Holding Hands with History
Conversation with Morten Viskum

Jean Wainwright

With Anthony Ritter taking part
in the conversation

The Funeral, 2006 (detail)
Taxidermied rats, bronze chairs and
coffin in wood, 30 x 244 x 244 cm

I. The Dead Birds and Other Stories

Jean Wainwright: When was the first time that you thought about mortality?
Morten Viskum: It was probably when I saw dead birds on the terrace of our family house in Norway. That is the first clear memory I have of death. There were huge 2 x 2 metre windows which reflected nature, these confused the birds and they flew into them breaking their necks and dying. I remember being particularly aware of this when I was six, the year before I was in school: there were thirty-five houses in the development and every one had a similar problem. I found the dead birds when I woke up, it seems that they flew into the windows early in the morning.

JW: At what stage did you feel you had to arrange a burial for the birds?
MV: I am not sure what I did for the first ones; maybe I put them in the garbage, as you couldn't leave them on the wooden terrace. There was no blood, but if you didn't clear them away the insects would come and it was unpleasant. I remember that I started to make a graveyard under some trees in a small wood quite close to the house, although as a child it seemed much further. I buried the birds and put down small stones, a wooden cross, and then arranged some very small fresh flowers (to fit the scale of the grave) on top. During that summer the graveyard became bigger and there ended up being more than fifty graves, as I also collected the birds from the neighbours' gardens, carrying them to the burial place in my arms. Some children keep pets and bury them when they die of course, but I was doing the ritual alone with wild birds.

JW: They sound like miniature installations. Much of your work is about quantity, *ten thousand* candles… *a million pieces* of jewellery… it's a big statement, and a big commitment to bury all those birds; but it also makes one think of the collecting as an art. Were you always interested in art?
MV: Yes, in my early school books there are lots of drawings filled with colour.

JW: Did your parents have works of art on their walls?
MV: Yes, but it was my grandfather Oddgier Hagen Viskum who was the collector. He acquired a large amount of mainly Norwegian art in his house; he was the Director of Education in Moss, and one of the people who began the Art in Schools project. He wanted to use art to educate people and to foster a greater understanding of it. My parents also had some paintings and I remember thinking that it was normal for every home to have

art. However my grandfather was concerned that the artists he knew were often poor, so he advised me that it was important to pursue my dream but perhaps to think that *as well as* being an artist I should have a stable profession. So I made a decision when I was young that I wanted to be a vet *and* an artist but not as a profession, that changed later and I don't regret it. When I went to art school my grandfather was very happy but also worried as I was producing art that seemed strange to him. He was open to all kinds of paintings and he liked abstract art, but he was concerned when he started to read about the crucified rats and my conceptual work, but he soon changed his opinion.

Kayserling II, 1992
Fetus of a sheep in formalin,
2,5 x 4 x 7 cm

JW: Your mother was a teacher and your father an architect, so you came from a professional family. You were extremely upset by your father's premature death.

MV: I greatly admired my father Ola Viskum, but he died of brain cancer. I was scared to see his demise, which began when I was sixteen, the loss of speech, being unable to eat, the endless hospital visits… but somehow you almost think to the bitter end that the person will survive. My father was interested in city planning and then when he was a young architect he was made the chief of the city planning department of Drammen, he was very successful and well regarded. When Oslo needed a new city planner my father applied for the job, it was a long drawn out process and he won with a small margin. However, in January 1982, when I was sixteen and he had been at his new job for a few months, he was skiing alone outside our house when he collapsed, someone found him and brought him home, it was the first indication that something was wrong. He was diagnosed with cancer of the brain which he lived with for fourteen months. He was very scared, but didn't want to show it to his children. I was at home one day and the doctor telephoned and said there was "no hope". I heard the conversation from outside his study and his silence, or his answer—he told me it was the doctor afterwards. The doctors tried everything that was possible at that time to save him.

JW: You have commented in the past that you were scared of death, was your father the reason?

MV: I was scared long before my father died but I am not scared any more. I was scared of not living, I loved life and was terrified of no longer being *alive.*

JW: Witnessing your father's demise and suffering must have been very hard, do you think it affected your decision to become an artist?

MV: Yes I think it did, it made me listen to my inner dreams, because my father would talk about his dreams of what he would do when he retired. He was in and out of hospital and the last time he came home I took a photograph and later I made a *Viskum Box* (*Viskum Boxes*, 1993–1997), one of the seventy-two that I made as an art student with the last picture I took of him inside it, but I can't look at it. In the photograph my father is sitting on the sofa, he is bald because of chemiotherapy and trying to eat, and we have some

Performance *Cancer Cells*, 1994
Video stills from performance,
dimensions variable

friends visiting and they cannot speak with him as he cannot speak anymore. I don't remember what else I put in the box but I do remember the photograph.

JW: So your father was the first person you ever saw dead?

MV: We were at the hospital and my brother and I were walking outside and when we came back he was dead, which was a shock. I have seen four people dead in my family, my grandfather, father, grandmother and my mother-in-law, but not all of them died like this—they all had cancer but two were very, very old and they looked near death for the last few weeks. In contrast my father was only forty-nine, he died nine days before he reached fifty and was buried on his birthday. It has been my goal for so many years to be older than my father. A goal I have now reached.

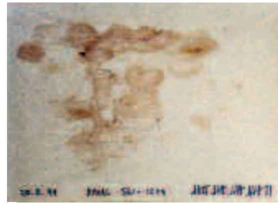
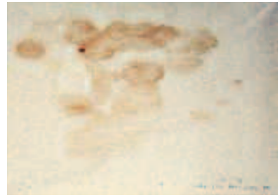
JW: There are many references to death in your works: for example, one that perhaps could be related to your father is the *Cancer Cells* series.

MV: I can see why you might make that connection. But what is interesting about those works, and for example about *Cancer Cells ABI – 11841* (1998), is that when you look at the series it's not really possible to know how they are made. However, I did a performance on video which showed the act of making the works and then people realised. The art came about because I was working with laboratory animals and at the weekends I worked on experiments that couldn't be completed during the week, so I finished them on my own at weekends. I had to take cancer cells out of the stomachs of the mice, which I first had to kill and then dissect to remove the cells. So the materiality of the work is the actual cancer cells, which have fallen onto the papers that were used to cover the areas where the experiments were conducted. They were stacked in such a way that as my series progressed there are fewer and fewer cells. I was using the normal practice of the laboratory and making art from something that is customarily discarded as medical refuse. When I showed them in an art exhibition they became something different, but it's real and it's about our society, but people found it difficult to relate to.

JW: I find the *Cancer Cells* series compelling, because there's something about the disappearance and trace that fascinates artists and cancer is something that multiplies, but we constantly work towards its elimination. I was also thinking of works like Andy Goldsworthy's *Giant Snowballs* (2000): they melted over the period of three days until all that was left was the trace, or Edward Ruscha's *Stains* (1969), his boxed sets of single sheets of paper, where he let selected materials such as acid and LA tap water sink down into the paper ground… Your works are powerful because as soon as you say the word "cancer", which is not a neutral word, you create another conceptually terrifying layer.

MV: Each person brings their own interpretation, but I also gave each work a colourful background, so they looked deceptively appealing. I play with this, "You don't want to hear about it. You don't want to know about it", and yet it still attracts you in a way.

JW: The work raises questions doesn't it? There is the whole history of animal experimentation, but these animals are bred in the interests of medical science to find cures for

Cancer Cells Dynal 561-1249,
1994 (detail)
Cancer cells and blood on paper,
160 x 360 cm overall

diseases. My question is, how important is it for people to be compelled by the complexity, the links to animal science as well as the abstract artwork?
MV: For me it is important to show with my artworks—and it's really strange for me to see people getting so angry—the world as it is. The cells have been isolated and re-contextualised and conceptually re-framed like a Marcel Duchamp, a contemporary *Readymade* by me, whereas normally these cells are disposed off as toxic waste, out of sight. And I really like that transmutation that art can effect.

II. Remains From Heaven: An Art School Training

JW: Can we talk about your decision to become an artist, you felt the need to *train*, it was very important to you to have a formal qualification.
MV: Yes. In Norway two things matter: whether you have been to the Statens Kunstakademi [National Academy of Fine Arts] and whether you have participated in Høstutstillingen [The Autumn Exhibition]. If you have, then you are accepted as an artist whatever you do. I'm talking about general opinion. At that time I already had twins who were two years old when I started art school; my girlfriend at the time had got together with me when I was a student training to be a vet, which I had been doing for six years at the Norwegian School of Veterinary Science. So of course when I told her that I wasn't going to be a vet but wanted to be an artist, with four more years of study, it was a bit of a shock. But it was very clear to me that I had this one chance to be an artist, and I wanted the best education that you could get in Norway. Of course, like many artists, I could have taught myself, but in Norway it's much harder if you don't have the right education.

So when I went for my interview [at the Academy] I thought, "I can't make any mistakes", because at that time over one hundred people were selected for interview but only twenty were accepted onto the course. Getting into veterinary school is also very difficult, if you don't have good enough grades you know you won't get in, but with art school I just didn't know, because the selection process was subjective. So I really felt that if I didn't do it then, I would have to work as a vet, and it seemed unlikely that I would go back to being a student once I had taken that path.

I was told by one of the students already studying at the Academy: "You have to be very honest, and if you want to make something big such as an installation—you have to get there early, because it's very crowded". So on the morning of the practical I arrived early and sat in the middle of the sculpture hall, with my jacket on the floor. All the other students were sitting against the wall and they made smaller things. I was different from the very beginning, I made a huge installation, *Real Love* (1993): it was partly because I was afraid that people would see that I wasn't an artist, that I had this background as a vet, so I didn't want to do anything with animals. The installation had sex advertisements from magazines with big golden frames, and blow-up dolls from sex shops in different positions on tables around the room. They told me that was the first time the caretaker had ever shown any interest in a new student's artwork! Many years later I asked them why they let me in, and they told me they didn't let me in because of what I had *made*, but because of what I was *going* to make.

