MICHAEL O'DONNELL
THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY

A Fish in the Night

It is a seemingly absurd constellation: a monumental, luminous fish on the mountaintop tower at Slottsfjellet in Tønsberg. From afar it looks like a typical company logo; up close you find that the fish shape is a contour line consisting of glaring red light bulbs. Could it be a garish ad for an amusement park? Or for a Disney-inspired aquarium?

Michael O'Donnell's light-installation evokes associations to advertising and entertainment – since some of his props are taken from these areas. But then it has been a major premise of the work of this British-born artist ever since he moved to Norway in 1977 that anything can be turned into art – that the concept of sculpture no longer inherently depends on the conventional materials bronze, marble, granite, and wood. The artist is naturally at liberty to express himself by means of any medium and means he may choose.

Such artistic freedom does not necessarily win general acceptance: the Tønsberg fish provokes a controversy as soon as it enters the Vestfold Kunstnersenter project kunstanlegg:1 [Art Installation:1], in the fall of 2002. The anti-modernist art historian Paul Grøtvedt finds it difficult to see that kunstanlegg:1 has anything to offer its audience, since the various projects are not only banal and unprofessional, there is also reason to question their legitimacy as art. He goes on to ask whether the luminous fish atop Slottsfjellet could possibly bear any relation to art, concluding that it lacks all artistic merit and quality and is simply visual rubbish and artistic impotence, devoid of any artistic value. [1]

O'Donnell's fish is made neither of marble nor bronze, nor is it placed in an art museum. Far from it: it is placed atop Tønsberg's municipal landmark, on historic ground. This is the site of King Sverre's siege of the Baglers in the fall of 1201, where the remains of medieval fortifications can still be seen. A huge, lit fish is out of place here, viewed by some as a provocative prank.

The provocation thus makes us re-consider and re-view, as Grethe Hald points out in her review of kunstanlegg:1: "The fish lights up the night, making us look to the mountain, surprised and considerably vexed: is it really possible to see this town and this mountain in a different light than our familiar one? . . . This kind of contemporary art only seeks to challenge our firmly held

beliefs – but perhaps it may be dangerous enough?" [2] The local newspaper soon confirmed that this was indeed dangerous enough: "The three representatives of the Labour Party demanded that the fish be removed this very day." [3] They were voted down in the arts committee, however. But the fish foes constituted a majority in the local newspaper's poll: "Seventy-one percent of Tønsberg residents think that art such as the neon fish atop Slottsfjellet should be prohibited." [4] They wanted to keep the lit cross placed on the tower at Christmas and Easter, however – seventy-four percent were in favor.

The case of Michael O'Donnell's provocation represents a study in social processes at work in a small community. His fish succeeds as art, both by challenging our habits of perception, forcing us to rethink long-established "truths," and by engaging a large segment of the local community, making them feel that the issue concerns them directly. The mass media's populist approach of suggesting that art and its historical development ought to be decided by the opinion polls and their percentages, is rather predictable and reflects the general level of the Norwegian art discourse. The role of provocateur is an enviable one for an artist – art does not as a rule engage that much. In Tønsberg O'Donnell's art works as a catalyst for views on art as well as on the town and its hallmark. Symbols are not to be taken lightly in Norwegian society – change is easily perceived as a foreign element. The fish is not merely such an extraneity; it blares its garish red light against the sky, as if protesting against the established security of the tower monument.

The Slottsfjell tower itself is extraneous – it has nothing to do with the old fortifications, being simply a romantic addition from the 1800s. Atop the tallest spot in town it reaches for the sky like an exclamation mark. If one were to consider placing a fish on top, it ought to be a jumping fish, a fish reaching even higher, as if leaping straight into the heavens. But Michael O'Donnell's fish is not jumping, instead it heads downwards – as if diving into the tower, as if descending from the sky and using the tower as a conduit to those standing at the foot of the tower.

If we pursue this line of thinking, it may no longer "lack all artistic merit and quality" and simply be "visual rubbish." The concept of art is an ever-changing social and cultural device demanding both a context and an analysis. [5] What follows is an attempt to supply O'Donnell's fish with just that.

A fish from the heavens – this is a strong allusion to one of the first Christian symbols: in early Christian times, before it was permitted to depict Christ, the fish served as a substitute, as a symbol of Jesus, especially in the catacombs of Rome. The Greek word for fish – Ichthús – makes an acrostic: written vertically the letters in this word can be read as the first letters in the sentence: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior." The fish is thus a frequent adornment on the stones covering the graves in the catacombs. O'Donnell exchanges the light cross that sits on top of the tower twice a year for another ancient Christian symbol. With his shining fish appearing in the sky he opens for an interpretation closely related to early Christian symbolism: he actually expands it. Jesus here appears to be returning from Heaven, in radiance, on the Last Day, to judge the quick and the dead. But there is an additional Christian reference: when the Roman emperor Constantine faced his greatest battle – the Battle of Ponte Milvio, in 312 AD – he claimed to

have seen a symbol of Christ, the cross, in the sky, and to have heard the voice of God saying: "Through this sign thou shalt conquer."

Is this another sign from God appearing in the sky, this time in Tønsberg? Is it the Second Coming, in the form of a symbol?

The fish can scarcely be seen as a victorious Christ returning to pass judgment on humanity, for the artist has underlined its absurd lack of meaning precisely by placing it head down at the top of the tower. We may then detect irony in the fish, but not as an empty gimmick or a limp visual joke. On the contrary – the irony opens for an interpretation that addresses the existential quest of humanity: in all its loftiness the nineteenth-century tower becomes a metaphor of the last remnant of vertical transcendence – man's yearning upwards, the notion of a connection between man on earth below and God in Heaven above. The tower is lofty in two ways: both as architecture and as a metaphor of man's longing for a god. If the tower is a conduit from man to the heavens, what might be coming through today?

Since O'Donnell's fish seems on its way downwards in this shaft, this could be a way of reducing God – pulling Him down to earth. The artist seems to suggest that since God no longer has a place in Heaven, we might as well pull him down to distribute him among ourselves. It becomes more like a prophecy already fulfilled – one that points not forwards, but backwards – to what happened when Christ was crucified. The soldiers divided his clothes among themselves, reducing the divine to a question of earthly existence – "that the scripture might be fulfilled." [6] Obviously pulling this fish down through the narrow shaft of the tower will shrink its monumentality down to just an ordinary little fish. It reverses the perspective, to where the magnificent, the important, and the meaningful can no longer be sustained.

The French philosopher Luc Ferry sees the philosophy of the Enlightenment as having led to a humanization of the divine and a divinization of the human: the previously vertical transcendence (the relationship between God and man) was replaced by a horizontal transcendence (the relationship between human beings). [7] When the fish, full of Christian symbolism, is caught and brought down to earth, it is as though O'Donnell places the sacred amidst humanity. The revelation of God through light, which used to be essential to our understanding of man as part of a larger, metaphysical context, has now been reduced to a carnival-like glare unfit for any kind of salvation. In this light, and with the symbolic reference of the fish pulled downwards to earth, man is left to his own devices; he must find some way to make himself divine, both to endure an earthly existence and to establish meaningful bonds to his fellow beings. This is what Ferry argues when he says that "If the sacred is no longer rooted in a tradition whose legitimacy is tied to a revelation that predates consciousness, it must henceforth be placed at the very heart of mankind. And this is how transcendental humanism is a humanism of man as God." [8]

By leaving such evidence of humanism in his work O'Donnell seems to reveal by concealing; he undermines his own existential frankness by counterbalancing it with gaudiness and vulgarity. He draws on the background of his childhood England of the 1950s, which still had

the amusement park atmosphere of seaside resorts; and he is both fascinated and revolted by the colored lanterns and all the tinsel that garnished the dreary life of the working class – a life that a brief respite could neither pull them out of nor free them from – and that could only give the holiday-makers a cheap form of escape for a brief spell. It is as if O'Donnell, with his monumental, glaring fish, wants to tell us that this amusement park sham is all man can expect from above – a garish escapism unfit to save anyone. The cheerless beauty of civilization is a vainglorious one.

The confirmation that Emperor Constantine claimed to have received in his omen from above, so evocatively depicted in Raphael's fresco [9] – as an effective piece of papal propaganda – has lost all of its power of conviction, all of its old ideological undercurrent, in O'Donnell's work. Man is now left alone and abandoned, his only recourse being to seek warmth in the glow of the amusement park's red – and dead – glare. The light from above is no longer a divine token – it has become a sign of the absurdity of human existence in the hollow halls of civilization. No matter how brightly it shines in the nocturnal darkness, there is no way out for mankind. There is a shivering in the night, for this luminous revelation yields no heat. Life is a trap.

The old dramatic device deus ex machina – the unexpected salvation in the form of a god from above in the ancient Greek tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides, a miraculous divine intervention in secular affairs – turns out to be a fish carrying religious symbolism, destined to force its way down to mankind through a shaft, robbed of any redemptive power. This absurd light from above is thus doubly tragic. Its brilliance is impressive; its bright outline makes a magnificent sight in the night, above the floodlit tower. But it is in its very illumination of our field of sight, by means of a strong radiance generated by electric power, that the sculpture proclaims its powerlessness against an ultimate darkness – its inability to save the world and its inhabitants. Nocturnal despair rules, envelops all – but it still has to suffer a frivolous flame, a contortion of a fish that belongs neither in Heaven nor on earth.

Soft Foam in Hard Confrontation

It was at a time when Norwegian sculpture was still rather conventional and in need of fresh input from abroad. Per Palle Storm, with his representational naturalism, had long been in charge of the teaching of sculpture at the art academy in Oslo, where he held a professorship longer than anyone before him, from 1947 to 1980. [10] Fresh input arrived when Michael O'Donnell moved to Norway at the end of the 1970s and immediately started using his expertise and his un-Norwegian approach to sculpture, developed during his studies at British art academies (Cardiff College of Art, Leeds College of Art, The Royal College of Art, London) during a decade when British sculpture grew at an amazing rate, placing it in the vanguard – a whole new generation of artists born around 1950, with Tony Cragg, Bill Woodrow, Antony Gormley, Richard Deacon, Alison Wilding, and Richard Wentworth as some of its strongest proponents and practitioners.

Michael O'Donnell also came out of this circle, and his work has to be seen in the context of this new British sculpture, which matured in the 1980s. One of its hallmarks is a will to break out of the straitjacket of conventional sculpture (as in the clean, classical-modernist style of Henry Moore) – to look for new forms and new materials. But also to combine the physical expression in sculpture, its concrete materialization, with conceptual aspects: the notion of idea and process, which allowed for more of a humanist and socially engaged art. The purity of modernism was rejected – Tony Cragg and Bill Woodrow pulled the waste of modern consumerism into the gallery, where they recycled it into new forms in new contexts – transforming the trivial, man-made surroundings of postindustrial society into sculptural signs. This was based on a sense of sculpture as metaphor, shared by a majority of British sculptors of their generation – a metaphor of both human emotions and man's desire to grasp social and existential relationships. It called for a new freedom that quickly left its mark on British contemporary sculpture, but which took time to find a foothold in Norway.

O'Donnell first caused a stir in Norway around 1980, when he exercised this new freedom to create his lengthy, slender Anal Openers, which differed from anything previously seen in Norway. They were not only erotically charged objects that could be seen to suggest what might be called perverse tendencies; they also represented a metaphor of O'Donnell's strong need and determination to stake out previously unexplored channels of sculptural art in Norway – to give it a new direction.

