

## Jan Erik Vold 1966 – Avant-gardist, Pirate Editor and Offset Enthusiast

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In contrast to the prevailing attitudes in academic and radical circles in the 60s, the young Norwegian poet Jan Erik Vold was fascinated with the financial and graphic developments made possible by modern printing techniques. For a short period of time he also acted as a kind of pirate publisher in the underground enterprise *Kommet forlag* (*Kommet publishing firm*). His own book, *blikket (the gaze)*, Kommet forlag 1966, is a poetic-mechanical “word-machine experiment” with permutative combinations of just five words spread across twenty pages and written on an electric typewriter with a replaceable type head imitating computer letters. The intense and strictly mathematical discipline of these varied combinations demonstrates how language is a subject that can be moulded, and thus, Vold’s verbal strategies offer a multiplicity of possible perspectives both on the language itself and the life-world of the reader.

In the mid-60s Vold’s publishing practise was unique in Norway. Today, with the use of real computer technique, it is a preferred form of publishing for many poets all over the world. On one occasion Vold returned to this practise himself as *Kommet forlag* reappeared after almost forty years to publish some signed copies of his poetry collection *Diktet minner om verden*.

## Jan Erik Vold 1966 – Avant-gardist, Pirate Editor and Offset Enthusiast

For almost half a century, Jan Erik Vold has played an important part on the cultural scene in Norway, both as a poet, an essayist, reviewer, translator and editor. He has also taken an active part in various public debates, and he has created jazz and poetry performances in co-operation with leading Norwegian and foreign jazz musicians. From 1966 he and other authors (among them Dag Solstad) edited the literary periodical *Profil*. Among them they started what has later been known as “*Profil-opprøret*” (the *Profil* revolt). This was a strong, partly mocking criticism of the state of affairs in contemporary Norwegian literature and literary reviewing practice, in particular that they gave priority to solemn, late-symbolistic modernism, but also of the conservatism of the big publishing houses towards new, experimental literature, and of their financial practice. Their estimates excluded avant-garde experiments and new ideas. It soon appeared that these “rebels” were not so rebellious after all. Time was more than ripe for what they represented. A short time later many of them were engaged as literary reviewers in the national newspapers, and could therefore set the tone for literary critique in the Norwegian press.

This early stage of Vold’s career has tended to recede into the background and be replaced by the conception of Vold as a gentle, amiable poet, easily understood and without any intellectual challenges. This is how he staged himself in *Mor Godhjertas glade versjon. Ja. (Mother Kind-hearted’s happy version. Yes.)*, Gyldendal 1968, which made a huge success. This paper will undertake to go behind this happy version and back to the early stages of Vold’s literary career, concentrating on *blikket (the gaze)* (1966) and his short career as a kind of pirate publisher in the underground enterprise Kommet forlag (Kommet publishing firm).

Vold made his debut with *mellom speil og speil (between mirrors)*, Gyldendal 1965. The poems are brief, some of them are shaped as geometrical figures, many of them use symbols which are familiar within a post-modern conception inspired by orientalism and neo-baroque. We find both the chalice, the hourglass, yin and yang, but in particular, as indicated by the title, the mirror. In a Norwegian context, this experimenting with typographical effects was something new. It was the first example of concrete poetry in Norway. In many of the poems the poet is a prisoner in a house of mirrors from which he obviously wants to escape, but all these attempts at escape result in shattered glass, with new reflections of the self, even more fragmented and confusing than they were in the first place. This may be read as a demonstration of a solipsistic attitude, a fundamental doubt as to the existence of an external reality, but it may just as well be understood as an attack upon the solipsism and mirror metaphors of modernism. Gradually the poet finds another human being among the mirrors; a woman. But even here the meeting with another becomes a starting point of self-reflection – he wants to meet the other, but all the time he recognizes himself.

This debut collection appeared the same year as the government established a purchasing system for Norwegian literature. On the recommendation of a literary committee, 1000 copies of each book were distributed to public libraries all over the country. In addition to this financial support to the libraries, the intention was to lower the price of books of fiction, give authors a higher income, and lower the financial risks for publishers who wanted to bring out young and promising authors. And the system did result in a wider and bolder publishing policy. There is no doubt that young authors, many of them representing a more experimental approach, have profited by it.

