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The Desire for Freedom

Öyvind Fahlström

Three images from the series Columns and Sketch for World Map Part I

By Max Liljefors

1 The four screenprints by Öyvind Fahlström in this exhibition depict quasi-hybrids of comics and maps. They present complex global networks and connections in the post-war period, all of which revolve around the worldwide military and economic dominance of the United States: the Vietnam War, racial segregation, global economic injustice and the cynical, triumphant march of capitalism. The works displayed date from the 1970s – a creative period in Fahlström’s career in which he grappled with concrete political and social issues from an explicitly leftwing standpoint. According to Pontus Hultén, the founder of Stockholm’s Moderna Museet, this development took root after Fahlström’s move from Europe to New York in 1961. Nevertheless, on the New York art scene Fahlström’s engagement with Realpolitik was perceived as typically European.

2 Sketch for World Map Part I, from 1972, is a study for Fahlström’s painting, World Map (acrylic and Indian ink on vinyl), of the same year. In this sketch, the oceans between the continents are reduced to mere straits. National borders barely follow their actual paths. The forms Fahlström has given to various territories more or less serve the purpose of telling these lands’ contemporary political and economic histories in a flurry of words, images and diagrams. Thus, a pervasive theme is the U.S. support for dictators and paramilitary forces in Latin America, as well as the considerable profits accrued by American corporations that this policy facilitates. Roughly in the middle of the image there is some documentation about U.S. support for armed death squads in Costa Rica, which had abolished its army in 1949; immediately beneath, and to the right, there are details of American involvement in Brazil’s economic growth and turbulent changes of government. In his maps, Fahlström abandons the objectivity of cartographical projection in favour of visualising the phenomena of political oppression and economic exploitation. Geographic borders are transformed into image and text fields, visual and narrative elements compose so-called image-swarms about poverty and wealth, suffering and gun violence, and the profits raked in by the rich from the defenceless poor. In other words, these are images about the real story, or stories, that ultimately unfolded, and still unfold, behind national demarcations, and show that these demarcations are sometimes even maintained, purely for the sake of providing a functional context for them.

3 Throughout his entire artistic oeuvre, Fahlström has sourced his visual inspiration and graphic vocabulary from popular culture and the mass media, as well as from comics, puzzles, games, maps and the news media. The three additional works in the exhibition share the collective title, Columns, as a nod to the columns of text in a newspaper.

4 In the middle of the 1972 lithograph Column no. 1 (Wonder Bread), there appears a light blue image field in the shape of piece of toast featuring a muscular man in a white T-shirt. This is a paraphrase of a classic American advert for Wonder Bread, which, according to the advertisers, makes a person strong: ‘Wonder Bread helps build strong bodies in 12 ways.’ The darker blue field immediately beneath it then metaphorically depicts the negative health effects of this so-called wonder bread: a loaf of bread decked out as a tank, with the muzzles of rifles protruding from the front and firing at the now naked man. To the right of the slice of Wonder Bread is a man torn to shreds by a bomb; the text informs the viewer that the company behind Wonder Bread also develops electronic systems for armed missiles, and thus: ‘Wonder Bread helps destroy strong bodies.’ The metaphor of firearms in the loaf of bread is a concrete illustration of the normally concealed, murderous connection between America’s comfortable way of life and its warring effect on other parts of the world. Surrounding these scenes, Fahlström has spread before us a tapestry of similar themes. Beside elaborate statistics on the profits of the weapons and oil industries and the unjust tax system are pictures illustrating the history of the slave trade, while modern-day newspaper headlines report trivial events: ‘4 police cars crash chasing nude driver’ (four police cars collide, in pursuit of a naked driver).

5 Fahlström sets the White House at the centre of Column no. 2 (Picasso 90), of 1973: like a spider, it creates a web of corrupt liaisons.
between politics, finance and the military that spreads out across the U.S.,
along with the rest of the world. Octopus-like tentacles embrace the CIA,
FBI and the corrupt trade unions allied to President Richard Nixon and
other Republican politicians. A crazed pattern of injustice unfolds,
depicted in a mix of comparative statistics and pedagogical illustrations.
With this collage, Fahlström expresses his belief in the responsibility of art,
in a world of injustice and oppression. This notion is made verbally explicit
in the bottom right-hand corner of the picture, where he addresses a letter
to Picasso, whose Guernica (1937) he holds to be a model of
politically engaged art. Here, however, Fahlström takes the famous
Spanish painter to task for failing to act on demands that he use his
painting, which is kept in New York, to make a political statement: ‘Why
don’t you honour the pleas from American and other artists to remove
Guernica from the Museum of Modern Art, until the USA completely
withdraws from all of S.E. Asia?’ Fahlström’s proposal is particularly
poignant, considering that Guernica was created in protest at the German
bombing of civilians during the Spanish Civil War. On the one hand, the
Germans’ military strategy recalled the bombing of Vietnam, a persistent
theme in Fahlström’s work. On the other hand, Guernica was on loan to the
MoMA at the time, because Picasso had forbidden the painting to be
transported to Spain, as long as the country was not a democracy.
(Guernica was only returned to Spain in 1981.) For the same reason,
Fahlström thought, Guernica should not rest on American soil. An image
field beside the letter shows Guernica being carried out of the MoMA.