O'Donnell's impact on Norwegian sculpture increased once he started teaching sculpture at the art academy, and even more so when he became a member of the jury of the annual (national) autumn exhibition (Høstutstillingen) in 1984. Supported by the rest of the sculpture jury – Aase Texmon Rygh and Steinar Christensen – he saw to it that almost all sculptural works submitted were refused. Only four were accepted, while the three members of the jury showed one work each, as if to set a standard. There was an uproar. The newspaper Dagbladet reported that “the ‘slaughtering’ of sculptors at the annual show has brought strong reactions,” predictably accompanying this with a statement about the sculpture jury having "intentionally misused its position and completely botched the job, according to Per Ung, one of the refused artists. . . Its refusals are not based on considerations of quality. The jury has simply accepted only one style. . . But this is not the prerogative of a jury. . . They have thus discredited themselves, says Per Ung." [11] And Arbeiderbladet quotes the sculptor Olav Orud, a board member in the sculptors’ union, as saying that the heavy-handed sculpture jury was "a political, but undemocratic attack on the very purpose of the national exhibition. . . There will have to be a reckoning. . . It is widely felt that it has exceeded its mandate." [12]

In retrospect what happened at the annual exhibition in 1984 can be seen as part of a necessary cleanup in Norwegian sculpture. The next step was taken two years later, when O’Donnell’s contribution to the exhibition was a sculpture made of folded foam rubber, Folds I. It is indicative of the inflexibility of the annual exhibition that the work had to be classified among “other techniques” for the sculpture to be entered into the show. Several art critics reacted to it –

among them Grethe Hald, who intimated that this object, which she describes as “foam rubber mattresses joined together, with an excrement-colored substance smeared in the fold,” belongs to the anal stage, demanding the expertise from a field far removed from that of art, wondering: “The question is then: does Folds I present an interesting case for the artist's psychiatrist or that of the viewer?” [13]

Folds I is ideally suited to provoke; not only does it make light of the great bronze tradition in Norwegian sculpture, it also presents compelling testimony to a new way of conceiving and creating sculpture, based on the characteristics of the particular material and its potential as sculptural form: a foam rubber mattress has been folded and particles of rust spread on it. O’Donnell explains: “It was part of a larger series, made at a time when I was working with materials that dissolve in miserable sadness. The color of that mattress reminded me of the feeling you get when you wash your hands with a pink soap that slowly slips away. When combined with rust the colors turned out to be a perfect match.” [14]

On one level Folds I is thus a product of memory, an evocative object; on another it is an exercise in form based on a conviction that any material at all can, in principle and in practice, be used to create sculpture. This particular object involves more, however: it is a sort of ironic comment on Barnett Newman’s abstract expressionism and the zip that is so central to a number of his paintings. Indeed, O’Donnell’s Folds I can be seen as a fairly straight inversion of Newman’s breakthrough painting from 1948, Onement 1, both in its composition and in the sculpture's reflecting the two colors of the painting. Newman’s zip is an irregular, vertical line bisecting the monochrome surface of the painting – the result of the painter’s extreme sensitivity. How far can this form of artistic sensitivity be theorized before it turns into a parody of itself? Very far, in the view of the American critic Harold Rosenberg, who claimed that to Newman the zip represented his transcendental self, the bisected rectangle reflecting the whole range of existence, in a heroic way. [15] O'Donnell's contention, in Folds I, may then be that Newman's paintings can no longer sustain the load of this existential burden, thus collapsing under it – so that this final remnant of modernism can now only survive cradled in cushiony, flaccid foam rubber.

The foam rubber makes a kind of shock absorber against the last heroic drumbeats of art history, thereby also offering an alternative: a demonstration of the capacity of even the most impotent of materials to make potent art, however lacking it might be in the heroic, existentialist rhetoric found in latter-day modernism. The American critic Clement Greenberg – the leading advocate and defender (as well as preserver) of abstract expressionism – at one time believed in a purity of art by virtue of its power of self-criticism: "The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each be rendered 'pure,' and in its 'purity' find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as its independence." [16] But at the time when O'Donnell exhibited his Folds I, the notion of this ultimate purity had collapsed, as the modernist Utopia had crumbled. In Norway that dream of purity still lingered, however; although some of the artists felt the need for making a clean sweep. The foam rubber sculpture Folds I contributes to this in a message that is succinct, devastating in its irony, and most sincere.

The entry of Folds I in the 1986 annual exhibition may be seen as Michael O'Donnell's recipe for burying modernism, in a gentle but lethal suffocation.

Clear communication was important to him also in his work at the academy, where he devoted himself to the task of updating their educational methods. He questioned their emphasis on the study of the nude: "You don't learn to be a sculptor by staring at a naked lady for three days." [17] In the Norwegian media O'Donnell has left a trail of pithy comments on his role as an artist. When he had a show at the Ibsen House in Skien in 1980 – where he exhibited a suitcase full of birch wood carrying the title A Norwegian Goes South – a journalist made the mistake of asking: "But what is your message?" He got his answer: "I hate cats. I'm a member of the anti-cat squad. They are nasty little animals. But I love women with big boobs. If I sell enough sculptures, I hope to be able to buy some." [18] The answer underlines O'Donnell's reluctance to give unequivocal answers or definitions of his work. In one interview he states that "To me what is most important is not that my sculptures say something clearly but that they serve as catalysts for my audience. Once the audience has seen and experienced them, their continued existence is irrelevant. I work with creativity, not art as pretty and precious objects." [19]

His retort in Skien, about women and cats, also reflects the streak of absurdity that was evident even then – both in his art and his attitude to it – an undercurrent that he gradually channeled into more than humorous headlines, and which he now adds when picturing the quiet desperation felt under the weight of history – a despair that becomes ever more pronounced in O'Donnell's exhibitions from the late 1990s.

Combining his most important statements on his work and his role as an artist, we see the outline of a kind of manifesto, or, at the very least, a clear and concise artistic agenda. At its core is a recognition of the threat of stagnation as an artistic impetus in itself. Having made his light sculpture Blue Fire, consisting of one hundred and twenty spotlights of altogether 6000 watts for the exhibition Referanser [References] at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Oslo, the Bergen Art Society, and the Lillehammer Art Museum in 1995, he writes in the catalog: "Not unlike the world of unicorns and the Australian platypus, cave dwellers and underwear made of sacking and ash, sculpture had moved forward, and the sculptors were also expected to progress." [20] In an interview as early as 1986 he points to a change in the role of the sculptor: "I suggest that the time of ego sculpture, irresponsible sculpture, is past. It is time for sculpture to play its part, confront the space, confront people – stand forth and declare intentions. The alternative is those awful public sculptures or coffee table rubbish that most people take to be sculpture – getting cheated." [21]

Instant Ruins

It is in 1986 that Michael O'Donnell truly declares his intentions, confronting people and making a strong public statement in the form of a series of television sets made of cast iron and

cast marble, on the Sola beach outside Stavanger, placing them as a barrier against the sea and the horizon. The television screens depict more or less abstract “landscapes” – hints of horizon lines and contours of trees, mountains, and birds, and the traces of wind and rain frozen for eternity. These television monitors intercept the horizon line of the ocean, but provide their own horizon as images on the screen. What is real and what is illusion? The spaces between the monitors provide glimpses of sea and sky. It seems to call for a choice: either the living, pulsating landscape out there, or the petrified image of the landscape on the screen, which represents a second-hand experience only. Not all of the visitors to the beach are ready to make that choice – O'Donnell's sculpture, called New Landscapes, is part of the international art festival on the Sola beach that summer, organized by the local municipality and having Pia Myrvold and Randy Naylor as its curators – and the reactions are swift: one night someone aims a shotgun at O'Donnell's sculpture, vandalizing it, and the newspapers are full of letters about the exhibition, most of them very negative. [22]

In an interview O'Donnell talks about his television monitors: "The pictures on the screen are related to the ocean and the nearby landscape. The next time there are technical difficulties with the television perhaps someone will think of the sea at Sola instead of getting upset." [23] And in a piece in Dagbladet following the shotgun massacre O'Donnell heightens his criticism of the television medium: "The artist suggests people blow their own television sets to bits instead of wrecking those that he has placed on the beach." [24]

The frozen television image in an ever changing landscape – the juxtaposition of first and second hand experience, the actually lived, experienced life and the edited media version – constitutes a focal point in O'Donnell's investigation of the meeting between art and society. This sculpture is socially committed, not by presenting the answers but by confronting us with an issue that we need to find a proper response to. It provides an opportunity for heightened sensory experience, as an alternative to the mass media's deadening of all our senses and our ability to think. It is paradoxical that O'Donnell shows us this possibility of keener reflection and more immediate perception through a sculpture that has petrifaction as a key element.

The sculpted television monitors on the beach, which the artist later that year exhibited in a show at the Drammen Art Society, calling it Domestic Decay, stand as a petrified monument – an archeological find, perhaps, from a distant past, recently excavated from the sands, harboring a riddle waiting to be solved. This use of petrifaction appears in O'Donnell's work at the beginning of the 1980s; its early form draws a vivid description from Gunvald Opstad in his coverage of O'Donnell's exhibition at the Kristiansand Art Society in 1981: "He becomes fascinated with a shirt frozen stiff on the clothesline on a Norwegian winter day, and shortly thereafter we find it all exhibited – the shirt and the clothesline. He casts an old coat, with its hanger still intact, and winds a fireman's rope around a coverall." [25] The artist seems to look around in amazement as he finds a petrified civilization, a society ground to a halt, a frozen life. What kind of human existence is possible here? Are these simply archeological finds, remains of a lost civilization? The television monitors on the beach are contemporary contraptions, but they appear ancient with their rusty, brown hues – looking like instant ruins of our society here and now, uncovered some

time in the future and exhibited as objects for the interpretation and analysis of the past, which is now. Inside the art society's gallery they testify to domestic decay, in which the first-hand experience has been replaced by an artificial, edited "reality" where most things have come to halt.

It is just this impression of a puzzling find that intrigues Åsmund Thorkildsen in his review of the exhibition: "The strength of the show lies in its success as an installation in these particular rooms. Those familiar shapes of television monitors, cupboards, and plinths give O'Donnell's project a critical and historical implication. The exhibition is worth a visit also as a mythical place – could this be the vision of a holy site of the future?" [26] In his first book, which covers a series of four exhibitions in the period 1986-87, among them the one at the Drammen Art Society, Michael O'Donnell writes about the need for "creating instant ruins" and of the artist's role as an archeologist of the present: "A consequence of the digging and searching is that towards the end of the 20th century the artist has assumed the mantle of contemporary archeologist. In a sense this gives him a ticket to travel anywhere and to use anything. To cross relate what exists on the surface to what exists under ground . . . So the artist is quite unique." [27]

O'Donnell's words about "creating instant ruins" imply a strong desire to see sculpture in the context of social engagement. And yet, his works are never reduced to one-dimensional poster art or to instruments of propaganda – they are full of an ambiguity that stirs our imagination, inviting our own interpretation. There is an element of the British tongue-in-cheek – the friendly kind of humor that says something but not all, the sting that sweetens the medicine and sours the sweet all in one dose. But there is also an element of play with our notion of monuments: placed on top of one another in two rows, as a kind of wall, the television monitors amount to more than the sum of their numbers; they are turned into a monument and appear to say something about priorities. The ambiguity can be seen also in the question: are these our priorities today, or are they the priorities of the archeologists and museum staff some time in the future, in their trying to figure out our times, our priorities, which then belong to a remote past? This creates an elegant intellectual loop, which forces us to keep shifting our point of view, from present to future, and consequently also to the past. O'Donnell creates these expanding circular movements in our encounters with many of his works, be it monument-like sculptures, sculptures recalling animals or fish, or photographs with various forms of staged lighting.