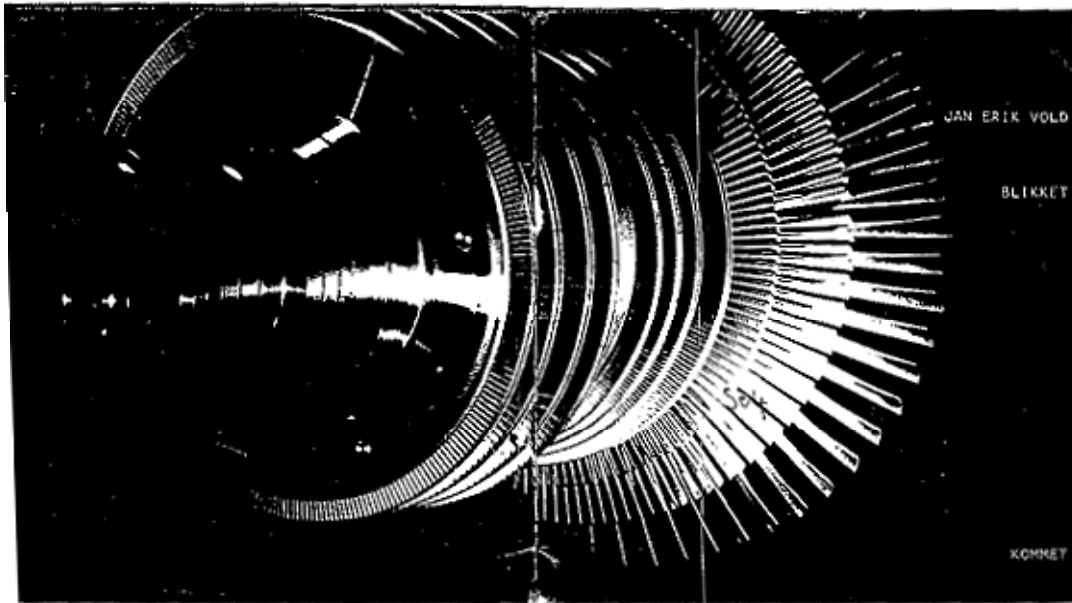
But still there were some obstacles in the way. In the beginning of 1966 the young poet Jan Erik Vold hands in a literary experiment to his publishers, and he is refused. This leads to an essayistic reflection on the politics of the big publishing houses, especially when it comes to poetry. In spite of the purchasing system, “Poems are too expensive!” Collections of poems, usually of about fifty to sixty pages, cost between fifteen and twenty Norwegian kroner,

which is too much money for a young person who wants to acquaint himself with up-to-date literature. In those days, new book series introducing modern foreign prose were only slightly more expensive, and then you got about 200 pages. Not to mention all the paperbacks which were being poured out by the publishers. In Sweden and Denmark, at first, then in Norway. “All kinds of literature can be bought in paperback, except poems.” Vold proposes different ways of solving the problem. “In my experience, collections of poetry costing fifteen to twenty kroner are usually on sale for a fiver some four years later. Now if the publisher sells half the edition for twenty kroner and the next half for NOK 6.50, why not put the price at thirteen kroner once and for all, thereby having a fair chance that most of the copies will be sold at once.” (Vold, 1976 : xxd) Yet he trusts the publishers to be doing their best, faced with the high costs of printing only a few copies of a book. But is that necessarily true?

During the autumn of 1966 he has learnt a thing or two. He is about to start his own publishing firm, *Kommet forlag*, for the publishing of avant-garde literature, and he has realized that printing books is far cheaper than he thought it was, as long as one uses up-to-date printing methods. The point is to use *offset*, not letterpress, when printing poetry collections. This will render superfluous the more expensive process of setting it in type before printing. The offset technology allows the author to write his or her text on a typewriter; it is a photo-technical production method which can be done without a printer. By using the new electric typewriter with replaceable type heads, the authors can even produce block letter types and print their own text. This way, the cost of printing 500 copies of a book of fifty-six pages, in A 4, can be lowered to 700 kroner, i.e. 1.40 kroner per book. Then of course there will be additional costs, of distribution, advertising and PR, bookseller’s profit and fees – “but still, there must be something wrong *when a book which could have been produced for 1.40 kroner costs 18.50 kroner at the bookstore.*” (Vold, 1976 : xxd)

Quite as important as the financial aspects are the printing possibilities opened up by the new offset technology. Vold has discovered the potential of expression in modern typewriter printing, and photo-technical printing methods are cut out for concretistic poetry. There is none of the outlay for the expensive clichés of traditional book printing.

Kommet forlag published two books, both in 1966. One of them was handwritten by the twenty-two year old debutant Helge Rykkja, and according to the publisher this was “a handwriting that in many ways supports the text and deepens it.” The other one was “a poetic–mechanical “word–machine” experiment” written by the publisher Vold himself, “printed on an electric typewriter with a replaceable type head: the obvious thing was to use computer letters.” Publishing books this way was something quite new in Norway in the middle of the sixties. The market budget was probably minimal. But it sometimes happened that those two books found their way to an interested and rather wondering public. Personally, I bought both of them for a nominal sum. I still have the hand-written one, but the other one disappeared long ago, probably to end up in the bookshelf of some friend or other. Some few Norwegian university libraries still have it, but it is not for loan. On the other hand, they lend you a copy, and so may be said to fulfil Vold’s forty-five years old visions of cheap duplication of creative work.