JW: In 1993 when you applied to the Academy there was all the publicity around AIDS

Blood and Ccer Cells V and *VII*,
1999
Cancer cells and blood
on MDF plates, 60 x 60 cm each

which was reflected in the art world in artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe (who had died in 1989), Andres Serrano and Cindy Sherman's 1993 sex doll photographs: so actually it was a very provocative piece to have these images—the "fantasy love"—, your blow-up dolls with pornographic images.
MV: I think it was the right time. I don't think five years earlier it would have been possible, also I am not really interested in drawing people. The work is not something I am proud of today, however it was interesting in terms of the process. In my interview the Professor of Art Theory, then Stian Grøgaard, said: "Oh, this is a really interesting one", because I had all these years of theoretical education in a different discipline, so he was very curious about me. I had written a very special proposal. I said that I wanted to make art and do something for ordinary people, to put contemporary art in society and promote debate, something that was not only for art critics. And in a way that's what I have done, with the Vestfossen Kunstlaboratorium. But the interview was really strange, because they asked me whether I was interested in having a veterinary practice at the Art Academy, and whether I had any problems with my dogs… and I was thinking: "I will never be accepted". The next week I had an exam at Vet School, and I was thinking: "Should I quit? Should I revise for the exam?", but then I thought that although it might be my last week there, I should at least continue until the artwork was finished.

JW: Because at this point you hadn't made the installation?
MV: No. The interview came first.

JW: But what were you basing your idea of being an artist on? What did being an artist mean to you?

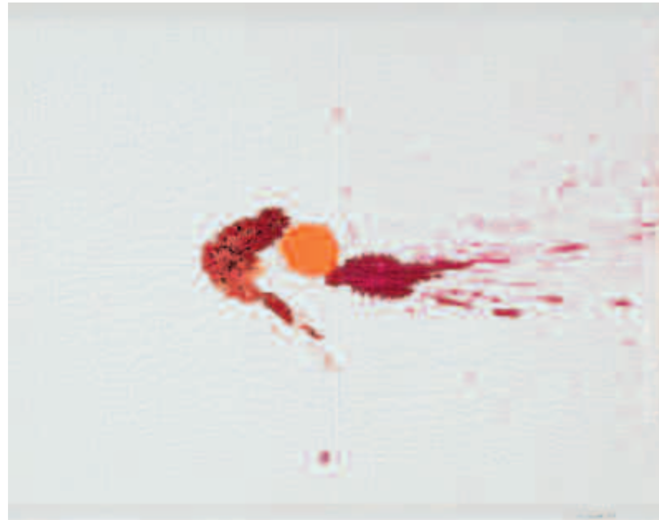
Cancer Cells, 1994
Video stills from performance,
dimensions variable

MV: At that time I had many things that I wanted to say about what I was doing or thinking about, but I couldn't write it down and I couldn't write songs, so I was hoping I could do it with my hands. When I got the letter offering me a place I was crazily happy, it was my dream.

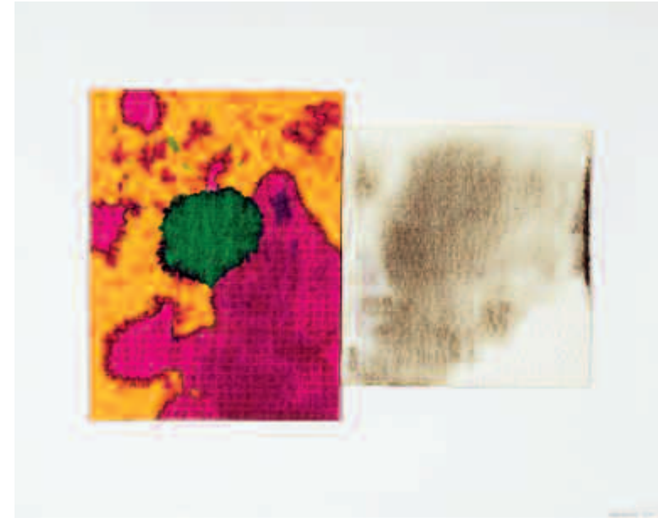
JW: You made your very controversial *Rats/Olives* project (1995) when you were still a student, which was the first of your controversial works to go into the public domain, it was a provocation. So, were you looking at other artists' works, such as Piero Manzoni's *Artists's Shit* (1961) or Damien Hirst?
MV: There are two answers to that question. Firstly I was told by my tutor Stian Grøgaard that if I wanted to become a *real* artist, I should not get too involved with other artists because they were going to put me down. Of course I went on trips to different countries with the other students, and I ate and partied with them, but they were not my friends. I have only very few close artistic friends.

Secondly the answer is yes and no, I saw other artists' work yes, but I am not interested in provoking, I really think it's boring in a way. So when I first made *Rats/Olives* of course there were debates, as I was not only still a student but also I had emptied the contents of olive jars and replaced them with baby rats in formalin. I thought: "Has everyone misunderstood, because it's not about this controversy it seemed to have caused?" But then I realised that it's like this almost every time with my work. There is so much "noise" generated when I do it, but afterwards it can be interesting to reflect and then all the different dialogues are part of the piece or the artwork that I do. So the reactions to the twenty jars of *Rats/Olives* that I placed in stores in Norway were part of

Mark from a Mouse I, 1997
Silk colour, blood and cancer cells
on paper, 35 x 50 cm



Mark of Mr X / Blood I, 1997
Silk colour, blood and cancer cells
on paper, 24 x 36 cm



the project, as was the press coverage in newspapers and on TV. But that is not why I did it.

JW: What was it that attracted you to preserving dead rats?
MV: My interest began with a chart at my school with animals on it, and in the basement of my grandparents' house I used to look at the stored preserved fruits, later at veterinary school I saw preserved specimens which we studied.

JW: Was there a significance for you in the labelling of the olive jars, as yellow and red are not only colours that you often use, but also they are the colours of fast food branding?
MV: The S&W brand was the most beautiful I could find in the small stores in Norway at the time, it was also a brand I could purchase in bulk. I bought sixty, twenty for the stores and then later twenty for the rats and twenty for the olives to make twenty complete sets, in order to put twenty in the stores and then to keep twenty as sculptures, then later on, when these appeared in the shops, I had to make twenty duplicates. So now I think there are only one or two originals from the stores that exist, because all the store owners threw them away before the people could buy them.

JW: Did you approach the shops?
MV: Most of my works are about not saying anything, because if you ask, you are not allowed to do it. So I just went into the shops and put them in. So it is the opposite of stealing. The controversy started when one woman who picked up one of the jars went to pay and then she said that she was shocked. That was very interesting because I did not ex-

On pages 94–95
Rats/Olives Part I, 1995
Rats in formalin, olives in oil,
15 x 4,5 cm each
Present in 6 public collections

On page 96
Absolut Kurant, 1996
Rats in formalin, Absolut Vodka,
28 x 9 cm

On page 97
Absolut 40%, 1996
Rats in formalin, Absolut Vodka,
28 x 9 cm

SW
MANZANILLA
OLIVES

ABSOLUT
Country of Sweden
KURANT
This superb vodka
bears the distinctive
flavor of natural
Black Currants, which grow
throughout Sweden, even above the
Arctic Circle. Flavoring vodka with
berries is an age old Swedish tradition.
Vodka has been sold under the name
Absolut since 1879.
40% VOL. 1 LITER
IMPORTED

ABSOLUT
Country of Sweden
VODKA
This superb vodka
IMPORTED

pect the extreme reaction, but I was expecting and hoping that people were thinking that it was something different and strange. But it should not be obvious that it was art, because *is it* art?

JW: Yes. So you were questioning, "is it art?".
MV: Yes, because it's many levels, consumerism, science, what we expect from art. The main reason why it became such a big problem and drew so much attention was because one of the store assistants thought she had unpacked the jar from the supplier and had put it on the shelf, but she remembered wrong. It *wasn't* unpacked, because *I* put it on the shelves. That's the reason why all deliveries with all Nordic countries were stopped and also the factory was closed for inspection. But of course that was not my intention. That was her (the store stacker) misconception.

JW: What was your reaction to that, because that was pretty dramatic, it made the news and the headlines, how did your professors react to this?
MV: That's also very interesting, because when I presented this for the first time to my professors at the Art Academy they asked how I wanted to present and display the jars… because originally in 1995 I did not plan to place them in grocery stores but rather place them as objects in an exhibition. But then I thought: "Oh, maybe they belong in shops", but I didn't tell my tutors. Then I travelled to five different cities in Norway with the art, placing an olive jar in four different shops in each city. The last destination was Trondheim, and after a delayed flight I came home and nothing happened for the first twenty-four hours, but the second day the press started to write about it, then it became a huge story. The S&W brand is American, they wanted to sue me for a million dollars, so consequently my professors became afraid because when you are a student there is the tension between being a private person and the interests of the institution. The consequence was I couldn't have materials like formalin in the art school, and I had to get a studio outside the Academy so that the institution would not be implicated.

JW: How was the million dollar lawsuit resolved?
MV: I think that the American lawyers for S&W realised that in Norway you can't sue somebody who doesn't have the money at that time forever, so they dropped the case. But the police prosecuted me, so I got a criminal record. I was also working in an animal laboratory at the same time, and I lost that job. So it was quite dramatic. But two days later somebody had already bought the glass jars and I got my first exhibitions at the Sogn & Fjordane Art Museum in the West of Norway and the Lista Lighthouse Gallery in the South of Norway. And then my family stopped asking me whether I was "really going to be an artist" or "was I going to finish my veterinary education afterwards", they knew I had chosen my path.

