

Fahlström Afresh

A traveling retrospective, on view this summer at MASS MoCA, examines Oyvind Fahlström's prescient blend of formal complexity, comic-book images and politicized cartography.

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

Given the abbreviated nature of Oyvind Fahlström's career—his first significant work dates from 1952-53, the last from 1976, the year he died at the age of 47—and his slow, labor-intensive methods, his oeuvre is surprisingly extensive. It includes his early abstract paintings and drawings of the 1950s; Pop-related paintings and sculptures from the first half of the 1960s and numerous films, performances and contributions to art happenings throughout that decade; five large sculptural installations (1966-73); and, from the late 1960s until the end of his life, a wave of densely populated, information-packed paintings and drawings addressing global politics. He also authored several lengthy manifestos, wrote scripts for stage, screen and radio, composed a five-hour "audiophonic novel" and produced a variety of prints and multiples.

His art won him a substantial following and inclusion in important exhibitions such as "New Realists" (the 1962 show at Sidney Janis Gallery in New York that helped usher in Pop art) and the Venice Biennale (Fahlström represented Sweden in 1966). In the years immediately following Fahlström's death, several European museums mounted retrospectives, in Stockholm (1979), Paris (1980) and Rotterdam (1980). These shows were followed by a U.S. retrospective (seen at the Guggenheim Museum and the Walker Art Center in 1982-83). But despite these accolades, and despite the brilliance and increasingly evident prescience of Fahlström's art, his work has not been seen in any depth in the U.S. for nearly 20 years. For those, like me, who missed the 1982-83 exhibitions, the only subsequent opportunities to see the full range of Fahlström's work have been two shows in Spain: a 1992 survey at IVAM in Valencia and a more extensive retrospective that debuted last fall at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). A visit to the latter exhibition forms the basis for this article. (A smaller version of the MACBA show opens at MASS MoCA on June 15.)

A total original and noteworthy innovator, Fahlström is a major artist who has yet to receive his full due. In a perceptive 1995 essay on Fahlström's work, the artist Mike Kelley suggested that Fahlström was long seen as a minor Pop artist "because he allowed the 'political' to enter his work, because he was interested in issues of narrative, because his work was compositionally busy." And, continues Kelley, although Fahlström's "tactics have more in common with the ambitions of the Conceptualists than with those of the Pop artists with whom he is usually grouped . . . his use of popular imagery is inconsistent with most Conceptualist practice."¹ Another factor that perhaps has slowed recognition of Fahlström's achievement is his complex nationality. He was born in Brazil to Swedish parents who sent him back to Sweden for the summer at the age of nine. Unfortunately, it was the summer of 1939, and Fahlström found himself trapped in Sweden by World War II. He wouldn't see his parents again until 1947, and he never returned to Brazil. His artistic career commenced in Sweden, Italy and France, but it was in New York that he spent his most productive years. As a result of this peripatetic existence, no nation has been able to claim him as its own cultural treasure.





Opera, detail, 1952-53, felt-tip pen, gouache and ink on paper, 10% by 466 1/2 inches overall. Private collection.

The formal variety and visual shifts in *Opera* are astounding, as Fahlström empties out and fills up successive segments of his scroll-like drawing.

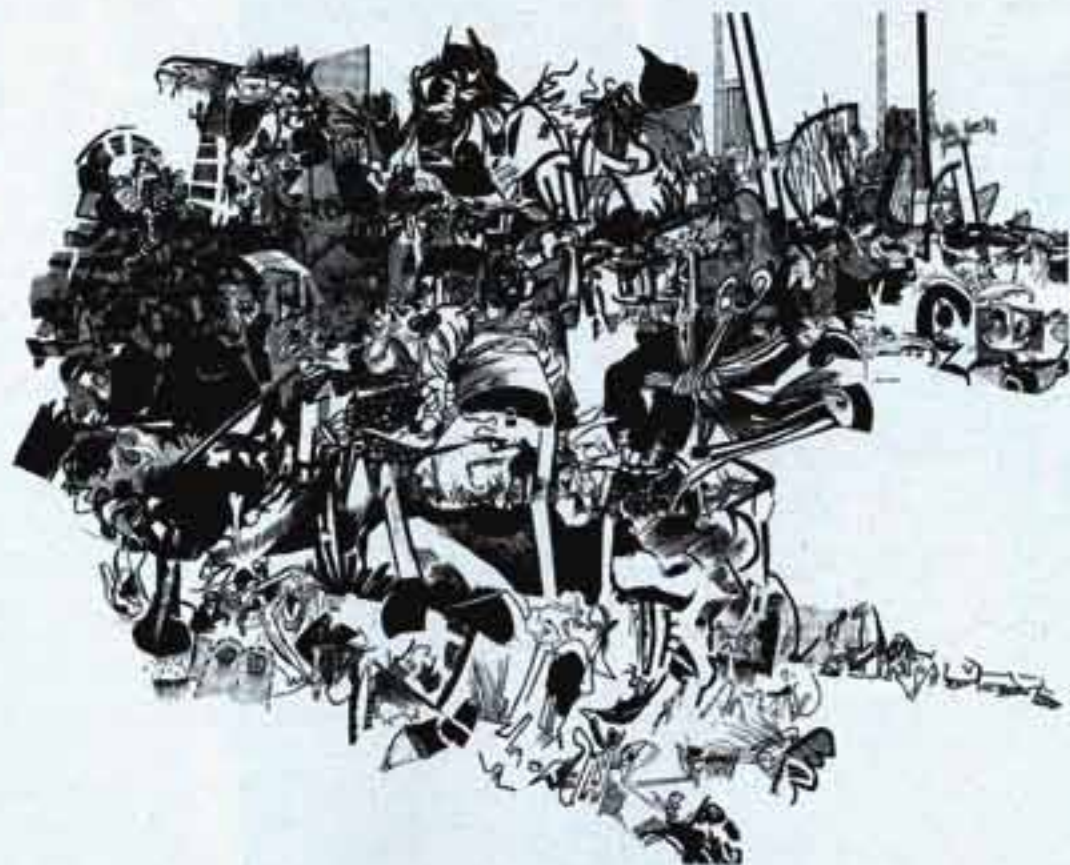
Like several other important European artists of his generation—Marcel Broodthaers, Dieter Roth, Daniel Spoerri—Fahlström came to visual art via poetry. His earliest poems from 1949-50 recall the automatic poetry of the Surrealists, with concatenations of strange, often visceral images along the lines of “a rudder sticking out of his skull guided him/ through a huge baroque slaughterhouse in the dark/ where gentlemen in gold-laced whips sat absorbed in their entrails.”¹² But in 1952, Fahlström experienced a stylistic revelation that not only changed his poetry but also helped launch him into visual art.