It is this intellectual loop involving different points in time that Göteborgs-Posten's critic refers to in his review of O'Donnell's exhibition in Galleri 54 in Gothenburg in 1986: "Michael O'Donnell's sculptures are reminiscent of what is found in the specimen collection of an ambitious museum. Fish-like, oblong idols are combined with knotty bones from prehistoric animals. . . A sense of time, proximity, source is ever present." [28] And at an exhibition three years later his Gothenberg critic is still struck by "a convincing unfathomable power" that recalls the strange sensation at seeing the present in a vision from the future: "This future vision takes form in Michael O'Donnell's evocative sculptures at Galleri Garmer. Somehow his objects thus inspire a feeling of already being faced with the incomprehensible scientific leftovers of our own time." [29]

There is another substantial work that shows a petrifaction of our society, which O'Donnell has never actually exhibited. In the open area behind his studio he has 50 concrete casts of refrigerators, made in the period from 1988 to 1991. It is a crude, direct working method used also by the British sculptor Rachel Whiteread in the 1990s. The concrete shapes stand there like some alien, monumental Easter Island sculptures or ruins from the Aztec civilization in South America – silent witnesses to a lost civilization, but still absurd imprints from our own time. It is the last frontier of civilization before the wilderness of the forest; useless objects of no practical value, but with a strong visual and evocative presence. They carry an analysis of a civilization encapsulated in its own contentment, its own monumental and impermeable stupidity.

Michael O'Donnell's instant ruins make us see ourselves and our time in the perspective of the future. We are left to draw our own conclusions – possibly to alter the future these sculptures preempt, by changing ourselves and the society we live in right now.

Anti-Monument

The steps are short and quick in Michael O'Donnell's work between instant ruins and monuments and back again. His ideas about the artist as an "archeologist of the present" leads him to the war memorials in northern France, an experience that triggers a new phase in his career. At the end of the 1980s, when he comments on the heroic monument tradition – and the willingness of artists to be used in this connection for propaganda, nationalist agitation, and various forms of historical revision – he does so with a critical eye and by means of subversive materials: in O'Donnell's sculptures rust and lead become effective metaphors of decay and silenced sorrow.

The rust is a quiet revolution – a slow breakdown of old structures, of the iron itself as well as, metaphorically, society's power structures. Rust never sleeps – it keeps insisting on the passage of time. We are trapped by time; and its passage produces ruins we cannot escape. In O'Donnell's rust sculptures and rust prints it serves as an apt metaphor of both a changing society – the decay of our culture – and of the subversive impact of art on the remaining social structures. He uses the lead as a coating or capsule in monumental sculptural forms, undermining them by irony, since they are often based on templates from children's coloring books. O'Donnell's sculptures from the late eighties have a certain deliberate naiveté – a paradox he exploits for all it is worth. O'Donnell makes use of the child's instinctive interest in finding easily recognized shapes "resembling" something seen before and therefore applicable in its imaginary world, to point to a corresponding interest among adults. And yet the templates in the coloring books limit the children's freedom: someone has already given the shapes they can work within – stipulated the terms, completed the manipulation. So also in official monuments. The contradiction is repeated in the materials used. When O'Donnell covers large, drum-like shapes in lead, the sound seems totally muffled, as if the drums and fanfares of public ceremonies lose their strength and die down when barely started. Or as if the pained scream of oppression is sti-

fled in its own grief. There is also dissonance in the motifs chosen: the coloring book clichés are not as innocent as they appear: we find a wolf, a bear, and a soldier – a threat concealed in the simplest of forms; the naiveté hides dangerous forces beneath the surface, turning deliberate.

O'Donnell himself points to the monument aspect in his early sculptural influence: "It is very hard to think back to when I was first confronted with sculpture. Perhaps in common with many of my background and generation it was memorials, church statues and gravestones. . . Perhaps the graveyard implies ownership – a strip of land which is permanently yours – a seat of family stability – a sense of place and identity. The graveyard also mirrors the church – and the church the museum. All three are hushed places – containers for an illogical peace – linked by their vastness, repetition and their reference beyond their physicality." [30] It is interesting to see him tying formative childhood experiences to social structures that actually use monuments as part of their communication of power. Such a language of power reaches its most heroic level in the war memorial, which to O'Donnell becomes nothing more than a logical extension of the church statues and gravestones of his childhood. And he poses the question: what happens when mass violence is turned into nationalism, glorification of the state, and political symbols of honor?

The first thing to happen is that the sculptors win the war – they willingly allow themselves to be used in support of the powers-that-be; and the war memorials provide work for them for years, leaving a legacy such as those in the north of France after the First World War; or, for that matter, the profusion of memorials on the battlefields of Gettysburg that, in the aftermath of the American Civil War, has transformed the entire area into a theme park and a very successful tourist trap. The next step is that the rhetoric of war continues, through the memorial, into the peace, as if to drown out the anti-war voices of poets such as Wilfred Owen and artists such as Otto Dix, Käthe Kollwitz, and George Grosz.

O'Donnell comments on the official war memorials through his own anti-monuments, never reducing them to simple political statements, but imbuing them with an atmosphere of older social structures crumbling in post-industrial society. He uses the monument as a vehicle for complex sculptural matters. They are complex because we are unable to pick out a single element as the primary one – once again O'Donnell's sculptures elude our grasp. In presenting his sculpture Wolfmonument at the annual autumn exhibition in 1987, he on the one hand identifies the establishment as a beast of prey, politics as aggression, influence as violation – in an increasing degree of abstraction. But the sculpture, constructed of planks, is covered in lead. Here is a metaphor of a muted enclosure by the use of a blunt material that silences the old balance of power, as if the heroic monument is being choked. Or, seeing the lead as a poison, as if it is the role of art is to infect the establishment and see to its slow death. But the wolf in this sculpture appears only as a negative form – a hole in a wall, seemingly escaping from the danger by withdrawing, ready to attack again at a later opportunity. The cut-out shape of the wolf is template-like and naive; but used in an ironic wolf monument it makes a striking example of O'Donnell's way of turning things upside down, making the naive cunning.

Another work from the same period is More Trouble in the Hen House – a gigantic plank monument to a chicken, in which also this creature is a gaping negative hole, based on a shape picked out of a children's coloring book. In this case the artist draws on the legacy of Dada and Surrealism – the combination of elements that are familiar enough in their own right, but which together constitute a logical breach, thereby creating a new and absurd entity. In this case the chicken rises in triumph. It is as though it has won – won a war, become emperor, built an industrial society, or the like. The bird appears as fully heroic, while disappearing into a hole in the wall: it no longer exists. The bird has flown (except chickens cannot fly). The combination of the monument form and the poultry figure illustrates O'Donnell's preference for sculptural staging and his knack for juxtaposing aesthetic differences – as well as his un-Norwegian sense of humor. The monument thus becomes totally ridiculous; it becomes its own antithesis, an anti-monument.

In Star Monument, shown at Galleri Riis, Oslo, in 1988, we see large, curved structures evoking associations of the Gothic cathedral's flying buttresses, and the church vault – humanity being fathomed in something greater and more powerful than itself, an existential longing, a patriotic intoxication. The curvatures of the sculpture have been crowned by a big star, reminiscent of some kind of national symbol, heroically placed on a level more elevated than man. The monumental scale and the symbolic power and strength suggested here carry a clear reference to the propaganda of a totalitarian state, be it the visual rhetoric on the Nazi arenas for mass gatherings of people or the socialist coercion of the arts in the Stalinist Soviet Union. But this monument is made of rusting iron sheets: rust never sleeps, it eats its way into the material and causes a slow disintegration of the power structure. In time it saps the spheres of power, loosening their hold, undetected until it is too late.

A Cumulative Method

In the period between the fall of 1988 and the winter of 1989 O'Donnell shows the result of his work with monuments and anti-monuments in four new exhibitions, in the Drammen Art Society, the Buskerud Art Center, Galleri Riis, Oslo, and in Galleri Garmer, Gothenberg. [31] The most noticeable feature in these exhibition is the artist's cumulative method. In the course of a highly productive working process, marked by the compulsiveness of hard physical work as well as incisive analysis, he produces quantities of sculptural raw material that is added to what has previously been made, allowing for a number of different combinations and adaptations to the various exhibition spaces. He then uses parts of his raw material when installing the exhibitions, each of them showing great artistic stringency while supplementing the others, thereby contributing to a greater totality, mysterious and ambiguous at the same time. It is as though these four exhibitions become stations where we recognize elements from the preceding and following stations, but where the whole becomes a different one and greater than its individual parts. In his review of the exhibition at the Drammen Art Society Åsmund Thorkildsen makes an apt comparison with the first movement of a symphony: "Just like a composer he works in

movements, in which both the leitmotif and the secondary motifs are developed and explored at length." [32]

For Michael O'Donnell this has become an essential working method: he adds show upon show, putting layer upon layer of meaning in his works. His dynamic, compulsive, almost frenetic work pace and perseverance – where he isolates himself for days on end in his studio in the woods – is on one level a sort of sculptural stream-of-consciousness technique, one association leading to the next, one idea giving birth to another, all of it materializing in an outpouring of artistic matter. On another level there is also an analytical and critical attitude to both society and the work of the sculptor. These qualities accompany him in his entire series of exhibitions. The interdependence of the exhibitions continues to expand our understanding of content and meaning; and O'Donnell's work is still so open that we are invited to bring our own experiences into the interpretation and the analysis, as he keeps placing familiar forms and objects into an unfamiliar context: "He confirms the belief in the role of the artist as a contemporary archaeologist who rediscovers traces of his own experiences in the objects of a society. And who points out the possibility for the individual to be able to reconstruct fragments of meaning when the objects are placed in new contexts." [33]

An important feature is the creation of meaning through the working process, the choice of materials, and the setting of the individual sculpture. His capacity for handling his material in the lesser context (the individual show), in the greater context (the series of shows), as well as in the development taking place over time, is something O'Donnell uses to shift perspective and focus just enough to remove unequivocality, to prevent ready categorization, leaving the ambiguous and the equivocal as the most vital strength of the objects, sculptures, and installations. To O'Donnell it is their enigmatic character that is the very justification of the sculptor.

A similar justification can be found in his overall perspective of – and his awareness of all the strong but invisible threads to be drawn through – his sculptural production, which allows for a recycling of ideas, sculptures, and objects – leading him to conclude: "It never fails to amuse me how certain things set on a shelf years ago get dusted off and set into action again – to the point where I now consider all earlier works as a source of words in the working language, and the fact that I have used them before – a moral defense for their use again." [34] It is then evident that his artistic vehicle is not as much the individual piece of work as it is the greater context in which he places it. Vitally important in this connection is a criticism of our culture that is full of pessimism. In an interview he points to all of the featureless items surrounding us, and which depress him: "There is a constantly growing distance between us and the objects we produce. The objects lack quality and character. But as far as I am concerned, melancholy might be a better word than pessimism." [35]

In his review of O'Donnell's show at Galleri Riis in 1988 Harald Flor points to the impact the artist's productiveness, his cumulative method, and his need for sequence in his work, have on his art and on our reception of it: "The main reason for this vast output must be sought in the way O'Donnell approaches and pursues artistic challenges. It is not a question of his effective

and innovative use of techniques. The answer lies in his desire to show different aspects and to establish connections within a complex sculptural universe, rather than seeking a concentrated expression or the great synthesis within the single piece of work." [36] The complex sculptural universe sought by O'Donnell can be seen both in his linking of exhibitions, in series, and in the space between the exhibitions. In an interview in 2000, on the occasion of a show of his in South Africa, he addresses this: "It's the contextual framework that I find interesting. At the moment I have two shows going (in Sweden), and it is the reciprocal relationship between these two shows I find interesting, the bit in the middle when you can see in both directions at the same time and read how the work is functioning here and functioning there." [37]

It is interesting to note that it is just in the empty space between two shows that O'Donnell's work gains a perspective that yields meaning – this space may be seen as negative space, related to that found in some of his anti-monuments. By highlighting this space between his own shows it is as though he transforms the art into an anti-monument of itself, since the required step back to gain the needed distance entails a critical and analytical stance that the conventional monument does what it can to eliminate in our exposure to it.

