

MATIAS FALDBAKKEN:

UPPING THE ANTI

"The biggest problem you can have is of course being mainstream:
being white, male and heterosexual."

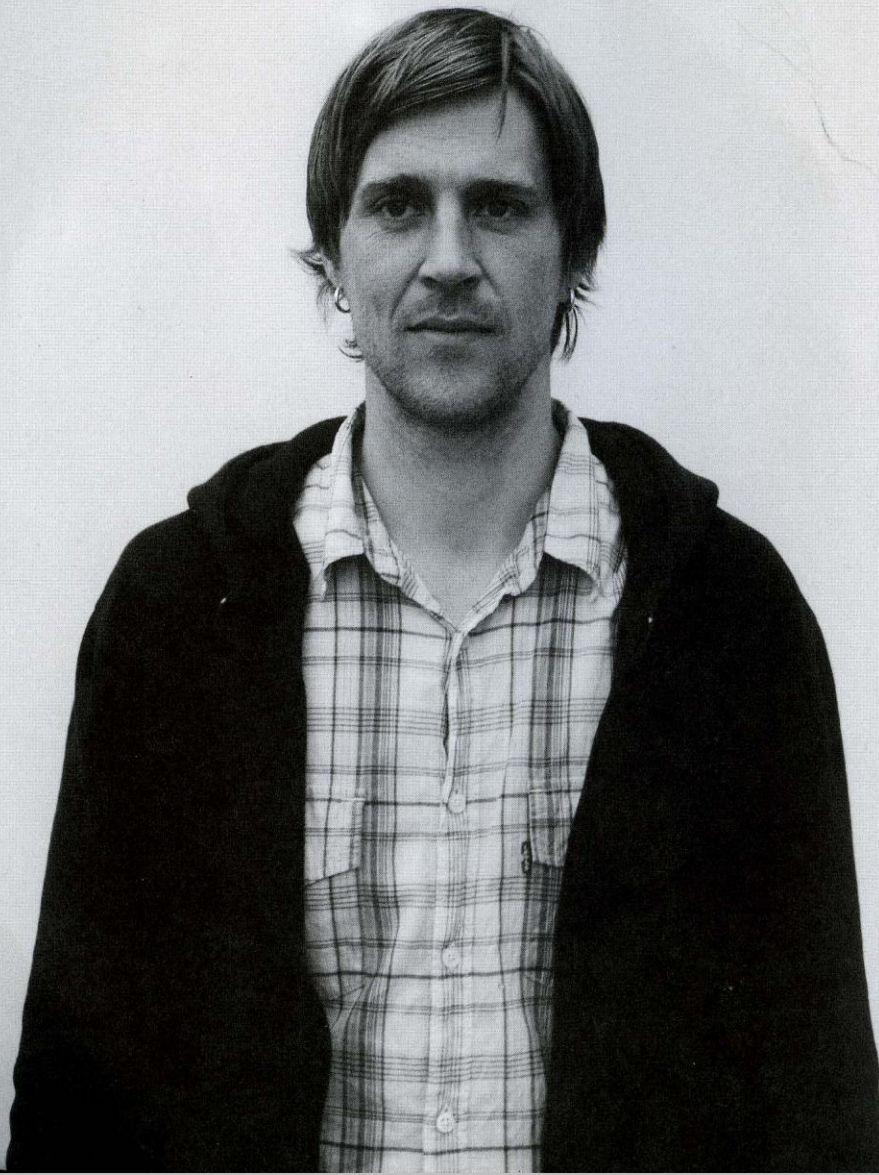
Matias Faldbakken, born in 1973, lives and works as an artist and writer in Oslo. Son of the celebrated Norwegian author Knut Faldbakken, he published two novels, The Cocka Hola Company and Macht und Rebel, as part of the Scandinavian Misanthropy trilogy under the alias Abo Rasul. Drenched with acid humour and continuously below the waistline, his books immediately caused a considerable stir in Norway.

His protagonists struggle with postmillennial phenomena such as the 'coffee-tableization of everything' or the idea of the 'survival of the hippest,' and an unhealthy amount of hatred for everything around them. Intended as severe attacks on the tolerance of 'humanistic cultural workers,' his books nevertheless turned out to be everything but refused.

This vicious circle of the subversive - each critique in the cultural field being not only immediately absorbed but also turned into a cultural good, and therefore soon tuning into the mainstream - is part of his topoi as a visual artist. His non-literary works also deal with the chasm between mainstream and underground, independence and commerciality, and the possibilities of an intervention of the artist and his utopias in the real world.

