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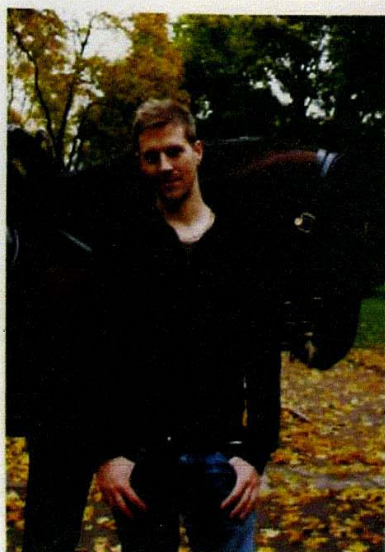
intro:

(innledning)

Caroline Ugelstad, a curator at the
Henie-Onstad Art Centre in Norway.

looks at contemporary art practice
in her country

Cover and all photography
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Lars Botten



Contemporary artists in Norway live in the shadow of national icons such as Henrik Ibsen and Edvard Munch, and work in a country that, fuelled by oil revenues from the North Sea, is one of the richest per capita. It excels in athleticism, peace-brokering and natural beauty: art in Norway is made between fjords, mountains and valleys. Large sectors of the contemporary art scene are supported by public funding, but the place for contemporary art in the nation's cultural identity has not yet been fully established.

The contemporary art scene is still young, and major changes are under way: new institutions have recently been established, such as the Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA), and old institutions are being merged, such as the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, and the Oslo National Academy of the Arts. While the impact of the merger between the museums and the college is still uncertain, the importance of OCA in developing the dialogue in contemporary art between Norway and the international scene is without question. It invites foreign artists and curators to its Oslo studio and runs an international residency programme for Norwegian artists. In 2006 the institution expanded its programme to include a seminar series, collaborating with institutions such as the London-based Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy. For Norway's contemporary art scene – which had previously lacked a tradition of discursive theoretical thinking or a clear position for the writer or critic – OCA provides a long-desired critical forum.

In the context of globalisation – and an artworld constantly out to conquer the new – remote art scenes such as Norway's enjoy a certain privilege of being left to their own devices. The Scandinavian contemporary art scene is rediscovered time and again: back in 1998 it was heralded as no less than a miracle by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Laurence Bossé's show *Nuit Blanche, Scènes Nordiques: Les Années 90*, held at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. The European curators were astonished to find that the 'self-enclosed' Nordic art scene created work that was so in tune with international trends. With hindsight, such acclamation smacks of an exoticism and ethnological curiosity that cannot but feel somewhat constructed. Emerging artists today are less at ease when being introduced as 'Nordic' or 'Norwegian', as if their art presents a form of cultural particularity. A case in point is Momentum – Nordic Festival of Contemporary Art, held every two to three years. Momentum was entirely Nordic when it was first staged, in



Oslo in autumn
facing page: Henry Moore's
Standing Figure; *Knife Edge*,
1961–76, outside the
Henie-Onstad Art Centre
left: Artist Matias Faldbakken
in the grounds of the
Norwegian royal palace

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ArtReview: Norwegian art scene

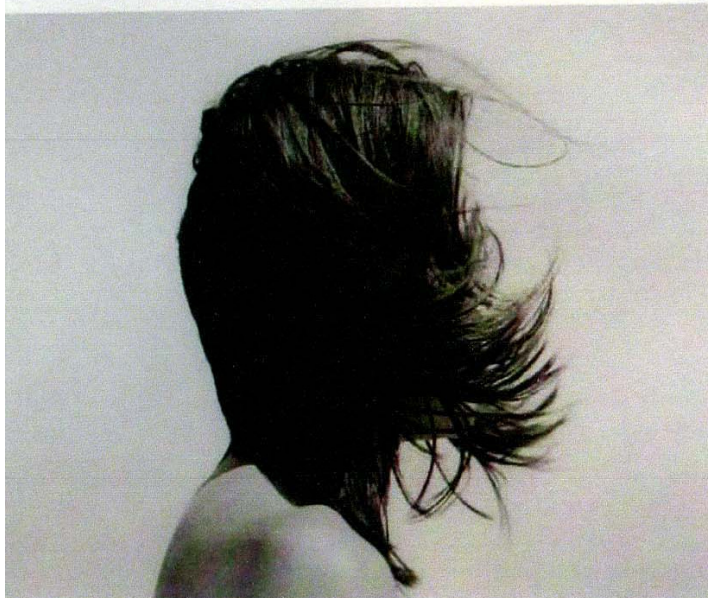
1998; this year's festival, the fourth, opened up its borders in an effort to reflect the broader international network in which many Nordic artists are working. But when Momentum trades its original idea of being a Nordic biennial to become a biennial like many others – albeit one located in a remote city outside Oslo – its identity and purpose come under contention.

To some degree, artists in Norway participated in postmodernism's theoretical reassessment of art and art history, but they never broke with traditional media to the extent that artists did elsewhere. For a long time Norway was devoted entirely to media such as painting, sculpture and graphics based on handicraft techniques. Photography was extremely slow to catch on as an art practice in Norway, only really hitting the scene with Vibeke Tandberg, Mikkel McAlinden and Torbjørn Rødland during the 1990s. Installation-based and conceptual art likewise had a hard time. This has now changed fundamentally: artists such as Bjarne Melgaard, Matias Faldbakken, Gardar

Eide Einarsson and Berre Sæthre, whose practices can clearly be traced to conceptualism, have attracted an enormous amount of attention in recent years.

