

Stay with the Negative

Norwegian artist and novelist **Matias Faldbakken** responds to socio-political sore points with ambivalence and provocation
by Dominic Eichler

There are two complementarily opposing views out there: that visual artists have issues with words; and that the most vitriolic art writers are probably failed artists. Underlying these commonly held opinions is the presumed schism between language and art, which persists despite the fact that art is highly talkative and intertextual. Some years ago, at a house party where everyone was drinking beer from bottles and sitting huddled around each other in tight circles in a Northern European way, I caught myself lazily repeating these opinions to the art historian Tom Holert. Maybe it was because I had been struggling, as most of my art-writing colleagues have at one point or another, with the challenge



of putting into words an exhibition by an artist whose work was not yet bolstered by any writing of note. Perhaps the meagre attempts by the gallery or the institution to do so seemed inadequate or trite, the ultra-sparse, reticent works then in question were all staunchly untitled, and the artist was unwilling to be interviewed or downright hostile to explanations or 'translation'. When you want words to spring up as easily as weeds and smell like roses, sometimes white walls can feel like a desert. Holert pulled me up and said that, in his experience, many of the best artists are very good writers too (if they wanted to be writers in the first place). I suppose that may well also make them the best critics of art critics as well.

As I write this, I heed Holert's words, aware that the author and artist Matias Faldbakken is still considered something of an exception to the supposed artist-versus-writer rule. In the last decade, Faldbakken has somehow managed to be unthinkably productive as both an artist and a novelist. He already has under his belt a collection of short stories (*Snort Stories*, 2005), a trilogy of biting, raucous novels ('Scandinavian Misanthropy', 2001-8) and a produced play *Kaldt Produkt* (Cold Product, 2006). The play is a contemporary update of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879): now, Ibsen's Nora is a successful commercial lawyer, and Torvald is the editor of a snowboarding magazine that exists to launder drug money. These works established Faldbakken's reputation as a scandalous, bad-boy author in Scandinavia. The artist, who is the son of well-known Norwegian author Knut Faldbakken, originally studied fine arts but for a while was disillusioned with the idea of pursuing art as a career and applied himself to writing. Under the pseudonym Abo Rasul, he made his literary debut in 2001 with the novel *The Cocka Hola Company*, the first instalment of his trilogy; *Macht und Rebel*



Below left:
Untitled (Video Sculpture)
2005
Video tape, concrete base
and steel pipes
360x40x40 cm

Above:
One Spray Can Escapist
2008
Chrome spray on wall
Dimensions variable

(Power and Rebel) was published two years later, followed by *Unfun* last year. All three of these trash-pop romps have been translated into German and an English translation of the latter is currently underway. The novels are caustic, relentless satires populated by creepy individuals worthy of a more sexually explicit Norwegian version of the television series *Little Britain* (2003-ongoing). The first novel, for instance, involves a family porn production firm and doesn't spare any details.

Meanwhile, Faldbakken has also become an increasingly high-profile visual artist. He produces an eclectic body of work – including video, sculpture, installations and painting – that is conceptually indebted to the anti-establishment, anti-art threads of the Situationists, Dada and punk, amongst others. His focus, though, is not historical. Rather, Faldbakken is actually questioning whether or not there is such a position as 'anti' any more. There is a kind of wilful, in-your-face, what-you-see-is-what-you-get quality to most of his works. If you want your art to have mystique and to unfold over time, then it is probably best to look elsewhere. Take, for instance, *Abstracted Car* (2009), which is a burnt car wreck strapped like an asylum inmate to a metal transport frame. Or his many text-based, anti-slogan works – black tape on panels or canvases spelling out words, or words that seem to be coming undone – that are becoming progressively more abstract and difficult to read. *Untitled (Cancas #15)* (2008), for example, possibly declares 'death and destruction' and might have been inspired by the marks self-harming teenagers make on their arms.

Apparently, Faldbakken wants to keep his literature and his post-Conceptual visual art in separate spheres. Why, I wonder? After all, artists do read novels when they are not busy putting them in vitrines or mining them for references that turn up veiled or transformed in their work – although, admittedly, they write them far more rarely. Is it because doing both is like having two jealous and demanding lovers? Or is it that, comparisons being inevitable, one will seem better than the other? Is there an appropriate scale on which to balance fields with very different criteria? Whatever the reason, Faldbakken's exhibitions function independently from his books – although his characters in the latter sometimes have caustic thoughts on Europe and high culture. For example, his first novel includes the tirade: 'Why the hell do you keep going down to fucking Europe? [...] You've got to, got to, got to start to understand how sickening, sickening, cities are – do you hear? – with their air of history, and all their memorials and grand buildings, and so much bustling life, and such cultured urban people.' In a recent interview addressing the relationship between his art and his writing, Faldbakken explained his approach in terms of different modes of communication to a viewer and a reader respectively: 'Both my art practice and my writing have been about negation and negativistic strategies: hate, misanthropy and so on. My books are deliberately easy to read and entertaining whereas my art is more hermetic and mute [...] I use my art more as a tool for doing silent, negativistic gestures without any intention of convincing, impressing or communicating with an audience.'²