The keepers of an illogical peace have gotten a most complicated retort.

But the moment we thought we had understood this artist and his mode of operating, he turns it all upside-down: he gathers all of his sculptures for one labyrinthine chaos, with no space or perspective between stations. Instead he gives us simultaneous exposure to all. This happens in 1992 in Oslo, with the show Wood for Trees, in an old storeroom at Skøyen Citadell, under the auspices of Galleri Riis: seven hundred cubic meters of what he calls "sculptural components" make a kind of dense forest to be studied from outside, from the perimeter of the forest, or to be entered, to be swamped by it – to lose perspective – to get lost. Inside this maze of an accumulation of sculptural elements that used to have their specific place and function in carefully planned exhibitions and installations each work loses its individual meaning, taking on another, that of a fragment in a context that is no longer clear. It turns into a meeting in the form of a close encounter with the individual sculptural fragment – an installation that is not only site-specific in terms of the storeroom where it is shown; it is also space-related to O'Donnell's total sculptural output – all of his shows that we have seen earlier and carry with us as memories – to his work situation in the studio as they all begin to pile up, to the cramped and mute existence in storage at the end of a show. It is thus related as much to a mental space as a tangible, physical one – a conceptual museum, retrospective and contemporary at the same time.

This installation is therefore also a stockpile, a multitude of possibilities, a showroom of the forms and materials of the sculptor, of the options and means available to him – an alphabet of sculpture – ready for another round. But with his predilection for paradox the show does not end here. For Wood for Trees also shows a kind of collapse, as if his entire sculptural universe has imploded, as if the totality can no longer be seen, so that all he has created can now only be experienced as fragments, in line with our postmodernist experience. This implies a criticism of his own medium and of the role of contemporary art in today's society, as well as a criticism of

his own emphasis on the space between exhibitions: he has now collected all these intervals, as if to gain a better overview; but they have collapsed under the weight of the voluminous art that at one time made the creation of them feasible. So his cumulative method is demonstrated to the point of absurdity, through a frenzied self-irony.

Illumination

An installation such as Wood for Trees carries a symbolic destruction of his own work, his own artistic manifesto – apparently a necessary one for O'Donnell, in order to progress as an artist. New art is generated from such a destruction as an artistic act; this is tangibly evident in works from 1993: Flame Canvas, Blue Flame, and Flaming Fire. In these the artist sets his own wooden sculptures ablaze, only to photograph them as they light up the pitch dark Norwegian winter night. It is a ritual burning of his own work, an obliteration, a scattering of ashes, as in an ancient funeral rite. The photographs are not just documentation – they later appear as autonomous works in future shows.

Seen in relation to O'Donnell's work with monuments and anti-monuments, this burning may be experienced as a true act of subversion, an anarchistic attack on the monument as form. But the burning sculptures shape the flames so that they become even more flame-like, since the wooden sculptures evince the form of flames even before they are torched, not being complete until they burn against the sky; flames feeding flames, flames consuming flames – yet one more contradiction – in a closed circle. A monument to the flames – to fire itself – is clearly an impossibility: in becoming a monument, the flames disappear. The sculptural wooden flames burn up, as the flames flicker and die. And it is in its own self-destruction that it becomes significant: by virtue of disappearing the burning sculpture becomes art.

O'Donnell's next move is another kind of illumination, using the most Norwegian of resources: electricity. He makes use of ready-mades – manufactured products in the shape of spotlights and disco lights – to create lit contours of simple figures. The incandescent sculpture is repeated as a silhouette of the flames, in variations during 1994: Bål [Bonfire] during the city art project PIG in Oslo, with the light contour placed high up on a wall – Red Fire in Telemark County Gallery – 2 Flames located in the ruins of the old industrial complex Tinfos in Notodden, the flames being ten-meter-high spotlight shapes using eighteen kilowatts, above a ton of fish cast in wax and placed on the ground. A year later the artist shows another variation, Blue Fire, in the show Referanser [References], at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo, also part of a traveling show for Riksutstillinger.

An interesting aspect in all of these nocturnal illuminations is the fact that however delimited and clearly drawn these light-installations might appear, it is as though the compact form dissolves in the night, the light itself being incapable of being restricted to the sculpture, thus blazing out into space – the sculpture in effect leaking light into the darkness. When the light sculpture Yellow Flag is shown at the alternative gallery Herslebsgt.10, Oslo, in 1994 – inside

an old storefront – the light shoots across the street, being reflected on the wall opposite. It is as though the artist is no longer in charge of the sculpture, but has to yield some of his control. The art can no longer be confined to a specific place – it escapes, taking hold of or infecting other parts of our society than those traditionally designated for art, the galleries and the museums.

The pig and the moon, which O'Donnell had used earlier as a three-dimensional sculptural form – Pig & Moon, first shown at the Buskerud Artist Center in 1988 and then at the exhibition Blind Navigator in Bergen in 1991 [38] – a strikingly stringent form with an absurd subject: a leaden pig trying to rape an equally lead-clad crescent moon – reappears in O'Donnell's show at the Stavanger Art Society in 1994, this time as separate and separated light forms on the wall. Now it looks as though the pig is chasing the crescent moon – an equally absurd situation. When he next exhibits at the Lillehammer Art Museum in 1997, he puts up the lit pig and moon on the facade of the museum, together with a horizontal bonfire or flame, as if company logos or neon advertising. This is a play with signs in a clever twisting and turning of the conventional use of signs that we recognize in our society: simple signs clearly communicating that someone has a product to sell us without the loss of time, without our having to puzzle over the message; or the signs might show us the way to an institution or another building. In O'Donnell's signs only the signal effect is left: we see that something is going on here, but the signs have lost their clarity, leaving us confused and disoriented.

In the catalog for the Lillehammer exhibition Ingrid Blekastad writes about O'Donnell's use of signs: "These are images which do not naturally belong together; however, they reflect a fascination with the visual world, for individual phenomena within our surroundings. . . He repeats his own symbols of the fire and the pig in a non-essential way. They usually do not reflect anything else, and when they do, they shift their meaning from exhibition to exhibition." [39] O'Donnell's work with signs that refer only to themselves also continue his earlier work with the anti-monument as a catalyst for the experience of old structures crumbling. The dark color of rust has, however, been replaced by the blazing power of light.

The criticism of our culture that is implied in this corresponds to Jean Baudrillard's thesis on signs, in his essay, "The Ecstasy of Communication" [40] : in the Middle Ages the cultural symbols were binding; later there was a gradual disintegration of the meaning of signs in society, to where they are now emptied of all content: they no longer have an original to refer back to, no organic context in which to function, and no destination they point towards. Today they refer only to themselves, incapable of representation – for, as Baudrillard discusses his concept of simulacrum: "All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning . . . Representation starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent . . . Conversely, simulation starts from the Utopia of this principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value . . . Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum." [41] In his work O'Donnell explores this thesis of the radical negation of the sign as value – not as any prescribed manifestation of philosophical theory, but as an attempt to approach the limits of mean-

ing, in order there to find new meaning. He thus does not become as pessimistic as Baudrillard: there is always an element of humor in his work. He also thinks that it is still possible for him to rework history – and the weight of it – in his art: the bright radiance of his big light-installations reflects the gaudiness and glitter he experienced in British holiday resorts, with their role in the history of the British working class – so obviously a superficial phenomenon only, an entertainment gimmick – a flash in the night.

Again a paradox: O'Donnell gives his luminous signs meaning through their meaninglessness – he apparently sees a need for them to be emptied of meaning in order to reappear in another context, with a new meaning. It is in such an emptying that he disposes of the monument tradition in his exhibition at Skøyen Citadell; it is how he gives his sculptures a fresh start through burning; it is how he keeps the pig from raping the crescent moon on the facade of Lillehammer Art Museum. The signs no longer carry meaning – the rape has already taken place.

And the rape continually occurs, as in his big light-installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1994: Rødt Kors Oslo Mai 1994 [Red Cross Oslo May 1994]. One hundred and thirty-four red spotlight bulbs fastened directly to the wall, making a cross four and a half meters tall and five and a half meters wide, with a timer – eight kilowatts of blinding light and heat suddenly being switch on in cramped quarters. The installation feels like usurpation of power by a tyrant, a violation of individual freedom, since the unexpected light and heat turn on unasked, imposing on the defenseless viewer, who can hardly escape in the tiny, claustrophobic space. The tyrant appears to be the establishment, the shape of the cross being a flag symbol, in which the state borrows its authority from the Christian tradition. O'Donnell comments on this particular work:

Power symbols – the symbols of power have been a working element within my sculptural language since the mid 1980s. . . When working in such an area I find it gives the work an edge – which provides a moral fundament on which to build forward. . . but at the same time art is not a pedagogic instrument with which to moralize and brow-beat the already converted . . . So flags filtered in to the studio scene as abstracted wisps or heavy furniture-like objects . . . Having cut out more crosses from flag objects than I care to remember . . . boredom set in and a frantic search out of this crisis took place, ending in the resurgence of lighting elements . . . So instead of cutting into the object to produce a form-shape-symbol – made of empty space, I decided to fragment the emptiness further by projecting the form-shape-symbol from the object via light. [42]

The "heavy furniture-like objects" are flags transformed into three-dimensional shapes. One of them, Two Black Flags from 1992 – now in the Rogaland Art Museum, Stavanger, collection – is made of steel-covered wooden planks with cut-out star shapes in the center, made to look as if the flags became petrified while flying in the wind, turned into a kind of solid fur-

niture, lounging heavily in self-satisfaction at their own might. The national symbol of freedom and independence has been turned into a tool of oppression and power for its own sake. Armored and impenetrable, but in fact rather empty. A hollow shell of a monument, clinging to its power.

When O'Donnell further fragments the emptiness, in his first light-sculpture with the flag motif (1993), he discovers how this symbol of power has both an unforeseen reach and an actual extinction: the lit flag blazes out of his studio window, across the garden, straight through the windows of his house and out on the other side, the light "screaming through the forest, in which the house nestles, and off running down the valley to be lost for ever – and certainly laying claim to being the longest sculpture I've ever made." [43] As in so many of O'Donnell's works, there is an ambiguity here: public authority, symbolized by the flag, demands influence and insight into even the darkest nook in the land; and yet the cross of light disappears into the woods – it dissolves, as if one more power structure is about to crumble.