Fahlström’s fourth work in this exhibition, Column no. 4 (IB-affair),
from 1974, deals with a political scandal in Sweden. In 1973 Peter Bratt
and Jan Guillou, journalists for the newspaper, Folket i Bild/Kulturfront,
exposed the existence of an undisclosed secret service, which had been
set up by the post-war Social Democratic government to spy on Swedish
communists and operated without any form of legal basis.

Among other things, Bratt and Guillou managed to prove IB’s
extensive cooperation with the CIA and the Israeli secret service, Shin
Beth, in violation of Sweden’s doctrine of neutrality. Bratt and Guillou were
sent to prison on sentences for espionage. In Fahlström’s lithograph, the IB
affair is depicted as a facet of America’s global imperialism. In the middle
of the picture is a tape recorder, wearing a police hat and sunglasses and
framed with the following inscriptions: ‘US Public Safety Program’ and
‘Murder Export, Inc.’. Beside it, there is text explaining that between 1962
and 1967 the U.S. spent 308 million dollars on training and drilling 7,480
foreign policemen to join death squads, torture people and terrorise the
independent trade unions. Diagonally below, and to the right, is a floppy
Swedish cap, also with sunglasses, labelled ‘IB affair’. And below that is an
illustration of the contradiction between the myth of Swedish neutrality and
its reality: in an orange image field stand the journalists, Bratt and Guillou,
behind bars. After seeing Fahlström’s picture, Bratt summed up the
leftist view on Sweden’s international role as follows: ‘In the eyes of
Swedish intelligence, Sweden lost its political innocence and became a
small link in the chain of America’s global network.’

The works presented here are examples of the way in which
Fahlström, in his 1970s output, made his aesthetic decisions on the basis
of objective economic and historical information. In a sense, Fahlström
saw this as a renewal of the convention of history painting. ‘With the
introduction of a completely coloured background (in the Column series,
World Map, etc.), I have gotten into a sort of historical painting where all
kinds of data and ideas – historical, economic, poetic, topical – are
presented in a unified style. For the sake of clarity, data and
interpretations are both written down and depicted visually. Blue colours
denote USA, violet Europe, red to yellow socialist countries, and green to
brown the Third World.’

Fahlström’s detailed documentation and sharp political criticism
arose from his sympathy for all the poor and disadvantaged people in the
world, as well as from his ethical standards and high intellectual integrity.
He describes his impression of the U.S. in the 1960s, as follows:

‘Living in LBJ’s [Lyndon B. Johnson’s] and Nixon’s America during the
Vietnam war – culminating in the Christmas ’72 terror bombings of Hanoi
and Haiphong and Watergate – it became impossible not to deal in my
work – once I had the stylistic tools – with what was going on around me:
Guernica, multiplied a million times.’ Nevertheless, the explicit
political statements in Fahlström’s work are not at the expense of
aesthetic and formal considerations. If anything, indeed, Fahlström went a
stage further in the 1970s in working out some of the artistic problems
that had concerned him at an earlier stage in his career. The term
‘Bisociation’ sums up the central principle and challenges of his work. The
expression stems from the 1964 book, The Act of Creation, by the Austrian-
Hungarian and English author, Arthur Koestler. (Koestler’s anti-totalitarian
novel, Darkness at Noon, of 1940, gave its name to one of the different
thematic groupings in the present exhibition). For Koestler, ‘Bisociation’
signified a fundamental force of all creativity: the ability to combine two
otherwise unrelated perspectives, in order to reach a new and surprising
level of meaning. If two distinct, or even contradictory, thought
paradigms – with fundamentally different origins, criteria and values – meld or collide, a new thought horizon can open up, to suggest startling new meanings. For Fahlström, this linkage does not primarily take place through combining irreconcilable areas of subject matter, such as the infantile idylls of the advertising world with the factualities of slaughter, or the blending of art and popular culture. He is more concerned to defy the contrast between form and content, and between unworldly formalism and political engagement, which helped to spawn numerous art movements in the 1960s.

