

I SAY 'STONE' OR 'FLOWER' – REFLECTIONS ON A PRACTICE
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When someone asks me what I do, I reply; I am a poet. I cannot recall ever not being a poet. This is my contentment and destiny. However, lately I hear myself adding an appendage. I say; I am a poet, I am word-based.

This text is an attempt, for myself, to understand what I am doing.

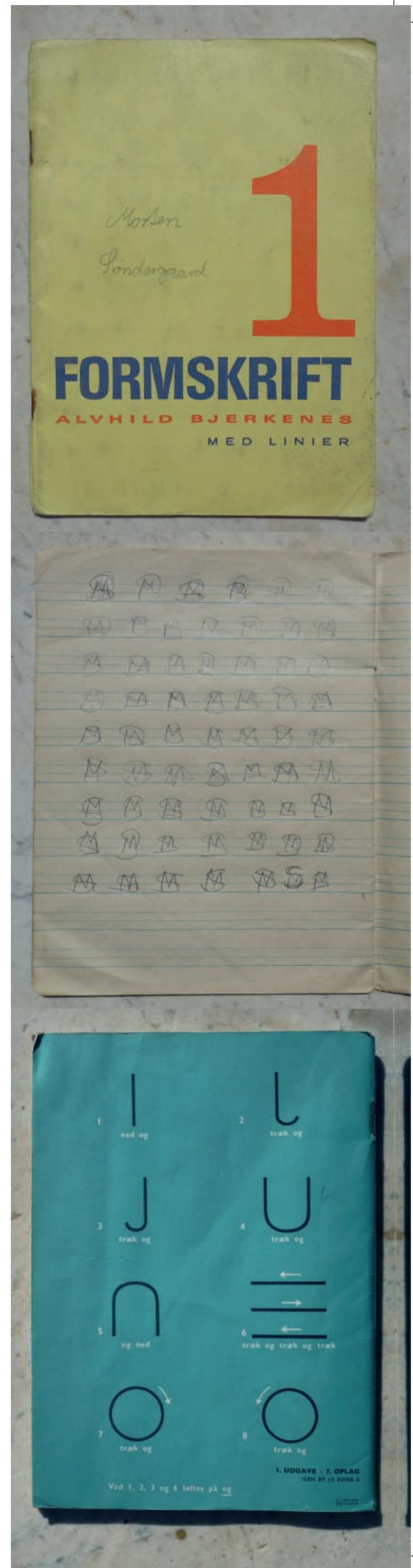
As a child, I lived close to a printing house in Odense. The company was called The Cooperative Printing Works. It was a place I liked to visit and snoop around in after school. The printing halls exuded a magical sense of expectancy. It was a monstrous word factory. Back then, books were printed with lead type. When you came into the great hall, the first thing that greeted you was the type-setting machine. Here, the text was prepared by a setter.

The setting machine looked like an organ. When the setter pressed the keys, the words were cast. From the casting mouth, an alloy of lead, antimony and tin fluids was injected into a mechanism that instantly moulded words. The type slid down narrow chutes and gathered itself into lines. There were small letters and blocks assisted by cogs and wedges that slowly formed the page of a book. A scent of oil, warm metal and sharp crashes as if from a weapon. When the book page was completed, it was carried over to the printing press where large blank printing sheets lay ready.

I had not yet become a reader. I was ten years old, books were shunning spines, secrets that took me a very long time to approach. In school I had trouble spelling, had trouble settling down. Books belonged to the world of adults. I was an explorer, a Red Indian, a footballer, a prisoner on the run and a dyslexic philosopher.

Large waste containers full of shredded paper stood at the back of the printing house. Here you could find enormous stacks of printers' proofs and errors. At the very bottom were the coveted lead types. This was what it was all about. I collected them, pockets bulging. Shattered slivers of a mirrored magical text. Sometimes I read them, with difficulty, but their primary value was that they could be melted again.

In an old frying pan on the stove, I smelted the lead type into new shapes. And when I threw the liquid lead into the snow, they solidified into new enigmatic signs. Shapes that could mean anything. The air in the kitchen was pungent, probably poisonous. As the letters melted,



a mercury-like membrane formed, shimmering and quivering, announcing the arrival of something new.