JW: Very dramatic, all in the second year of your course!
MV: Yes, so when I was at art school I wanted to learn as much as I could, very quickly. I was into all kinds of activities, applying to artists' organisations for funding, learning about the art system, art history, the role of galleries and museums and the machinations of the

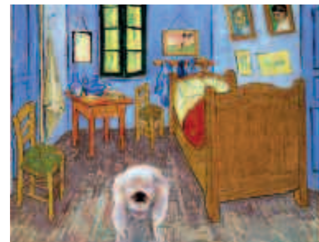
Love From God, Two Heads, 1997
C-print on canvas, 300 x 200 cm

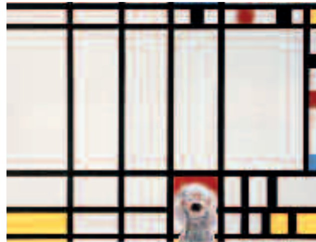
On pages 98–99
I Hope You Didn't Die in Vain, 1999
(detail)
Mice in formalin (2160 mice),
200 x 800 x 30 cm

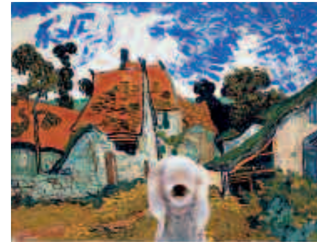
art world. I was reading and learning about other artists and I thought: "It's very important not just to be famous for the *Rats/Olives* project". I was very clear that this should be one of many kinds of works that in the end would be *my* body of work. It was Rose Finn-Kelcey—one of the guest tutors at college—who told me: "You are not working with death, you are working with life". She also knew Damien Hirst's works very well, but she told me: "Some of your works look the same, but you have *such* different aesthetics, and also background, so it is so different". After that I relaxed! We also had visits from Andres Serrano, and one gallerist from Matt's Gallery in London, Robin Klassnik. I never did anything with a brush after I started art school, I realised that I wanted to make art that had the appearance of an installation, so I was enrolled in the sculpture department. Also at veterinary college I was thinking about carcasses and how I could use them in the art I wanted to make. When I saw Damien Hirst's *Mother and Calf Divided* (1993) everything fell into place, as I had already been making works like this previously, such as *Embryo 4th Feb 1992*.

Love From God, Red, 1997
C-print, 90 x 70 cm

On pages 102–103
Love From God I and *II, White*, 1997
C-print, 60 x 50 cm each







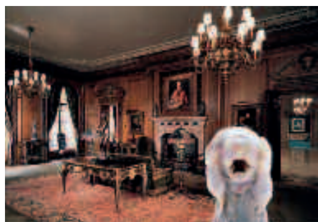
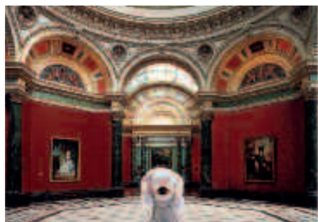
I Hate Art I-XVI, 2013
Digital print on watercolour paper,
40 x 60 cm each

JW: Of course, Klassnik was representing very early on people like Mike Nelson, Richard Wilson and Willie Doherty with his political works from Northern Ireland. He also showed Jordan Baseman, *July the 12th 1984* (2002–2003), whose screen-based piece was from transcriptions of the recording of an execution (of a man sadly later declared innocent), a work that seems to resonate with yours. I am intrigued with how you dealt with death in your work while at the Academy.
MV: Klassnik and I discussed the idea for a work… he was wondering what would happen if I put all the needles and scalpels I use on dead animals into a pile, so I did and made my work *James Last Trip* (1996). I found it really interesting to see what happened if I didn't work as directly as I normally do, with my own ideas. So I now have *one* work that is his idea in Oslo. It was also interesting to meet other visiting artists at the Academy, but as a student it is not always the ones who make the most interesting artworks who might be the best to talk to. With some artists such as Andres Serrano, I felt there was more affinity to his work than in my discussions with him. I have some of his works in my collection, *The Scream* (1986), *Two Christs* (1986), and *Gold Christ* (1987). I did however make my series of eighteen photographs *Love from God* (1997) not in reaction to his work but to find my own voice with my subject matter. That was a very particular work that is all about the dissection process that I was using in the lab. I made a series of photographs of a ten-day-old laboratory rat hanging on a cross. This work raised many questions in people's minds about religion and sacrifice, politics and ethics, all themes that reappear in many of my later works. It also highlights the power that an image can have to make one think, to re-examine and confront.

The religious references in *Love From God* also are implied in the elaborate frames, to the Norwegian hymn of the same name that is sung at weddings and funerals. Viewers are often surprised at the size of the prints and they sometimes find it hard to confront the stages of dissection of the rat, until all that is left is the trace of its existence. These dynamics of confrontation in order to speak about many issues at once is very important to me, I also feel it is necessary for the viewer to bring to the image and the viewing space their particular background and interpretation.

JW: When did you see your first installation in a gallery, can you remember any installations you went into that affected you as relating to a *space*?
MV: It was at the first Saatchi Gallery (in North London), Richard Wilson's *20:50* (1987): the way you could smell the sump oil, and how it affected your equilibrium as you walked along the ramp with the oil on either side of you. It was of course not the first installation I had seen, but it was the first that affected me relating to a space. I was intrigued that you didn't know how deep the oil was, as in fact its surface is like a mirror, reflecting the ceiling. I was impressed by it because of the multi-sensory aspect; it was not just about what you saw.

Then for my final exhibition at the Art Academy in 1997 I made an installation, *Remains From Heaven*. It consisted of 658 small objects that were collected from each day that I went to the Academy. I placed the objects on four shelves that were mounted in a square, so that you had to walk around it. Each object had a number, that was written with a label machine. The display consisted of animal food on cans, mice in for-

I Hate Museums I-IV, 2013
Digital print on watercolour paper,
40 x 60 cm each

Opposite
Installation photo, 2007
Paintings on canvas and paper,
taxidermied rat, dimensions variable

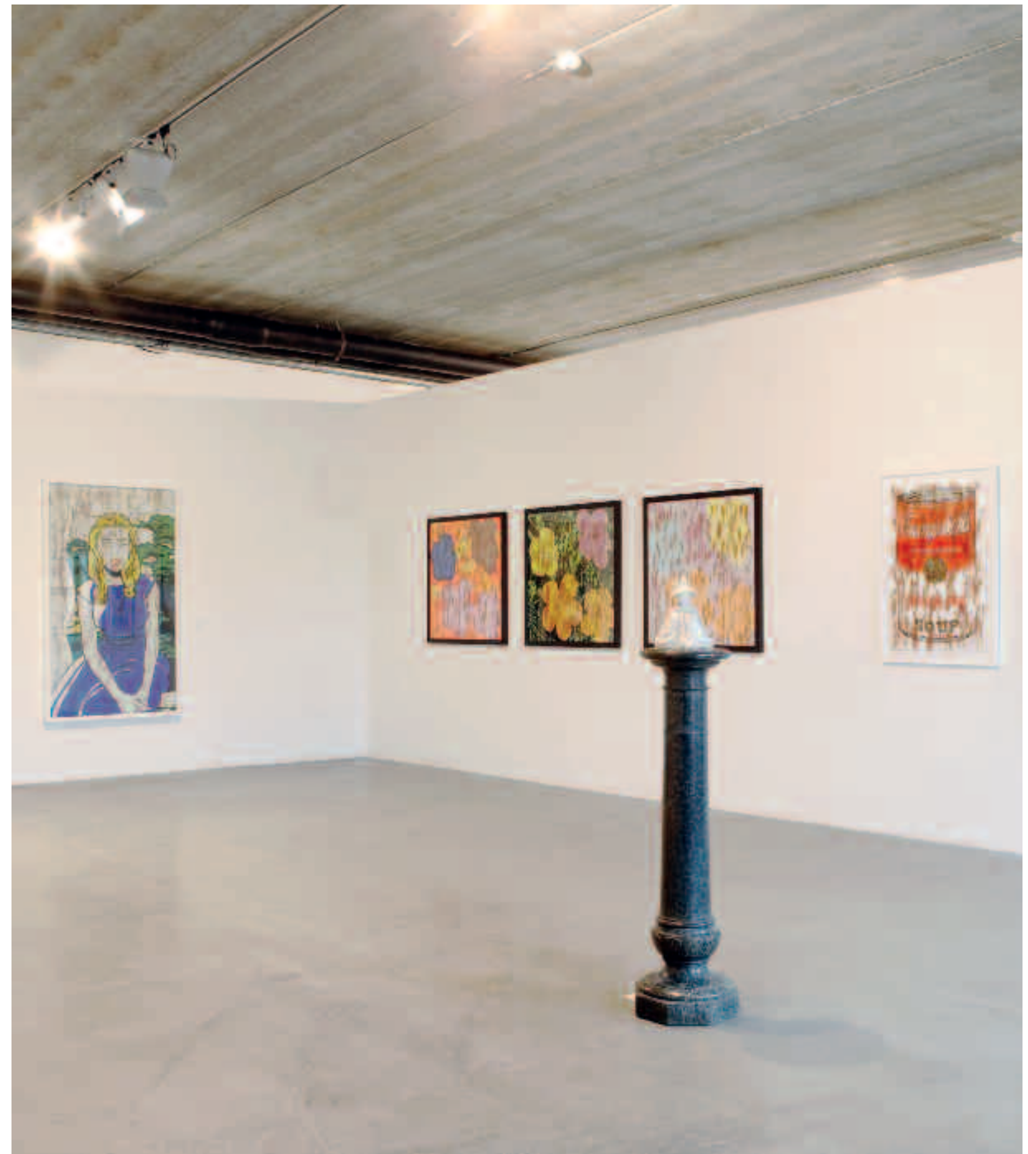
malin, pharmaceutical products, and my notes. It was displayed in a systematic and rational manner, like an archive or a diary of my days at the art school. Some people have seen references to Ilya and Emilia Kabakov in this work, in particular their installation *The Garbage Man: The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1988–1995), maybe because the installation is in The National Museum in Oslo and because of the displays it contains, or because of the title.

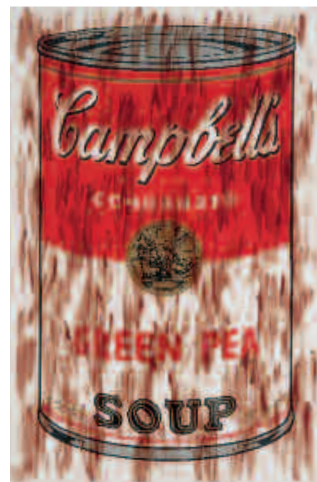
JW: So is *Remains from Heaven* a template for many of your later installations which are often huge and contain hundreds of objects?
MV: Yes in some ways, but this also represents a very happy time for me; but of course it was not the only work that I was doing that related directly to my art school experience. I began my *I Hate Art* (1996–) and *I Hate Museums* (1996) while I was there. The idea began when I was looking at world-famous artworks in museums and then I purchased postcards and prints of the works and the buildings. I took them back to my studio and made photographic works with a screaming rat in the pose of Edvard Munch in front of each postcard image.