When the symbol of power vanishes into impotence, in the dark of night, it may also operate as a metaphor of the unending transformation of society, which greatly affects its individual members. It is only when single light bulbs are combined that they make up a comprehensible totality – a society, in other words – but circumstances cause them to burn out into an impenetrable darkness. In a Danish interview the Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Baumann explains how modernization makes people and skills superfluous: "Modernization is the construction of an order, and there will always be individuals who do not fit into a given order, they must be moved. . . Economic development means that with every new skill acquired there will be old ways of life that become superfluous. . . There is simply a process of modernization that never stops – and this means that there are constantly abilities that have been useful for a long period that suddenly lose their value; and the individuals that believed they had secured their entire lives by acquiring these skills become redundant." [44]

Even if O'Donnell's light-flags obviously deal with hegemony and nationalism, there is also a second topic brought out in the first flag blazing from his studio window: the superfluous human being, ways of life no longer valid. O'Donnell talks about this in a 1989 interview, in the midst of his work on anti-monuments of rust, steel, and lead: "I grew up at a time when production meant hammering and clanking – an industrial process in which steel plates were welded and bolted together into structures and objects based on principles that came out of the industrial revolution. Now there is a trend towards much more hidden and noiseless production based on the use of microchips. Thus the social power structure also becomes more covert. This has helped wreck traditional values. We live more and more on the surface of our culture." [45]

This unexpected signal sent out into the ultimate darkness of the nocturnal forest, starting with a cross of light, also becomes an expression of the metaphysical side of O'Donnell's work, as he points out in the 1989 interview: "There is also a metaphysical side to these sculptures. . . It is not sufficient for the sculptures just to work in a physical sense. They must refer beyond themselves, refer to a greater reality." [46] The artist who sends a light signal out into the dark and

who sees it getting lost in the distance, without knowing whether it will ever hit anything or anybody – whether contact will be made – creates a metaphor of the experience of absolute solitude on earth, and of the existential quest – and melancholy – that this solitude brings out. And once again he makes use of a dichotomy – a reversal of the light that sends its signal into eternity, into the great darkness: in 1997 he makes the object Pocket Halo – a sixty-watt light bulb covered in twenty-four-carat gold. The bulb's glass has been made non-translucent: it can no longer illuminate on its electric power, but it still shines by its own, as if transformed into an icon, a sacred image in which the gold radiates a divine light. The paradox is metaphysical: only when the light no longer shines does it really shine. Do we need to seek the ultimate darkness in order to find gold, the precious light? And can it then be kept handy in a pocket, as indicated by the title?

Indeed O'Donnell makes an attempt at the latter, quite literally. In 1994 he photographs himself with two strong, blazing light bulbs in his pants pockets, dangerously close to the groin, as if in an endurance test; and he calls it Fool's Gold Small Change. Again a typical tongue-in-cheek title: the small change in his pocket can soon turn into a sort of castration by heat and light, in which case the change will not be small, but considerable: a kind of sex change.

O'Donnell also draws on his Catholic family background, in his luminescent cross in the big light-installations, and in other works as well, by implicitly questioning whether rituals can reestablish a form of metaphysical connection, or if rituals only cover up the emptiness, the loneliness. When he makes his rust prints at the end of the eighties, he does so precisely through a ritual with a religious touch: he imprints rust particles onto the paper and sprays it with salt water for a week or so, in order to achieve the right amount of rust. This is done in the manner of a religious ritual – a joy in reiteration every morning, as if attending a mass, sprinkling water, which carries associations to the use of holy water in Catholic churches.

This is a purity of concentration: seeing the water being sprayed onto the paper. There is no immediate reaction, only the certainty that in a few days there will be an enhancement of the rust quality. You need faith, conviction, to perform this ritual act – the result does not happen now but rests there in the future. This may be the closest O'Donnell gets to a purpose or a result of his metaphysical quest. He does not find a god in the distance, but a purity of concentration close at hand and tangible: what he creates envelops in its physical qualities also spiritual ones, becoming a manifestation of art as an existential force. His awareness of this keeps O'Donnell from making his work overly explicit. Even in his strong engagement in monuments and their antithesis he leaves a residue of the inexplicable, the inconceivable, the mystical, that which cannot be readily deduced. In his review of the artist's 1989 Gothenburg exhibition the Swedish critic Mårten Castenfors underlines just this aspect: "Each room takes on its own special character, its strength, its light, and its sound. O'Donnell thus invites both eyes and ears into a convincing, unfathomable greatness." [47]

O'Donnell's illuminations cast light on the metaphysical side of his art. In his light-installations he lights up the night, the museum spaces, and our lives as we meet this luminescence. As they did in the illuminations of medieval manuscripts – miniatures painted to illuminate the

metaphysical content of the text – O'Donnell illuminates the existential questions of his own time by means of his sculptures and installations.

Luminous Paths

Michael O'Donnell has on a number of occasions demonstrated that it is possible to avoid the monument form in large public commissions. One of the most successful of these was placed at Stavanger University College, Faculty of Health and Social Work in 1995. It is a good example of how the enigmatic nature of objects to O'Donnell becomes the very confirmation of a sculptor's legitimacy. This work has a vital ambivalence, and it enters into a meaningful dialogue with the building and the square.

The building, designed by the architects Knut Hoem and Ole Tonning, has two wings dominated by large tiled surfaces framing the cafeteria and a somewhat lower building mass with a lot of glass arranged around a square. This opens up in both directions – for a generous view of the square from the cafeteria and for an inclusion of the square in the architecture. The strength of O'Donnell's artistic treatment of the site is that it does not interfere with this impression – it rather enhances and underlines it.

The work consists of two large, open, stainless steel hemispheres or vessels open to a diameter of 2.25 meters. The two vessels are set in an irregularly shaped, shallow basin covered in black stone. The water runs continuously from the cavity of the vessels into the basin. Three series of lights lead from the basin in different directions – spots placed in the ground, the flooring, and the wall. They snake along as luminous paths: one leading to the cafeteria and continuing indoors, one towards the auditorium wing, continuing up the wall, another towards the main entrance. In the night they provide alternate routes, directions, into the house of learning, or they run as nerves or veins out towards the twin steel forms that unite the square in a single focus.

In their form the two steel hemispheres are a reworking of the large double sculpture Lifeboys, shown at O'Donnell's exhibition in the Stavanger Art Society in 1993. It shows a camp-eroticizing of the frigid material quality of the steel, done with lights, which turns the work into a kind of glowing sex symbol with associations to both the man's testicles and the woman's vagina. In his public commission at the college O'Donnell again makes use of earlier work, making it resurface in a kindred and yet new form, now carefully adapted to the site it is meant to adorn. The erotic element has now been toned down, but it is still there; and in the filling and emptying of running water the erotic element takes on an abstract quality that makes it only one of many in a place crowded with young people. For O'Donnell's use of metaphors is equivocal: the spheres or vessels also have associations related to education: the horn of plenty that will never run dry, the fountain of knowledge always there to drink from, the cleansing effect of water in relation to health. The sound of running water mixes with the sound of people walking across the square, amplified by the resonance chambers of the hemispheres, turning the

sculpture into a focal point for all activity there, helping to make our experience of the place a sensual one.

The irregular shape of the basin is unexpected. At a distance it is the geometry that is striking – the spherical form leads to an anticipation of regularity that has to yield once you get closer. The basin is like a cleft in the ground and may evoke thoughts of earthquakes. Art may thus have an eruptive impact on the spot, continually pouring forth from the depths of the earth, sprinkling the open area with running water, a spiritual force. The three light-paths can be seen as an extension of this eruption metaphor: it is as if there are cracks running along the ground and up the wall of the building.

The range of experience is further expanded by the work's changing character in shifting light conditions and seasons. During the day the sunlight is reflected in the shiny steel and the glass lenses of the light fixture set into the ground and built into the wall. At night these paths shine as nerves in the dark, linking the volume of the building and the adjacent air, inside and outside, idea and matter, art and architecture. And in winter the lights create special effects in the covering snow. Abstract metaphors become a tangibly sensual experience.

Nullifying

How can repetition be effectively used in art? Michael O'Donnell employs different strategies to answer this question. The ritual iteration of the rust prints is soon replaced by another kind of monotony in his production of art: he starts making wax casts of simple forms, by the hundreds. In his exhibition at Galleri Sølvberget, Stavanger, in 1989 he spread 600 wax rabbits all over the floor, as part of an installation also consisting of larger elements. The rabbits are all the same, anonymous forms seemingly mass produced, far removed from what we normally think of as an original work of art.

The monotonous, repetitive labor involved in the process of making all these wax rabbits in the studio speaks of an artist who is prepared for boredom, and who apparently needs a fresh start, a nullification, a method of making his art totally worthless, in order to once again establish meaning, a content for his art. He finds still more meaning when he melts the wax down and makes thousands of fish for use below the blazing flames of his installation at Tinfos in Notodden in 1994. On one level this outdoor installation deals with elements in industrial production – fire and water. On another level there is a religious imagery, where the fire symbolizes the Holy Ghost, in the Pentecostal miracle: "And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were filled with the Holy Ghost . . ." [48] As we have seen earlier, the fish is also a symbol of Christ. At Notodden quantities of fish have been placed before the flaming tongues of the Holy Ghost, as if a reincarnation of Christ on earth, extended to an absurd mass production of this idea. And, following this Christian reading: the fish becomes a metaphor and a focus of the spiritual quality that in fact resides in the monotonous routine and

boredom involved in the casting of all these fishes.

But wax and fire do not mix well. It is as if O'Donnell wants to tell us that the spiritual power in his work is precarious: it does not take much for the wax to melt in the heat of the flames; it does not take much for the artistic power to evaporate and vanish. Art seems to lead an uncertain and endangered existence right in-between abundance and meaning on the one hand and rejection and ultimate annihilation on the other. This is a main point in Lotte Sandberg's review of O'Donnell's exhibition at Lillehammer Art Museum in 1997, in which he includes an installation of 1525 wax heads – cast from his own head – in an almost endless series of self-portraits: "As a sculptor Michael O'Donnell thinks in images, with no fixed or specified framework, making his exhibition balance between recognition and alienation, the sublime and the dissociated, banality and wit." [49]

Fifteen hundred and twenty-five wax heads, self-portraits. Placed on the floor in front of a large wall projection of his own face. The original no longer exists, there is no authentic model – O'Donnell works in the aftermath of Andy Warhol's pop art-understanding of the world: that no original can be found any more in our world of mass consumption and mass communication. What will be the impact of this on the self-image of the individual and on the artist's potential for understanding the world? It is as though O'Donnell obliterates himself in the very multiplication of himself, as if the monotony completely drains the self-portrait – the artist's own identity – of all distinctiveness and meaning. The artist uses the authentic (individual facial features) to show that there is no longer any authenticity. Here Baudrillard's thesis about the dissolution of signs and their being emptied of all content is exemplified in a concrete way. And the artist does not stop there: the manic monotony concerning his own identity takes on a new expression when, in an exhibition at Galleri Brandstrup in 2002, he places 1800 remodeled wax heads of himself on the ground outside the gallery.

The boredom in the monotonous work of making all these heads gives a meaning of its own and becomes a driving force in his work – a South-African interviewer reported that "he lives in Norway because he wanted to live in the most boring country in the world," and O'Donnell himself explains: "Boredom is the key to all creativity. When you have nothing, you have to be creative." [50] It is as if he assumes a new identity both through this boredom and through the result of it, namely the laborious remodeling of the wax heads. This is not all, however: the 1800 self-portraits remain outdoors in the summer, the sun shines, and the heads are partly melted. O'Donnell's self-portraits are deformed by the heat – it is as though his own identity as a human being and an artist collapses.

