years later, in August 1929, Axel Olson participated in the formation of the only post-cubist avant-garde group in Sweden, which was given the name the *Halmstad Group* because all six artists lived in or had connections to Halmstad (in the 1930s the group became known as the avant-garde group of surrealism in Sweden).

Bengt O. Österblom (1903-1976) studied in Berlin at about the same time as Axel Olson, but they do not appear to have met. Österblom, who worked as a clerk in Stockholm, was drawn as a young man to GAN's painting and to Léger's stage design for *Skating-Rink*, when the Swedish Ballet visited Stockholm in 1922. In the autumn of the same year he went to Germany, where he saw the big Russian art exhibition in Berlin. In particular Malevich's suprematist painting made a profound impression on the young Österblom. In the spring of 1923 he studied with the German abstract artist Moriz Melzer, a member of the *November Group*, at the Schule Reimann in Berlin. Österblom became a devoted adherent of non-figurative geometrical painting and in Berlin he produced a series of compositions in the spirit of Suprematism. The largest and most important work during this creative period was the 15 m² cartoon *Space-Time in Black Circle*, which was intended as a wall painting but was never executed on any wall, and was later lost (it is preserved as a sketch and in a photo).

Österblom later went on to Paris, where for a short period in 1925-26 he studied with Fernand Léger, but without becoming a Léger disciple in the same way as Otto G. Carlsund, Franciska Clausen or Erik Olson. In Paris he also conducted some sculptural experiments in the spirit of Tatlin. After the Stockholm exhibition in 1930 he abandoned non-figurative painting and by his own account became an "introspective Surrealist" and was active as a writer and critic. In a memoir of 1962 he wrote of his time in Berlin in 1922-23:

I came to Paris (1925) from Berlin (1923), which in the first post-war years with the revolutions in Germany and Russia was a both politically radical and aesthetically ultramodernist centre, more seethingly active than the victorious city of Paris. In Berlin I had experienced Malevich's Suprematism and Kandinsky, the *November Group* and German Constructivism, and I had become a convinced,

fanatical adherent of the new faith in a new world, artistically expressed in a supranational, abstract art style: the abstract, the Einsteinian universe of the open space, aesthetically tangible but non-figurative (*Gegenstandlos*).¹³

In Österblom's belief in a purely abstract, non-figurative style as a new "supranational" art we hear a distant echo of Viking Eggeling's thoughts on non-figurative art as a new universal language. Eggeling was the only one of the five Swedish artists discussed here who played any real role in the avant-garde in Berlin in the years 1920-25. His artistic efforts, it is true, were only an unfinished torso, but thanks to his pioneering activities he has been counted among the salient figures in the international history of modernism, in both visual art and film. Nell Walden lived in Berlin for a much longer time than Eggeling, but as an artist she was insignificant and no innovator. It was above all as a collaborator with Herwarth Walden in the *Der Sturm* movement in 1912-1924 that she made a contribution and was to play a certain role in the history of German modernism. For GAN the stay in Berlin in 1913-14 meant a life-determining transformation, and in time he became part of *Der Sturm* and exhibited in Berlin. But, unlike Eggeling, GAN played hardly any role in the avant-garde in Berlin – in contrast to his influence on Swedish modernism, in which, as a pioneer of futurism and cubism, he is one of the central figures. As for Axel Olson, his study period at Archipenko's painting school in 1923 was important for his artistic development; but any dream he might have had of a further career abroad came to nothing. In Halmstad the young Olson had been a "free pupil" of GAN and as far as we know he was the only Swedish artist who met Eggeling in Berlin. For Bengt Österblom too the encounter with modernism in Berlin in 1922-23 was of great importance. He wholeheartedly embraced the non-figurative ideas, but met neither Eggeling nor Axel Olson. Within the Swedish avant-garde he remained a quite peripheral figure who was only rediscovered after his death in 1976, when his artistic estate was donated to the Norrköping Museum of Art.

NOTES

⁰ Sturm Archive, Staatsbibliothek, Berlin. (Ahlstrand 1985: 43 and 2000: 36).

¹ GAN's diary vol. I, GAN archive, Lund University Library, Lund.

² *Expressionistutställning. Gösta Adrian-Nilsson och Einar Jolin*, Catalogue, Lund University Museum of Art, Lund 1915. The exhibition had its opening on the 16th of October 1915.

³ *Synthesis of a City* was used as a symbol of Lund in the poster for the City of Lund millennium celebrations in 1990 (property of Lund City Council, on permanent loan to the Museum of Cultural History, Lund).

⁴ Review in *Berliner Börsen-Courier* December 1917, GAN archive, Lund University Library. Quoted in Lindgren (1949: 63).

⁵ According to an interview in *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* of 2.11.1930 GAN had planned to settle in Berlin again, but was disappointed and returned home after a week. Instead GAN moved in the beginning of 1931 to Stockholm, where he lived until his death in 1965. See also Ahlstrand 2000: 47-48.

⁶ O'Konor, *op. cit.*, p. 90. The article was published under Richter's name in *De Stijl*, (Leyden 1921: 7 and 109-112).

⁷ O'Konor 1971: 253, n. 49. Quote from article by Richter in *G. Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, Berlin 1924:3.

⁸ O'Konor 1971: 52. Quote from *Film-Kurier* 22.11.1924.