JW: It's the dilemma of the art student when you see canonical works, some artists have an extraordinary status.
MV: Yes, so I made works with Salvador Dalí (*I Hate Art VII*), Vincent van Gogh (*I Hate Art II*) and Henri Matisse. I wanted to play with all the iconic images and buildings I had seen because they had made me want to go to my studio and make art, I didn't hate them, they stimulated me. I used a rat, as it was easy to position it in the Edvard Munch screaming pose. It was also—as an art student—strange to see how famous Munch was, yet the version (of *The Scream*) by Andy Warhol seemed to be more known than the original (Munch) and I was playing with that concept of the art industry surrounding Munch, the T-shirts, horror films and Halloween masks.

JW: Perhaps we could just revisit for a moment the fact that you painted before you went to the Art Academy.
MV: Yes, my work was very different, I was painting with a brush in a much more conventional way, something nice! I was interested in a kind of beauty and I didn't trust myself to do what I really wanted, because this is what people liked, and bought. I had some exhibitions of this type of work before I became an artist in the Bodli Dahl Gallery in Oslo in 1990 and The Art Festival in Oslo in 1991 and 1992. One of my paintings from that time was a kind of moon landscape…

JW: But even then you can see hints of your later work, in the green and red colours of your sky and a kind of cell structure in evidence.
MV: Yes and I also collected my first artwork, a Marc Chagall lithograph, *Hyméne*, in 1986: I used the money from eighteen months of my student scholarship. I was thinking: "I'm going to be a vet and if I want to be part of the art world I have to collect". I had also kept my clothes from 1986 so I was able, when I made my self-portrait *An Artist Collecting Art 1986–2013* (2013), to have the accurate clothing to dress my self-portrait in. The portrait





Viskum/Warhol, Green Pea, 2006
Print and blood on paper,
103 x 71 cm

Viskum/Warhol, Chicken Soup, 2006
Print and blood on paper,
103 x 71 cm

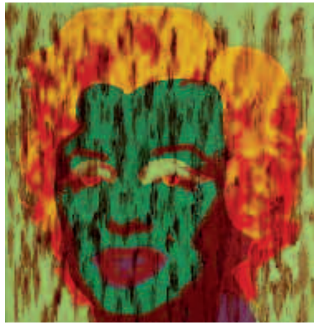
Viskum/Warhol, Tomato, 2006
Print and blood on paper,
103 x 71 cm

Opposite
Viskum/Warhol, 4 Mao, 2006
Print and blood on paper, 80 x 60 cm

is based on a photo of me from 1986, with the clothes, the carpet and the wall all from that year. I also made another self-portrait in 2013 on my 48th birthday, *The Collector 2013*, which has been in many exhibitions and can be seen together with my own works or works from other artists.

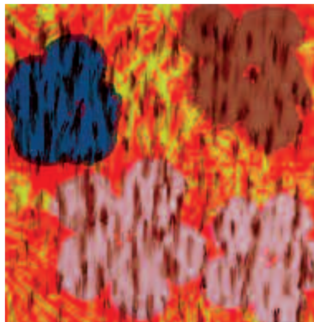
Another very personal work related to my family during those years, for example, is *Burial Shroud* (between 1994 and 1997). I used a knife to pull away the mattress material from the bed when someone died, a reference to the departed and the idea of presence, in an absence.

JW: You acquired your first dead hand when you were still at the Academy: can we talk about that?
MV: Yes, but that also came about in a very random way, because when I had my studio outside the art school I had already had an installation and performance on Norwegian television, in spring 1996. My plan was that the result of the performance— a pig's head with needles in it used for extracting blood and samples—was going to The National Autumn Exhibition (Høstutstillingen). At the Høstutstillingen, students from other schools could choose one artist they wanted to meet, and most of them wanted to meet me. I had many students coming to my studio when I too was a student; one asked why I always used dead animals in my artworks, and without thinking I answered: "It's because I don't use human beings", which provoked me to think that maybe this was not true. I began thinking about how I could use humans and it was at this point that I started to look for human body parts. Within two months I had acquired a dead hand in a very special way: it was also, in a way, shocking to have the dead hand in my studio, and I was not sure if it was ok or not to have it, and to use it.



Viskum/Warhol, Marilyn #1 and *#2*,
2006
Print and blood on paper,
91 x 91 cm each

Viskum/Warhol, Mao #1 and *#2*,
2006
Print and blood on paper,
91 x 91 cm each



Viskum/Warhol, Flowers #1 and *#2*,
2006
Print and blood on paper,
91 x 91 cm each

Viskum/Lichtenstein V, 2006
Acrylic and blood on canvas,
122 x 122 cm

Viskum/Lichtenstein VI, 2006
Acrylic and blood on canvas,
122 x 122 cm

Viskum/Lichtenstein II, 2006
Acrylic and blood on canvas,
112 x 112 cm

Viskum/Lichtenstein IV, 2006
Acrylic and blood on canvas,
122 x 122 cm

Viskum/Lichtenstein III, 2006
Acrylic and blood on canvas,
99 x 98 cm

Viskum/Lichtenstein I, 2006
Acrylic and blood on canvas,
99 x 99 cm

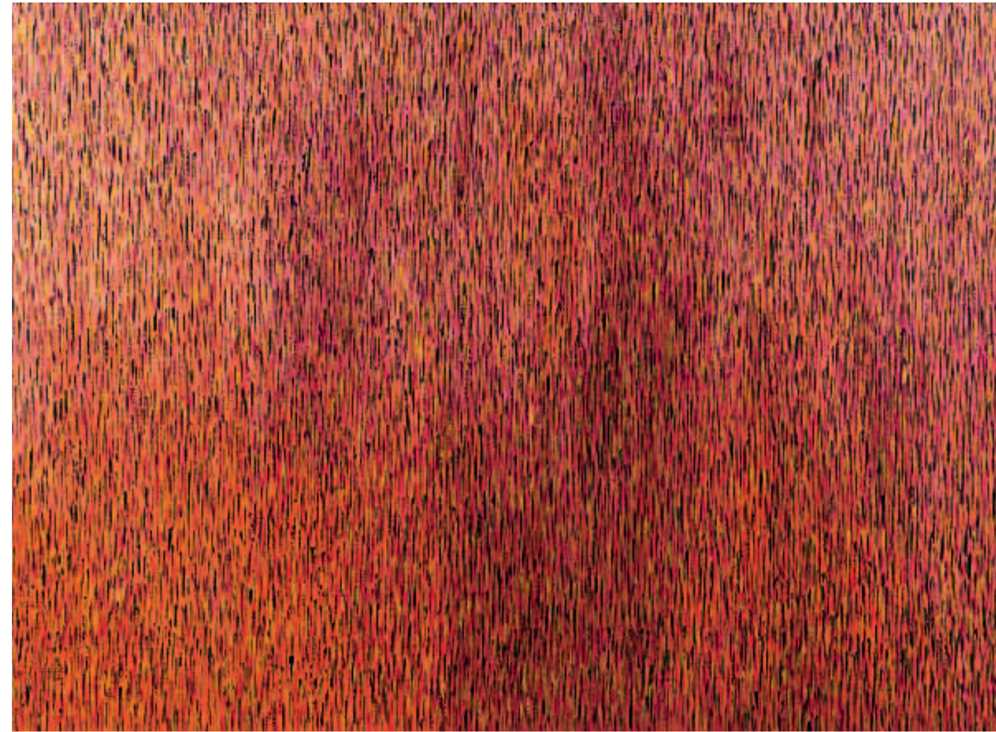
The Hand That Never Stopped Painting XX, 2013
Acrylic on canvas, 135 x 185 cm

III. The Hand That Never Stopped Painting

JW: We live in a sensational world and people always want to know where the dead hands that you paint with come from. Do they all have a story?
MV: I have some information, some are facts, and some are stories I have added. On occasions I reveal a little about the hand in the texts that I paint but most of the information I do not share.

JW: Why do you use blood with the hand as well as acrylic paint? Were you thinking of metaphorically giving the dead hand life?
MV: I had previously used traces of blood on paintings and I also used a brush but that was just to make the background, I have used the remains of animals since 1998. I began with animal skulls from my vet studies.

JW: So much of your work is about performance. With the series of works titled *The Hand That Never Stopped Painting* (1998–present) why did you decide to use the hand as a tool, but also what is the significance of this act for you? You kept the hand in your studio for six months before you used it?



The Hand That Never Stopped Painting XIII, 2013
Acrylic on canvas, 135 x 185 cm

MV: That's almost the correct story, because using it as a tool was my intention from the very beginning. The reason why it took six months was because I was not sure if it was ethical to use it for my art. It was always my intention to make paintings with it.

JW: Did you research the ethical issues surrounding it?
MV: My mother always wanted me to have a lawyer or someone I could ask advice from before I did my work, and I told her that I couldn't have that because all of them would have to say "No".

