

## Local Hero Öyvind Fahlström

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A rocket shoots into the sky, a large tear falls from Dr Schweitzer's left eye and a flag declares: 'The End'. Fahlström's large installations, such as his magnum opus of 1964-6, Dr Schweitzer's Last Mission, display a mixture of geopolitical fantasy and detailed economic fact. Fahlström, who liked to work in his studio with the TV on, was involved in a frantic and meticulous mapping of the technological and political conditions that form the context for human life and activity. The investigation was never-ending, but the further he travelled into the political labyrinth, the more puzzling and frustrating he found the situation: 'I deplore my incapacity to find out what is going on. To find out what life, the world, is about, in the confusion of propaganda, communication, language, time, etc.' To distinguish between fact and fiction, he concluded, was virtually impossible: 'There is no reality which is not illusory, no illusions which are not reality.'

Looking at Fahlström's labyrinthine political charts - so full of statistical information and absurd journalistic details - I often recall the lines of Jorge Luis Borges: 'I meditated on that lost maze: I imagined it inviolate and perfect at a secret crest of a mountain; I imagined it erased by rice fields or beneath the water; I imagined it infinite, no longer composed of octagonal kiosks and returning paths, but of rivers and provinces and kingdoms ... I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths, of one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future and in some way involve the stars ...' (The Garden of Forking Paths).

In the early 1950s Fahlström emerged as a painter and poet in the Surrealist tradition, and the labyrinths through which he travelled were poetic and linguistic but not necessarily political. With widening political awareness came an increasing interest in the world of hard facts and in the infinitely complicated workings of the global economy: arms, finance, oil, drugs, food, cars, medicine, labour. Works such as Column 1-4 (1972-4) and World Map (1972) are really colourful maps of the world that try to reveal political reality in all its complexity, brutality and pettiness.

Everything and every nation is intimately intertwined: from Brazil and Chile to Tanzania and Mozambique, the United Arab Emirates and Sri Lanka. 'Sweden is one of the five countries with more assets abroad than at home' is the caption accompanying a strange octopus/businessman. 'No one thinks about killing people - it's all very impersonal. You don't see the bombs - IT'S ALL VERY ABSTRACT', says a US pilot with a blue face. And then there are statistics, statistics and more statistics: '\$40 million', 'Growth: 1000% in 20 years', '40% per year', 'The German government lost 20 million', 'October War: cost \$10 million per minute.'

In a discussion with Stuart Hall, Sarat Maharaj claims: 'There is the assumption that somehow the global is bad, and that there is this primordial good called the local which we must somehow hold on to as the point of resistance.' The dichotomy of global and local is never as clear-cut as people think. There is emergence, dissolution and then re-establishment: recent trends can quickly come to be seen as a local tradition. One of the most ambitious and systematic attempts to think through the relationship between the local and global is Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's recent study *Empire* (2000), which intelligently criticizes all naive scepticism about globalization: 'What needs to be addressed [is] the production of locality ... the social machines that create and recreate the identities and differences that are understood as local.' This is exactly what Fahlström attempted to do in works such as *World Map*. There he is, of course, critical of US dominance and of the global levelling of cultural differences, but he is also interested in the micro-dynamics of the global/local relationship, in the 'social mechanisms' that allow local identities to take shape. Nowhere in Fahlström's work does one find a facile defence of all things local, the simplistic attitude described by Hardt and Negri as 'a kind of primordialism that fixes and romanticizes social relations and identities'. Although he has been dead for a quarter of a century, Fahlström thus appears to me the most interesting artist on the subject of the global economy. 'The issues raised by his work are more timely than ever', wrote Mike Kelley seven years ago. He's still right.

Over the years Fahlström issued several manifestos, including *Hipy papy* bthuthdththuthda bthuthdy - *Manifesto for Concrete Poetry* (1953), the politically

more radical S.O.M.B.A (Some of My Basic Assumptions) (1973) and, perhaps the most visionary of them all, Take Care of the World (1975). Divided into twelve sections - Art, Games, Multiples, Style, Essentials, Risk Reforms, Arms, Terror, Utilities, Profits, Politics, Pleasure - Take Care of the World presents a fully fledged revolutionary aesthetic, beginning with a definition of art itself: 'Consider art as a way of experiencing a fusion of "pleasure" and "insight". Reach this by impurity, or multiplicity of levels, rather than by reduction.' The sections on 'Multiples' and 'Pleasure' articulate ideas about the future production, distribution and display of art: 'It is time to incorporate advances in technology to create mass-produced works of art, obtainable by the rich and the not rich.' Other schemes include a series of cut-out games to be sold by subscription and a robot theatre operated by computers. Under the heading 'Pleasure' Fahlström envisions entirely new forms of cultural institution: 'New concepts for concert, theatre and exhibition buildings; but first of all pleasure houses for meditation, dance, fun, games and sexual relations (compare the "psychedelic discotheque" on the West Coast, and the multi-screen discotheques of Gerd Stern and Andy Warhol). Utilize teleprinter, closed circuit TV, computers etc., to arrange contacts, sexual and other. Incite to creative living, but also approve "passive" pleasures by means of new drugs - good drugs, strong and harmless.'

Fahlström's anti-reductionist credo, his belief in impurity and multiplicity, has of course long been the norm and a common starting-point for dialogue and cross-fertilization between the visual arts and other art forms. His two major works for radio, Birds in Sweden (1963) and The Holy Torsten Nilsson (1965), are the most complex and confusing artworks I've come across. The latter work (named after Sweden's Social Democratic foreign minister in the late 1960s) manages to bring together local Swedish issues and global politics. It opens with Fahlström trying to get access to the intellectual centre of Swedish leftist ideology through telepathy: 'Young man: On a stairway outside Sven Lindqvist's flat in Hägersten. About to visit Lindqvist, the leading ideologist of the radical tendency, Öyvind Fahlström is true to form and arrives a few minutes early in the hope of tuning in telepathically to the

thoughts of those living in the building.’ It turns out that his telepathic capacities are so strong that he enters not the mind of political journalist Lindqvist but that of Social Democrat politician Olof Palme. But that’s just the beginning. Lee Harvey Oswald’s wife, Swedish prime minister Tage Erlander, some CIA call-girls, Chinese general Lo Jui-Ching and a host of other historical figures also appear in this sound labyrinth, which transforms political fact into fiction and, via a collective LSD trip in Peking, true socialism into reality. Those were the days.