Faldbakken studied at the National Academy of Fine Arts in Bergen as well as at the Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main. In 2005, he represented Norway in the Nordic Pavillion at the Venice Biennial, as well as showing his work amongst others in the Wrong Gallery at the Whitney Biennial, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the National Museum Oslo, the Sydney Biennial and the KW Institute for Contemporary Art Berlin.

At the moment, Matias Faldbakken is writing the third installment of the Scandinavian Misanthropy trilogy.





art institutions – is it really possible not to be ironic if you are participating and at the same time know how they are working? Irony contains both, the explanation and the critique – two tones at the same time – and that's maybe the only way you can speak about certain issues. Some phenomena and some forms of existence require this ironical rhetoric, this double voice in order to cope with complex social and organizational situations. It's not necessarily bad or insincere; it's just an immediate way of saying that there are more sides to a story. It's very hard nowadays to take uncompromising stances because this is obviously not a solution. But I actually feel that my books are more sarcastic than ironic.

FASCINATION

Did you read Mein Kampf?

Yes, parts of it. It was more for research purposes though, not the kind of book I would read in the park. I bought it in Copenhagen; I just stumbled over it in a bookshop and noticed the cover. It is funny, there are all these editions coming out with forewords denouncing it as the worst piece of writing ever produced. The publishers then have to excuse themselves for printing it by saying that it obviously is a very important 'historical document.' Anyway, the book has some verbal surplus to it and it is kind of inventive. The way, for example, he makes metaphors for his ideas. It was a funny read as I didn't expect it to be full of analogies and metaphors referring to the flora and fauna which he then uses to express his conception of society and racial issues. In that sense I would even say it is artistic in a way. For a political pamphlet it sure is creative.

Some characters in Macht und Rebel get fascist tattoos, swastikas and slogans like 'Unsere Ehre heisst Treue' or 'White Pride World Wide,' for example. Seeing them placed in the context of the story, one gets the feeling that these symbols and slogans have lost their reference.

I wouldn't say that they have lost their reference. Pull out the swastika here and now and see what happens – it's still going to cause a strong reaction. But there is some detachment going on and I am using that in

the book. I am using it in a way not to refer to the actual historical drama but as an example of something that has a strong symbolic power. This specific quality is important to me when it comes to the discourse about the desperate search for friction that I describe. The Nazi symbols are an example for a symbolic power that is hard to kill.

It is strange that symbols possess such power – in the end it is just a sign. However, it's also interesting in relation to the branding of the world in general as this is what all the major corporations are looking for or trying to construct: a symbol that is so strong that it's indestructible, unforgettable and timeless. And in this sense, the Nazis are unbeatable, so far.

Did you refer to these symbols as they are employed by various youth cultures?

Yes. A part of what I want to express when using these symbols is to show that their meanings have taken detours. The obvious use of the swastika as a symbol for provocation is well known from, for example, the punk movement. The book is more on that kind of note. The funny thing is that it's still an issue. Of course, in Germany it's more of an issue than, let's say, in Norway, but still in the end, the response wasn't that much different.

OVERSOCIALIZED LEFTIE IN PAIN I+II

Did you have doubts about having Macht und Rebel published in Germany?

I was afraid of it at first – I thought that I really didn't want to have it published in Germany. I dreaded that it might be read the wrong way, was afraid that things would go off track and this wasn't my intention or interest at all. There are a lot of controversial issues discussed in the book but it really is more tongue in cheek than anything else. When I wrote it I was often thinking of an audience with some connection to the art business. These people don't take provocations as such. But the thing with literature is that it's spreading rapidly and that it is reaching a broader audience, which is often apt to take it on a more literal level. The reading of the book has really been branching out into all kinds of directions.

DECIDE:

- 1) *IT'S OKAY TO BE A MISANTHROPE*
- 2) *YOU GET THE RED FLAG SHOVED
UP YOUR ASS*

You subtitled your books Scandinavian Misanthropy.
Would you call yourself a misanthrope?

Well, on a personal level I am quite satisfied. But I am not very optimistic when it comes to the big picture. This might not actually be misanthropic but I certainly don't have a bottomless belief in the guys and the girls. What I write is taken from my personal feelings and understandings and yes, I tend to be quite moody. But of course, the idea of playing out a hardcore misanthropy in a literary form is a construction. I guess, I'm playing with this idea to a certain extent by taking parts of a general feeling I have and then turning up the volume. Still, I wouldn't say that it's just acting out something I have no connection with.