That said, as with his writing, many of Faldbakken's art works touch on socio-political sore points in a highly ambivalent, consciously 'provocative' way. For example, his video *Getaway* (2003) consists of heart-stopping appropriated footage shot from the handlebars of one of the many Swedish motorcyclists who make a sport of life-endangering excessive speeding. Or works such as the installation Faldbakken



**Matias Faldbakken and
Gardar Eide Einarsson**
Whoop There It Is
2002
Upholstered bench, 308 litres of Litago
chocolate and strawberry milk
Installation view

made in collaboration with the Norwegian artist Gardar Eide Einarsson, *Osculum Infame* (2001), the title of which refers to the medieval etymological origins of the term 'ass-kissing'. The exhibition consisted of a black room within the gallery and a thousand free books containing historical illustrations and quotes relating to the practice. Or their installation *Whoop There It Is* (2002), which took place in the car park on the site of Oslo's new opera house. At the time, the area was a hangout for junkies. Apparently, the enviably oil-rich and peaceful Norway has one of the highest per capita numbers of heroin addicts in Europe. The work consisted of a bench stocked up daily with free flavoured milk that has a bad reputation among sober locals as a junkie's drink. Obviously not one to shy away from hard topics, Faldbakken

– in response to an invitation from the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, in 2007 to propose a 'Memorial for the Iraq War' for the eponymously titled group show – superimposed the logo of famous thrash metal band Slayer three times onto the gallery wall with black tape: *Untitled (Slayer Upon Slayer Upon Slayer)*.

These works often involve one-to-one appropriation, and always refuse to comment – as though Faldbakken wishes to suggest that contemporary art is no place to pontificate or to take a didactic position or the moral high ground – if such a place still exists, or ever did. *Untitled (Video Sculpture)* (2005), for instance, consists of reels of videotape tangled like toxic spaghetti around a crooked support towering above the viewer – a construction that mimics the Taliban's infamous public anti-monuments of destroyed videotape. It is certainly a bad hair day for new media and a satisfyingly frightful, rather haunting mess that casts a considerable shadow.

The latter work was included in Faldbakken's recent – and first – survey exhibition in a museum: 'Shocked into Abstraction: Selected Works 2005–2009' at the National Museum in Oslo. (The show travels to Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, where it will open in late November). Faldbakken wanted his installation to look as though the works had been placed around the space at random by the art movers, in order to express a detachment from the host institution, or perhaps even a detachment from what is usually considered a powerful or successful display. The extensive constellation of works in the show brought forcibly to mind the dilemma around any kind of articulation or pronouncement about the world we live in. In a sense, Faldbakken's works exploit the moment of the breakdown of earnest communication, of attempts to say or mean something. Emblematic of the posturing and deception this can involve is his sculpture *Away from Sound* (2005). The



Background:
Remainder #4
2009
Spraypaint, tiles

Foreground:
VHS Stacks
2009
VHS tapes
Installation view,
Reena Spaulings
Fine Art, New York



Macht und Rebel
(Power and Rebel)
2002
Book cover

piece consists of 20 dummy Marshall amplifiers of the kind used as stage decoration at large rock concerts to give the appearance of 'realness' via old-school hardware, visually belying the massive sound usually digitally generated elsewhere. The result is almost a celebration of the 'emptying out' of art, in which the futility of artistic gestures or works, even when they are also 'topical', is the point.

Faldbakken is aware that although his work is predicated on negation and emptiness it also involves a big, productive affirmation of art.

Faldbakken's most recent novel, *Unfun* (2008), opens with a quote from Ad Reinhardt: 'Stay with the negative. All the time.' Nearly all of Faldbakken's writing to date notes his gratitude to Reinhardt's thinking. Some of his canvases even refer directly to Reinhardt's five-foot-square painting format. In Faldbakken's work, however, paint never even makes it to the surface: all the 'marks' that appear on his canvases are made with tape. It's a compelling irony that these pieces seem formally resolved to the point of being ultra-chic and, judging by the collectors credited on the wall labels, highly desirable. This is another nice twist in his art: the fact that for all of its post-nihilism it also has a knowingly fashionable look. Faldbakken, it seems, is aware that his work, which is obsessed with and predicated on negation and emptiness, also involves a big, productive affirmation of art. If there is an obvious contradiction there, it seems to be one that he openly encourages.

