



Matias Faldbakken, *Supernote (PN-14342)* (detail), 2007, triptych, ink on paper, each 17 1/2 x 42 1/2".

## OPENINGS

Christopher Bollen on

# Matias Faldbakken

"NOTHING DOING," Matias Faldbakken's solo show last year at Standard gallery in Oslo, was accompanied by a koanlike statement of intent. "This is not thought made visible but nought made visible," wrote the thirty-four-year-old Norwegian artist. "This is information exodus. This is aphasia. . . . The Eskimos have two hundred ways to say snow. I have three million ways to say no." The artist exhibited a series of blown-up edges and blanks from newspapers, the nearly monochromatic images' only subject the scarce, unreadable print bleeding through from the other side of the page. But this insistence on negativity has taken many forms in his work. In *16:9*, 2006, the black horizontals seen above and below a letterboxed wide-screen film are remade as luminous brushed-aluminum bars, hung on the wall minus any intervening picture—thereby reversing the area where "nothing is doing." *Zero Tolerance*, 2005, in which

the title is spray-painted on a white wall, comments on Scandinavia's zero-tolerance stance on public graffiti. A 2005 wall text coolly reads, TO ESCAPE HORROR—BURY YOURSELF IN IT, a line Faldbakken lifted from a photograph of LA punk-club graffiti that quotes Jean Genet. Indeed, as he jumps among video, sculpture, graffiti, wall texts, installation, painting, and literature—he has received acclaim for two biting satiric novels in a trilogy called "Scandinavian Misanthropy" (the third is due out in April)—Faldbakken traffics in the use of linguistic games to subvert values and ideologies until their logics tip into unsettling voids.

At first, it would be easy to dismiss these examples of the artist's tactical negativity as agitated rhetorical gestures of middle-class, mainstream rebellion—the drowsy disaffection of privileged white male hetero youth all too at home with its apparently discontented lot in society (a charge that clings to a stew of artists today who capitalize on anachronistic, token forms of revolt that read as queasy nihilism). Faldbakken himself describes the feeling of being "upset because there's nothing to be upset about," and his artistic practices have often been launched directly—and humorously—at his own social disillusionment. Since 1997, he has collaborated with fellow Norwegian artist Gardar Eide Einarsson: They have produced a series of zines, set up a "milk bar" in a gentrified Oslo neighborhood once home to junkies, and made black-and-white poster portraits of themselves dressed up as zombies (*I Am Alive and You are Dead*, 2005). But overwhelmingly, Faldbakken's productions are not simple gestures of angst but a more complicated response. "Whatever subculture the white male or female constructs," he states, "it ends up being mainstream



because it is always already contained within.” And there’s the rub: Faldbakken dips his fingers into the cracks and fissures of mainstream value systems by effectively mimicking them. Graffitiing the very position of authority (ZERO TOLERANCE) nullifies both the subversive act of vandalism (I will mark my individual insurrection against the clean wall of the institution) and the power structure that tries to erase dissident messages (I’m just repeating exactly what you wanted). In other words, to circumvent authority, bury yourself in it.

This “inherent transgression,” as Slavoj Žižek has written, is built into society’s

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power structure. Amending Hegel’s dialectical double negation, Žižek describes the “negation of a negation,” implying that behind every negation, a second one occurs to recoup the loss—returning it, in effect, to the hands of authority. Using pop allegory for political commentary, Faldbakken speaks to this dissenter’s quandary in the 2004 video *Movie Scenes Where the Problem Gets Bigger If or When They Fight It*, a montage of movie scenes in which the characters’ attempts to battle the enemy only make it angrier. And in his provocative ongoing series “The Name of a Person That I Want Dead, Written in X’s,” 2006–, *x*’s painted

in black retoucher’s paint on photographic paper stand in for the letters of an individual’s name. The *x*, in a sense, doubly negates: Faldbakken’s transgressive desire is covered up, but the identity of the one wished dead is also obliterated—in a sense, the mark has already been hit. Remember that in Plato’s *Phaedo*, Socrates compares misanthropy to misology, the hatred of speech and logic. Faldbakken’s “no” cuts off any chance to make his own dissonance articulate.