This approach can be traced back to Fahlström’s early output. At the end of the 1950s, he began sampling visual gestures and topos from the world of comics, from MAD magazine and later from the illustrators, George Herriman and Robert Crumb. For some time this influence was noticeable in the non-figurative, yet visually distinct, pictorial elements that occupied the entire surface of an image, such as Sitting from 1962.

The results are pictures that aim to tell us something without being read as a narrative, something with no legible entity. The impulse to read is awakened and simultaneously inhibited. In Fahlström’s non-figurative Adele Nander II, which he worked on from 1955 to 1957 [the title derives from a science fiction novel by A. E. van Vogt], semiotically similar shapes create delimited structures in separate sections of the image surface. This not only results in an original composition, but seems, in other respects, as well, to be of prime importance to Fahlström. According to Pontus Hultén, Fahlström was inclined to show a work to interested friends at various stages of completion. Fahlström would drape a sheet over the image, so that only the part he was concentrating on at the time could be viewed through a hole in the sheet. The purpose was to prevent the spectators, as well as Fahlström himself, from being distracted by other parts of the image or by the composition, as a whole. Evidently, Fahlström would even work on the picture in a similar fashion.

In this compositional technique, the artist Mike Kelly saw a parallel to Fahlström’s democratic perspective on geopolitical questions: each part should first be appreciated in its autonomy, and only then integrated into a larger system.

Throughout his entire artistic production, Fahlström was fascinated with rules and games, from his concrete poetry right through to his world maps. This was most forcefully expressed in his interactive, or variable, paintings and installations, where certain elements of the work can be moved by the spectators. In his 1966 text, ‘Korvar och pincetter’ [Hotdogs and Tweezers], Fahlström described the idea of the game as a simple, fundamental world view and explained his work as a combination of gaming rules, invariable forms and the variables of the playing subject. He held that the resulting constellations appeared to reflect the fundamental tension between ‘man’s astronomically free choice’ and the ‘absolute harshness’ of reality.

For Fahlström, the tension characterising the idea of the game stands in contrast to the ‘free form’ of formalism, in which everything can be connected with everything else, so that in principle, nothing is really connected, and everything appears to be of equal value.

Yet, in terms of content, there is also a contrast between Fahlström’s attitude and the attitude of indirection displayed in Pop Art and Neo-Dadaism. It is here that Fahlström’s ‘bisociative’ leaps take on greater significance: the rules of reality – with such disparate examples as the border between Congo and Angola, the numbers in a telephone book, and the positioning of buttons on a jacket – are characterised by a fragile stability; they look absolute, yet they are easily changed. Ultimately, it is about a new definition of Realpolitik. Realpolitik is generally understood as the pragmatic, often dirty, political practice that stands in opposition to principles and ideals. Yet Fahlström would like to show that this structuring of reality by Realpolitik does not actually exist. The rules are inmaterial, and thus brittle; they can always be reinvented, altered, or discarded. Fahlström’s geopolitical engagement emerges from this optimism.

Fahlström’s refusal to accept the opposition of form and content, as a limiting factor in his artistic work, makes him difficult to classify, in art historical terms. He was part of the international art scene in New York, in touch with Neo-Dadaist and Pop Art figures, such as Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Erró, and many others. Because of his appreciation of popular culture, he himself has been designated as a Pop Artist, but his interests in rules and game theory make him more of a Conceptualist and closer, in a sense, to Neo-Dadaism and Fluxus. Yet the concrete political content of his art differentiates him from these movements: in contrast to the ‘coolness’ of Warhol and Lichtenstein, he was ‘hot’. In hindsight, Fahlström appears to have been an avant-gardist, who was an inspiration to a later generation of post-modern artists. This became clear, at the latest, at Documenta X in Kassel, in 1997, where two of his greatest installations were reconstructed: Meatball Curtain (for R. Crumb) (1969) and The Little General (Pinball Machine) (1967–1968). His 1953 manifesto for concrete poetry,
Notes


15. 'Meatball Curtain' is in reference to a comic by Robert Crumb, in which meatballs – an allusion to H-bombs – rain down on Los Angeles. back


17. In A. A. Milne’s, The House at Pooh Corner, Owl, at Pooh’s behest, writes ‘happy birthday to you’, but spells it ‘Hipy Papy Bthuthdth Thuthda Bthuthdy’. A. A. Milne’s, The House at Pooh Corner, New York, 1943. back
Öyvind Fahlström
Sketch for World Map Part I (Americas, Pacific), 1972
Offset lithography, 86.4 x 101.6 cm
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