In a sense, Faldbakken is touching a nerve here; especially when you think of the numerous claims made for all kinds of contemporary art as being 'subversive',

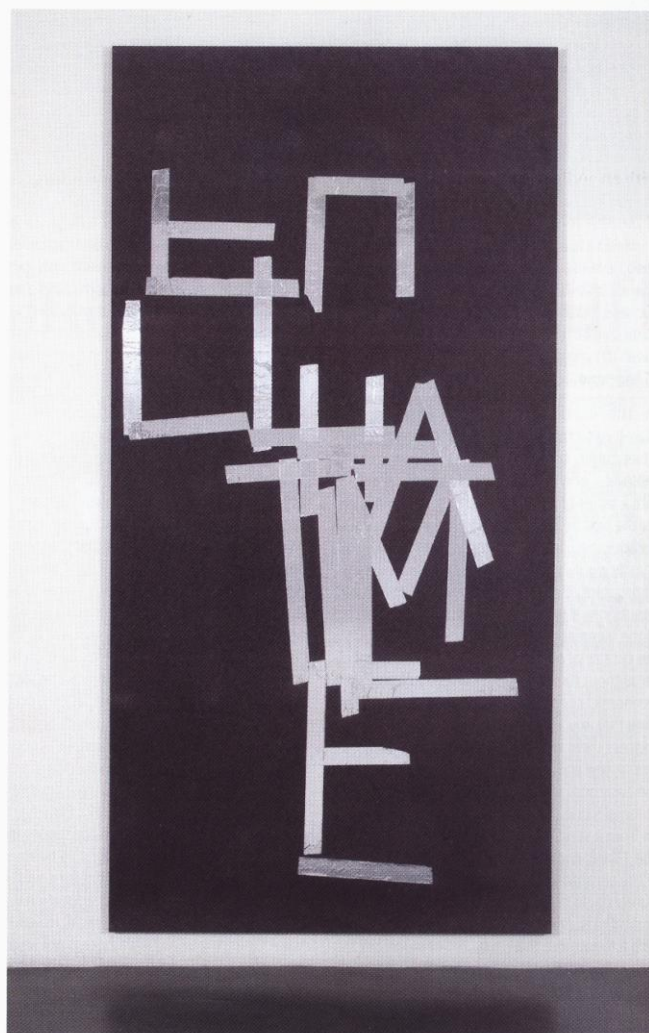
'radical' or even 'political'. It is a satisfying conceptual step to take the *frisson* of these almost fashionable expectations and, as bleak as it seems, to declare their falsity or impossibility. Whether his oft-repeated thesis – that everything ends up as a coffee table book, doomed to be absorbed into the mainstream – holds true, is another matter: it's too easy to think of artists whose lives and works were never mainstreamed. In any case, if a good idea is widely absorbed, does that always have to be a bad thing? Despite all the problems we encounter in contemporary society, would any thinking person in the West really like to wind back the socio-political clock to the 1950s, for example? In general, art and culture has been part of the argument for social change and dissent, even when, on the microcosmic level, it may all too often seem utterly pointless. In this regard, Faldbakken would probably suggest that the best way forward is first to say 'no', repeatedly, as convincingly as you can. Given the blinding 'yes' expected of us most of the time, he has a point.

Further feeding this discussion are his works involving *faux* graffiti. It seems to me that Faldbakken knows that artists can't actually do graffiti, they can only refer to

it or adopt it as a style. The inexpert and clumsy-looking wall painting *Zero Tolerance* (2005) makes fun of the official Norwegian attitude towards graffiti: the country's 'zero tolerance' policy of persecuting vandals. But, like so much of his work, it also swings the other way to ask questions about what kind of aesthetic tolerance is at play in an art context. Can a work of art ever be too low, too debased, too superficial, too dumb? Faldbakken exhibited pieces in a similar, if more elaborate, vein in a recent show at Reena Spaulings Fine Art in New York. Works such as *Remainder #4* (2009) comprise tiled surfaces, redolent of public spaces, onto which he sprays or scribbles words that are then partially cleaned off. What remains is an air of frustration and misunderstanding, a crappy smudge where words once were, an erasure and dirty half-silencing that speaks volumes.

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- 1 Matias Faldbakken, *The Cocka Hola Company* (German edition), Blumenbar Verlag, Munich 2003, pp. 21–22
- 2 Matias Faldbakken interviewed by Luigi Fassi, 'A Million Ways To Say No', *Mousse* magazine, March 2009, p. 12



Untitled (MDF #1)
2008
Aluminium electrical
tape on grey MDF
125×250×2 cm