Fahlström’s analysis of the situation of avant-garde poetry, formulated in “Manifesto for Concrete Literature” (1953), led him to the conclusion that writers must put aside the clichés of automatic poetry and focus instead on the visual and aural rhythms of words and letters, on “concrete poetry.” In trying to spell out his ideas, Fahlström, who by then was moving back and forth between Rome, Paris and Stockholm and writing cultural journalism for Swedish newspapers, cites examples of rhythmic composition in the paintings of Giuseppe Capogrossi and the compositions of Pierre Schaeffer, the inventor of musique concrète, in which raw sounds were manipulated into musical patterns.

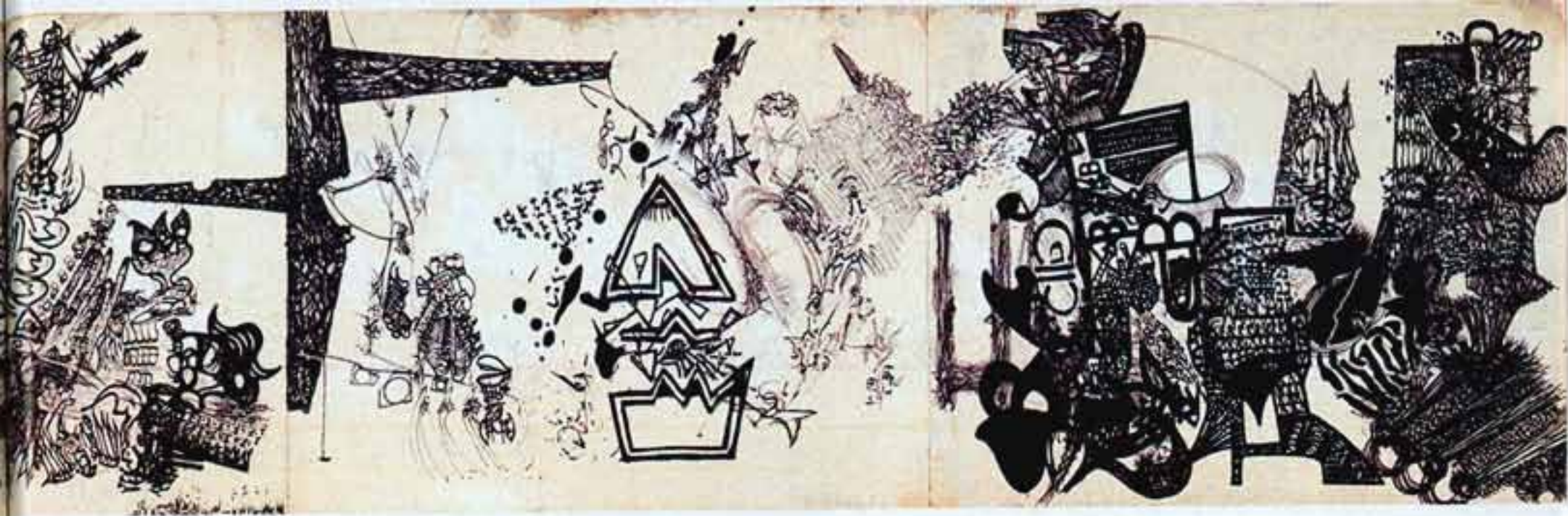
As he was writing “Manifesto for Concrete Literature,” Fahlström was also creating his first significant art work, an over-38-foot-long gouache-and-ink drawing titled *Opera* (1952-53). In both its scale and its incredible variety of forms, the work is epic, but it didn’t start out that way. As Fahlström told it, he was fooling around with a refillable felt-tip pen (a relatively new medium which had caught on with some abstract painters in Rome, where Fahlström was then living), creating automatist drawings. After a while, this time-honored Surrealist approach started to feel monotonous. “I began putting together some of the sheets on which I had drawn,” Fahlström recalled years later, “and I could see continuity and larger themes begin to appear.”¹³ As he started to assemble the sheets and add new ones, his drawing style changed: biomorphic forms began to give way to patterning, and tangles of filamentlike lines were replaced with thicker, more graphic strokes and forms that are frequently repeated (Capogrossi’s modular compositions were a clear influence, as Fahlström was the first to admit). Even more importantly, instead of hatching shapes from his own mind, Fahlström began to incorporate preexisting imagery, in particular fragments from Mayan codices. (At MACBA, in the gallery where *Opera* was hung on a long, gently curving wall, vitrines displayed documentation of Fahlström’s sources.) The formal variety and visual shifts in *Opera* are astounding, as Fahlström empties out and fills suc-

sive segments of the scroll-like drawing. It is by turns architectural, topographical, biological, Mayan, Islamic, cartoony, hieroglyphic, Gaudiesque (the only word that appears in the work is “Güell,” an obvious reference to Gaudi’s Park Güell, which was, of course, particularly resonant for a Barcelona audience), orderly, chaotic, serene and apocalyptic.