The world could be resmelted.

The words melted and new shapes that seemed more correct and precise formed a swirling lead-alphabet, which I copied into a notebook. Open signs bursting with possible meaning.

Many years later I saw some drawings in Paris by the Belgian poet and painter Henri Michaux, and I was overcome by an absolutely electric elation when I recognised the same alphabet, which in its potential, exceeded the boundary of what it said and how it said it. This was what I had been searching for. Something recognisable and foreign at the same time.

In school, we learned to write in joined-cursive. I was more or less successful. But then there was a school reform and cursive was replaced by simple longhand. As a result, to this day my handwriting is still illegible. I sat for hours, in detention, and wrote unending rows of deeply tedious words, incessantly repeating them, words that resembled barbed wire around a prison camp, or columns of soldier ants marching towards an abyss. The word-insects arrived dragging definitions that far exceeded their own body weight.

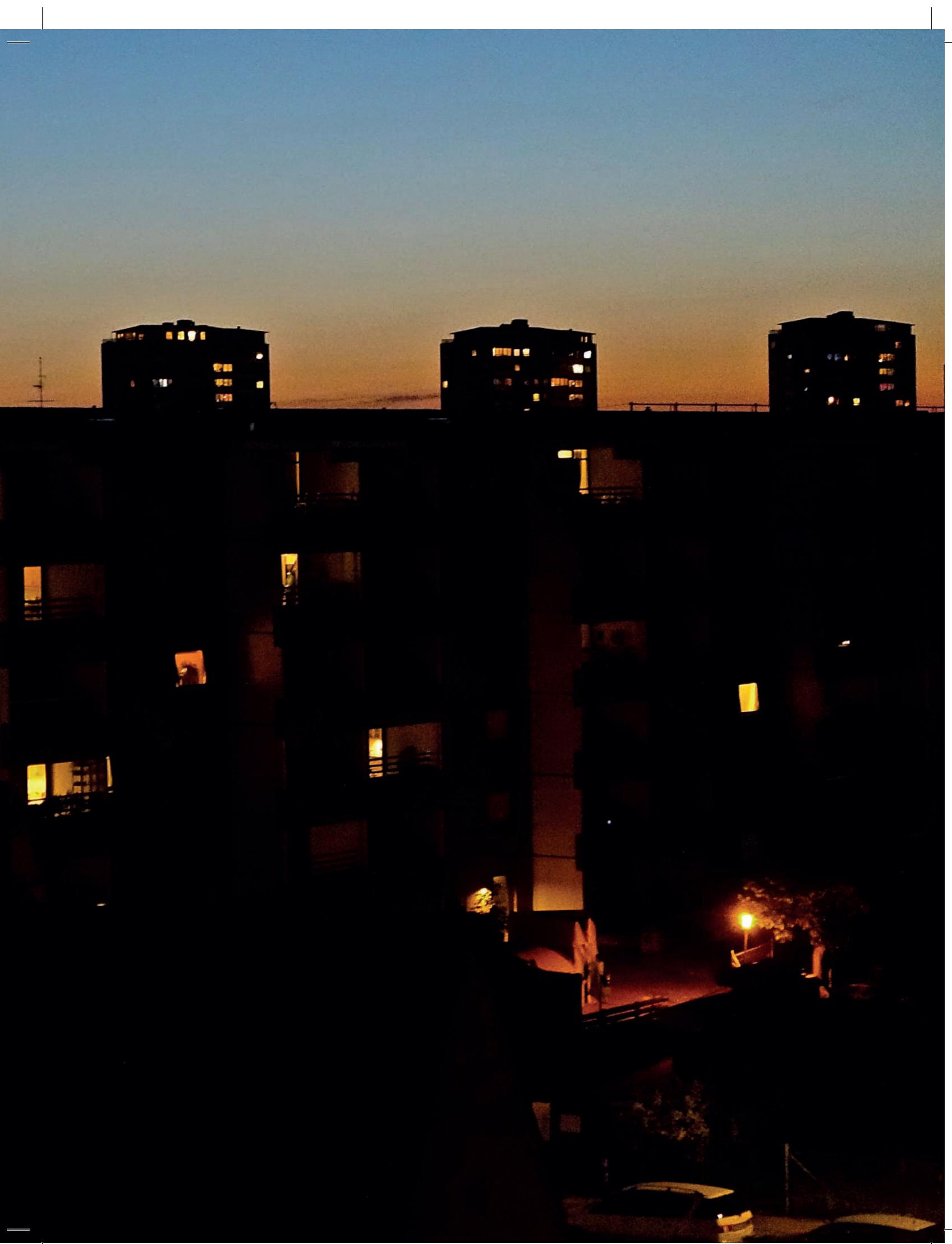
Or I sat and wrote my initials, M and S, page up and page down, because if you wrote them on top of each other, they transformed into a little face. A letter-Zorro who took up the cause against the world's volumes of impenetrable words and sentences.