Is the kind of misanthropy you describe comparable to a state of entropy where everything radical and subversive is ultimately brought to a level of consensus?

I used this term to describe some form of existence and it's certainly close to the way you describe it. It's the idea of co-optation of dissent and the harmonizing of turmoil that I have been pushing through, at least in my second book; the loss of friction and the levelling out of every attempt to construct friction out of difference. I don't know if you can link this directly to misanthropy as the latter is also connected to the characters in the book, but such a status quo sure is fertile soil for misanthropic sentiments.

Don't you think that being an artist and thus being creative is a way out?

There is always a vast feeling of emptiness following everything I do. But I don't really know what else I should do and I don't think any other solution would be any better. So I am stubbornly clinging on to it, which doesn't imply that I am not always looking for other opportunities. It's not that art and literature are the only true forms of expression for me – I simply have quite a hard time coming up with alternatives to it. So far, it's the best solution I have found.



With your father being a well-known writer, do you think your family background encouraged you in pursuing a career in the arts?

Even though my father is a writer and my mother does arts and crafts it was not what you call a Bohemian family. But of course, being artists themselves, they could never really deny me in pursuing my idea of being an artist. I mainly grew up with my father and he was never pushy in that respect, never trying to tell me what to read or dragging me around to exhibitions. He would live a completely regular life, going down to his little writer's hut in the mornings instead of going anywhere else, and re-appearing again at dinner time. So I would say I grew up quite normal.

Was he someone who made writing attractive to you though?

About his writing, my father said he had the impression that he was delivering a school paper every day and I didn't really like school. But I probably got the idea that there was some sort of freedom connected to writing. I didn't plan to be a writer though – I decided to do visual stuff when I was about 15 or 16. Before that, I think I wanted to be a veterinarian, I don't know how I got hooked on that one.

I grew up in the countryside so I didn't have much access to contemporary art at that time. That's probably one of the reasons why I was really into the classics like Michelangelo, Rembrandt and Vermeer. But then, of course, as soon as some information started to come my way, about art being done a different way – because this didn't really come from my family – I started to look at it differently.

What was it like to grow up in the countryside? Did you have the chance to get involved in any kind of youth culture?

Well, for a while I enjoyed living there but then it was hell on earth. Basically, I was just waiting for the time I could go to art school and start at the academy. But I was into graffiti and quite a serious skater. I was in the national championships and my top score was third place in street skating in 1990.

After studying in Bergen, how did you go about supporting yourself with art?

After I finished art school I worked for a couple of years teaching prep courses. So I got out of school and went straight back into teaching. That

was actually when I wrote my first novel, *The Cocka Hola Company*. I did it in the lunch breaks of my teaching job. For the last five, six years I have been able to make a living from my art. Meaning, of course, that I hardly do anything but think of money. Like everyone else.

What kind of artistic environment does Oslo offer?

It is not like Berlin, that's for sure. But, let it be said, I am afraid of this kind of environment anyway. People are emigrating to Berlin because it is cheap and spacious and happening, but there is a limit to how many cultural workers you can put into one place, isn't there? Last time I was in Berlin, I walked into a small coffee shop and I saw about fifteen 35-year-old guys with shaved heads and turtlenecks sitting in front of their Macs, side by side. It was like an army and I just thought, 'Jesus, what kind of place is this?' So, that is a scary thing as well, but of course you have possibilities of raising awareness concerning your work that you don't have in Norway.

I am not staying in Oslo because of the scene, although there is stuff happening now. The gallery I work with, Standard (Oslo), has an international profile and a defined conceptual base to what they are showing. But then again, living in a place like Oslo, you have the possibility of retreat, of leaving the scene for a while and that's what I like.

Has your relation to Norway in general changed with regards to the racism that has lately led to the rise of the extreme right?

Norway certainly is not the most racist country in the world but people are very prejudiced and afraid of what they don't know. That's normal. Still, the right wing Populist Party is now the biggest party in Norway with 34%. They are not marching Nazis but they are very strict when it comes to immigrant policies and such. The rest of their plan is just lower taxes, cheap liquor, cheap gasoline, and spending more of the oil fund for old people.

