



# MATIAS FALDBAKKEN

THE CONCEPTUAL SABOTEUR PUTS THE "NO" IN NORWAY

written by **Maxwell Williams** photographed by **Marcel Leliénhof**

A FEW YEARS AGO, IN A PAST LIFE AS AN ART HANDLER, I WAS DE-INSTALLING A show that Matias Faldbakken's works were in. The show wasn't for sale, and Faldbakken's two pieces were crudely placed tape on MDF board. At the end of the show, Faldbakken gave the instruction to destroy the works. It isn't until I ring him at his home on a soggy Norwegian day, does this historical tidbit come to the fore. "If it's sold," he laughs, "it's preserved, and if it's not, it's destroyed. That's the logic."

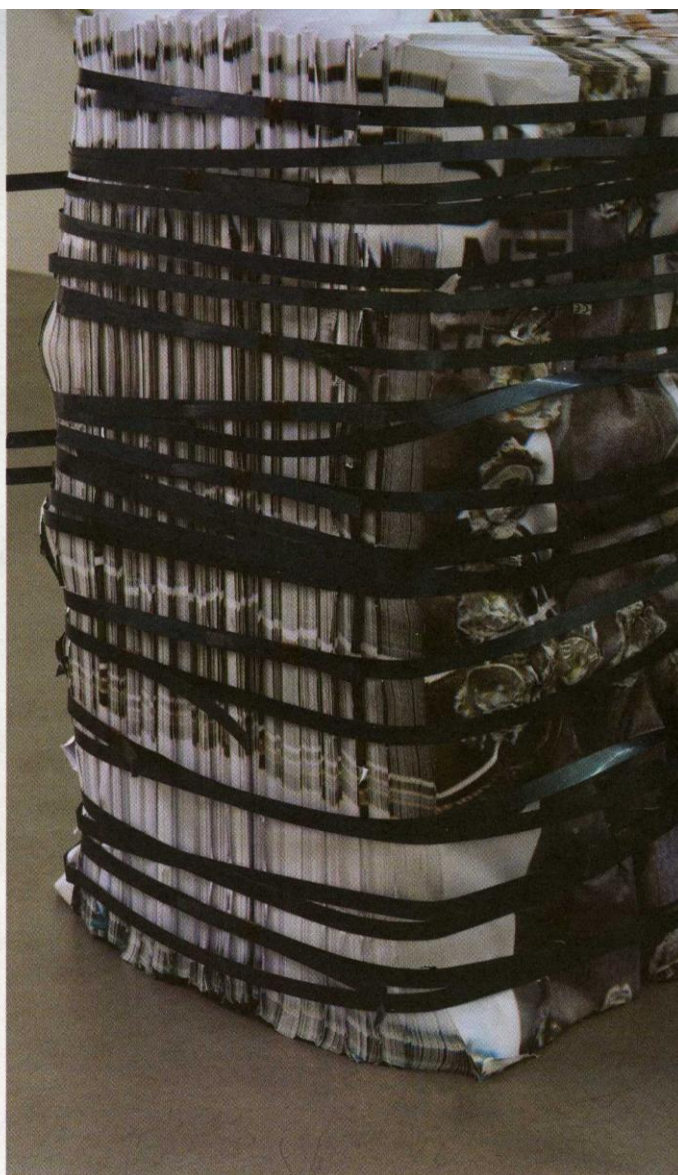
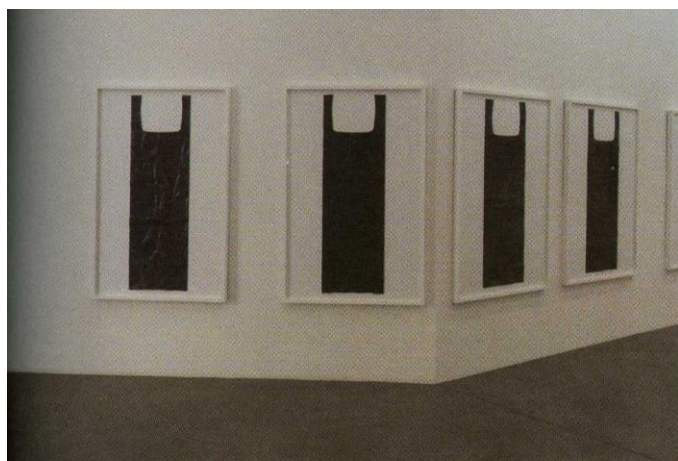
Faldbakken is a sort of ghost in the art world machine like that. In years prior, his art dealt with abstractions in negativity. He would take the meaning out of things, strip them of context, and send them into a black hole of negation. For his show *Nothing Doing* at Standard Gallery in Oslo, Faldbakken wrote in the catalogue, "The Eskimos have two hundred ways to say snow. I have three million ways to say no." Lightjet prints hung on the wall, images out of focus, nothing held any sort of discernable meaning. But that wasn't quite enough.

