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Öyvind Fahlström

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One of the most memorable pieces in the 1997 Documenta X was Öyvind Fahlström's *The Little General (Pinball Machine)*, 1967. Resembling a raised indoor swimming pool with some two dozen movable parts spread out across its shimmering Plexiglas surface, the thirty-year-old "variable" sculpture radiated a visual audacity that made much of the current work around it pale by comparison. Ersatz scoring cues brushed up against cutouts of historical and pop-culture figures, who in turn seemed to jostle dismembered cartoon limbs and partial anatomies. The cumulative effect was dizzying, as if news, commercials, and cartoons were being broadcast in one overpowering barrage.

It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that, since the artist's death of cancer at age forty-seven, when he was at the peak of his career, Fahlström has been primed for a major international rediscovery. Every few years a new exhibition opens and the torch passes to the next generation. Now, Barcelona's feisty MACBA has taken the plunge, organizing a thorough survey of Fahlström's work—some seventy paintings, drawings, videos, and installations made between 1953, when his career began, and 1976, when it prematurely ended.

Born to Norwegian and Swedish parents in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1928, Fahlström went to Sweden for the first time (on what was meant to be a short visit) in 1939, but war broke out, and he was not reunited with his parents until 1947. He moved to New York in 1961, his artistic career then well under way, and lived there until his death. As a participant in the now historic 1962 "New Realists" exhibition at Sidney Janis Gallery, Fahlström found himself at the forefront of American Pop art, and his invention of paintings with variable parts remains one of the unexplored legacies of the '60s. With the unforgettable comic-inspired installation *Dr. Schweitzer's Last Mission*, 1964–66, as a calling card, Fahlström would undoubtedly have become a household name had he chosen to follow the consumer-culture banner held aloft by Warhol and Lichtenstein.

Instead, in a swerve to the left that strangely mirrors the stifled career trajectory of American Pop maverick Peter Saul, Fahlström was drawn deeper into politics. He reinvented the Monopoly board as a superpower tussle over Southeast Asia—*Indochina*, 1971—and came up with another game prototype, *Kidnapping Kissinger*, in 1972. But even as his sculptures became grimmer, more weighted with satire and driven by helplessness, Fahlström's irrepressible humor continued to blaze in his playfully labyrinthine drawings. From the late '50s on, these obsessively detailed, surrealist-flavored reports from the underground have been an indispensable guide to the overlapping terrain high art and comics once shared, and firmly establish Fahlström as one of the great imaginations of the latter half of the twentieth century.