It's bordering on the funny that this is actually possible, that one in three people you see in the streets is actually voting for these guys. One very high positioned party member was almost – but only almost – kicked out for more or less raping a 15-year-old girl and there is more shady business going on, linkages to all sorts of criminals and neo-Nazi groups, but they are not losing any votes for it. They are not hypocritical, they are just very straight up about what they are doing and people can relate to that – this irrational and folksy way of going about it is obviously making them more human.

FUCKT OR FICTION

Don't you think that the experience of reading, of being alone for hours and having someone speaking to you in a very direct way – as you do – is a way of communicating quite different from other forms of artistic expression?

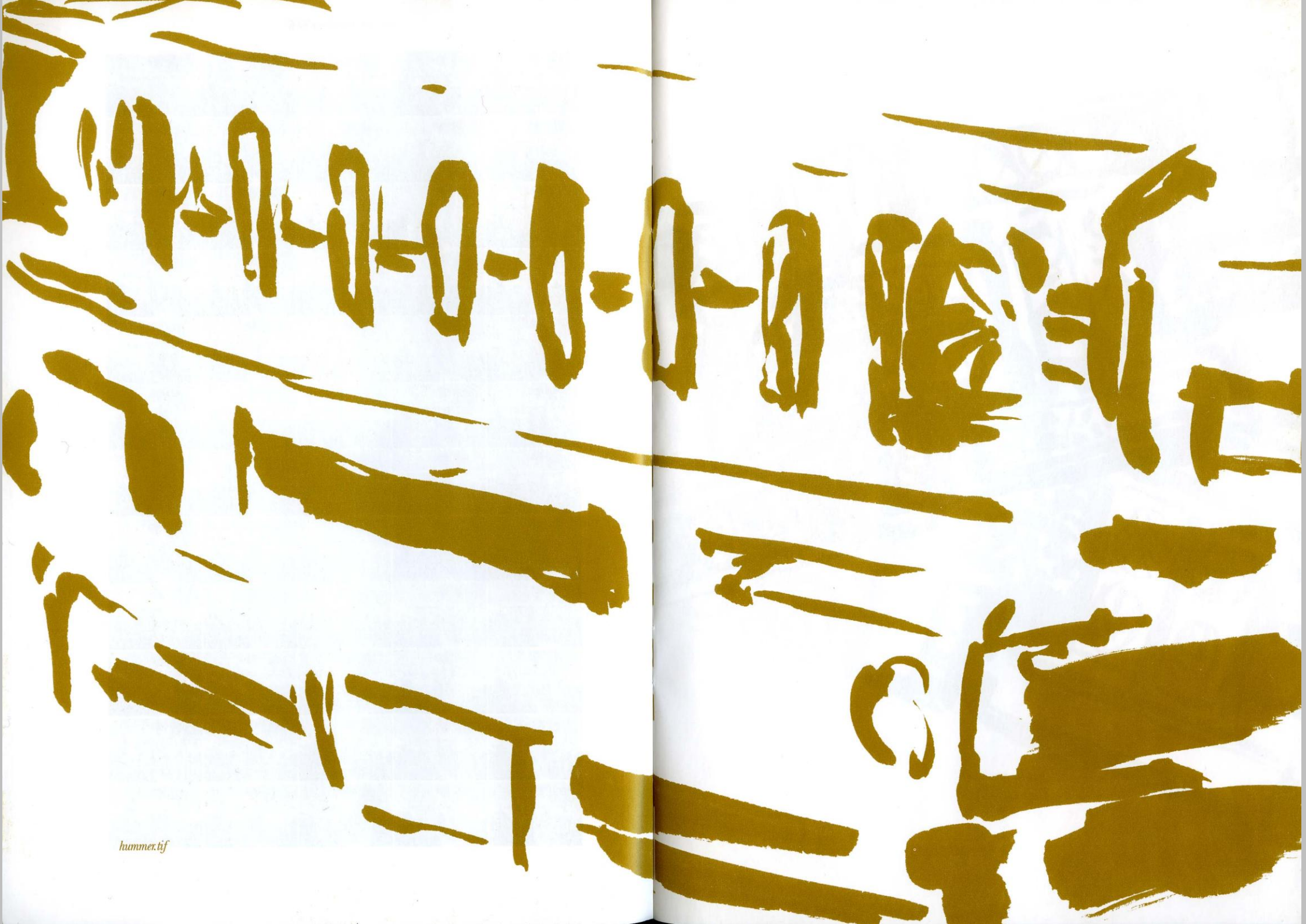
In my mind, art is more closely related to the discussion and production of ideas, whereas literature is more linked to the audience. Literature – as a tool – has shown itself to me as being effective for putting out ideas and suggestions. I don't really go around with theories about the reception of my books but I feel that I'm giving myself more space when I'm writing than when I'm making art. And if this would also apply to the reader, then there would be some sort of sharing this particular space. When you are starting to write, you are becoming aware of that, because whatever you write is taking someone's time, and someone's mind.