JW: I want to pursue the idea of the authentic, how we talk about the "hand of the artist", were any of those ideas in your mind?
MV: I think what you are saying is true and part of the reason. When people ask why I use the dead hands, I tell the same story, it is also about art history because artists such as

6 Hand-Painted Bottles, 2011
Acrylic on bottles,
dimensions variable

Giorgio Morandi
Natura morta, 1957
Oil on canvas, 30 x 44 cm
Private collection

On pages 116–117
The Scream, 2015
Still from performance,
dimensions variable

JEG

JEG

JEG

JEG

Kos I-III, 2010 (triptych)
Acrylic painting and blood
on canvas, 40 x 50 cm each

Opposite
Jeg I, 2013
Blood on canvas, 200 x 100 cm

The Scream, 2015
Still from performance, blood and silkscreen on canvas

Opposite
The Scream I, 2015
Blood and silkscreen on canvas, 110 x 80 cm

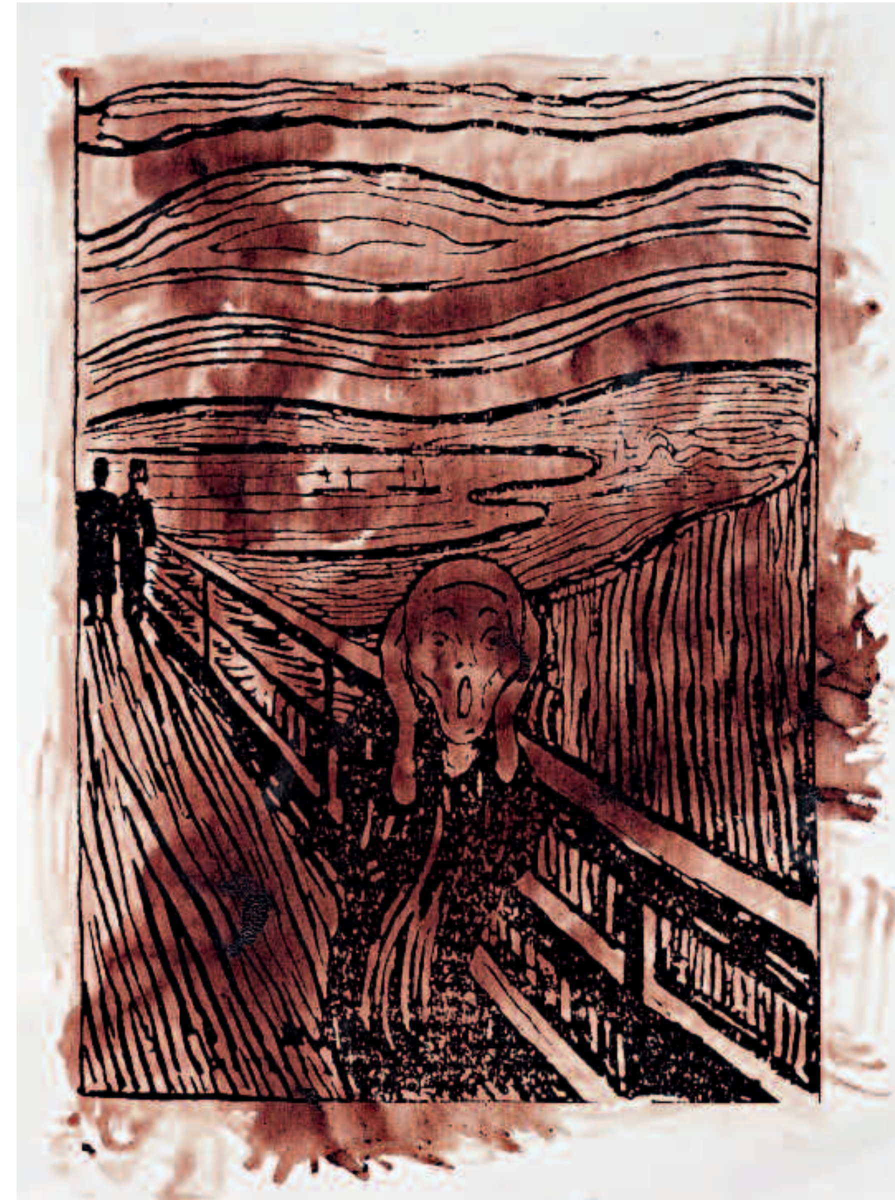
On pages 122–123
The Scream V and *IV*, 2015
Blood and silkscreen on canvas, 110 x 80 cm each

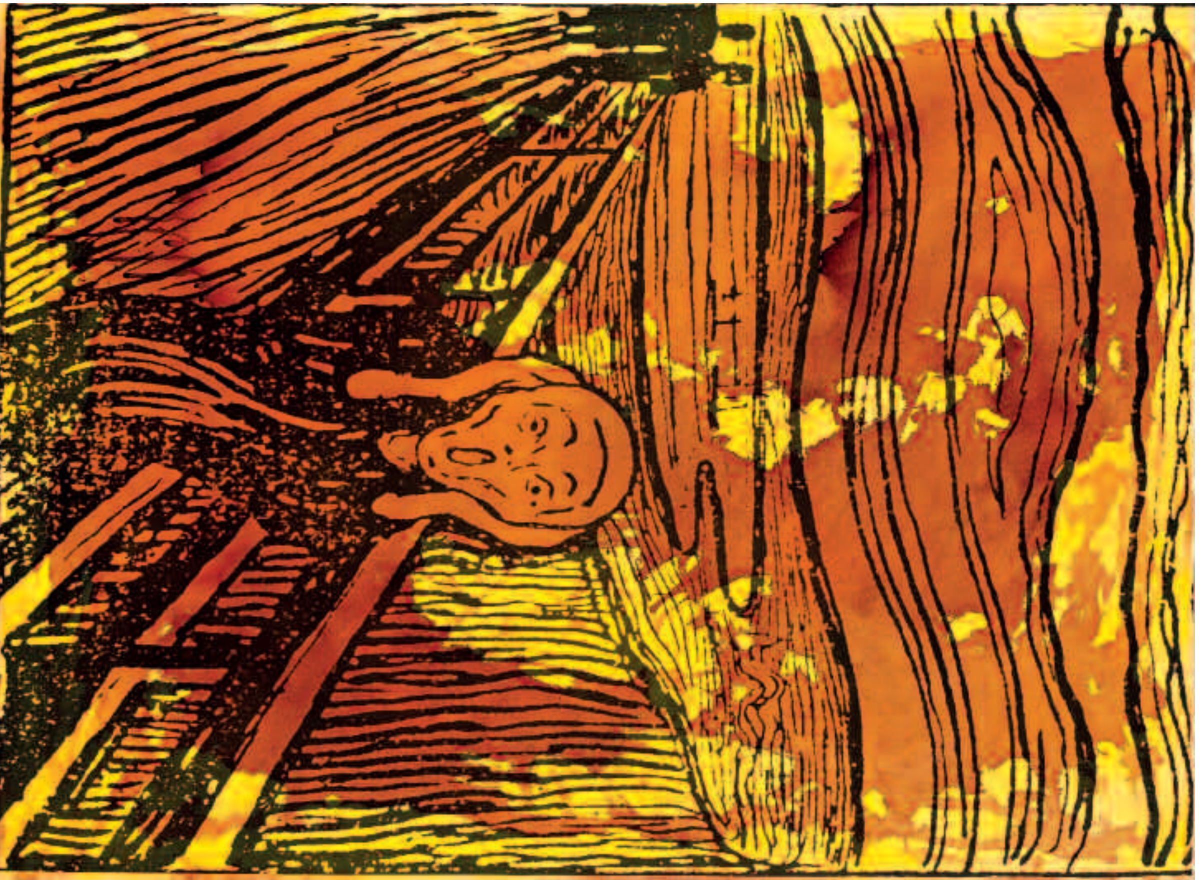
Théodore Géricault went to the morgue to paint dead body parts, and I took it a step further—I removed the dead body part and painted *with* it.

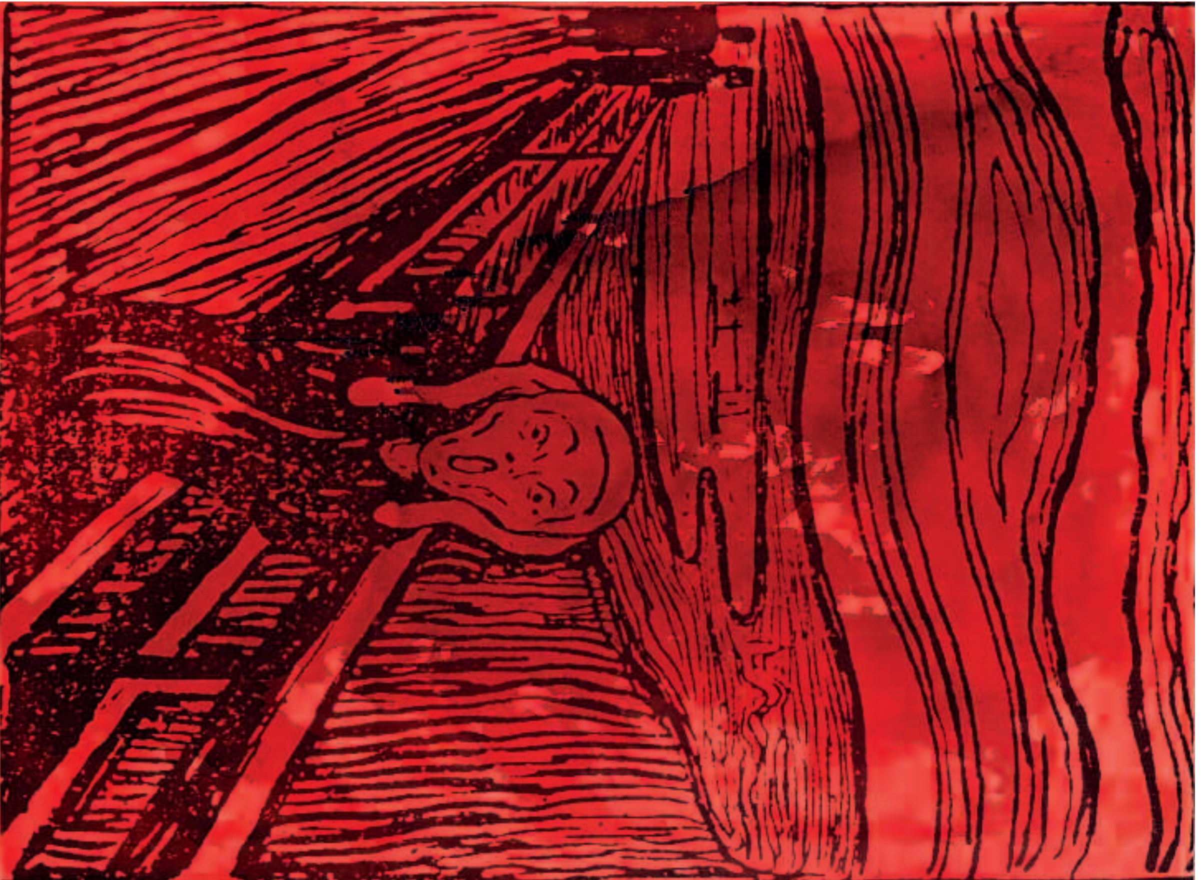
JW: Yes, he studied cadavers at the Hospital Beaujon in Paris and borrowed them to study in various states of decomposition…
MV: So Géricault was on my mind, especially his painting *The Raft of Medusa* (1818–1819) which I had seen in Paris when I was a student.