In this question of identity there is a vulnerability and a brittleness closely akin to the British artist Mark Quinn's exploration of the same topic: in the course of eight months in 1991 he drew eight pints of his own blood, which he then made into a self-portrait in the form of a cast of his own head. [51] This self-portrait, Self, can only survive in a frozen state, being displayed in a freezing-chamber made of glass – in the event of a power failure the portrait would dissolve, making it impossible to retain the identity represented in the portrait partly through

the genes in the blood and partly distinguishable in the familiar features of the face.

Quinn's self-portrait in blood and O'Donnell's multiplied self-portraits in wax are prime examples of how some of today's art strives to establish a new humanism, on the ruins of the old one. [52] While the Renaissance could use optimism and a firm belief in man's potential for progress as an important basis for establishing its humanism, today's society precludes this optimism. To the question: what is a human being and what are his living conditions? the answer is far more elusive, an indication of man's vulnerable and exposed position – his precarious state on this earth. O'Donnell's reduction of the significance of the self-portrait by an almost unending and extremely monotonous repetition, and by the use of wax, which melts and becomes distorted in the sunshine, gives us a cryptic answer to the question about man – an answer further weakened by another interesting association.

For when the human heads have been scattered on the ground, and when they have partly decomposed, partly been defaced so as to preclude recognition, thoughts go to the battlefields, the fields of death – the killing fields. The official rhetoric of war – as expressed in any number of war memorials and as punctuated by O'Donnell himself in his anti-monuments from the late 1980s – here finds its ultimate antithesis, in an arrangement that makes a strong and immediate impact on the viewer precisely because it refrains from a visualization of violence in form of blood and gore – it is simply the artist's white head in wax that gradually disintegrates. It is as if the artist, by means of a medium, the wax, which he used earlier in the fish shapes, the symbol of Christ, desperately and resignedly takes on the futile task of saving the world, as if he takes onto himself all sin and violence of this world – all the horrors of war, the history of bestiality – in a conciliatory gesture that only art can make, but which art also only can demonstrate the futility of.

We see how religious thinking forms the basis of much of what O'Donnell has created through the years – not as specifically Christian material, but rather a frame of reference that has followed him since childhood and which he can use to cast light on history, on the state of man here and now, on man's possibilities for understanding himself and his time – and which he, above all, can use to grasp the role of art in society today.

In his depiction of the horrors of war in the deformed whiteness of the wax heads O'Donnell also implicitly rejects the shocking, gaudy portrayals found in some contemporary art, used by, among others, the brothers Jake & Dinos Chapman in their three-dimensional version of the Goya motif Great Deeds Against the Dead, from his series of etchings Los Desastres de la Guerra, showing grossly dismembered human beings hanging from a tree. [53] These the brothers elaborate further, in unmatched detail, with hundreds of bloody, dismembered bodies, in their installation Hell, 1999-2002, shown at the Apocalypse exhibition in London in 2000. [54] When O'Donnell reverses the direction and gives us the most soft-spoken art, which invites analysis rather than just an instant emotional reaction, it is as though he performs a heroic act that is muffled by its own futility, or meaninglessness. The artist's many faces are initially identical, then gradually individualized by the sun in a parody both of the warm caress and of a manipulation

of genes in which the cloning failed, also recalling the carnage of the battlefield. His production cannot save the world from war and violence – but the artist tries anyway (as wax, as fish, as Christ), even if he knows that the attempt is doomed to fail and although he sees the absurdity in the situation. Here lies an interesting kinship to yet another British artist – Boyd Webb, who in the 1980s created absurd tableaux in his studio: staged photographs that often show people performing heroic feats in vain, as their acts are always futile, their endeavors always pointless in terms of the impending disasters and problems. [55]

O'Donnell's many heads, self-portraits that are incapable of holding on to their own identity, doubly become art that destroys or cancels itself: through the heating process of the sun the wax is deformed, and thus the essence of artistic creation is dissolved – the artist's question of who he is and what art can be can no longer have a clear answer. Wax is also associated with death masks. O'Donnell thus finds support in current art theory: in an interview the British art professor Sarat Maharaj, who was one of the co-curators of Documenta 11 in Kassel in 2002, says that "art must also cancel itself, for it makes its own stereotypes of what it is and what it can be. My idea of cancellation . . . is a modern version of what the avant-garde artist Marcel Duchamp spoke of when he referred to art as Vitriol, a dissolving acid that also dissolves itself. . . Visuality fixes us in a static image. So we must instantly use the cancellation stamp, or the dissolving acid, on ourselves." [56]

In O'Donnell's case the dissolving acid becomes the power of the sun, which melts and deforms the wax. He turns into Icarus, who in his hybris and with his wax wings flies too close to the sun and plunges to earth – drowns, cancels himself, and in the process of this obliteration becomes a myth. This is why Icarus is still remembered today: he plunged to death and cancelled himself, he continues to plunge to earth, in an eternal fall, in a perpetual dissolution of himself – as in the original fall, as in Lucifer's fall from heaven. O'Donnell's wax heads placed on the grass outside Galleri Brandstrup encompass all this, his acid being the primal force of the sun, which destroys art to make it last, to transform it into art. Only by being made worthless – the phenomenon which the British in their lengthiest word call floccinaucinihilipilification [57] – does this art acquire its value.

Meanwhile the grass keeps growing, slowly covering the deformed heads. The grass pulls a veil of forgetfulness over the bestiality of the killing fields, acutely observed by Harald Flor in his review of the exhibition: "The natural processes thus become a part of the work, as a metaphor of the fickleness of memory." [58]

The Persistence of Memory

In 2002 O'Donnell shows a new series of exhibitions: Belysning (Naming Names) [Lighting] at Henie Onstad Art Centre, Høvikodden, outside Oslo; Balls Bollocks and Beyond at Galleri Branstrup, Oslo; Talking to Lions at Hå gamle prestegard, south of Stavanger; and his lumines-

cent fish in Tønsberg. Once more he makes installations out of some recycled, some new material. Earlier themes recur in revised form, and some elements from one exhibition finds its way into the following one, but in a new combination. When Lotte Sandberg writes of his exhibition at Lillehammer Art Museum in 1997 that "the artist plays around with meaning, letting different narratives break apart and spawn new, often contradictory asides. The exhibition . . . represents a playful way of moving around in the field of sculpture," [59] it is not just a fitting description of this particular exhibition – it also matches the method we have already seen O'Donnell make use of, and which he makes the most of in these new exhibitions.

In his Høvikodden exhibition he places 815 handwritten Norwegian names cast in bronze on plaques running in six horizontal rows – a continuous frieze along the wall, lit up by a vertical pillar of very powerful lamps, as if the frieze of names radiates from this light. He has resurrected his old theme of monuments and memories, death and identity, nationalism and the individual. He comments on this: "They are Norwegian names and refer to "name days" from the 1999 calendar. The names collectively make up a volume of one year – and also took a year to make. The whole piece weighs approximately 650 kilos and is about forty meters long and one meter wide . . ." [60] When all these names go into the official almanac's list," the almanac assumes the function of a collective national identity, expressed in the quintessentially Norwegian names and the particular way of arranging them in Norwegian name days. Cast in bronze the names look like stamps – as though the Norwegian state puts its seal of approval, in the form of a name, on each individual.

But in this large frieze the individual is lost in the crowd, as it also does in the name days, since many people share the same day. O'Donnell focuses on the absurdity of the name day tradition, at the same time as he uses these names to create a travesty of the monument. It calls to mind the old Greek temple friezes, such as the Parthenon frieze, now part of the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum. These friezes make heroes out of those portrayed – gods and heroes – thereby lifting them out of everyday triviality into a loftier sphere. They are also a manifestation of the old myths; and in their role as such illustrations they throw light on – they illuminate – the subject of the old myths. O'Donnell plays on the ambiguity of the Norwegian title – Belysning – which refers both to the actual, strong “lighting” of the installation and to the English word “illumination.” In addition it refers to his own light-installations of a few years earlier. The powerful light in the exhibition at Høvikodden also illuminates all the plaques, but the long frieze of names illuminates no gods, saints, or heroes. The name days celebrate no heroism; on the contrary: they highlight common names shared by many – the great Norwegian mediocrity. The artist's monotonous work in making all these plaques thus also becomes a negation of heroism and hero-making – the work appears futile – the frieze can never bring forth any heroes, like those of the Parthenon frieze.

The names are also a form of memorial plaques; and they are placed in a room already charged by memorial plaques that now exist only in the minds of the audience that saw them: in 1999 Susan Hiller here showed her Monument, a photo installation of Victorian memorial plaques of British heroes – nineteenth-century individuals who sacrificed their own lives in an

effort to save the lives of others. Each plaque holds a name and an inscription telling what happened. [61] But since the Norwegian name days do not recall the individual, either as hero or otherwise, the idea of the memorial plaque loses all import, becoming nothing but an empty phrase, a gesture only capable of conveying something about a nation's understanding of itself in the most trivial sense. This makes it possible to see O'Donnell's installation as a satirical comment on Norwegian everyday banality, leaving us to read irony into his words on the exhibition: "This idea of Norwegianness via a year of names may be my first truly Norwegian work – after all these years it may be high time." [62]

More plaques are cast in bronze, this time words of abuse in English – Words of Abuse – first appearing as another running frieze along the wall of Galleri Brandstrup, Oslo, later as stumbling blocks fastened to the floor in the converted barn at Hå gamle prestegard. It is as if the words of abuse, with all their graphic qualities, become concrete, tangible instruments of harassment and persecution, as if they have turned from verbal weapons to heavy, petrified aggression. As a frieze on the wall they are highly anti-heroic; as fragments on the floor of a barn they resemble cow patties – new and fresh or old and dry.

At Galleri Brandstrup there is an undercurrent of quiet desperation in the whole exhibition, giving it a mood of melancholy solitude. In the first-floor room O'Donnell has placed an iron bed with brightly lit bluish-green lamps – Bed Spread. Nothing else. The light gives the room a welcoming glow; but entering, you still hesitate. Is this not an electric bed? An instrument of torture and execution? Is this the entry to an exhibition saying, in the words of Dante's Divine Comedy: "All hope abandon, ye who enter here"?

This particular bed was used by the king of Siam on his safari in northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1957, when the king was actually offered the throne of what would become the independent nation of Zambia, but with Kenneth Kaunda becoming its first president. By his use of this keepsake O'Donnell has set the stage for an exhibition that makes a strong statement on imperialism and racism. Upstairs we find an installation called Lusaka Lion with Friends – a fake bronze lion (bronze-colored plaster) covered in powerful red light bulbs, surrounded by a large number of tiny bronze fragments, as if bits of animals just eaten by the lion. The lion, a symbol of the majestic British imperialism that consumes one and all in its unquenchable thirst for power and control, appears to be lying there digesting its meal, while a video shows African youth miming to the tune of a cheerful music hall melody: "Oh we do like to be beside the seaside" – as if nothing has happened, as if the wounds from colonial times can be glossed over by festive singing and the garish, amusement-park seaside lights from British seaside resorts: the short-lived amusement where all have fun and forget the serious business of life.

