



View of 'Matias Faldbakken: Shocked into Abstraction,' 2009, National Museum of Art, Architecture, and Design, Oslo. Photo: Vegard Kleven.  
Opposite page: Matias Faldbakken, *Cultural Department* (detail), 2006, acrylic paint on wall, dimensions variable.

1000 WORDS

## Matias Faldbakken

DISCUSSES "SHOCKED INTO ABSTRACTION"

**MATIAS FALDBAKKEN** is a master of the fine art of sucking all the air out of the room. What room? Hard to say exactly, but it seems to be the space of modernity as seen from the perspective of the Western artist—that overworked zone indelibly marked by issues of abstraction not only in images and

artistic strategies but also among social and cognitive phenomena. A rich body of literature suggests that if there is abstraction in art, it is because social relations more generally have been rendered abstract—reduced to mere relations of exchange that are rendered increasingly obscure, thanks to the power and fascination exerted by the mysterious phenomenon of the commodity. Or is it because of a growing tendency toward conceptual abstraction, a tendency related to the way in which digital technologies transform objects, experiences, and sensations into pure information? Critical emphasis may shift a bit, depending on what type of artistic practice one is referring to, but the general idea is that these are the basic conditions within which modern art operates, its specific space of thinking and experience.

With his exhibition "Shocked into Abstraction," on view until September 20 at Oslo's National Museum of Art, Architecture, and Design, and later this year at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, UK, Faldbakken enters this discursive space of artistic and social abstraction from a position that can only be described as cunningly faux-naïf. Reading like a tabloid headline, his title suggests that we should once more identify with that historical moment when the insurmountable aporias of early modern life—the promise of progress and reason held against the horrors of mass exploitation, violence, and rapidly increasing societal complexity—were enough to make any sane artist abandon all faith in the ordinary business of representation.

More precisely, the title invites us to recall the German art historian Wilhelm Worringer's 1908 attempt to explain the stylistic tendencies of modern art in psychological terms: In his view, artistic abstraction could only be explained by shock, i.e., as the result of a sensual and intellectual severing of empathic engagement with the world. Taking off from Worringer's approach, Faldbakken's work in no way promotes abstraction as a viable critical artistic strategy today. If anything, the artist presents it negatively—as a compromised, ghostly form of hermeticism that can only be traced through a type of mind-set in which abstraction is cognitively hardwired to impulses of violence, defilement, and transgression. This is why, with "Shocked into Abstraction," he lets his works remain right where the art handlers left them—a form of aggressive nonengagement that is closer in spirit to adolescent misbehavior than to the Zen-inspired letting go of personal taste typical of avant-garde models of



past decades. And this is also why the various refusals to signify that are articulated in the objects on view—wall pieces made with packing tape; more or less illegible tape writings on huge canvases; silver spray-paint markings on MDF boards or on the wall; blurred scans of newspaper ads—are only

marginally associated with the complex languages of artistic abstraction. They pass beyond or below the nuanced concerns of color theory and the engineering of sensation, the invention of radical form, the exploration of the properties of media and those of various scientific, formal, and institutional languages.

In fact, it seems that what is really being evoked here is the paranoid or nerdy mind-set of the extremist, for whom the world is reduced to a few big categories interlinked through a simple binary logic—good and bad, us and them, domination and subjection. What Faldbakken presents is, in other words, the *idea* of an avant-garde gesture of refusal distilled to a kind of absurd essence—an idea derived more from hearsay and Googling than from primary sources. It is this radically reductionist and sensorially deprived version of abstraction that is routinely subjected, by pundits and theorists alike, to a process of extrapolation that takes us beyond the increasingly indefinite contours of "art," so as to associate it with forms of extremism found outside the realm of the culture industry proper. It is the us-versus-them attitude of the graffiti vandal, the highway ghost rider driving at breakneck speed, the computer hacker, the Taliban foot soldier scouring the streets of Kabul for illicit music and videocassettes. These personae now appear as agonistic collaborators in the production of artistic gestures whose main source of power is the shrunken universe of the eternally misunderstood. Such a bleakly sardonic vision would be very much in keeping, after all, with the sensibility of an artist who is also a prolific writer and whose best-known literary work is a trio of novels titled "Scandinavian Misanthropy."