The enormous possibilities opened up by *Opera* helped turn Fahlström from a poet into an artist. Indeed, *Opera* was the focus of his first solo show, in Florence, in 1953; it was shown again, in Paris, in 1955. In his next body of work, the “Ade-Ledic-Nander” paintings (1955-57), Fahlström sought to corral the proliferating glyphs and marks of *Opera* into a more conventional format: rectangular oil-on-linen paintings. Taking their inspiration and terminology from a science-fiction story by A.E. Van Vogt and displaying a mostly earth-tone palette, these meticulously executed canvases do indeed suggest views of some alien planetary system, with celestial bodies and all manner of strange life forms and what look like vessels for interplanetary travel. In preparation for the paintings, Fahlström made detailed diagrams and wrote dozens of pages minutely describing the characteristics of the picture’s inhabitants, which he divided into three “clans” or “societies” called Ade, Ledic and Nander. Initially, Fahlström planned a



Feast on MAD, 1957-59, india ink on paper, 39 1/2 by 49 1/2 inches. Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.



Ade-Ledic-Nander 2, 1955-57, oil on canvas, 74 1/2 by 83 inches. Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

20-painting series, but only two works were completed before he abandoned the project.

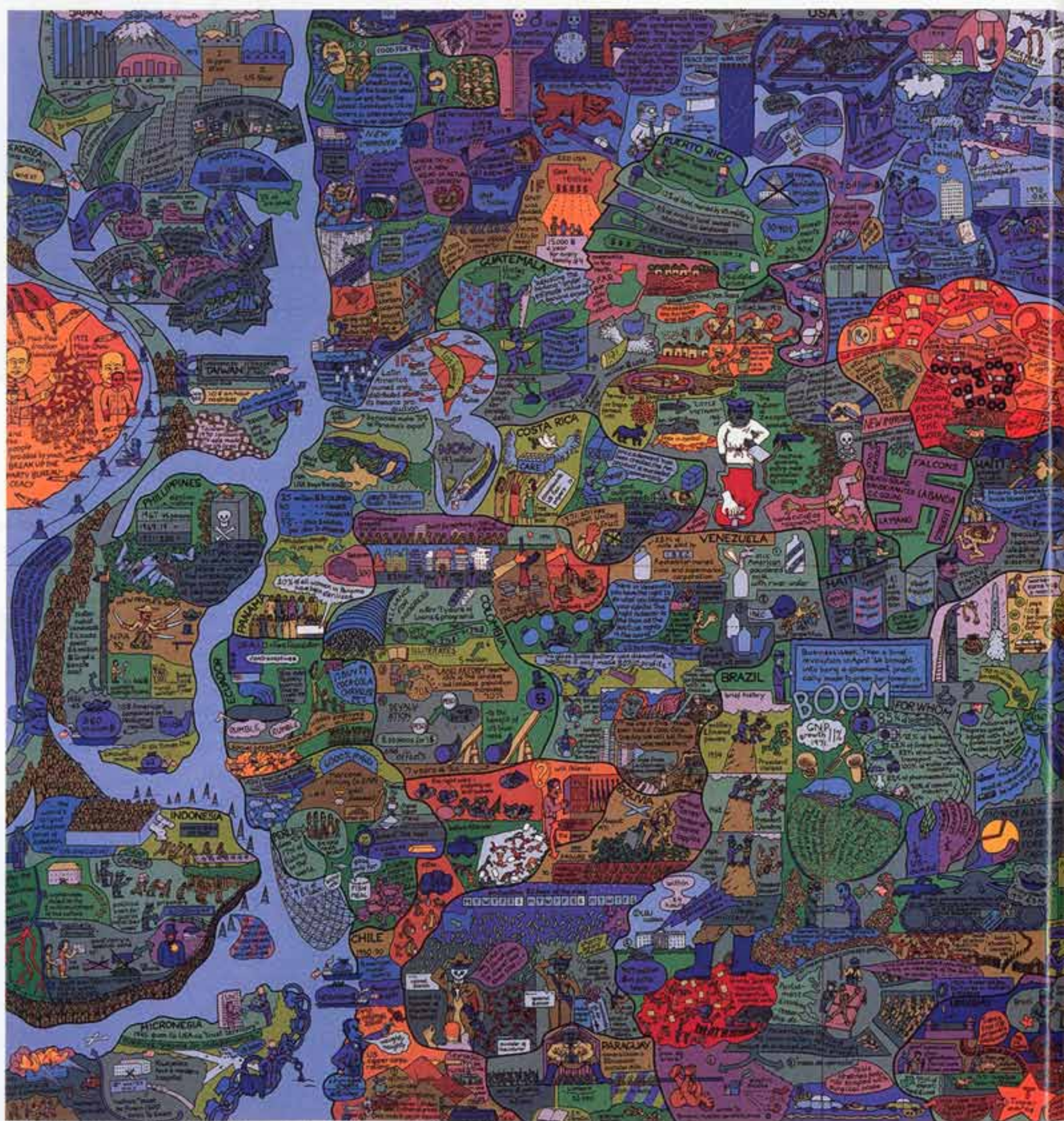
As with *Opera*, Fahlsström borrowed motifs from a variety of sources, sometimes using stencils and tracing paper to reproduce images of, say, the floor plans of ancient temples. Reminiscent of Miró and the Duchamp of the *Large Glass*, the "Ade-Ledic-Nander" paintings are also a reminder of Fahlsström's admiration for the sci-fi surrealism of Roberto Matta. But for all their fascinating details and formal daring, neither the "Ade-Ledic-Nander" paintings nor the other canvases Fahlsström painted through the rest of the 1950s are nearly as compelling as *Opera*. The reason, I think, is not hard to find. Whereas *Opera*, with its ultra-horizontal format, led the artist (and, after him, the viewer) into unusual compositional realms, the subsequent paintings revert to less distinctive structures. Fahlsström may well have suspected as much himself, since he cut short the "Ade-Ledic-Nander" series and started, instead, to explore a realm that would exert a powerful influence on his work for the rest of his life: American comic books.