Suicide, of course, is the ultimate act of self-negation, but in Faldbakken’s hands, it becomes a form of spectacular return. *Untitled (Alan Turing)*, 2006, is a darkly colored print of the Apple Computer logo—an apple with a bite taken out of it. Turing, the English mathematician and cryptographer who is considered the father of computer science, was convicted of “gross indecency” (i.e., homosexuality); he allegedly committed suicide by eating an apple poisoned with cyanide. His dramatic death, ripped from a fairy tale—he is said to have loved the story of Snow White—has been miraculously reinstated in the symbolic order as the beneficent rainbow-striped emblem of a hundred-billion-dollar computer corporation. In the language of capitalism, three million noes still mean yes.

One of Turing’s legacies is the Turing test, which evaluates whether a machine can be mistaken for a human. Faldbakken turned to the topic of artificial intelligence in “A Hideous Disease,” his exhibition for Art Basel’s Art Statements section last June. The title comes from an entry in sci-fi writer Arthur C. Clarke’s diary, describing an idea for the 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Clarke suggested to director Stanley Kubrick, with whom he wrote the screenplay,

Opposite page: View of Matias Faldbakken, "A Hideous Disease," Swiss Exhibition Center, Basel, 2007. From left: Douglas Rain (*What Do You Mean "We," Fleshtube?*), 2007; *Untitled (Main Frame Sculpture)*, 2007; and *Supernote (PN-14342)*, 2007. This page, from left: Matias Faldbakken, *Untitled (Alan Turing)*, 2006, ink on paper, 23¼ x 23¼". Matias Faldbakken, *Untitled (Canvas #16)*, 2008, canvas tape on linen, 60 x 60".



that the aliens be "machines who regard organic life as a hideous disease." The antagonist in the film, of course, is the supercomputer HAL 9000, who attempts to wrest control from the astronaut crew in order to avoid being disconnected—the machine version of death. (Faldbakken earlier addressed this termination in his gigantic color billboards *Shut Down*, 2001, and *Turn Off*, 2004, which blow up to massive scale buttons from the computer toolbars of Windows 2000 and its update, Windows XP.) HAL's power comes from his ability to use our language and reason, but Faldbakken mutes him: The photograph *Douglas Rain (What Do You Mean "We," Fleshtube?)*, 2007, which formed one part of the installation, is a distorted portrait of the actor who gave voice to HAL. Never viewed in the film, Rain is here seen but not heard; the artist has once again negated the negation.

"A Hideous Disease" also included a photographic triptych of three close-up scans of a hundred-dollar bill, its intricate ink patterns filling the frames. The title of the 2007 work, *Supernote (PN-14342)*, refers to the most notorious counterfeit American currency, which the United States has accused the North Korean government of printing (others accuse the Central Intelligence Agency). This phony tender matches the real one almost flawlessly, the imitation devaluing the authentic at the moment they meet. Once again, authority is destroyed by its exact simulation. In front of the triptych stood *Untitled (Main Frame Sculpture)*, 2007, an aluminum facsimile of a supercomputer. A photograph hung nearby, *Monolith (Golden Shower)*, 2007, shows a rectangular black structure in a

Seattle park; briefly and mysteriously placed there in 2001, the sculpture was intended to look like the "monolith" in Kubrick's film, an alien object whose presence increases human intelligence. In this found press image, however, a dog marks the black box with urine—the "hideous disease" of organic life gets the last crude, vandalizing laugh.

In his latest work, Faldbakken has moved to cleaner, starker material, but he's still fighting his misanthropic battle with linguistic tactics. In "I Don't Think So," an exhibition that took place last fall at Minneapolis's Midway Contemporary Art, the artist showed several works featuring letters in black canvas tape stuck to untreated linen (others are made from black electrical tape on white paper). The tape comes to resemble the overlapped brushstrokes of Faldbakken's acknowledged art influence, Ad Reinhardt, who saw his black canvases as the "ultimate paintings" in modernism's "negative progression": The minimal tape piles up in unreadable graphs, like layered graffiti that leaves a tagged wall utterly abstract, eventually returning it to its initial role as barrier. The hard geometry of the tape gives the "paintings" the look of limp flags; unbuoyed by wind, their political content cannot be read. One piece supposedly states, NOT IN A MILLION YEARS, but it hardly matters what it says. After Faldbakken's sustained attention to language and his fascination with computing and simulation, one wonders whether this is what information exodus looks like. □

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