

Artforum • Öyvind Fahlström • Rachel Withers • 10 february 2002

## Öyvind Fahlström

Rachel Withers

When Baltic's blurb calls Öyvind Fahlström the "last unexplored continent" of postwar art, it isn't just another case of hyperbolic spin. Of course, Fahlström's status as a first-order practitioner has been an open secret outside the UK for some years—but this retrospective (launched at MACBA Barcelona in 2001 and showing in Gateshead in its most expanded form) should help get British art audiences up to speed. (It's also a riposte to those who doubted Baltic's pulling power: This meaty show more than compensates for a few hours' misery courtesy the UK's ailing railways.) The exhibition includes drawings, paintings, "variable paintings," multiples, and installations (including the 1966 Venice Biennale exhibit *Dr. Schweitzer's Last Mission*) made between the early '50s and Fahlström's death in 1976. We're treated to examples of Fahlström's experiments in concrete poetry, such as *Birds in Sweden*, a 1962–63 Swedish radio broadcast featuring the fantastical bird languages "birdo," "whammo," and "faglo." There's also film and performance documentation (including footage of the Dada-esque 1966 *Mao-Hope March*—giant mug shots of Bob Hope and Chairman Mao paraded down a New York street). Fahlström's project might be summarized as a sustained attempt to rearticulate the dialectic of "public" language and "individual" expression, global reality and personal experience, outside the liberal frame—but given Fahlstrom's concern to frustrate as well as respond to the desire for legibility, tying the parcel up so neatly itself feels like a form of misreading.