Fahlsström relocated to New York in 1961, but his interest in American comic strips went back to at least 1954, when he published a substantial article titled "The Comics as an Art" in the Swedish daily *Expressen*. He seems to have applied what he'd learned about comics to *Opera* (and the experience of making *Opera* no doubt helped him to appreciate even more the sequential art of the comics). He observes, for instance, that in a comic strip "everything must be directed toward suggesting movement by the greatest possible contrast between the frames, instead of gradual transitions." The article pays particular attention to the "specific system of signs" developed by comic-strip artists (a row of z's to show that a character is asleep, short parallel lines to indicate objects in motion, etc.) that readers "adopt without reflection." And he also celebrates the continually evolving nature of the comic strip: "Real comics are never finished; a part every day, as life is lived in daily installments. . . . A 'finished' comic is a cruel absurdity."

A few years later, while still in Europe, Fahlsström made his first direct use of comic strips in an india-ink drawing, *Feast on MAD* (1957-59). The graphic use of



Roulette, 1966, oil on photos on vinyl and board, magnets, 59 by 70 inches. Museum Ludwig, Cologne.



World Map, 1972, acrylic and india ink on vinyl mounted on wood, 36 by 72 inches. Private collection, New York.

ink in *Feast on MAD* is reminiscent of *Opera*, as is the variety of forms, but all the motifs have been compacted into a ragged-edged mass that fills most of the 39-by-49-inch sheet of paper. As Fahlström hints in his title, the images are all copied from *Mad*, the satirical American magazine that started life as a comic book in 1952. It would take a real *Mad* aficionado, however, to detect any recognizable images in *Feast on MAD*, so thoroughly has Fahlström fragmented and recombined his source material. In some ways, this apparently free-form, constantly morphing drawing is in the tradition of Surrealist automatism, but

Fahlström's choice to exclusively employ preexisting imagery sets the work apart—it is not so much his own individual unconscious that the artist is trying to access, but the unconscious of society. The use of preexisting imagery also relates to the musique concrète method of recording a sound effect and then creating a musical composition through copying and splicing.

During the years Fahlström was making *Feast on MAD*—which was followed by two further *Mad*-derived works, the proto-psychedelic *Dr. Livingstone I presume, I* (1959) and *Dr. Livingstone I presume, II* (1961)—there were few



other artists who were making use of comic strips. In San Francisco, Jess had started cutting up Dick Tracy comics in 1954, and the English artist Peter Blake had copied pages of Sunday comics into several paintings in the mid-1950s, but it wouldn't be until 1960-61 that Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein would begin basing their paintings on comic strips.

In contrast to Warhol's and Lichtenstein's practice of isolating and enlarging single comic-strip frames, Fahlström was more interested in the narrative power of comics, in the way images interrelated. (A number of critics have pointed out

that an interest in the sequential character of comics was something Fahlström had in common with other European Pop painters like Bernard Rancillac, Hervé Télémaque and Erro.) This becomes clear in the first major work he embarked on after moving to New York, *Sitting . . .* (1962). As with the *Mad* drawings, this painting and the equally fascinating ink-watercolor-collage study for it (borrowed for the MACBA show from the collection of Jasper Johns), were created with images extracted from comic books. Painted in tempera on paper which is mounted on canvas, this roughly 5-by-6-foot rectangular composition has its two

During a visit to Los Angeles in 1969, Fahlström discovered Zap Comix and the drawings of R. Crumb, an event that would have a profound impact on his art.

upper corners cut off, creating a houselike contour. As in a real comic strip, white lines divide the panels, but here the lines follow no regular pattern. Many of the panels are open on one or more sides, allowing the densely packed imagery to flow from one section to another. The white lines also suggest eccentrically arranged floors and walls, as if the painting were a cutaway view of a multistory house. (The notation "huset," Swedish for "house," on a preliminary drawing makes the architectural structure clear.)

While there are a number of easily identifiable details—some bat wings (*Batman* comics were a major source for the work), a ship seen through a periscope, an elephant's foot—as well as explosions, gunbursts, smoke trails, torrents of water, most of the images are hard to place. One can only surmise their original purpose and context. Does that metallic cone belong to a spaceship? Is that strange orifice part of an underground cavern? By isolating details, Fahlström celebrates the bizarre visual richness of the comics, and by scrambling these elements he taps into the incredible kinetic energy that comics deploy.

The painting's title is an abbreviation of a nonsense phrase in a tiny speech bubble tucked away somewhere in the middle of the painting: "Sitting like Pat with a bat in her hat." (Pat is Patty Oldenburg, Claes Oldenburg's then wife and collaborator, and part of Fahlström's New York circle of artist friends, which also included Johns, Rauschenberg and Billy Klüver.) There's much more information about the content of the painting to be found in the "directory" Fahlström made for *Sitting . . .*, which includes thumbnail versions of the painting's motifs.