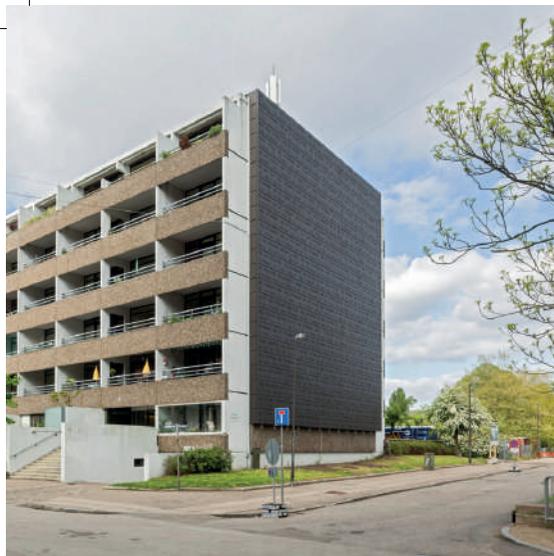
Back then the question was: How can words envelop their things in such a cocksure manner?

Words seemed to be somehow impeding the way to the world. They administrated knowledge that I was denied access too. How did one get there?

I am on my way home from school. I am ten years old. I am on my way home after a detour past the Cooperative Printing Works and have my pockets full of lead. I walk and think about words, and where they come from.







Jeg drømmer om en lille hvidegipsstatue jeg drømmer om at få en lille jernvogn i minnet
 om jeg drømmer om fred i verden jeg drømmer om at blive stor jeg d
 om min kone jeg drømmer om hastekarlighed jeg drømmer om at kunne d
 g drømmer om at holde kontakten jeg drømmer om et hus i italien je
 en krig jeg drømmer om silent angeis jeg drømmer om en gavi uden k
 gne jeg drømmer om gensidig respekt blandt os jeg drømmer om et li
 at vores søn får et godt liv jeg drømmer om ferie jeg drømmer om
 smal jeg drømmer om bosnien og hercegovina jeg drømmer om hende på
 en tur til venedig med min mand jeg drømmer om at få mine drømme
 være ydmyg jeg drømmer om dengang danmark vandt om i fodbold jeg
 ommer om at møde min mand igen jeg drømmer om at gå på stykker ude
 a jeg drømmer om duften af gule rapsmarker og nyslået græs jeg dre
 ommer om at lykkes jeg drømmer om sommerlugte jeg drømmer om et la
 meraftner med grill og vin jeg drømmer om varme himmelstrøg jeg d
 g drømmer om et sundt liv jeg drømmer om at skrive en bog jeg drøm
 millie og venner jeg drømmer om at verden bliver mere grøn jeg drøm
 g drømmer om en ferrari jeg drømmer om at blive politidame jeg dre
 spade jeg drømmer om at få bedre forståelse for livets lys jeg dr
 halvtreds meter crawl ved de olympiske lege jeg drømmer om at leve
 re sikkerhed i gården jeg drømmer om olsenbanden jeg drømmer om en
 et arbejde jeg drømmer om at husisjen ikke stiger jeg drømmer om
 ommer om gode naboer jeg drømmer om sex jeg drømmer om at gøre en
 forsta universets gåde jeg drømmer om at sidde på en lysere sky
 angen med guldbukserne jeg drømmer om min nabo jeg drømmer om at g
 kommunikation jeg drømmer om en ipad jeg drømmer om at finde min dre
 verden kun er smuk jeg drømmer om at komme ud i naturen jeg drøm
 st som mikkil køslær jeg drømmer om at flytte til ghana jeg drømme
 ne drømme jeg drømmer om at sidde på en af de små caféer i paris j
 li blive beredygtigt jeg drømmer om at forblive positiv og glad jeg
 nyt liv og få familie jeg drømmer om at danse jeg drømmer om at bli
 ommer om at blive succesrig jeg drømmer om at rejse til et nyt land