At the National Museum, the story Faldbakken tells is not about opening up art to uncontrollable subcultural energies—to movements, groups, and perspectives traditionally excluded from the "museum" or from dominant culture. Neither is it a celebration of the rebel, the outsider, or the bad-boy transgressor, or of various types of attack on good form. Something about his project recalls T. J. Clark's dry remark, in his 1999 book *Farewell to an Idea*, concerning artworks that take up Georges Bataille's concept of the *informe*: "They are no kind of basis for conflict with, or criticism of, the bourgeoisie, which possesses descriptions and practices far and away more powerful, because more differentiated, than anything modernism can come up with." Seen as an entity, Faldbakken's work operates on a level where such a critique of modernism's



subversive potential is already assumed—a far more perverse approach than the *informe* itself. While this might appear to be a degree of capitulation bordering on nihilism, it should instead be seen as a particular kind of strategy that is not easily transferred to the realm of good intentions. Essentially, his works perform a repeated inscription—a sort of hyperinscription—of the very generalities, the too big or undifferentiated concepts, that could be seen to subvert the space of modern art or “avant-garde practice.” It is, in particular, a repeated inscription of the big concepts of depletion, loss, and negation—an inscription of negativity spinning around itself so fast that the whole drama of the avant-garde in the end comes down to a few tiny “cartoonish” (to use the artist’s word) characters, as hilariously predictable in their operations as Tom and Jerry.

This, of course, is abstraction in its purest form. And nothing good, Faldbakken

seems to say, can come of it. (If he recycles modernism’s obsession with negativity as a “social” universe replete with a number of familiar figures or agents, this universe is still mainly presented to us as an aesthetic experience: the sensation of an airless space with, as he puts it, no exit.) But this experience of depletion, loss, and negation might give way to a form of rejection that has its redeeming aspects. It may, for instance, produce some skepticism about certain key mythologies of Western modernity—the self-punishing stories of a culture formed by the losses of *tradition, origin, God, meaning, man, self, community, authenticity, connection*, and so on. Ultimately, with “Shocked into Abstraction” Faldbakken pushes us to ask whether abstraction *really* is the master trope of the complex social formations named modernity—and if it is not time to invest in a different, and more differentiated, set of descriptions. —INA BLOM

People often tend to see all sorts of subcultural or “underground” fascinations or allegiances in my work, but my approach to such phenomena is based on a doubt as to what the underground could actually be. It is hard to know what kind of activity would be truly marginal, what would be below zero, or where things are really situated.

TO ME, “SHOCKED INTO ABSTRACTION” is sort of like an absurdist play without exit: It’s this big production that is all about holding back, about being almost nonproductive. It’s my first solo museum exhibition, so there was of course the question of how to conceive of such a show. I didn’t want it to seem like a retrospective, but at the same time I didn’t want to make all new works: I wanted, rather, to contextualize the new pieces by means of highlights from the past four years. The solution, one that goes along with the overall logic of my work, was to take seriously the generous invitation to exhibit in such a context, yet at the same time to somehow cut short the positive vibe that comes with such an invitation by more or less just dumping the stash—the material, the artworks—in the museum, without much regard for where it all would be placed or how it all would look. Basically, I tried to let the works stand or hang where the transportation people had placed them, as if the premise of the exhibition were just to haul everything—the stuff from storage and the loaners and the things from my studio—to the museum and get it in the door. Once that was done, anything I did in the museum space would be a bit arbitrary. This strategy is linked to my general attempt to do things in a really halfhearted way, to make halfheartedness the core of my production, so to speak, as if very little were at stake. And it is clear to me that the museum—even if it’s a place where I might not want to spend all my time—is the only institution that allows you to work in such a manner. I cannot imagine any other place where such a practice would be possible and even appreciated. And so my work turns around

all the conflicts and ironies that come with the institutionalization of these kinds of strategies.

I think the packing-tape wall pieces are among the most emblematic of this way of working. At first, around 2008, they were based on the way in which broken windows are taped together by store and office managers: I would photograph and then remake the kind of senseless abstractions that are created this way. But I soon found that the link to vandalism became too obvious, so I chose to drift into my own kind of abstraction, just arranging strips of tape on

the wall really quickly and spontaneously. The works are simply what you see: pieces of tape on the wall. They are rewarding, somehow, on a visual level, but at the same time they are completely throwaway gestures and hard to take seriously as artworks. Still, they get the full museum treatment when made in this context: “We are going to measure this and describe it and photograph it, and it will follow you for the rest of your life.” I’m interested in almost cartoonish ideas of abstraction and the relations between the cartoonish and the deadpan serious that you may find in, for instance, the work of Ad Reinhardt. Or Wyndham Lewis, for that matter. If one considers Reinhardt’s image production as extremist, then the caricature of the extremist is brought to the forefront in his writing, but not necessarily in his cartoons.