Several related works followed, including *Sitting . . . Six months later* (1962), a set of dominoes with comic-book details painted on them (1966) and a sculpture of large blocks, similarly decorated (1965-66). All of these works incorporate an element of variability, a procedure that became central to Fahlström's esthetic. *Sitting . . . Six months later* was the first of what Fahlström called "variable paintings." Elements of the work can be slid into and out of slots, swung on nylon strings and affixed in new positions, held in place by magnets. As the variable paintings developed, magnets would become Fahlström's favored method for securing movable elements.

Like other artists of the time, Fahlström had absorbed John Cage's esthetic of randomness. In his 1966 essay "Hot Dogs and Tweezers," Fahlström connects his interest in the notion of art as a game not only to Cage but also to LSD guru Timothy Leary and psychiatrist Eric Berne, author of the 1965 best-seller *Games People Play*. For Fahlström, as for many others, the social and cultural revolutions of the 1960s crystallized around the notion of play. The second item in his 12-point program for global salvation ("Take Care of the World," 1966) is labeled "Games," and he saw his variable canvases as standing "somewhere in the intersection of paintings, games (type Monopoly and war games) and puppet theater."

When he likened his paintings to a puppet theater, Fahlström was probably thinking chiefly of *The Planetarium* (1963), a variable diptych that combined his interests in concrete poetry and comic strips. On the work's larger right-hand panel are 46 faceless, white figures wearing items of clothing cut from comic books. Each of these Plexiglas-backed figures is mounted on the painting by a magnet. The elements on the left-hand panel are also attached by magnets, but they bear one or two short words instead of figures. The painting's structural apparatus is typically Fahlströmian, that is, multilayered and overdetermined. Each word is keyed to a partic-

ular item of clothing, and the placement of a word on the left panel indicates where the corresponding piece of clothing can be found on the right one. In the arrangement the artist decided on—although his variable paintings were in principle liable to infinite alteration, Fahlström generally didn't want them changed after they left his hands—the figures are scattered around the painting in loose groupings, many in poses that suggest some kind of modern dance. The word groups read like quotes from Gertrude Stein: "He calls as something at something" or "As long as is." In fact, Fahlström created his lexicon by breaking up several sentences from an English translation of Nathalie Sarraute's 1959 novel *Le Planetarium*. At MACBA, visitors could view the very comic covers from which Fahlström cut some of the clothes for the work, and for *The Cold War*. He seems to have favored EC comics from the early 1950s—"Tales of Terror" ("128 Spine-Tingling Pages"), "The Vault of Horror," "Shock," "Crime"—which featured tales of lurid suspense.

The Planetarium is at once charming and challenging, nostalgically evoking an old-fashioned child's game as it dares the viewer to puzzle out its organizing principles. The more one studies the poses and relationships of these figures, the more one can sense what an impact avant-garde dance had on Fahlström. In a 1966 article ("After Happenings"), he mentions Yvonne Rainer, Deborah Hay and Lucinda Childs as dancers whose work had engaged him since his arrival in New York. At the end of the article, Fahlström also makes clear his enthusiasm for less recherché '60s phenomena, praising "the mellifluous swing music in the prologue to *Goldfinger*; the deep heartbeat of the Supremes; the upsurge when consciousness hits the bottom on an LSD trip." Lysergic acid turns up again in Fahlström's 1967 wall sculpture that combines two shiny vacuum-formed plastic signs, one replicating the Esso Oil logo, the other spelling "LSD" in identical red-on-white lettering. Related to Broodthaers's vacuum-formed plaques and the wordplay in Jean-Luc Godard's mid-'60s films, this stripped-down piece is something of an anomaly, given Fahlström's more-is-more esthetic.

In the same year he wrote "After Happenings," Fahlström pushed his experimentation still further with a performance and film titled *Mao-Hope-March* and his first installation, *Dr. Schweitzer's Last Mission*, in which cutouts like those in the variable paintings (only much larger) were placed around a room in the Nordic pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Unfortunately, the Moderna Museet in Stockholm chose not to lend *Dr. Schweitzer's Last Mission* to the current retrospective, but *Mao-Hope-March* was continuously projected (as film, not video) in one of the galleries at



Meatball Curtain (for R. Crumb), 1969, enamel on metal, Plexiglas and magnets, dimensions variable; at Espace Gustave Fayet, Sérignan, France. Collection Sharon Avery-Fahlström, New York.

**The fragmentary images
Fahlström painted on the
eccentrically shaped
cutouts of "Night Music,"
his last series, include
lines of poetry and
doomsday scenarios.**

MACBA. Initially presented during Fahlström's multimedia spectacle *Kisses Sweeter Than Wine*, the film documents a pseudo-protest march Fahlström staged on the streets of New York. As the artist and a group of friends walked through Manhattan carrying placards with photographs of Bob Hope and Mao Tse-tung (Hope's face adorned six placards, Mao's only one), an interviewer taped the responses of passersby, which range from amused to befuddled. Asked whether there is any connection between Hope and Mao, one interviewee deadpans, "I hope not." Although we can't experience *Mao-Hope-March* in its original context, the film is an engaging record of a hilarious art prank worthy of Abbie Hoffman in his yippie heyday, and Fahlström's use of Mao as a ready-made icon anticipates Andy Warhol by some six years.

Yet another artistic avenue was opened in 1966 with *Roulette*, Fahlström's first variable painting that used photographs (tinted with oil paint) rather than comic-book illustrations. Relying largely on film stills—*The Brain That Wouldn't Die*, *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*—*Roulette* explores visual strategies that John Baldessari and others would take up at least a decade later.