Which is nice, but when you fill it with the kind of stuff I do... I'm not really into romanticizing this idea of the relationship between author and reader. However, when you read books, there's a certain element of truth in it. A good book establishes a space that you didn't know before. You simply feel the need to respond to what is presented to you. That's why it can take that long, why you can keep up the concentration. There are many myths latched onto the act of reading, though. Maybe in the past you did learn more by reading, but generations are coming up who are used to getting all their information from other media. How many history books have you read in comparison to watching *Discovery Channel* programs, lately?

How much does your fictitious world correspond to the real world?

I think that people take literature very seriously and this kind of approach is quite different to the art world. That's for good and for worse. People treat literature as pure fiction but at the same time they actually take it at face value – at least some people do. That's something specific about literature, and it isn't to be found anywhere else.

You invent characters, you give them lines, and you think up dialogues. After you're finished with the book, though, you sit there, talking about your own characters in third person, as if they were real.



For example, I have a decent fan base in Norway, high school kids are text-messaging me, 16, 17-year-olds and I have no control over how they read the book. But I believe that the tone of the book and the humour in it keep it at all times from being read too literally. This was actually something my publishers in Germany were afraid of. They asked me what they were supposed to say if this book was picked up by neo-Nazis and used as an example. They asked me, 'Is there anything in it that denounces what it's saying, whether sexist or racist?' And there isn't, if you read it word-by-word.

Certainly the level you take these issues to doesn't make it suitable for such adaptation.

That was what I was saying. It is too tasteless and funny to be read by these kinds of people, but then again – you never know. They might just not get the joke and the question is then how to go about it.

How do you feel about giving something to the public and then losing control over it and seeing it take on different forms?

In comparison to my other artistic activities, this is something positive about writing and it was one of the reasons for me to do it. To go into an institution that is somehow in between fine arts and entertainment and to get a distribution that is completely different to the art world where you always know more or less who you are talking to. I find the art scene too limited and predictable: opening an exhibition in Sydney or Berlin or Oslo is more or less the same. But a novel that is read by your aunt, your younger brother, high school kids and literary critics is a different thing.

Literature is certainly also institutionalized, but the rules of the game, of how you experience the work, are more established within the piece itself. A book is accessible in a different way than an exhibition.

This is a chance as you create a conceptual framework while having some ideas in mind of how it's going to be read and then seeing it being interpreted in so many different ways. I feel that there is a lot more at risk putting out a book than there is opening an art exhibition. With the latter, it would be impossible, stupid and a waste of time to try to 'shock' the audience. However, in the books I wrote I had the possibility to thematize the shock effect, specifically, and transgression, on a general basis.



This is a normal thing to do in the literary scene. And you are asked things like, 'Why does Simpel feel like that?' It's a little weird that people relate to the characters as real personalities.

What is it like for you to present your work?

When it comes to readings, it's, well, not boring but kind of unpleasant to sit there and read this stuff you wrote in a fury several years ago. I think the idea of readings stems from the age-old myth that there is something in an author's voice, that the text is more powerful with the author reading it himself. But this is not relevant when it comes to my books – I just feel stupid. To have me physically express and read out what I've been writing is somewhat unnecessary. I don't really see myself as a writer; I'm not that into literature, you know. And there are not really any other authors that I directly relate to. When I started writing, I just thought it was funny.

BLACK POWER=WHITE POWDER

In Norway, you published your books under the alias of 'Abo Rasul.' Was that an attempt to keep people from drawing a connection to your father?

Yes, it was a practical reason as my family name is well-known in Norway. It also enabled me to release a product that didn't have a sender – you simply had to turn back to the book to get answers. So it was also about the old idea of a separation between author and piece.

And it worked, too. People did really concentrate on the texts, as they couldn't ask me. Otherwise writers are always dragged into the foreground, and their personalities overshadow their works.

You didn't want to provoke by publishing your book under an Arab name?

I almost can't remember why I wanted an Arab name – but I wanted it. And the timing was right, because my first book, *The Cocka Hola Company*, came out in the week of the September 11th terrorist attack. So it took on a whole different shape after that. I think it was not entirely accidental, though, as I had been interested for some time in the organisation of the

al-Qaida and Osama Bin Laden as the ultimate dissident. I read quite a lot about him before September 11th, and I thought how funny, this absolute opposition that he is running.