it is enough to stand still,
 just for an instant still,
 afterwards it begins to take form,
 it cannot avoid taking form,
 a stone or a flower,
 it does not matter what it is.
 I say 'stone' or 'flower'.

From "Bees die sleeping", 1998.

It is difficult to learn to spell the world. The road leading there is winding, but all roads eventually lead there.

It is not easy naming the world. It is not easy to write a poem.

But it is the only thing I'm capable of.

A clear precise memory comes to me: sitting in the back of the car, driving through the suburbs and suddenly, effortlessly being able to read road-signs. STOP. HJALLESE. YIELD. BRUGSEN.

Suddenly being unable to *not* read all the words as they flash by. Suddenly understanding that there is writing and words everywhere. Everything becomes, all at once, legible. I have access to the promised landscape of language.

Having first crossed that Rubicon there was no going back. My eyes automatically searched for words and I read them. Now already read, now unconditionally decoded. I read everything I could get my hands on. First comics and Famous Crimes, then J. P. Jacobsen's collected works, "Why Life? Why Death? Why live, when we must die?". It never ceased after that.

Books and words became an obsession. A substance I craved more and more. Because there could be language everywhere. On packets of oat flakes, on the labels on clothes, on posters in newspapers. Words and sentences flew through me before I could close my eyes. Words battered my retina; language was a glittering sphere hanging in the world, outshining everything else.

Words and letters created an unending desire for language. I am convinced that my difficulties with reaching the landscape of reading, enclosed by a high electrical fence, has meant that I today experience language, words and sentences as three-dimensional and tactile objects.

Words, things and space were, from the very beginning, interwoven and connected by an enigma, an obstacle to overcome. It was a case of life or death, something to be held together at any cost. Because now I understood, how easily words could melt and assume real new forms.

Begin again.

Words are windows that we can see the world through.

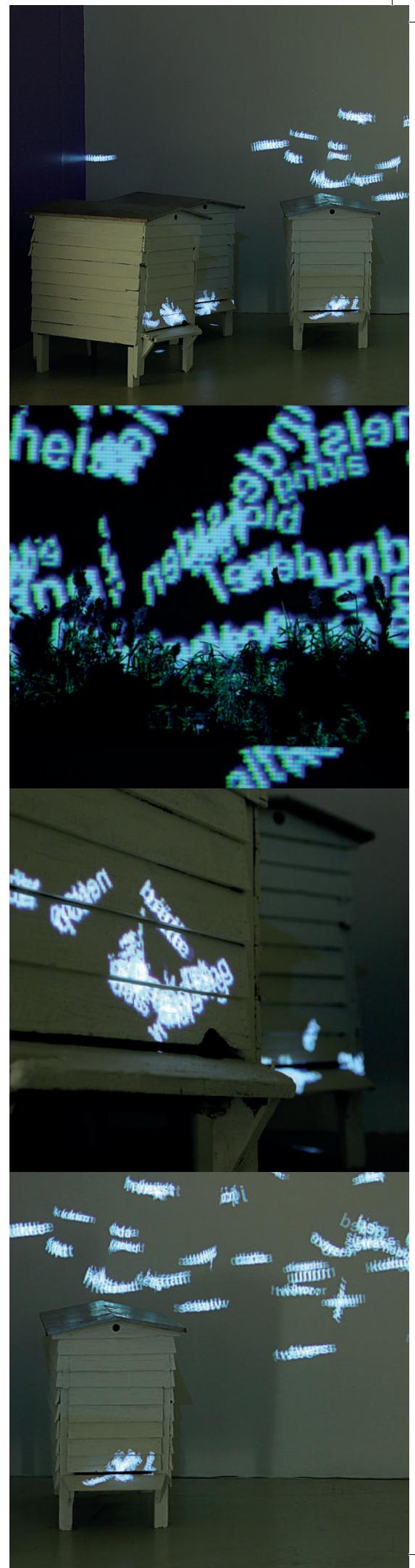
Windows can be more or less grimy, newly polished or some can have curtains hanging in them. Curtains woven by politics, religion, oppressions of every kind.