After 1966, painting took a backseat for several years as Fahlström concentrated on installations and films, and became eagerly caught up in the tumult of 1968 and its aftermath. In a 1968 article for a Swedish magazine he argued that Happenings had given way to street theater and demonstrations. That year he also made two documentary films in New York for Swedish television and completed *U-barn* (projected continuously at MACBA), a half-hour-long 35mm film that combines images shot inside various Swedish institutions (nursing homes, schools for disabled children) with altered TV ads and an antiwar street-theater performance in Stockholm. Amazingly, all this cinematic activity didn't prevent him from completing *The Little General (Pinball Machine)*, an installation work he'd begun in 1967.

One way to approach *The Little General* is as Fahlström's most radically deconstructed painting. In their shallow 9-by-16-foot pool, which is set atop a waist-high platform, the floating images—magazine photos that Fahlström rephotographed and tinted and placed on pieces of buoyant Styrofoam—can be set in motion by the viewer's hand or breath. Further variations result from the fact that it is possible to walk completely around the pool, viewing the gently shifting composition from different angles. The images offer an irreverent, witty commentary on the culture and politics of the 1960s. Political figures such as Lyndon Johnson and Charles de Gaulle bob in the water alongside an image of black power graffiti in Watts, some coffins, a green-tinted penis (apparently the artist's own—it's titled "Self Portrait"). As throughout the show, a vitrine displayed Fahlström's working materials for the piece, revealing that as well as using found images, he also recruited models and props for his own photographs.

In early 1969, Fahlström was invited to participate in an exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art called "Art and Technology." The museum flew him to Los Angeles for a tour of various corporations and manufacturers which had offered their services to the artists in the show. As "Art and Technology" curator Jane Livingston recalled in a 1994 essay, Fahlström, after abandoning some more high-tech fantasies, became intrigued by a company that specialized in plastic signs for fast-food restaurants. Of equal importance, during his visit to Los Angeles, someone from the museum introduced

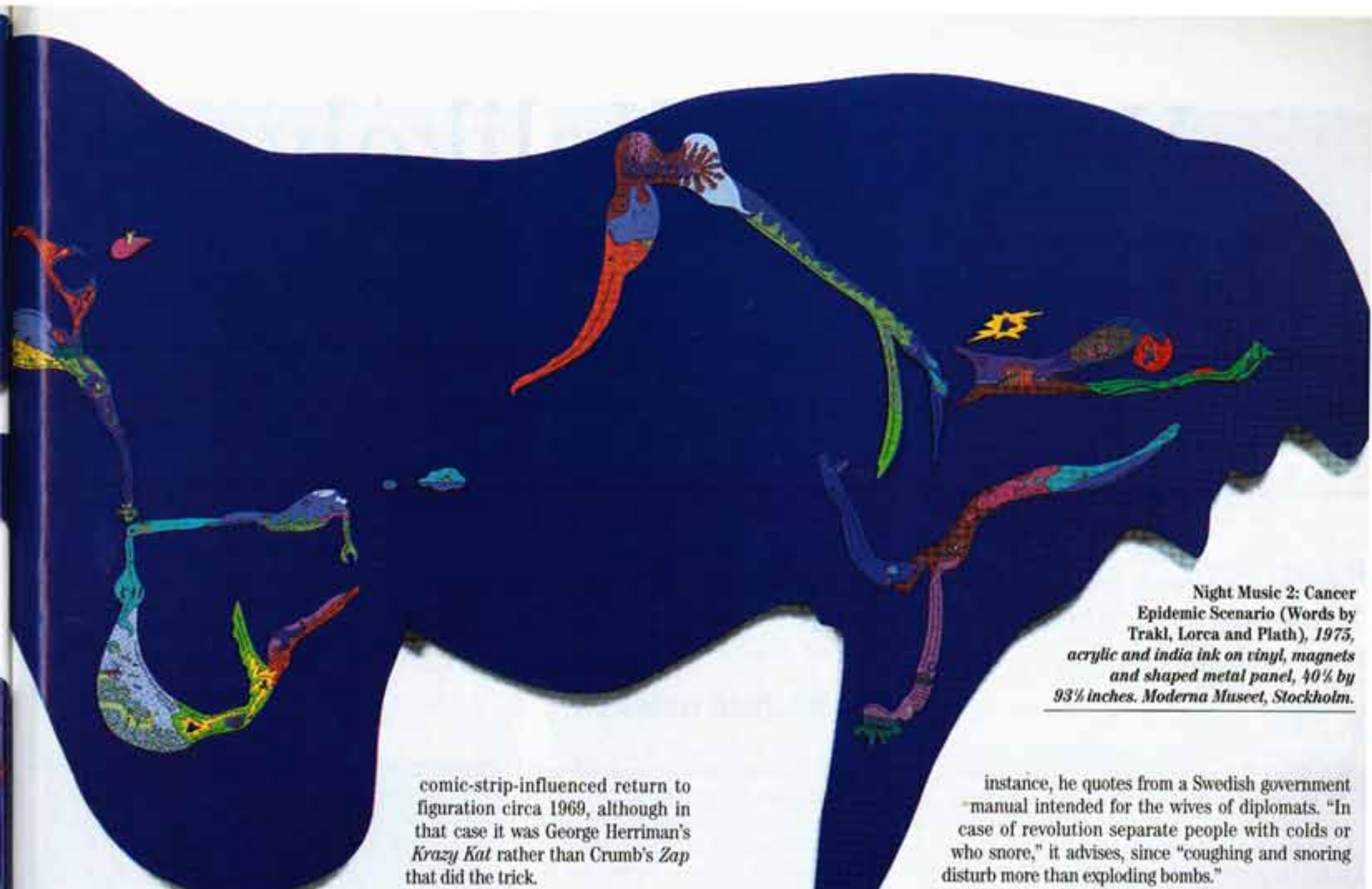
him to underground comics, specifically to *Zap*, the worthy, if considerably more outrageous, successor to *Mad* that featured the drawings of R. Crumb.