But not only is your pseudonym Arabic, there is also a young Arab gang turning up in *Macht und Rebel* that you seem to assign a certain power or potency to.

In this text and others I have been putting forth the idea that the biggest problem you can have is of course being mainstream: being white, male, heterosexual and having no subculture or speciality that you can subscribe to. So that's the problem of not having problems.

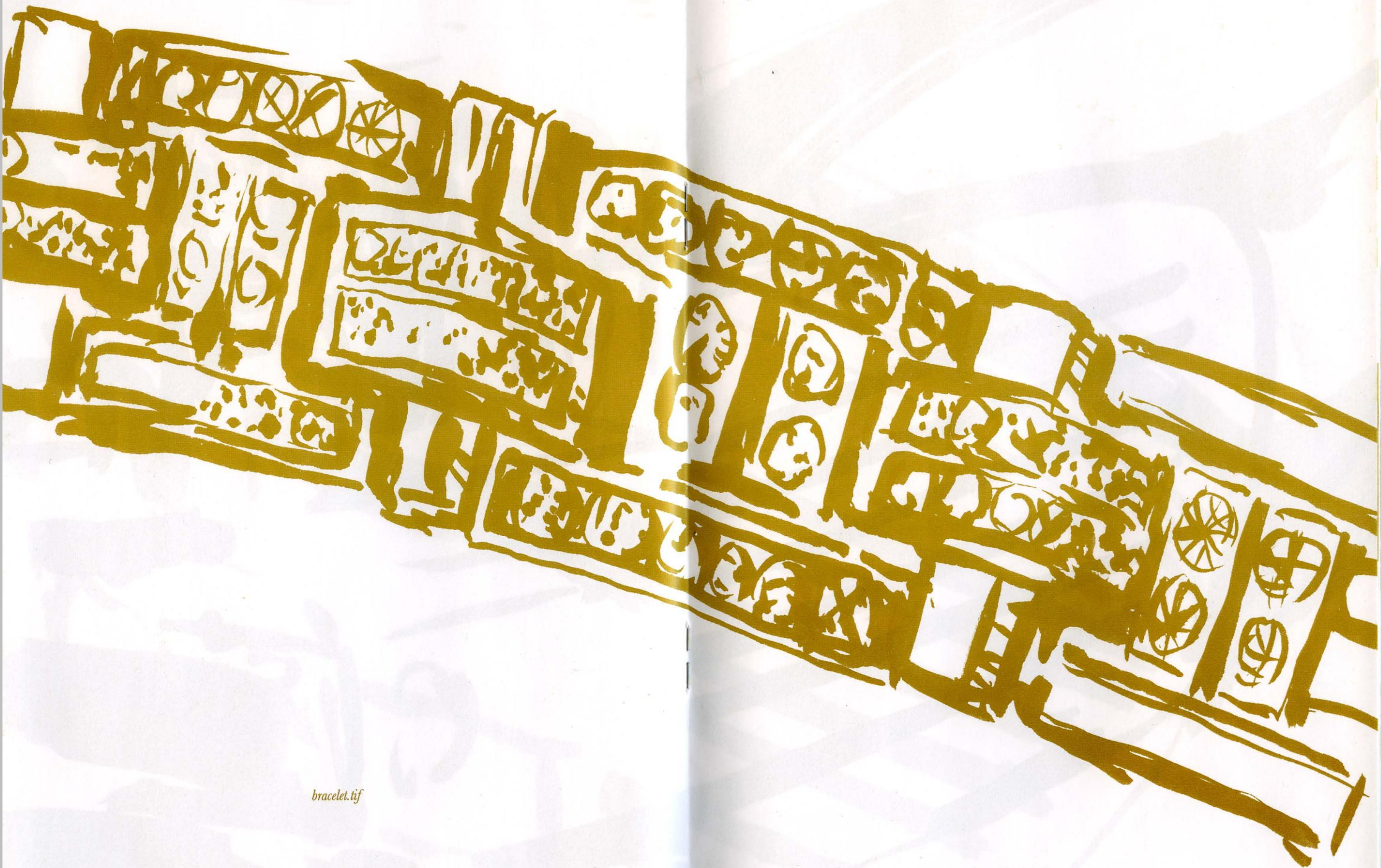
In *Macht und Rebel*, the Arabs have something that Rebel doesn't possess: they have a certain level of alienation that he wants. So he uses them to alienate himself, to put himself aside. But he's not in the position to truly become somebody else. He has to construct his own differentness.