The racial aspect of this postcolonial perspective is further developed in the form of a large, vertical banner or flag hanging in the staircase of the gallery. With its large color fields the flag does not give away its nationality; and superimposed on it O'Donnell has placed a large photograph of himself as the wandering, branded Jew: squeezed up against the wall he wears a star of David on his back; and he has called the work Feeling Like a Masking Tape Jew. It may seem

just cynical and provocative, but seen in relation to the rest of the exhibition and O'Donnell's other works, it does convey a message. The powerless Jew has the courage to confront the symbol of power, the flag. Just as the artist takes on all the suffering in the world, metaphorically speaking, in his installation of eighteen hundred wax heads outside the same gallery that summer, he now seems to more specifically address the suffering of the Jews – as if this British artist wants to use his art to atone for all acts of racism, whether committed by British imperialists or German Nazis. It is, of course, a futile act, but as a symbolic gesture it poses an interesting question of a link between all that the Nazis in their anti-modern zealousness prohibited and called Entartete Kunst and this art's autonomous position within modernism: Harald Flor notes that in O'Donnell's work "the Jewish symbol is placed in a context of the heyday of Modernism's color-field forms. Well-known American painters like Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko were Jews, and that background influenced their work." [63]

This photo of the artist as a marked man atoning for all racism and oppression of art and artists is juxtaposed against another photo in the exhibition: BOLLOCKS, in which O'Donnell has placed himself reclining under the title word written in bright spotlights, totally passive and opposed to his own idea of redemption. Indeed he depicts himself in a role diametrically opposed to that of the Jew. Here he is a Sleeping Beauty – seemingly waiting for someone to wake him. He might be a Sleeping Beauty dreaming of sex; the radiant word on the wall seems to suggest that. On a nearby wall he has put a lit "sign" saying BALLS, and on the opposite wall there is a photograph of a bicycle full of bright lamps. The entire installation makes BALLS BOLLOCKS AND BEYOND. O'Donnell seems to suggest that the way out of the man's sex fixation and narrow sex roles – the escape route to something past it – is the bicycle, which is, however, a pretty hopeless vehicle in this case. All the lights lock the man into his own pattern, his own role, adding to the oppression of women, like those of racism and imperialism.

Once more O'Donnell introduces doubt about the interpretation, in an appendage to the lit bed – this time in his exhibition at Hå gamle prestegard: a bathtub lined with strong, colored spotlights, seemingly inviting you into an electrical execution which is pleasant and garish at the same time. The bathtub is especially fascinating for its association to a seductive but lethal female sex organ that is ready to set its teeth into the male member, were he to try – a vagina dentata, perhaps the man's ultimate fear. This might be part of the man's dreams while lying there, seemingly slumbering innocently. In both Bathtub and Bed Spread we can feel the light of the strong bulbs. It attracts us, but the heat is only mechanical, not a human embrace, serving to increase the undercurrent of pessimism and desperation in the exhibition.

The idea of the man's attitude to sex takes on a new form in the installation Unsolicited Males, where ninety-seven photographic portraits have been placed along the walls, while the rest of the room is filled with a barrier of empty cartons. Only a narrow corridor between the cartons and the walls makes it possible to study the photographs. Once again O'Donnell uses an ambiguous title: it suggests both that these men, who all smile at you or try to be convincing by appearing self-confident and eager to please, have not been approached by prostitutes on the street, or that the services of these men have been unwanted. The latter might also be explained

by their being photocopies of the pictures in junk mail delivered in the artist's mailbox – they are all men that tried to sell him something, unsolicited. All the empty boxes can be thought to hold what they tried to sell.

These obliging male faces already got their story in the context of O'Donnell's work at an exhibition in Galleri 21 in Malmö, Sweden, in 2000 – being placed on the wall around a bath-tub with the strong, hot spotlights – as if the men are hankering for the glowing red female sex organ, which, given the chance, is ready to function as a vagina dentata. It makes for quite a sex battle: the men are in the majority, but the object of their attentions is unapproachable despite all its inviting heat. And the title given to the male portraits two years later – Unsolicited Males – is contradictory from the start, since here, in Malmö, they are most definitely solicited – seduced into, or offered, sexual services by this giant, glowing vagina.

In Galleri Brandstrup the installation Unsolicited Males addresses the rhetoric of advertising and the question of identity – a frequent topic in O'Donnell's work. The men appear anonymous, like anyone you might meet in the street. Are they silent witnesses to history or dazzled men of commerce for whom history no longer exists? It is a relevant question, often raised by the artist in recent years, especially in his large series of appropriated photographs called Witness. Parts of it make up the heart of the exhibition at Hå in 2002.

In this exhibition he balances the epitaphic seriousness of the Witness series with a large portion of humor, especially in a video where we see O'Donnell perform his version of the British comedian Stanley Holloway's absurd tale of little Albert, who gets eaten by a lion – the artist becoming a laconic stand-up comedian "once removed." But the video conveys more than plain silliness: it is as if O'Donnell performs an incantation of sorts – senselessly and in vain – since nothing will bring little Albert back to life again. Or perhaps it is a British recitation of the suppression of the working class – with its brief respite in the form of a few days' holiday in Blackpool or another seaside resort, featuring cheap music-hall entertainment to make the workers forget their drab lives and their role as the underdogs in the class-ridden British society. Even a forceful retelling cannot produce a new and different result. Man is a slave to history, and the artist labors under its weight.

When this video is linked to another video, the one recently shown at Galleri Brandstrup, showing African youth singing another music-hall number, and when the monitor is guarded by the Lusaka Lion, a guardian of British imperialism, here without a catch, it is clear that the lion will devour these young people – the imperialists will swallow their Africans once again, for the Africans are being distracted by a silly tune, just as the working class was.

This is when laughter freezes to a grimace, an important element of the exhibition at Hå gamle prestegard: O'Donnell stages a laughter that keeps stopping in this grimace, since the historical weight looms like a cloud over the whole exhibition. The suppression we witness here sparks laughter but gradually builds anger and frustration. In his role as director O'Donnell plays the part of the well-meaning Englishman who came in from history with his desperation well

concealed but not forgotten. The lion is here, as in Oslo, absurdly decorated by strong red spotlights, as if this is another version of the festive and gaudy life in Blackpool from the 1930s to the 1950s – a part of the means of oppression society would like to camouflage.

O'Donnell hides the frustration this causes behind a mask of humor. This is his approach as an artist. In the exhibition at Hå, as well, there is an undercurrent of quiet desperation that he exposes by hiding it. In the large-scale video projection onto a gravel bed down in the barn's hay pit he, in an extreme close-up of his own face, repeats and repeats, compulsively and to near-exhaustion, a new magic spell: the ditty of Ten Green Bottles. It is not only the bottles that fall down and break – man doesn't seem to stand a chance here, either; the mechanical repetition and all the frustration and desperation it holds lead nowhere.

In Ulysses James Joyce refers to history as a nightmare from which man is trying to awake. [64] O'Donnell's spell is aimed at just such an impossible awakening, as he underscores in his big installation in the barn at Hå, taken from his Witness series: a long sequence of individual faces taken from the crowd in Heinrich Hoffmann's photograph from Munich in 1914, on the day WWI broke out. In this photograph the young, enthusiastic Adolf Hitler was later identified. O'Donnell is, however, not interested in him; instead he makes giant enlargements of all the other faces in the photo – all of the anonymous witnesses to this world event. It looks as if he is meticulously trying to identify all these others; but the result is the exact opposite: an erasure of all personal characteristics. Just like in all the Norwegian bronze names. In O'Donnell's installation the individuals in the photograph of the Munich crowd appear as the shadows of history, blurred by a veil of oblivion, silent witnesses to something they are unaware of, muffled by the passage of time, and now retrieved, as if from a collective memory. But name days cannot be celebrated, for we do not know their names.

This is the persistence of memory; but, just like in Salvador Dali's painting of the same title, everything has been distorted and transformed. In some of the enlargements we can barely detect any human features, in others the faces show more clearly. Who were these people? Did they have any impact on the course of history by being present just there, just then? Each one of them had a personality, which is now gone – a parallel to the sun's distortion and obliteration of the artist's self-portraits on the lawn in Oslo. In these outdoor heads as well as in those he shows in Lillehammer Art Museum in 1997 he stages himself, not as a Hitler who is in the crowd and who will later step out of it and into the arena of history, but as one of the many silent witnesses, as one who blends into the masses. Ingrid Blekastad makes a point of this in her catalog essay for Lillehammer: "Instead of the crowd – with the one, important historical person well hidden within the masses – O'Donnell produces his own crowd from a superficial version of himself." [65]

Hoffmann was also not interested in each individual when making his original photograph; it was the crowd that fascinated him. What O'Donnell does when he uses this photograph as a starting point, trying to recapture the individual human being, then becomes a way of working against the intention of the photograph and against history, as it were. Once again a heroic act

that seems futile. But he does bring out the presence of these people at a turn in the history of the world; and this is what intrigues O'Donnell: "I like the idea of being in a world where as you are passing through it on your everyday business it could be absolutely spectacular or totally insignificant. If I follow this logic though, then it is a very hopeful situation, possibly being present at a significant event, then there is a fair chance that anything can be significant. . . The real key is a complete fascination with the way people do things and deal with things – the world we live in – as an artist looking in." [66]

O'Donnell has taken one face from this picture and blown it up into a huge format, a monumentality that is befitting an official monument. But once again it is rather an anti-monument, a takeoff on monument characteristics that are carried into absurdity. He first displayed this head at an exhibition in Wroclaw in Poland in 1998, calling it Wroclaw Head. This provides obvious associations to Holocaust and the concentration camps that the Nazis built in Poland. This man emerges from this atrocity of history, so blown up and abstracted that he more than anything else resembles a skull. The artist has manipulated him to represent six million Jews, as he manipulates himself in the photograph of the masking-tape Jew to represent all Jews, all discrimination.

The relationship between the individual and the masses is a complex historical force. O'Donnell explores this aspect of our collective memory in several similar installations in the Witness series – for instance when he enlarges faces from photographs of the runner Jesse Owens winning the gold medal in the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936, of the execution of Mussolini in 1945, of the first prisoner of war released from Japanese captivity after WWII, of the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, of the murder of JFK in 1963 – and a photograph from the day Nelson Mandela was released from his long imprisonment in South Africa.

South Africa is indeed the place that has yielded the clearest analysis of the Witness series, in a review of his exhibition in Durban's NSA Gallery in 2000, written by Alex Sudheim: "This phenomenon, of the mass in conflict with individual behaviour, is something that obsesses British/Norwegian artist Michael O'Donnell. . . O'Donnell's vast and exhaustive photographic installations which make up his Witnesses series . . . are subtle and profound deconstructions of the very nature of human history. . . O'Donnell investigates the creation of collective memory through the device of the crowd. Historically significant moments, however epochal they may be, are ultimately functions of the arbitrary, mostly anonymous people who make up the collective of witnesses who ensure the event's transmission into history." [67]

The Nightmare of History

History is a nightmare from which man is trying to awake. It is the persistence of memory and the sum of experiences, sufferings, and joys of all the silent witnesses. It is the burden on the artist's shoulders, the branding on his back. This is an undercurrent in all of Michael O'Donnell's

work: he examines our collective memory by means of a critical eye that forms just these "subtle and profound deconstructions of the very nature of human history." And he presents us with his finds in a cumulative fashion that can be varied and expanded at will, but which also takes the form of a frenzied self-irony.

And he uses juxtaposition and contradiction – negation – as an effective artistic method. This is evident throughout his work as an artist: no sooner has he made his light-installations cast their rays out into the world than he finds a way to stop them, by enclosing them in pure gold. No sooner has he made a self-portrait, and thus asserted his identity, than he undermines it by making eighteen hundred of them. No sooner has he emphasized the space between the exhibitions than he pulls them all together in a great chaotic maze. This is a contrapuntal way of making art generate meaning; and this meaning is always multi-faceted in O'Donnell's work. He is here in line with Jacques Derrida's theories of rhetoric in nonfiction texts [68] - in his sculptures and installations O'Donnell shows that these can also be applied to the visual arts. While Derrida points to the basic instability of language and the problem of maintaining an unambiguous meaning in figures of language, which undermines the statements made precisely by means of language, O'Donnell contributes a corresponding deconstruction and negation in visual art. It has been a central theme of this essay to demonstrate this.