Then there are the pieces that seem a bit more worked out—the tiled walls, the kind you usually see in subway tunnels or public restrooms, with more or less successfully washed off graffiti markings that can always still be seen in cracks between the tiles. Here I wanted to make a kind of painting that was really easy to pass by, one that signals, “Move on, there’s nothing to see here.” A type of painting where the quasi-vandalizing act of marking space—so prominent in so much modern painting—competes for attention with the act of cleaning up and returning to order, a painting that would stage some sort of collaboration between the vandal and the vandalized, if you will. In painting, there is always the question of what to put in and what to remove, but here it’s as if painting were informed by a much more banal and straightforward problem: How can we possibly





Opposite page: Matias Faldbakken, *Untitled* (VHS Stack #2), 2009, VHS cassettes, dimensions variable. Photo: Vegard Kleven.  
Above: View of "Matias Faldbakken: Shocked into Abstraction," 2009, National Museum of Art, Architecture, and Design, Oslo. Photo: Vegard Kleven.

get rid of these violent markings and what they represent? *Cultural Department* [2006]—a work that replicates, directly on the wall, the splashed-paint vandalism of the Palestinian Cultural Department's offices by Israeli soldiers—is a different but related take on this theme. The *Abstracted Car* [2009] is another work that places a sign of equivalence between destruction and abstraction. However, there is no underlying story here—just a car that has been burned to a dysfunctional carcass and that has then been named "abstract." The whole point was taking an object that would immediately have all kinds of dramatic political connotations and then emptying it of all such things, ending up with what is essentially a rather vapid formal gesture.

People often tend to see all sorts of subcultural or "underground" fascinations or allegiances in my work, but my approach to such phenomena is based on a doubt as to what the underground could actually be. It is hard to know what kind of activity would be truly marginal, what would be below zero, or where things are really situated. I think a lot of my work, in fact, normalizes the transactions that are already taking place between different fields. To take one example: My video with the girl wearing sandals whose feet pump the brake pedal of a car, *Untitled*

(*Pedal Pumping*) [2009], made with Lars Brekke, was first placed on YouTube, where it got ten thousand views in no time, supposedly by the car-pedal-fetishist underground. I don't know what you would have to do to get ten thousand people to come and see an abstract painting in such a short time. In the end, I'm more interested in the mechanisms of extremism and the homologies that might be traced between the mute, passive, good-for-nothing artwork and the kind of really desperate actions that are products of various types of extremism—it is simply a more natural connection for me to make than between high and low, above- and underground, and so on.

I guess I am trying to map out the affinity between the exceptional and the normative—or to bring out the interaction between the two. Art history is of course full of various types of attempts at the extreme, and I suppose my work turns around the tension between extremist impulses and forms of freedom and the control over, or musealization of, extremism that takes place in the name of the same institution. More specifically, you could perhaps say I work with the highly ambivalent responses to the spectacle and the spectacular that can be traced in and through various cultural transactions—i.e., the many situations in which the extremist, or artistic, response

would be to try to delete or negate or subvert the spectacular. My remake of the "educational sculpture" of the Taliban—the roadside pole around which they had mounted videotape pulled out of cassettes as a sort of public monument to forbidden imagery—would be one example. I continually seek out icons of the nonspectacular, and I am particularly interested in the many cases in which such attacks on the spectacle still somehow tend to end up in the realm of the spectacle.

I know of course that I'm handling huge generalizations here, but that is somehow also the point: I allow obscure details to become representative of the wildest generalizations—and vice versa. This is an aspect of the halfhearted approach that you can also find in my writing, even though I keep that strictly separate from my visual-art productions. There is a point at which working with way too big words and terms, a completely unnuanced, generalized outlook, comes to represent a particular kind of existential conditioning—one that ultimately results in a totally nerdy, introverted, pedantic, and abstracted product or attitude. Maybe it is a response to the realization that most complexes are, in the end, too big for anyone to survey. □

—Matias Faldbakken