Those books are still some of the most avant-garde that have ever been printed in what Vold was later to call the kingdom of Gnore (Norway). Rykkja's book, which was actually called *BOK*, was praised in the literary periodical *Samtiden*, in a review written by – Jan Erik Vold, but it was also received with enthusiasm by other reviewers, as for example Pål Helge Haugen and Poul Borum. (The latter even used one of Rykkja's brief texts as a motto for a poetry collection he published the year after.) But apart from this, the reception was rather lukewarm. According to the prevailing standards among the literati, this was not real poetry. (The following year, Rykkja published his next book, this one just called *POESI (POETRY)*. It was the first publication in a new paperback series of poetry from the left-wing Pax publishing firm. However, the governmental literary committee turned the book down, and it was not purchased for free distribution to the public libraries. On the other hand, it was ridiculed in a debate in Stortinget and used as an example of the possible negative consequences of governmental financial support. This was wonderful marketing, and it has been reported that the book was sold in almost 3000 copies. This is quite sensational for a book of poetry in Norway.)

Vold's poetic-mechanical "word-machine experiment", printed with computer letters on an electric typewriter with a replaceable type head, may seem a technical paradox. Strictly speaking, one uses a typewriter to imitate a computer, at a time when the typewriter is on the point of becoming an antiquity. This might be compared to the former Stone Age blacksmiths, who competed with the Bronze Age technique by decorating carved stone axes with a distinct groove, as from a casting mould. A few years later Hans Magnus Enzensberger writes an essay in the Norwegian periodical *Vinduet*, where Vold was then the editor. Enzensberger characterizes this kind of experiment in the following words: "It is part of the picture of the artistic avant-garde that it imitates in advance the media possibilities that are still in the future." (*Vinduet* 1/1971: 4)

This poetic experiment, *blikket*, is based upon five words from a poem in the first section of Vold's debut collection, and this section is also called "Blikket" ("The Gaze"):

fanger du  
blikket  
fanger du  
meg fanger  
du ikke

The word-machine in *blikket* expands this poem, starting with the word-sequence BLIKKET/DU/FANGER/IKKE/MEG (THE GAZE/YOU/DO NOT/CATCH/ME). These words are repeated in strictly formalized variations across twenty pages – to begin with, one word on each page, then in combinations of two, three, four and five. There are well-known mathematical functions for such series. Very likely there is nothing *behind* the text. But *under* the surface of the text there is an intricate system of mathematical and syntactical deep-structures. The graphic also connotes the binary logic of data technology and underlines the formulaic, permutative, artificial aspect of the written text. Most of these word combinations are ungrammatical and as far from natural speech as possible. But the point here is not to give an impression of a natural, communicative language. On the contrary, the intense and strictly mathematical discipline of the varied combinations demonstrates how language is a subject that can be moulded.

BLIKKET DU FANGER IKKE MEG  
BLIKKET DU FANGER MEG IKKE  
BLIKKET DU IKKE FANGER MEG  
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Of course, Jan Erik Vold has certain patterns to go by. Attitude relativists, like the Polish author Withold Gombrowicz and Danish Hans Jørgen Nielsen, contemporary Swedish concretists like Jarl Hammarberg, Bengt Emil Johnson, and the “prose-machine poet”, Torsten Ekbohm. Also older system-poets from the previous decade, writing in German, like Eugen Gomringer and Helmut Heissenbüttel. Those two, in particular, show some of Vold’s avant-garde roots in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century’s literary expressionism, and in dada.

Heissenbüttel’s theoretical strategies are very interesting in this connection. His linguistic philosophy is based upon durable literary and linguistic theory derived from German Romanticism and philosophic idealism. He refers to Friedrich Schlegel’s rebellion against tradition and the established literary patterns; also to Johann Gottfried Herder’s and Wilhelm Humboldt’s idea that all natural languages give their users different ways of perceiving their surroundings, simply because they have different internal structures, both when it comes to grammar, vocabulary, idiomatic expressions and textual tradition. Today, this is known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, named after the American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. However, I believe this has always been common knowledge among multi-linguists

and translators. Heissenbüttel takes this a step further: if people are prevented from obtaining an accurate picture of the world because of their language, then the solution is to change the language. This can be done in two ways: either by changing the syntax, or by changing the familiar modes of expression, either it's a question of familiar phrases or well-known cultural quotes.