Words are what we have to assist us, if we wish to grasp the world. If we want to see through the window of language.

I believed that there was a simple connection between words and things, that it was possible to follow a thread, no matter how thin, back to the original thing. That 'stone' meant stone. That stone could smash the window, so I could see what lay behind, clearly and distinctly.

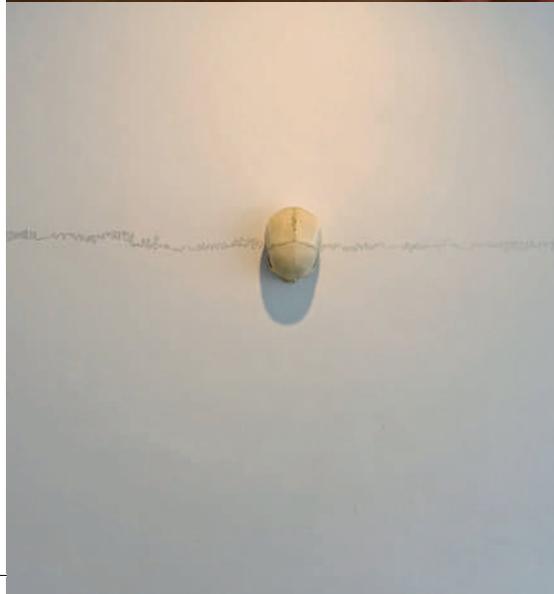
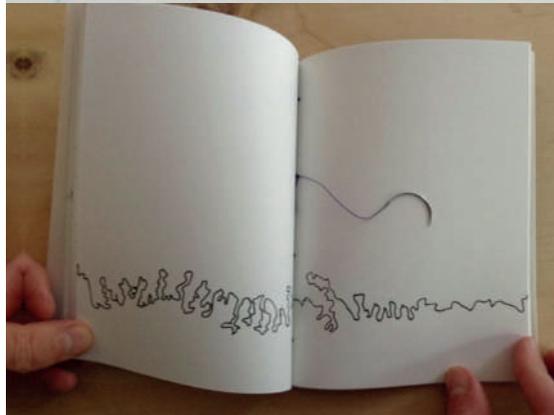
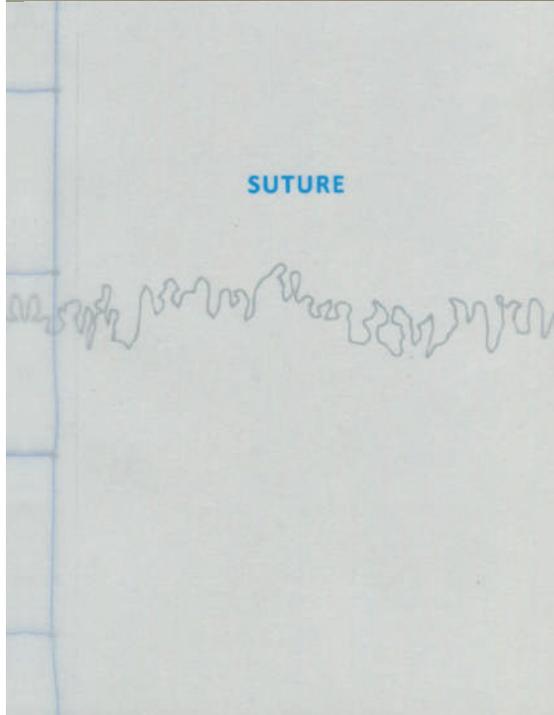
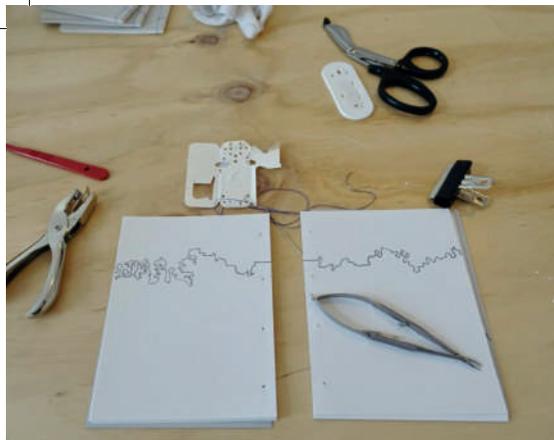
I'm not so sure any more.