In a small scene such as Norway's, trends are easily transmitted – there is less rebellion from the mainstream than there is adoption of ideas. A few key artists dominate the scene: Faldbakken, Einarsson, Marius Engh and Rødland. Rather than being a homogeneous group, Faldbakken, Einarsson and Engh play off each other in style and substance, most notably in their reduced minimalist aesthetic and in their subcultural affinities (for example skating, black metal or rock culture) – references now appearing in the work of many younger artists. Since the 1990s photography has continued to be influential, ranging from Tandberg's, McAlinden's and Rødland's playful, manipulated or staged photography to the documentary tendency shown by artists such as Eline Mugaas, Bodil Furu, Mette Tronvoll, Dag Nordbrenden and Marte Aas. In painting, photo-based painting (the so-called Gerhard Richter effect) has become significant, as in the work of Mari Slaattelid, Kira Wager or Harald Fenn. This is just the tip of the iceberg – many more could and should be mentioned.

It is true that small scenes such as Norway's easily create consensus, a lack of urgency and a tendency for introspection. But it is also a fact that Norway's democratic infrastructure gives it the freedom and the privilege, if taken, to form strong independent spaces for art, spaces with an agenda, where art practices are allowed to develop and exist on their own premises, and to create conflictual diversity within a local – Norwegian – art scene. As we Norwegians are about to leave a year of centennial celebration of the playwright Henrik Ibsen – he who himself characterised Norway as a free country inhabited by unfree people – rumour has it that something is going to happen that will shake Norway up from below.



Tom Sandberg, *Untitled*, 2004, silver gelatin print, 120 x 152 cm. Courtesy Gallery Riis, Oslo

Classical composition

Working exclusively in black-and-white, Tom Sandberg often photographs in a shadowy light that leaves his subjects partly obscured. Born in Narvik in 1953, Sandberg is widely held to be one of Norway's foremost photographers and will have his first show at a US museum this spring (P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, 11 February – 28 May 2007).

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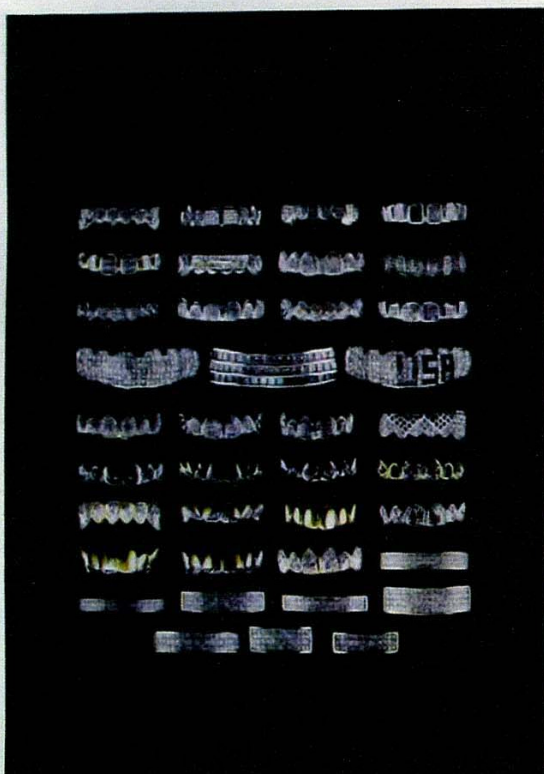
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profile 2:

(profil 2)

Matias Faldbakken



Matias Faldbakken, *Untitled (Gold Teeth #1)*, 2006, hand-tinted light-jet print on Kodak archival paper, framed, 110 x 78.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Standard (Oslo)

When Matias Faldbakken outed himself as the man behind the cult books *The Cocka Hola Company* and *Macht & Rebel* (credited to the unlikely nom de plume Abu Rasul), he became a household name in Norway overnight. People were especially intrigued by the fact that he is the son of well-known author Knut Faldbakken – as well as by the extreme misanthropy displayed within his books. Moreover, Faldbakken the younger had just graduated from art school in Bergen and didn't consider himself a writer. These books were to be seen as parts of a larger artistic project, and indeed they can be regarded as manuals for his body of work: Faldbakken's ideas are far more accessible in writing than in his visual output, which consists of the often anonymous appropriation of different readymades. His method is akin to shopping, harvesting items from realms in which anarchy and chaos seem to prevail – the subcultures of pornography, crime and drug use. But time and again Faldbakken's work shows true anarchy to be impossible. Subcultures quickly lose their underground status as they become accepted: crime really doesn't pay; the drugs either don't work or work too well;

and pornography, hijacked by advertising and reality shows, is no longer the subversive strategy it used to be.

Faldbakken's first solo exhibition, at Fotogalleriet in Oslo, featured *Getaway* (2003), a video, filmed from the rider's point of view, of a motorcycle being driven wildly through Stockholm, completely disregarding any traffic regulations. In the context of a gallery, however, Faldbakken's work only quoted this act of lawlessness, appearing to be no more than a piece of nostalgia for a time when art could really be controversial.

Faldbakken recently published *Snort Stories* (2005), a collection of short texts that have previously appeared in various venues. There are fake interviews that purport to be straight journalism; pastiches of literary criticism from a fictitious writer who has managed to cut his reviews down to a 'Yes' or a 'No'; and disturbing architectural visions inspired by Edward Norton, who is said to be planning a new model for suburbia. *Snort Stories'* conscious diffusion between fact and fiction opens up a space for potential interventions in the 'real' world – which is what visionary work has always aspired to. Faldbakken's method of breaking out of the boundaries of reality is to deny the very possibility of breaking out: escape lies only in denial, which could very well prove to be the case.

Tommy Olsson

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