Vold's method in *blikket* reminds us of Heissenbüttel's strategies. It might be directly inspired by them. Quite apart from the fact that he quotes some of his own words from his debut collection, he is trying out the syntactical strategy in *blikket*, abolishing normal syntax. On the other hand, *blikket* is not just a linguistic game. The many repetitions render a suggestive monotony to the text, almost mesmerizing, like a nursery rhyme. The reader (or listener) may not actually fall into a trance, but there is something magic and beseeching in this arithmetically conducted word-machine that makes the reader perceive an underlying pressure of an existential nature. It is about the unpleasant feeling of being caught by, or being turned into an object by, the eyes of another, about not wanting it, about not wanting to recognize oneself as a degraded object. Thus the text may appear to be a rather harassed circling around the same ideas as Sartre developed about the gaze, at the same time as mechanical repetitions try to create an impression of stability and calm.

To Sartre, as well as to Vold's desperate poet, it is really a question of shame and the feeling of an original downfall; not because he has done anything wrong, but because he has "fallen" into the world, right in the middle of the objects, and because he needs the other as an intermediary to be the one he really is. He wants to protect his own integrity, to hide his own state of being an object, to dress, so to speak, just like Adam and Eve when confronted with the eyes of the Lord (*Genesis*). At the same time he needs to look in the mirror of the other's eyes to confirm his own existence. One needs to be both free and a prisoner at the same time. This is an unpleasant paradox, but a necessary and therefore unsolvable one, requiring strong doses of grammar and mathematics to make it bearable.

The verdict of history has not been very kind to *blikket*. Even the most positive and sympathetic critics regard it as "a number in a series of curiosa in Norwegian literature" (Fjeldstad, 1973: 172), and about twenty-five years later, the literary historian Øystein Rottem passed the following judgement: "at present, this book of 'poems' is nothing but a thing of curiosity." (Rottem, 1997: 215)

But this curiosity was in many ways a revolutionary action seen from a media-historical point of view. In the middle of the sixties, this kind of publishing was not a matter of course. Hans Magnus Enzensberger relates it in the above-mentioned essay in *Vinduet* 1971: "From the very beginning of the youth revolt, at Free Speech Movement in Berkeley, the computer was a favourite object of aggression. [...] One of the characteristic phenomena in Paris, in 1968, was the return to antique production methods. Instead of making propaganda among the workers in a modern offset printing works, the students produced their posters with the help of a hand press at Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The political slogans were painted by hand; by using templates, they could have spread them *en masse*, but that would have been a violation of the creative imagination of the author. They weren't capable of a strategic use of the more advanced media; instead of occupying the broadcasting station, the rebels occupied the traditional Odéon theatre." (Enzensberger, 1971: 4)

As opposed to this exclusive attitude to artistic work, Vold displays a strong fascination with the financial and graphic possibilities opened up by modern printing techniques. As a media phenomenon, *Kommet* was something quite new in a Norwegian context. One single swallow, so to say, but certainly a sign of what was to come in the future.

At present, the big publishing houses report about financial difficulties. The melting together of publishing and book-selling has led to a narrower marketing, concentrated upon the bestsellers. Also, the publishers are concerned about too many titles in the market (cfr.

*Aftenposten* 07.07.2009). As a result of this, there is an increase in the growth of small publishing firms, and a new word, “indie-publishing”, has come into existence. At present, Norway has almost 1000 small one-man publishing firms. They have no financial backing and use their own equipment – in many cases just a computer and a printer, while others use a professional printing press. This has been called “a literary velvet revolution”, and it has also attracted interest abroad (cfr. *Klassekampen* 27.06.2009).

Kommet had a short-lived career, however, at least in the first place, with just the two editions of Rykkja and Vold in 1966. Then there was silence for many, many years. I haven’t seen the balance sheets of Vold’s editorial undertaking, and therefore have no evidence if his estimates proved to be right. But both Vold’s and Rykkja’s books have come in new editions, published by the big publishing firms Gyldendal and Aschehoug. For that matter, both *blikket* and *Bok* may be said to have attained a prolonged life in the world of publishing, though *Bok* was unfortunately reprinted without the handwriting. And Kommet reappeared almost forty years later, in 2003 (*Diktet minner om verden*). At that time, author and publisher Vold was the only contemporary writer of fiction to have become an honorary doctor at a Norwegian university. But he remains true to the radical and avant-garde ideals of his youth. In this latest book from Kommet, which was published by Gyldendal in a new edition next year, we find this poem about the Norwegian main airport, both funny and apocalyptic:

GARDERMOEN

DOGREMAREN  
AGDERMOREN  
MODERGAREN  
ENDREGARMO

ERDAMENGRO  
ERMONAGERD  
ERMEGANORD  
DRAREGONME

DONGEARMER  
ROGNEDAMER  
DORMEANGER  
EDAMERNORG

MENERAGODR  
AMOREDRENG  
ROMADRENGE  
ORGENDAMER

NEGERARMOD  
NARREDOGME  
MORDERENGA  
ERRMAGEDON

DERMEGORAN  
DRONEMAGER  
ORMEDRAGEN  
GNOREMADER

OGMERRANED

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