JW: Each of your works with the dead hand has a different mark, a different gestural vocabulary. I am reminded of Jackson Pollock's work, where he described himself working with energy and motion and "removing the conventional tools of the artist".
MV: Yes I see a connection with what he expressed and I hope that when people see my work they don't only see the painting, they also see the image of the performance. In a way I'm not a painter, it's not a painting, it's the *result* of a performance.

JW: You use a glove when you paint with the hand, why is that?
MV: You can't touch formalin, which is what I use to preserve [the hands]. In a perfor-







The Black Hand, 2016
Still from performance, acrylic on canvas

mance, when I say hello to the audience with the glove on, they feel strange I think, because they know later on I will start to paint with the dead hand. All my dead hands are quite similar in a way, but I can feel the subtle differences when I use them, though my surgical glove.

JW: Do you ever put your own hand onto the paint? Is it always the dead hand, or do you sometimes use your live hand to smudge or make a mark?
MV: No it is always a selected hand. Some shapes are more difficult than others, so, if it's a car such as the old Saab that I painted, it is not easy to get round the angles because of the flexibility of the hands, then I sometimes need to use my own hand. In some paintings the background is painted with a brush and on top with the dead hands.

JW: To return to the act as performance, were you interested in Yves Klein pulling the naked women through blue paint (*The Living Paintbrushes*, 5th June 1958) as a record of movement across a surface of a canvas?
MV: It is an interesting question, when I was young and visiting museums for the first time, I saw the Yves Klein monochromes such as *IKB 79* (1959) and I liked them, but they didn't wow me. Then I saw the Yves Klein exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1995, with all the media documentation about his performances, and my view of his work changed completely. I became very interested in the documentation of the performance and what remains, the relationship between the action and the artwork. I revisited Yves Klein's monochromes because they are not just monochromes, they are something *more*.

I have always been fascinated by what you can say with a monochrome and have made many in my own practice. I asked myself the question: "How can I continue with monochromes? What can I do that's new?" And then I found an answer. We have a very interesting art collector in Norway, Jack Helgesen. I told him: "I *think* I have made something you will like", and then I said it was a monochrome, and then he started to laugh. He told me: "I have seen so many, and it's done. So if you can add something new to them I will be very surprised". He knew about my dead hands but was not expecting that I would paint monochromes with them. When he came into the room and saw them in 2010 he said: "Wow, you've done it. You have done something I have never seen before with a monochrome". I had made a huge painting, a 2 x 4 metre monochrome with a special metallic colour, he went very quiet when saw that and purchased it. My small *Monochromes* made in 2014 change when different light conditions hit their surface, when

you stand in front of them or move across them, there are hints of Yves Klein's 1960's monochromes or Robert Ryman's works.

JW: Can I also talk about the process of making your other *Dead Hand* series? Many of them are very large-scale, so you're moving, making a journey, with the dead hand guided by you across the work. There are also references to other artists such as Robert Rauschenberg (*Monogram*, 1955) but you have treated your ideas in a different way?
MV: Yes, they vary in duration and in intent. The reference to Rauschenberg was the mix of cultural references to dada and pop art.

JW: Perhaps we can talk about *The Hand That Never Stopped Painting XXIV 1998 SYND*: it almost becomes like a Seurat painting… pointillist almost. There is so much happening on the surface, I am reminded of cellular activity when TV goes pixelated, yet created with a dead body part.
MV: Yes, that is an important work as it was also the one that someone came and tagged SYND (Sin) when it was in an exhibition in Denmark. Now I exhibit it with the additional gesture.

JW: You have said it is important for you that each work has a kind of personality. You have seven hands now, so did you get offered them by someone who is suicidal, some one who is dying, or someone already dead?
MV: There are two answers to that. Because partly there is a choice, but also I acquire them, then I have the story, then I decide which hand to use for each painting.

JW: With your work *The Black Hand* (2009), there is the story written in black acrylic with the dead hand used to write it. You have an accompanying installation which has a leaping impala and a painted text which is very evocative. So you *get* the story? Or the story is created?
MV: With that hand I didn't choose a black hand, it *was* a black hand that I was offered. I know whose it is, and I got some of the information about his background. The story is a mixture of facts from him and his life that I add to. There is an autobiographical dimension with that work which is different from the others, because the audience does not usually get so much information. The man wanted to go back to Africa and see the animals (mentioned in the story), but I don't know why he wanted to go back, so for me there was the personal element, the truth and then my artistic interpretation for my work. So it's a mixture, the relationship with the animals, and taking down the "big five"; but ironically all that happens is that a reservation animal accidentally comes across his path and is shot, it isn't actually targeted as one of "the big five". It's an interesting discourse on desire, about longing for a landscape, a place, and being detached from it, and yet somehow it comes back into his life. At the Venice Biennale in 2009 I installed my *Leaping Impala* (2009)… which is also related to *The Black Hand* work and seeing the animal almost jumping out from the gallery into the streets of Venice was very strange.

JW: Yes, ideas of loss and longing, also because in the history of slavery, hands would

Immortal, 2004 (detail)
Hammond organ and a dead
human hand, dimensions variable

be chained, the cutting off of hands as a penalty for theft, there are powerful metaphors here. Do the hands, for example the black hand, wear out?
MV: No, they are fully preserved and durable. I use acrylic paint and carefully clean them as I would a brush each time I use them and replace them in the formalin.

JW: The first time you did the dead hand performance were you anxious?
MV: I was very uncomfortable wondering if I had the right to do it or not. The very first time I used the different seven hands I had an idea how the paintings would or should look like. It is a mixture of the story of the dead person and my own story about him or her.

JW: Do you use the right hand or the left hand?
MV: The right hand, because I paint with my right hand, but I could choose if I wanted the left or the right.

JW: You have five male and two female hands, what is the difference between the genders?
MV: In the beginning there was a big difference because the male hand is bigger and heavier and because the Danish police who traced the hand when it was stolen in the Christ-

Onda, 2012
Acrylic on MDF, 440 x 1120 cm
Painted with The New Hand

ian Dam Gallery in Copenhagen, did not store the First Hand in the correct way, so it became smaller and lighter after that. I lost hands twice, I got back number one, but four which had a gold ring on its finger I left in a Chinese restaurant in London. It does seem a strange thing to steal. I always keep the first painting I make when I acquire a new hand; so for example *The Hand That Never Stopped Painting* (1998), using the first hand. The second is *The New Hand*, the third *The Black Hand*, the forth *The Hand with the Golden Ring (The Lost Hand)*, the fifth is *The Female Hand*, the sixth *The Old Hand* and the last one is *Rest in Peace*, which belonged to a young man who committed suicide.

JW: The mark making on each canvas is very different, for example *The New Hand XII* (2008) looks as if it was painted with a fast rhythm almost like a frenzy, whereas *The Hand That Never Stopped Painting 1* (1998) is far less frenetic.
MV: Yes, each one is as individual as the rhythm I adopted when making the painting; it is determined by whether I use one finger or the whole hand; there is the time I spend on it, and the energy I expend, each painting has its own character and performance. I have also used the first hand, *The Hand That Never Stopped Painting*, to paint ten covers of my *Morten Viskum Monograph* for a show I had in Paris at the Galerie L'Inlassable in 2015. This was accompanied by my collaboration with Edgar Sarin, a Parisian artist whose work is about the secret and unknown. He told me that he wanted to get "random people to express [themselves], to get rid of the burden that all human beings have and how to get rid of it properly". For his collaboration with me he asked me to send a painting that I had "never dared show to humanity", so he could wrap it in paper and it could be bought and unwrapped on the day of my death. I then thought: "We need to destroy this work". So we made a performance by taking the work and throwing it into the Seine for it to vanish forever.

JW: I was interested in the relationship between this and Yves Klein's *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* (1959–1962), where he threw gold into the Seine.
MV: My work is different but there are traces of Klein. I discussed with Edgar that what I wanted to address was a question of something vanishing, but somehow being reborn, that my work would be destroyed at the very point that it revealed itself. When my painting arrived in Paris in January 2015 it was carefully wrapped and taped with gaffer tape. It was a white canvas I had made in 1999 with a text written in blood and I am the only one who knows what the text is. Edgar wrapped his wrapping over mine in a particular way in cloth with the black tape round the edge to make it look like a blank canvas in a frame and during the exhibition at Galerie L'Inlassable it was hung on the wall with a title *Viskum/Sarin Concession á perpétuité # 63*; someone could have bought it and they could have unwrapped it and of course read the text, however the instructions specified that was to happen after my death. After the show I took a knife and carefully cut out the canvas, Edgar and I attached it to a piece of concrete that we found from a building. It did not sink immediately. Once the work was thrown into the river the blood words were washed slowly away by the water and it became a white pristine canvas again.

JW: The traces of the dead hand and the blood being washed remind me of a Bible pas-

Warhol/Viskum, Mao #3, 2006
Print and blood on paper,
91 x 91 cm

Warhol/Viskum, Flowers #3, 2006
Print and blood on paper,
91 x 91 cm

sage: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols". The work is symbolically provocative. Are you glad you made work with the dead hands and that it has become a controversial talking point about your work?
MV: I think that is really *me* because I could do all of those works with my own hand or a brush but then it wouldn't be me. It's my style, its not important to make a monochrome or to make a colourful painting, it's the *way* it's been done.

IV. Blood, Munch and the weight of Art History
JW: Was there any moment as a child when spilled blood stuck in your memory?
MV: I think like all children I first saw blood when I hurt myself, so I am quite normal in that respect. I think the colour is beautiful, fresh animal blood smells similar to human blood and if you don't have it in a freezer it starts to go off, it's then impossible to carry on working because of the smell. I have used older blood in a painting for the *Painting a Text about a Painting* (2013), where I used the text from Munch which related to his *Scream* series (1893–1910).