O'Donnell shows his finds also with a touch of humor that may seem innocuous, but which always carries a sting. When asked to make a mini-installation for the Museum of Installations in London – a museum that builds its collection by giving each artist a standardized cardboard box, stipulating that the installation has to fit within its confines – O'Donnell lines the box with silver and calls it Silver Lining, in a reference to the old catchphrase offered as encouragement when things look bleak. The silver lining makes the box seem light, and the uneven surface of the lining makes you think of fleeting clouds. But if you try to lift the box, you will discover that the lining is cast in silver-coated bronze, making the box seem inordinately heavy in view of its physical and mental content; in a sense it denies its own content, its own existence. The optimism of the title has suddenly turned to leaden pessimism, but with a smile. [69]

Do we have him now?

No, we still do not have him. For Michael O'Donnell escapes again and again, resisting the capture of simple, unambiguous readings or the seizure within any tried and marketable formula. His "silver lining" always turns out to be something other than the obvious. His identity is repeated, almost endlessly, in a profusion of wax heads; and yet this identity escapes, as it melts like the wax in his eighteen hundred self-portraits under the sun. He is an artist who never allows himself to be content with a successful form, who continually changes his approach. Stringent form is loaded with critical content in sculptures and installations – always challenging, since the artist never provides the answers, giving us instead the uncertainty that demands a sharpening of all our art senses.

The weight of history always rests at the foundation of O'Donnell's work; and when

confronted with this weight, he becomes a carrier of a loneliness that is both melancholy and existential. This historical weight may turn up as collective memory, but also as its own distorted counter-image. Breaking loose from it seems an impossibility in his exhibitions – like Prometheus caught in his chains, man is caught in the persistence of memory.

Translated by Inger Fluge Mæaland

[1] Paul Grøtvedt, "Aktuell kommentar: Hva er kunst?" Tønsbergs Blad, 5 October 2002. Grøtvedt interestingly bases his rejection of the fish on his being not just any member of the public but "a professional in the field of art," inspiring the artist to draw on his British humor and point out that his own higher professional status as a full, not merely an assistant, professor qualified him to overrule Grøtvedt's judgment and rightfully deem his fish to be a work of art, in: Grethe Hald, "Tårntukler og lyskunstner" [Tower Mauler and Light-Artist] Tønsbergs Blad, 26 October 2002.

[2] Grethe Hald, "Den troløse kunsten." [The Fickle Art] Tønsbergs Blad, 15 October 2002.

[3] Inger Lise Børringbo, "Neonfisken får fortsatt lyse." [The Neon Fish Allowed to Shine On] Tønsbergs Blad, 16 October 2002.

[4] Dag N. Kristoffersen, "Vil ikke vite av neonfisken." [Neon Fish Voted Down] Tønsbergs Blad, 21 October 2002.

[5] The Italian philosopher Mario Perniola stresses this: "In my view art is an open concept. Artists and critics are constantly widening it. The direction of contemporary art involves a constant crossing of boundaries, often towards the scandalous. From the time of Impressionism until today art has been continually transgressing its limits." Interviewed by Susanne Hedermann Hiorth in Morgenbladet 27 September-3 October 2002.

[6] John 19.24. And in Psalm 22.18: "They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture."

[7] Luc Ferry, L'homme-Dieu ou le sens de la vie (Paris: Grasset, 1996).

[8] Ferry, p. 241.

[9] Raphael, The Cross Appears to Constantine. Raphael's Stanzas, painted 1517- 1524, the Vatican.

[10] Elsebet Kjerschow writes about Per Palle Storm that "his naturalism verged on fanaticism, but was entirely consistent. . . He was an almost fanatical proponent of the naturalist agenda and impressed upon the students the need for a thorough study of the nude and the portrait. His extensive knowledge of anatomy and love of the old masters were fervently conveyed and gave his students a solid naturalist foundation. However, eventually his unyielding naturalist stance and his dismissal of modernism led to conflict with many of his students." Norsk kunstnerleksikon [The Norwegian Encyclopedia of Artists] (Oslo : Universitetsforlaget, 1986), vol. 4, pp. 75-76.

[11] Bernhard Rostad, "Kalt inn på teppet" [Called to Task] Dagbladet 28 September 1984.

[12] Ulf Renberg, "En provokasjon fra billedhoggerjuryen!" [Provocation from the Sculptor's Jury] Arbeiderbladet 26 September 1984.

[13] Grethe Hald, "Høstutstillingen – en smule tivoli" [Annual Exhibition – a Bit of Amusement] Tønsbergs Blad 16 October 1986.

[14] Hald, Tønsbergs Blad 26 October 2002.

[15] Harold Rosenberg, Artworks and Packages (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1969).

[16] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting." In Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts, eds. Francis Frascina and Jonathan Harris (London: Phaidon, 1992) pp. 308-309. Originally a 1961 radio lecture.

[17] Quoted by Per Bang in his "Surrealistisk credo" [Surrealist Credo] in Norske bilder [Norwegian Pictures], supplement to Dagens Næringsliv 4 October 2000.

[18] Quoted by Arab in Telemark Arbeiderblad 7 February 1980.

[19] Quoted by Sissel H. Dagsland in her "Negative skulpturer" [Negative Sculptures] Bergens Tidende 19 February 1987.

[20] Referanser [References] Catalog, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo/Riksutstillinger 17:1995.

[21] "Michael O'Donnell på Høvikodden: Ned med egoskulpturen!" [Michael O'Donnell at Høvikodden: Down with the Ego Sculpture] Asker og Bærum Budstikke 15 December 1986.

[22] A typical example of the negative letters to the editor is that of Anders Bondhus, who writes: "It says in the paper that Michael O'Donnell may suffer great losses. What could his loss be? Is there any reason to think that anyone would want to buy his boxes, with or without a sniper's bullet holes? We are sick and tired of feeding these loonies who gather all kinds of junk and call it art." In: Rogalands Avis 5 August 1986.

[23] Trond Borgen, "Den redigerte virkeligheten" [Edited Reality] Stavanger Aftenblad 14 July 1986.

[24] Øyvind Næss, "Hagle og sag mot kunstverk" [Shotgun and Saw against Art] Dagbladet 3 July 1986.

[25] Gunvald Opstad, "Godt håp om å bli forarget i Kunstforeningen" [Fine Prospects for Aggravation at the Art Society] Fædrelandsvennen, 1981.

[26] Åsmund Thorkildsen, "Nåtid som fremtid [The Present as Future] – Domestic Decay i Drammen Kunstforening," Drammens Tidende 19 September 1986.

[27] Michael O'Donnell, In Memorium: Four Exhibitions Sept 86 - March 87 (Oslo: Galleri Riis, 1987).

[28] Nils-Arne Holmlid, "Titt bakom drömmens galler" [Peek Behind the Bars of the Dream] Göteborgs-Posten 8 February 1986.

[29] Mårten Castenfors, "Om tumlande rum och ljud" [On Dizzying Space and Sound] Göteborgs-Posten 28 January 1989.

[30] O'Donnell, In Memorium.

[31] For a discussion of all these exhibitions see: Trond Borgen, Rotten Row (Oslo, 1989).

[32] Åsmund Thorkildsen, "Mektig første sats" [Mighty First Movement] Drammens Tidende 9 November 1988.

[33] Borgen, Rotten Row, p.43.

[34] Michael O'Donnell, "Rødt kors Oslo Mai 1994" [Red Cross Oslo May 1994] Terskel 12:1994, pp. 40.

[35] Trond Borgen, "Konsentrasjonens renhet" [The Purity of Concentration] Hrymfaxe 1:1989, pp.18.

[36] Harald Flor, "Forvitring og fantasi" [Disintegration and Imagination] Dagbladet 13 December 1988.

[37] Virginia MacKenny, "A Word in Praise of Boredom" NEWSART.KZN vol 2, no. 6, 2000.

[38] See the catalog Blind Navigator: the Heritage of Surrealism (Bergen: Prosjekt Samtidskunst,

1991).

[39] Ingrid Blekastad, "Michael O'Donnells lyskunst" [Michael O'Donnell's Lightpieces] in Michael O'Donnell: Looking Back. Catalog, Lillehammer Art Museum, 1997.

[40] Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication" in Hal Foster (ed.) Postmodern Culture (London, Pluto Press, 1985), pp. 126-34.

[41] Jean Baudrillard, "The Evil Demon of Images and the Precession of Simulacra" in Thomas Docherty (ed.) Postmodernism: a Reader (NY: Columbia University Press, 1993) p. 194. See also: Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994).

[42] O'Donnell, Terskel 12:1994, pp. 38-40.

[43] O'Donnell, Terskel 12:1994, p. 40.

[44] Fredrik Stjernfelt, "Planeten er fyldt op" [The Planet is Full] Weekendavisen 22-28 November 2002, culture section, p. 6.

[45] Borgen, Hrymfaxe 1:1989, p. 20.

[46] Borgen, Hrymfaxe 1:1989, pp. 19-20.

[47] Mårten Castenfors. In: Göteborgs-Posten, 28 January 1989.

[48] Acts, 2:3-4.

[49] Lotte Sandberg. "Når kunsten stirrer på betrakteren" [When the Art Stares at the On-Looker] Aftenposten 23 November 1997.

[50] Ingrid Shevlin, "Burning Desires." The Sunday Tribune (Durban, South Africa) 6 February 2000.

[51] Mark Quinn's self-portrait of frozen blood, Self, is owned by the Saatchi Collection, London, and was shown at the exhibition Sensation at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in 1997. See the exhibition catalog, pp. 146-49.

[52] For a discussion of the issue of establishing a new humanism in contemporary art, see: Trond Borgen, "Art of a Human Scale." In: Utopia. Exhibition catalog (Stavanger: Rogaland Art Museum, 2000) pp. 26-34.

[53] See the Sensation catalog, pp. 64-69.

[54] See catalog: Apocalypse: Beauty and Horror in Contemporary Art (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2000) pp. 210-225.

[55] See the catalogs: Boyd Webb (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1987) and: Boyd Webb: Oevres – Works 1988-90 (Brive: Chapelle Saint-Libérale, 1990).

[56] Jon Refsdal Moe, "Makulator Maharaj" [Cancellator Maharaj] Morgenbladet 15-21 November 2002.

[57] The action or habit of judging something to be worthless.

[58] Harald Flor, "Dødsmark og livsglede" [Killing Field and Joy of Living] Dagbladet 10 July 2002.

[59] Sandberg, Aftenposten 23 November 1997.

[60] Michael O'Donnell: Belysning (Naming Names) flyer (Oslo: Henie Onstad Art Centre, 2002)

[61] See: Susan Hiller. Catalog. (Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1996) pp.77-80.

[62] Michael O'Donnell: Belysning (Naming Names)

[63] Flor, Dagbladet 10 July 2002.

[64] James Joyce Ulysses (1922) (Aylesbury: Penguin, 1972) p. 40.

[65] Blekastad. Catalog (Lillehammer Art Museum, 1997).

[66] MacKenny, NEWSART.KZN, Vol. 2, no. 6.

[67] Alex Sudheim, "Mass hysteria revived as art." Mail & Guardian (Durban, South Africa) 17 February 2000.

[68] See e.g. Jacques Derrida, "'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority"

[69] See: Trond Borgen, Esker/Boxes. Catalog (Stavanger: Rogaland Kunstsenter, 1999).