Some six months after being turned on to *Zap*, Fahlström was declaring in the pages of a Swedish newspaper that Crumb was "one of the few truly major American artists today." Fahlström appreciated Crumb's drawing style with its roots in comic-book history, while also celebrating him as "the first significant artist to stake a claim in American underground culture." He was also clearly admiring of *Zap*'s wide audience. One of the Crumb creations he singled out was the four-page "Meatball," from *Zap*'s 1967 debut issue. In this episode, as Fahlström put it, "liberation comes from above, in the form of meatballs that drop from the sky on pedestrians' heads one sweltering summer day amid the skyscrapers, transfiguring the people and threatening the world order."

The work that Fahlström produced for "Art and Technology" was *Meatball Curtain (for R. Crumb)*, an installation of brightly colored Plexiglas and metal silhouettes, most of which were based closely on figures from *Zap*. Because it's such a lively, iconographically bawdy work, viewers at first tend to overlook the delightful paradox at the heart of *Meatball Curtain*—it's an emphatically three-dimensional work made mostly from flattened-out images. In an article in these pages about a 1995-96 show of Fahlström's installations, Ulf Erdmann Ziegler observed how "from certain standpoints entire motifs completely vanish while others snap suddenly into view" [see *A.i.A.*, Apr. '96]. At MACBA, visitors could compare the forms in *Meatball Curtain* with their *Zap* sources, which were displayed in vitrines. (Appreciative of Fahlström's use of his art, Crumb himself tracked down many of the references and loaned some rare early *Zap* issues.)

Crumbs and *Zap* had a profound impact on Fahlström's work that went well beyond *Meatball Curtain*. Indeed, the discovery of underground comics seems to have been a crucial factor in Fahlström's return to painting in the early 1970s. Interestingly, Fahlström's shift coincided with Philip Guston's





Night Music 2: Cancer Epidemic Scenario (Words by Trakl, Lorca and Plath), 1975, acrylic and india ink on vinyl, magnets and shaped metal panel, 40 1/2 by 93 1/2 inches. Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

comic-strip-influenced return to figuration circa 1969, although in that case it was George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* rather than Crumb's *Zap* that did the trick.

Despite the parallel with Guston, there really isn't anything in modern art like Fahlström's early 1970s paintings, with their proliferation of figures and their insatiable appetite for data of all kinds. The closest relatives of *World Map* (1972), *Some of My Basic Assumptions* (1973) and the "Notes" (1971) and "Column" (1973) series are probably those narrative medieval maps in which figures and landmarks are sketched in amid topographical details, although Mayan codices must also have contributed to the recurring glyphlike profiles.

The continental contours and national boundaries in *World Map*, which is drawn with a palette of blues, greens, purples, oranges and browns, have little basis in reality, but the statistics contained within them seem to be painstaking in their accuracy. Patient viewers can learn about the scarcity of workers' housing in Bogotá, the infant mortality (50 percent) and illiteracy (95 percent) rates in Brazil, the relative tonnage of bombs dropped on North Vietnam under Johnson (2.8 million in four years) and Nixon (3.1 million in two and a half years), how many acres of trees are consumed to print the Sunday edition of the *New York Times* (500), and a hundred more scary facts. Fahlström's analysis of worldwide political conditions is quite sophisticated, though it also reflects some of the naïve beliefs that afflicted so many Western intellectuals of the time (e.g., *World Map* is enthusiastic about China's brutal Cultural Revolution). The overall picture is of global conspiracy in which capitalist greed leads to exploitation, repression, disease and environmental depredation. To create his tapestry of capital run amok, Fahlström read obsessively, drawing from left-leaning periodicals of the time like *Scanlan's* and *Ramparts* and books such as Edouardo Galeano's angry chronicle *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*. Here, as throughout the exhibition, viewers could study displays of Fahlström's source material. (The current retrospective has benefited enormously from MACBA's innovative decision to temporarily relocate the entire Fahlström archive from New York to Barcelona in order to assist the curators.)

And yet, for all his evident anguish at the state of the world, Fahlström seeded his landscape of global evils with moments of humor, which is perhaps not surprising for an artist so fascinated by comic books. In *World Map*, for

instance, he quotes from a Swedish government "manual intended for the wives of diplomats. "In case of revolution separate people with colds or who snore," it advises, since "coughing and snoring disturb more than exploding bombs."

There is clearly more information in each of Fahlström's early 1970s paintings and drawings than can be assimilated in one viewing. Fahlström, however, was perfectly aware of the excessive amount of content he was providing, and of the possibility that some on the left might accuse him of failing to be an effective advocate for the issues he cared about. But he also understood that for all his strongly held political beliefs, he was fundamentally an artist, not a propagandist. "If I were only, or mainly, interested in educating my viewers," he explained in 1974 in some notes on his work, "I would create simpler structures, and use other media than hand-made art. I see myself as a witness, rather than an educator. As a witness I am increasingly concerned with the emotional impact of facts and events on the world."

During the last two years of Fahlström's life, the primacy he accorded emotion became even clearer. In 1974, he created a pair of works in which the tragedy of a political event—the overthrow of Salvador Allende's government in Chile—was evoked through poetry rather than statistics. The first work, *Packing the Hard Potatoes (Chile 1: Last Months of Allende Regime)*, is a brown metal shelf supporting 20 painted cutouts. The shelf imitates the geographic contours of Chile, while the attenuated biomorphic cutouts (attached at the ends of stiff steel wires that stand upright on magnetic bases) combine vignettes of events in Chile with lines of poetry by Sylvia Plath and Federico García Lorca. In *At Five in the Afternoon (Chile 2: The Coup. Words by Plath and Lorca)*, 20 painted cutouts are impaled on red fiberglass rods that project out of a metal plate shaped, once again, like Chile but this time positioned vertically and painted blue-green. In order to absorb the work, viewers must examine each individual cutout like botanists studying the leaves of a tree.