JW: What interests me, is that despite *The Scream* being *so* much part of the Norwegian psyche, *you* wanted to make it a "Viskum" to recontexualise the iconic work with your own visual language. You have taken on the angst of Munch's painting. Tell me a little about why you felt compelled to use the blood, and to use the dead hand to make these works?
MV: In a way it's very difficult and dangerous to make my own artworks with such direct references. I was not interested in doing it for many years, but then I was invited to take part in an exhibition in the Haugar art museum, "Munch by Others" (2013), and I started to read what he had written about his inspiration for *The Scream*. I had not known that Munch had written about his emotions that led to his artwork. Then I did a performance with the text—in Norwegian—using the dead hand (my second hand, *the new hand)* as the brush. I put blood into a porcelain bowl next to the work, it smelt because I only changed it once a week on Sunday. When I did dissection (as a trainee vet) with the animals, the smell of the blood was sometimes very difficult to handle. I think as a Norwegian artist living in Norway it's impossible not to be influenced by Munch, because when I was young he was the most contemporary artist I learned about at school, this is different now of course. In 2015 I decided to make not only an installation with the text, but also a painting. In *Scream I* (2015) you can see how the performance to make the painting has affected the way the blood has moved across the image and has pooled or is thicker in places. It is then taken from the wall and hung. The colour changes over time from dark red to brown and it would fade if left untreated, but I made the decision to treat the canvases to subvert that process.

JW: But when you began the series, when you did the performance, you used a raw canvas with just the print on it…
MV: Yes. I let the blood do the work of the colour. So in a way for me the original is the one *without* colour. I added colour to the other ones to make them look more like pop art paintings, the first one was like a sketch for the rest.

JW: Sketches often have blotches, splodges, folds and creases, because they're working drawings, *Scream I* is in a traditional 1970s aesthetic of performance art, you have the remains of the performance. But then you decided to make a series of works from the original sketch, if you like. Why?
MV: For most of my works I do a series, or at least with most of my paintings I do. I'm not sure if it's megalomania, because I really do like to see more than one, and in different colours.

JW: I'm intrigued by the angst you have given back to this overexposed image of *The Scream*. The pooling blood is literally *chasing* the tortured subject, the patches of light, clouds gather as if it's going to rain down… it's like a terrible storm of angst and fear all around this figure.
MV: I am also referencing Munch's text "red as blood".

JW: Yes, absolutely. "Over the blue-black fjord hung clouds red as blood, as tongues of flame… I stopped and leaned against the balustrade, almost *dead* with fatigue." We talked in the past of how you sometimes paint all night so I can see how the text would resonate with you. "My friends passed on, and alone, trembling with anguish I listened to the infinite cry of nature." It is a powerful, expressive, heart-rending description of feeling alone, anguished and frightened. Were you impressed by the power of the text?
MV: Yes. I'm very impressed with the passion of the text and you are right, I often paint at night when there is no one to disturb me.

Queen Sonja of Norway, 2012
Acrylic on plastic, 73 x 67 cm

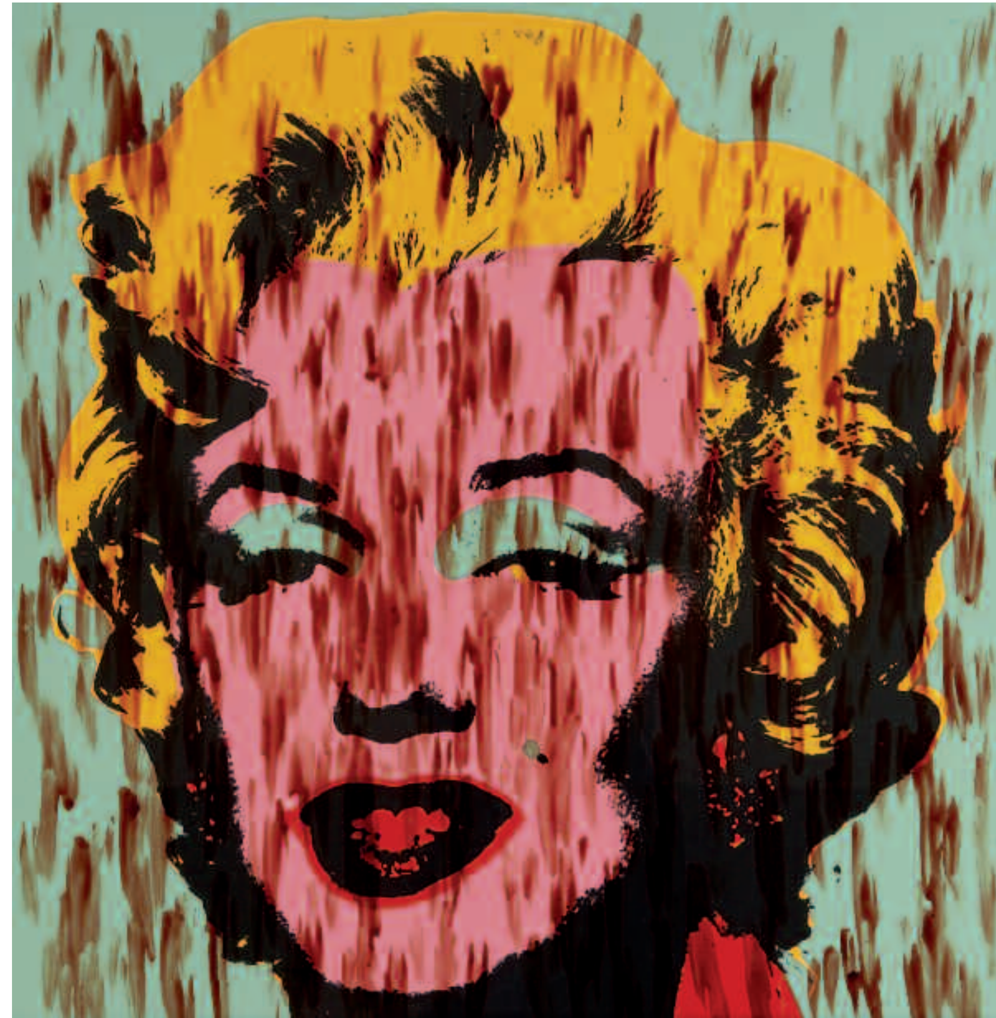
JW: You embrace risk, and it is risky taking on the art historical icons. But the *way* you use the blood, the way it drips… you add a layer that's quite startling. What informs how much blood you apply or pour onto your Munch series?
MV: I had to do it in my way with the dead hand; I use the blood in an instinctive way. I have also done it with copies of Lichtenstein, and also Warhol's—*Flowers* (1964–1965), *Mao* (1973) and *Marilyn* (1962)—so it's also about art history and my relationship with iconic artists.

JW: Did artists such as Hermann Nitsch, where he had Otto Muehl splash him with blood, or his action paintings in 1965 have an influence on you?
MV: I read about his work and it impressed me and then I collected it. I also have other works related to blood in my collection, rabbit blood for example from Joseph Beuys. What I do find interesting is how blood reveals its organic nature when you use it, the way the colour changes over time. If you use fake blood it remains the same colour. Most people have seen blood; they respond to it and have a reaction when they see it.

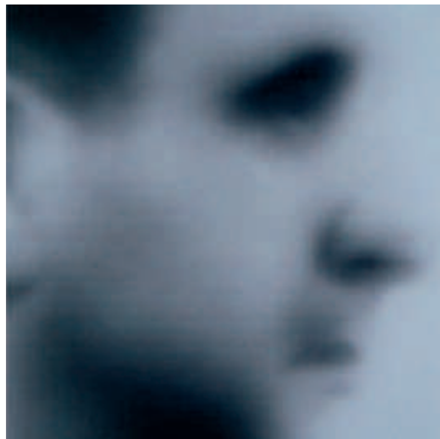
V. Père Lachaise: The Repeated Journey
JW: Can I begin by asking you when you first visited Paris?
MV: I first came with my parents and brother when I was sixteen, just before my father's fatal illness. We did all the things tourists do… saw the Eiffel Tower and visited the museums. I also came here several times as an art student. Then I got a grant from Ib Schlytter in 1998 and the really strange thing about that was that I didn't actually apply for it! It involved going to the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, tending Ib Schlytter's grave, then writing a report.

I had never been to Père Lachaise before, but when I entered the cemetery it was as though I had been there many times. It was really strange… walking around it felt almost like coming home. I had been given a map to find Schlytter's grave and then I realised as I walked around that there were many graves that nobody was taking care of. I had also seen this as a small child walking around graveyards in Norway. It was a revelation to me that Schlytter had made the tending of his grave possible without any children or relatives. I realised that I wanted to do something with all those neglected graves. This led to two different projects, but they are related: first in 1998 I began taking photographs of everyone that has a picture of themselves on their gravestone. My ambition was to eventually cover the entire site of Père Lachaise. Every year I go methodically to each section and I have taken twenty percent of the images so far. When I have documented the entire site I will start again, because the graves are on thirty-year leases, and if no one renews the lease after it is up, then they dig up the remains, put them in the Aux Morts ossuary and re-use the graves; it is also because over the years more family members die and put their pictures on the same gravestone, so that grave will change with additional images.

JW: Is it important that someone visits the grave for you, because I'm thinking also of the work you made, *The Funeral* (2006). So, there is a link between mourning and the forgotten? Did a subject matter like this and your installations help with your fear of death?



Warhol/Viskum, Marilyn #3, 2006
Print and blood on paper,
91 x 91 cm



Cimetiére du Pére-Lachaise X, 1998
C-print, 50 x 50 cm

Cimetiére du Pére-Lachaise X, 1998
Porcelain, 10 x 32 x 23 cm

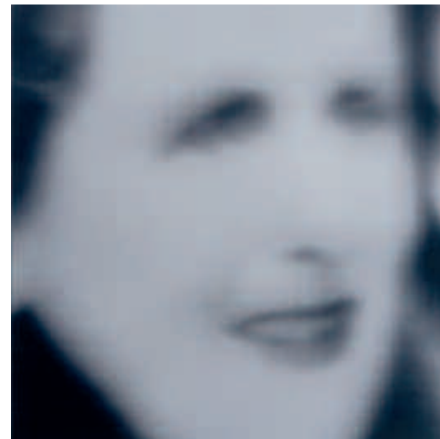
MV: It came step by step. I have now made so many installations and art projects that relate to death. I am not a depressed person though. In Norway we have humane attitude, if you die and there is nobody to attend your funeral the government pays for someone to attend. So the white taxidermy rats (in *The Funeral*, 2006) are staged in the setting of a funeral, with the cast metal chairs and the coffin.