Wouldn't you say that a white, male, heterosexual still has the possibility to relate to – and thus identify with – certain cultural groups?

The point is that those cultures are easier to commodify, and that there is more unbreakable alienation in the life of an immigrant. It is not sellable in the same way. Also, Western society is defined by its inaccessibility to others. It is quite comparable to the Mafia: it always has to exclude in order to exist, and even though it's tolerant and everything there is at least a micro-exclusion. African-American culture, for example, is almost monopolizing popular culture with Hip Hop or R&B, but that is not the same as real integration. Whatever subculture the white male or female constructs, it ends up being mainstream because it is always already contained within.

Meaning there is a definite limit to the kind of tolerance Western societies identify themselves with?

There's a notion of tolerance and also the idea of relativity, which are linked to each other – but they also have their limits. And it was funnily illustrated by the Mohammed cartoon case, where all of a sudden the biggest culture-relativists were saying, 'Okay, this far and not any further!'



I don't think tolerance is an absolute matter – at some point you'll reach the limit. Even though Western society may be quite a mouldable material which can accept various opinions, there are a few basic rules which you shouldn't really mess with. Freedom of speech, for instance. That's our ideology. So the Mohammed cartoon case was a good example of an over-tolerating society which suddenly saw the end of tolerance. If you ask me, I think it should be possible to caricature Islam or the Prophet, even though you know it's asking for trouble.

FUCK ALL YOUR PROTESTS

Would you say that your literature, as it focuses on these controversial issues, opens up a dialogue?

Yes, sure. Personally, I don't take a stand in my books, and that's an important point. But still, I'm perceived as someone who does. I'm making images, or examples of how things in Norway are to a certain extent. The anti-globalization movement and others have used my books as an example. I think it funny that my books have become something like a reference point.

Do you have any expectations toward what kind of reactions your books might evoke?

With the first book I didn't. But with the second one, yes, I definitely had. I knew more about the mechanisms of the book market and how it's all choreographed by the publishing houses – how it is passed on to the newspapers and reviewers, and how the audience responds. So you learn more and more about the means of production and you take it into account when writing.

To what extent does this influence your writing?

You could say that the books are sort of interventionist – interventionist in the literary institutions, but also in the public debate. You can be quite specific about how to move around in this field, based on your knowledge of how the media work and in relation to their idea of an author.



of it. That isn't to say that I'm not obsessed with money – I am. On a large scale, though, you can say that art dealing is reinforcing mechanisms that are problematic in the first place. But at the same time, it is a way of putting some part of the money on another track, which can then be used productively in order to create new ideas. But it doesn't make such a big difference after all.

Don't you think that in comparison to fashion, the art world is more honest in all its weirdness?

Yes, in a way I do. Especially when you consider what kind of art objects are being sold, and not only paintings but even weirder stuff, it's kind of funny, because art is the absolute luxury good. The items really serve the most abstract function but collectors are still willing to pay high prices for them. And in that sense it gives an image to the absurdity of capital. If enough people are convinced that something has the right symbolical value, it reproduces itself as a monetary value. I think that's even sympathetic. Germany is a good example: the big banks and corporations have huge collections and they put lots of money into this activity. The problem with this is the aspect of freedom: How much is the buyer in control of what is being produced? We'll just have to believe that sincere artists don't really sell things that they didn't want to produce in the first place. And in this sense, the capital follows the good ideas.

But you could also do works that don't turn into a product.

I've been a bit into that 'immaterial' and 'unsellable' art. A lot of my work is actually not that sellable, but that depends on the intention I am pursuing with a piece. I love the proto-conceptual work, from the '60s and '70s. And avant-garde practises, their attempt to break out of the cultural sphere, to make a difference and to find meaning within production. That has probably been the biggest inspiration for my own work during the last few years. Even though the desperation of the Dadaists and Situationists is a bit through, it's the historical avant-garde's attempt and unsurpassable ambition that lasts and that I find really interesting in art.

So what is your attempt?

As an artist, you're automatically linked to a leftist discourse and humanist ideals. Sometimes I think these ideas are too monolithic and I wanted

to challenge that. Hence the whole issue of misanthropy. The fact that humanism incorporates any cultural output – however harsh or critical it might be, that it is always read as a comment or criticism – is what I want to challenge. It's funny that even though my books take no position whatsoever they are read as criticism.