This distance, the distance between words and things, has in Judaeo-Christian history been associated with the fall from grace and expulsion from Paradise, where words and things were one. And this distance can no longer be eliminated.









We find a perfect example of eliminating this distance between sign and object in ornament. In ornament, we meet a twisting and curving, a deferral and interlacing of words, things and space. Ornament is something denied measure; it is pure extension, determined and stable, according to painter and poet Per Kirkeby.

I was once
invited home to Jarl Borgen and offered biscuits
the young poet and the elderly publisher
we walked
past the stretching shelves in the infinite apartment he
had on Gammel Kongevej and as if by divine
intervention, he stuck his hand in between
volumes and drew
out a book from among the finely ordered spines
titled
Blue, ornament
created by Per Kirkeby
and I had never in my life seen so beautiful a book
it consisted of the same blue
ornament repeated throughout
the book just as the title
promised
“be outrageous
and do
just like this”
Jarl said
and thrust it at me
I knew
straightway
that it was my mojo
and I have been outrageous
just like this
in my book
Suture
But I never got to
give
Jarl the book
before he disappeared
into the dark

Perhaps all poetry is an attempt to conquer and re-establish the gap between words and things, as something removed from time and space. This is a romantic proposition; recognizable in Dante's belief that native vernacular was somehow connected to something original. This is why Dante wrote in Italian, or more precisely, Dante refined Italian. Similarly, the Japanese poet-monk Ikkyu wished to be closer to the language of the people and so wrote poems in Japanese. Prior to Ikkyu, all poetry in Japan was written in Chinese.

That one can come closer to the world by uniting words and things, is a proposition that modernism has seen as its arch-enemy. For a modernist, this is to speak of metaphysics and metaphor. For the modernist, there is nothing behind the words.

Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.

Gertrud Stein threw a stone through the greenhouse window.

There are no roses that can bloom and emit fragrance in language.

*O, be some other name!
What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet*

asks Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet*, because it is their names that create the abyss of their love.

A rose is not a rose is not a way to say what we want to say. But, somewhere in her garden, Inger Christensen stands and sings:

Apricot trees exist, apricot trees exist

They live and exist because she repeats them. This is why the apricot trees exist. Because they are repeated and repeated, they spring forth in language, in space. They exist. The words breathe them forth, revealing them. Words make the apricot trees grow and blossom in front of us.

Here's the thing: Words arrive rowdily, with all their luggage and definitions. Words that are both what they say they are, and how they say it. Words always arrive a little too late, off to the side, but they hope that what they contain will eventually show up. That it is buried somewhere in the jumble of their word-suitcases.





The meaning of words is captured in a material. And the material also conveys meaning. Are the words captured in lead, on paper, in stone, in a cranium, a piece of tracing paper, are they light shining from within or light shining on a building? Are they a brass nameplate? Are they carved into marble? All this adds meaning.

Material adds meaning. Because an extended negotiation occurs between the words melting of things, to action and existence in space. In the cracks between what is said and the material, the way in which it is said, we find strange plants, growths and creatures, a lush fauna that sometimes transforms into art. Art happens there, on the edge, the threshold and the peripheral area before and after language.

The modernist and the romantic are pulling on the same rope in a tug of war: they exert and take turns having power over each other. But neither can win, because words and things have a tendency to change places. Words and things play a picture lottery with us. Words talk about the same things in many languages.

Poetry is a state of being that occurs between words and things. A state, the world can be resmelted into.

The world doesn't really give a damn about poetry.

But it allows poetry to occur on the edge between words and things.

I want to be on that edge.

I want to walk precisely there.

Translated by Phillip Shiels

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