⁹ According to Gösta Werner's information in Gösta Werner and Bengt Edlund: *Viking Eggeling Diagonalsymfonin: Spjutspets i återvändsgränd*, Lund 1997, p. 106. Werner also writes: "Why Eggeling's film, produced in Germany and first screened for a German audience, had a French title, it has never been possible to explain." (p. 51). Could the explanation be that *Diagonal Symphony* was part of the programme for the premiere of *Ballet mécanique* in Paris, and was there given its French title, which Eggeling subsequently kept? According to Louise O'Konor Eggeling paid a brief visit to Paris at the end of 1924 to meet Léger, and in a letter to Tristan Tzara, dated Berlin 10th January 1925, Eggeling wrote: "Etiez-vous à la représentation Léger, Eggeling? Tout le monde s'est renseigné vivement à propos de vous" (Were you at the Léger-Eggeling screening? Everyone has been inquiring actively about you"). The quote undeniably suggests that *Diagonal Symphony/Symphonie diagonale* was part of the screening in question, with Léger and Eggeling present. Eggeling's letter to Tzara is both printed and reproduced in O'Konor 1971: 53-55.

¹⁰ Gösta Werner: "Restaureringen av Diagonalsymfonin", in Werner and Edlund 1997, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

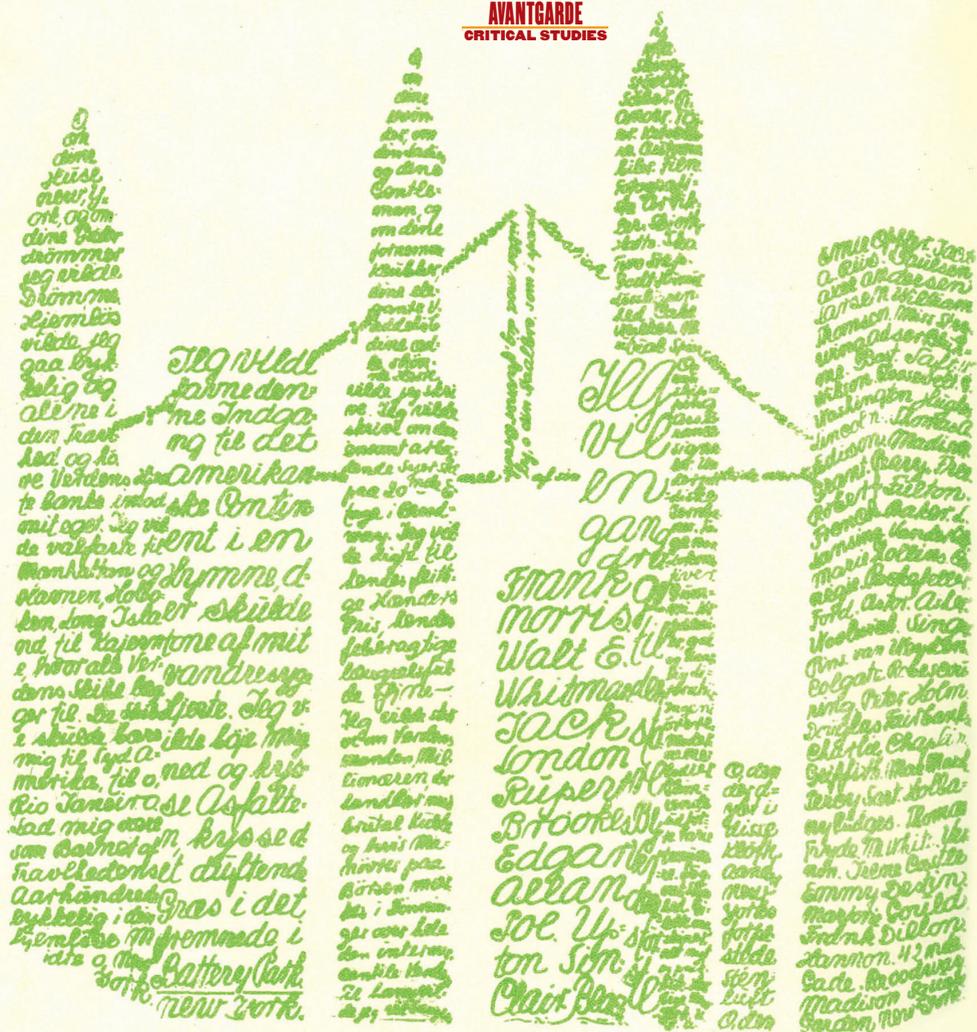
¹¹ Bosson 1984: 44. In the book eight letters from Axel Olson to Egon Östlund from the period November 1922 to June 1923 are quoted. Olson's portrait sketches of Viking Eggeling are reproduced on pp. 45 and 59.

¹² Östlund (1947): 30. The letter is also quoted in Bosson, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

¹³ Bosson 1984: 170. Österblom's letter is dated 5th October 1962. Dokumenteringsarkiv för modern konst, Arkivcentrum Syd, Lund.

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A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE AVANT-GARDE

in the Nordic Countries 1900-1925

Edited by **HUBERT VAN DEN BERG**, **IRMELI HAUTAMÄKI**,
BENEDIKT HJARTARSON, **TORBEN JELSBÄK**, **RIKARD SCHÖNSTRÖM**,
PER STOUNBJERG, **TANIA ØRUM**, **DORTHE AAGESEN**

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