How do you handle the fact that everything that is produced in the art world, even if it is a critique, or a critique of a critique, is immediately absorbed?

Well, it also happens to my products. My attempt is to make certain kinds of statements and to create an output that is not absorbed too easily. But my books can also be read as entertainment. And that's also part of the plan: to disturb, and to bring these negativist ideas into entertainment. Entertainment is such an important issue these days and hard to get away from. With my books I also contribute to fields which are not really artistic, but which carry on these ideas of how much dissent can be put into the mechanisms of the spectacular.

In Norway, I delivered stuff to radio programs, and I've been writing lyrics for music recently. I also do semi-fictional things for some newspapers, but nobody knows that I'm the one doing them. So I insert messages into general culture without any sender. And that's part of my research or experimentation within the different modes of entertainment.

In *Macht und Rebel*, Rebel once thinks about doing something more evil than paedophilia – but he can't imagine anything worse.
Can you?

Writing a love story, maybe.



gold chain.tif



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NORSK KULTURRÅD
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NORWEGISCHE BOTSCHAFT

Does that mean you adapt and subvert advertisement strategies
for your needs?

Yes, maybe, since it is all about spreading ideas. In my second book I wrote so much about leftists and leftist activists, I knew that it was going to be picked up. Because this happens whenever the leftists get written about or criticized, I mean – they love problematizing themselves! Just like the arts. When, for example, Adbusters is mentioned, they are crazy about reading it. But at the same time, I knew when I was writing about advertising, the brands and companies, that there would be no reactions from that side. What do they care? They are in power. They have the cash.

Not even from Puma, Adidas or Nike?

Well, you're right, there was almost a court case because of the logos in *Macht und Rebel*. The lawyers of Ikea, Opel and Microsoft had a look at it, but finally just dropped it.

How would you describe the trap consumer-critique falls into?

The big trap is of course to overestimate the results, to believe that it is going to change anything – and that's the problem. But I want to launch new ideas, some new kind of awareness, new twists – that's part of my work, my contribution. Not that it would change much or do anything about consumerism or make capitalism crumble, but I like the idea of spaces beside or inside the prevailing view and the *comme il faut*, where thought is so free that it is nauseating.

*I HATE THE FACT THAT EVERYTHING,
EVERY FUCKING THING,
EVERY ACTION AND EVERY FUCKING ATTITUDE,
EVERY REBELLION AND EVERY INDECENCY
~EVERYTHING ✕
TURNS INTO DESIGN, SOONER OR LATER.*

In that respect, how do you feel about selling your own work?

I think it's problematic. If I didn't have to sell it, I probably wouldn't. When it comes to art, I'm not fundamentally interested in the sales aspect

From a strictly misanthropic point of view – who do you hate best?

Well, people in general are annoying, as you know. Cultures on the whole, maybe? ‘German Culture’ or ‘African Culture,’ for example. And very often people who are similar to me, people working in the same kind of field.

So is your concept of misanthropy a concept of self-hatred?

Yes, I think so. Actually, very much of the anger in the books is directed toward things that could be connected to my own practice in a way. It is rewritten but the field of culture is the real target here. In the books I don’t have many attacks on popular culture as such. I do have a passage on Gwyneth Paltrow, though. But she is in a league of her own when it comes to annoying human beings.

Would you agree that ‘contemporary humanity has lost the ability to engage in productive solitude?’

One of the ideas I have been pursuing for quite some time now is what you are feeling for and about yourself and how productive that feeling is or can be. There are obvious reasons for filling up your time and space with books, films and other means of diversion because maybe it is your own company that is unbearable. Whether this emptiness is to be taken as a trait of contemporary humanity is something I feel I am not able to answer. I certainly don’t have any romantic ideas of the past in this respect, of people sitting by themselves and being full of life and existence. I guess both, painful solitude and misanthropist feelings have been around for quite a long time. Perhaps it’s just more visible nowadays because you have the means to fill the void and you then suddenly see only all these means and they become an image for the emptiness of existence as such.

In your books, one option to deal with this appears to be irony; you not only depict irony but comment on it as well. How would you describe your use of this meta-irony? Is irony ‘the voice of the trapped, who have come to enjoy their cage?’

In this so-called post-ironical age you have to understand irony as a way of speaking that is impossible to neglect, because there simply are some phenomena you cannot possibly speak of without irony. Think of all the