The unusual shapes of the cutouts were derived from "120 Improvisations for Chile," a set of ink-on-paper drawings which remind us of Fahlström's early interest in Surrealism and of his gift for pure formal invention, an aspect of his work often overlooked because of his interest in appropriated images.

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Fahlström's last series, "Night Music," began in a similar way, with a set of automatist drawings, "182 Improvisations for 'Night Music'" (1974-75), that became the basis for painted cutouts bearing lines of poetry. Backed with magnets, the cutouts are placed on deep blue, biomorphic metal panels that are roughly 3 feet high and 7 feet long. At MACBA, all four of the variable paintings that make up "Night Music" were on view. The gallery's subdued lighting—which was how Fahlström wished the works to be exhibited—seemed appropriate for the doom-laden, even apocalyptic, mood of the works.

For each piece, Fahlström wrote a "scenario" predicting a catastrophic (and entirely plausible) future for humanity. "Night Music 2: Cancer Epidemic Scenario" begins: "Leakage from nuclear plants. Nuclear testing. Nuclear 'mini-wars.' Gradual weakening of the earth's ozone layer . . . Number of cancer-causing substances reaches one million." Rather than quoting from the scenarios in the paintings, Fahlström chose to employ 20th-century poetry, by Plath and Lorca again, as well as the German Expressionist poet Georg Trakl and Nuyorican bard Pedro Pietri. The fragmentary images he painted onto the eccentrically shaped cutouts, which recall undersea creatures (the artist likened them to tropical fish) and internal organs, alternatively take inspiration from the lines of poetry inscribed on them and the doomsday scenarios. It's impossible not to interpret "Night Music" in relation to Fahlström's losing battle with colon cancer. One quote from Lorca in *Night Music 2* reads, "I want to sleep awhile—awhile, a minute, a century—but all must know that I have not died, that there is a golden manger inside my lips—that I am the immense shadow of my tears." Another, from Trakl, warns, "whoever is in pain will feel that pain forever and whoever is afraid of death will carry it on his shoulders."

Continuing a tendency that begins with the Chile works, the cutouts are so attenuated that Fahlström leaves himself hardly any surface on which to paint. And yet paint he does, creating meticulously executed scenes on the wildly irregular elements. In a two-pronged piece from *Night Music 2*, the lines just quoted from Trakl find literal expression in images of a seated man dumbly pounding his head with a hammer and a bicyclist pedaling along a narrow blue road with a tombstonelike object on his shoulders. The irregular shapes and the fragmented character of many of the images on them give "Night Music" an almost archeological flavor, as if Fahlström were reassembling the shards from a lost civilization.

A retrospective, of course, also has an archeological aspect to it. The exhibition I saw

at MACBA sought to gather evidence from an unusually diverse, active, nomadic career, and to give visitors a detailed picture of what went into the making of the artist and his art. Marshaling nearly all the major works that Fahlström created, and supplementing them with an impressive array of documentation, it succeeded beyond all expectations. The retrospective also revealed Fahlström as a figure of incredibly contemporary appeal: he may have completed his last work a quarter century ago, but everywhere I turn, I find echoes of his art. I see his interest in orchestrating politically charged data reborn in the conspiracy-theory diagrams of the late Mark Lombardi; his recycling of found images in oblique, oddly choreographed narratives has close parallels with the paintings of Jane Hammond; his embrace of the graphic and erotic possibilities of cartooning relates to the "superflat" paintings and sculptures of Takashi Murakami (and a hundred other comic-strip-influenced painters around the world); the laboriously elaborated sci-fi narratives of his "Ade-Ledic-Nander" paintings and the bright, sharply delineated biomorphism of his late work are recalled in the art of Matthew Ritchie; the concatenation of mutating forms in *Opera* is echoed in the friezelike mutant abstractions of Fabian Marcaccio; and his combination of "conceptual" information, pop-culture imagery and global awareness, though rare in the early 1970s, is practically a basic requirement for young artists today. As striking as these parallels may be, the foregoing list isn't meant to suggest that Fahlström's chief importance is as a progenitor of current trends. On the contrary, he achieved a unique hybrid of visual invention and narrative complexity that, to my eye, no artist has since come close to equaling. □

1. Mike Kelley, "Myth Science," in *Oyvind Fahlström. Die Installationen/The Installations*, copublished by Gesellschaft für Aktuelle Kunst, Bremen, and Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, 1995, p. 19.
2. From "Hallo All Stupid Titles," ca. 1950, in *Oyvind Fahlström*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1982, p. 24.
3. Text accompanying the 1968 silkscreen edition of *Opera*, reprinted in *Oyvind Fahlström: Another Space for Painting*, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2001, p. 40.

"Oyvind Fahlström" was curated by Manolo Borja-Villel, Jean-François Chevrier and Sharon Avery-Fahlström. After debuting at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona [Oct. 18, 2000-Jan. 8, 2001], the exhibition traveled to Fondazione Ragghianti, Lucca, Italy [Mar. 18-May 15]. A smaller version opens this month at MASS MoCA, North Adams [June 15-Sept. 3]. The accompanying catalogue includes contributions by Immanuel Wallerstein, Octavi Rofes and Suely Rolnik, as well as essays by the curators. "Oyvind Fahlström: The Complete Graphics and Multiples" is on view at Galerie Aurel Scheibler, Cologne, Germany [May 5-July 7]. A two-person exhibition of Fahlström and R. Crumb was seen at Espace Gustave Fayet, Sérignan, France [June 17-Sept. 2, 2000].