"More and more," Faldbakken explains, "I'm trying to avoid the 'n'

words—negativity, negation." He's been circling around another theme, one that deals with the value of the work itself, which may be the most sensitive place to taunt the art world. "[The problem is in] locating the value of the artwork," he says. "The situation where you don't really know if a work is disposable or if it's supposed to be worth a lot of money. I'm making quite a few works on trash bags. There is this shift from being a trash bag, to being worth a lot of money, to going back to being a trash bag. It's one of the headaches of contemporary art: the value of the work is always insecure."

Faldbakken first gained notoriety through something much more permanent and secure—a series of novels, dubbed in the press "The Scandinavian Misanthropy Trilogy." Though he's an artist, and doesn't consider the books very "crafty—they're not that literary," he is possibly better known as an author than a visual artist. "For people not in the art business," he says, "it's very easy to relate to. If they ask me what I do, and I say that I'm an artist, they're like, 'So you paint?' And if I say, 'Oh, I also write books.' Then a light comes on. If I want to impress people, I





Clockwise from top left:  
*Known to Few, Unknown to Fewer*, (2010). Installation view. Courtesy Simon Lee Gallery, London.  
*"Poster Sculpture,"* (2010). 3000 bound posters. 39.375" x 27.5" x 21.25". Courtesy Simon Lee Gallery, London.  
*Shocked into Abstraction*, (2009). Installation view. Courtesy Ikon Gallery, London. Photography: Stuart Whipps.

say I write books."

As the reputation suggests, the books deal with another form of negativity. "That's the only place I have used the word misanthropy. In my visual art, I've never used that term. I use terms like negativism and negativity as a driving force. Misanthropy—man hating man—that's in the books. The approach is satirical, just seeking out inter-human problems. The books are burlesque. They have a lot of characters, and it's not really realistic—it's a bit cartoonish. The characters are vehicles for ideas—one person is one idea. This is about porn, this is about abuse, this is about rape, this is about violence. Whereas in the visual work, I would say that it's one of my artistic tools, to abstract ideas of negativity."

But, I digress. Those are the works that have been destroyed and torn apart. Faldbakken's ephemeral period. His work has taken a delightfully recursive (on the art world) turn. Newer works resemble lockers and cabinets pulled taught by ratchet straps, the life crushed from them. "The idea is that I've done a lot of works that are about seriality in this pop way or minimalist art way. The squeeze works are a way of reversing a serial

object. Taking a serial object and compressing it back into one piece, and in the same gesture, destroying it."

Destruction, negativity, misanthropy. It's all so fucking dark. The conversation turns, of course, to black metal. He laughs that Americans are obsessed with it. But it's something Nordic about the negativity that Faldbakken exudes in his work. "Of course, there's the darkness and the melancholy of the north," he admits. "The perfect functioning Scandinavian has this flipside that produces the darkest of the dark. It's a socially democratic functioning welfare state, full of oil and design and nice nature, and on the other side, kids run around and burn churches and kill each other."

If you take away anything from this, it's that Faldbakken genuinely upsets the system. He is the church burner of art, taking the norms of gallery and institution work and pushing them from what their context suggests, into the nether of meaninglessness. And in there is something wholly refreshing, artworks devoid of expectation and the grossness of art. Somehow the darkness makes for inspired work, telling us that things aren't always as they need to be.