I have always been interested in graveyards but the only graves I had read about here in Père Lachaise were Oscar Wilde's, Édith Piaf and Jim Morrison. I went to other graveyards in Paris but this is where my project began so it will remain here.

I have also made work in the columbarium at Père Lachaise which is underground, it is very cold and has different levels. But it is difficult to make work there as you need to use a flash and other people can see it, and it's also difficult because the surface of the image is very shiny; so I use my digital camera with a low flash. I really like the columbarium, it's atmospheric and it's a kind of a place where everyone is equal, maybe it's very Norwegian, but in the Père Lachaise graveyard outside you see how important you are by the size of the grave. In Norway there is a maximum size of the grave stones, so the hierarchy is far less apparent.

JW: The Père Lachaise body of photographic work has sometimes been related to the work of Christian Boltanski.
MV: Yes, that is one of the problems of making work of this type, it can be read as relating to the Second World War and that is also something that I have to think about. My work is coming from a very different place with a very different history.

JW: So you document the photographic record, which preserves memory: were there some photographs that you related to more than others?



Cimetiére du Pére-Lachaise IX, 1998
C-print, 50 x 50 cm

Cimetiére du Pére-Lachaise IX, 1998
Porcelain, 15 x 18 x 15 cm

MV: My first thought was: "Why did they choose that photograph?" Some of them were poor quality, it could be the colour, or the focus, or just a really odd photograph, but I imagine the people who chose the image have done it with purpose, to represent how they remember their family or children, not thinking about the best shot, but a poignant memory. Also there were fewer photographs to choose from pre-digital and you can photoshop images now.

A photograph reveals age, the era is often revealed in the hairstyle: people choose photographs that were taken when they were much younger, many seem to do that, but if you die when you are eighty but have chosen a picture from when you were young, it gives a different impression. There are also scenarios that are revealed, sometimes couples put images of themselves together on the grave even though one partner may be still alive.

I make my Père Lachaise photographs deliberately out-of-focus. They are like apparitions. Sometimes, people say: "Oh, this must this famous politician", but they are mistaken. They read into the image what it is they want to see. It is not important that it is a specific person with a name, but rather it can become many different people, so that somehow they become a signage for something else, they assume a universality from their original specificity. It is also interesting that with so little visual information you can see that it is a woman, man or child.

JW: But tell me about the photographs you include in *Cimetière du Père Lachaise* (1998–) for your installation. What were your criteria for the selection of which ones to enlarge?
MV: It is often a case of finding a selection of different people so to eliminate too much similarity.

JW: There are two elements to your *Père Lachaise* project, the first are the photographs,

Vestre Gravlund (Western Cemetery),
2006
Up to 10,000 wax candles,
dimensions variable

the second is cleaning and taking care of the neglected graves and the removal of broken ceramic flowers from them, that you replace with new ones bought in the shop adjacent to the graveyard.

MV: It's important to explain that when I come to Paris every year I take hundreds of photos, but I only remove *one* ceramic flower, they are two distinct bodies of work. The flowers I remove are from graves that nobody has visited or taken care of for many years. Then *if* someone in the family visited, they would query: "Oh, who has done that". So in a way I am the unknown relative who comes and tends the grave, just like with Ib Schlytter's.

JW: Did that idea occur to you the very first time you visited in 1998?

MV: Yes, on the first day, when I saw the neglected graves. Most of the images on the graves are small and they are convex, there are also security guards patrolling the cemetery, as you are not supposed to take photographs, so I had to be very discreet; it's much easier now because I can use my iPhone!

I write down the names of all the people whose photographs I take, and where they are on the map… I have all these names, but I never use them in the exhibitions. It is also something I can do as long as I can travel, the project is about death, about having relatives, or friends, or someone who cares, so you are not just "gone". It is a really important question for me, what is going to happen to us after we are dead? It is not really about whether you're famous or not and that people visit your grave as a pilgrimage, but rather what interests me is remembering ordinary people. My project is a system, but in my exhibition it is random.

However, one exhibition I made with the photographs of the dead, that took place in 2002 at the Christian Dam gallery in Oslo, caused a problem. It involved a picture I had taken of a grave that had an image of a baby. I made the photograph the same way as the other ones—out of focus. A woman called me and told me that I had stolen her dead child and she asked how could I use the picture in the exhibition. I found it very upsetting, as obviously it was not her child, so it shows how powerful an image can be.

JW: There is something beautiful about the ceramic flowers, when they are isolated they crack, get dirty, collect water and debris all which you clean away. Can you talk about the sculptural qualities? They remind me of Jeff Koons' work, but of course your intention and process is very different.

MV: Yes it is, we don't have this tradition [of ceramic flowers] in Norway which are very beautiful, old or new. However when I added them to my installation they were laid on mortuary trolleys. The equipment came from the main hospital in Norway which was demolished and re-built. They sold all their equipment and I bought all the twenty-one of the steel mortuary trolleys in 2000, when I was living in Finland. In a way those tables became much more important than anyone could have imagined, not because of what they were, but because of the space they occupied. My studio was completely full of all these trolleys, so I couldn't work there. Then I had to find a new place to store all of them, and found the place in Vestfossen that really changed my life. I also bought six huge autopsy tables, and I was informed that all the murders or suspicious deaths that had occurred in Nor-

way were carried out on those tables. I bought them with the pipes used for draining blood and bodily fluids. They also held an auction for some of the better utensils and objects, I bought, or exchanged for artworks the best and most interesting items before they went to auction.

JW: So now you had a studio full of reminders of death. So you then examined the autopsy tables.
MV: I had to get some people to help me to transport them to my studio, and while we were doing that we found all this old hair from dead people when we took them apart to move them.

JW: Were you shocked? Were the people with you shocked?
MV: Yes. My assistants didn't understand what I was doing. Norway is a small country, all the stories about murder over the last forty or fifty years in Norway have been related to dead bodies that had rested on those six tables. I had their hair.

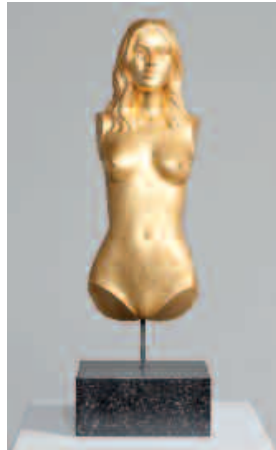
JW: So really this was detritus that had impacted in the hollow parts. What did you do with it?
MV: I still have it in my studio, and it *is* art, I also haven't shown everything that I acquired yet from the sale because there is so much of it.

JW: But there's something about these remains, you are resurrecting the discarded and giving it new life in the art world.
MV: It is also interesting to get the opportunity to show something which we know is there, if we thought about it, but that we never see. It is not so strange, the challenging fact is that I show them in exhibitions, that I am talking about something that people don't think about or feel uncomfortable seeing.

JW: I wonder whether the forensic pathologists performing the post mortems even thought about all these things. But you didn't use those autopsy tables for the Père Lachaise work. You used the trolleys instead.
MV: In my exhibition in the Nordic Art Biennial 2001 in Gothenburg I used thirteen hospital trolleys with thirteen different flowers, taken from thirteen different graves, on thirteen separate visits to Père Lachaise, accompanied by thirteen different photographs.

JW: The number thirteen has religious connotations, it is symbolic of rebellion and lawlessness, its a superstitious number…
MV: Yes, all of these references were in my mind.

JW: What reaction did you get from people?
MV: Like many reactions to my works, it was on many different levels, and it also presented a problem, because how much do you need to explain? Obviously I cannot be there all the time and answer questions, so if people don't know the reason why I do the work I do and how I do it, they might not understand all the nuances.



Girl W255, 2014
Resin with golden leaf, 42 x 17 x 11 cm
With plint h 65 cm

Oddgeir Hagen-Viskum 1904-2002, 2012
Furniture, books, clothes and remains from a private home, 200 x 488 x 732 cm

JW: You also have made a work, which is currently installed in your studio, *Ten thousand candles* (2005), which also relates to burial and the Western Cemetery in Oslo.
MV: I took the candles that were spent from the graveyard and I cleaned them up where normally they would be cleared and thrown away. I did the collecting of the candles in the mornings from about 5am to 7am. I filled up my car with seven hundred at a time. People normally place one candle on each grave and there are around 10,000 graves. They tend to place more at Christmas and then it becomes very cold with the ice and snow, so I went from March to April to collect them before it became warm. When the people that work in the cemetery went to clear them they would have thought: "Why are there so few this year". I then installed them in pathways so you could walk through the candles, some of which were lit and some extinguished, because they were at the end of their life.

JW: Many of them have burned down and buckled, so that they are almost a metaphor for what you were talking about, life and death. The symbolism in this installation is also evident in the Père Lachaise artworks.
MV: I would like the Père Lachaise project to continue after I am dead. I have done this project for seventeen years now, and I still don't know how the finished artwork will look or if it will be finished in my lifetime.

A True Friend, 2016
Giclée on watercolour paper,
51 x 42 cm

Absolut 100, 2016
Giclée on watercolour paper,
51 x 42 cm

VI. Becoming: Self-Portraits and Installations

JW: Your *Self-Portraits* are an important body of work that appear to be about mortality, yet you are also representing yourself in a dialogue between the tradition of self-portraiture, politics, religion and current affairs; you intend making the work until you die, can we talk about how the idea came about?

MV: My project is not one but two. The first is the individual portraits and the second is the biggest artwork ever, as some of my installations which contain my self-portraits are hundreds of square meters of me as an artist growing older. I made the first one in 2004, I always make them on my birthday, the 2nd February. When I was a student a colleague knew Anthony Ritter who had worked for Madam Tussauds and so I decided to go to Paris to visit him and ask if he could make self-portraits of me, we subsequently began working together in 2003. The genre of self-portraiture interested me but I wanted to make ones that were as real as possible, but with a twist; a body cast in silicone seemed perfect. The first one in the series *Immortal* (2004) explored the idea of the impossibility of immortality, yet its possibility through my sculptural self-representation. I faced a wall on which I had painted the word IMMORTAL in blood—which I varnished to preserve it from fading with a dead hand—so I was literally facing the fact of my own inevitable death. On the side wall I hung several, it can sometimes be up to twenty-one (*XX1* is for example in the collection of the National Museum) vintage phrenology head illustrations, in both front and side view, coated with animal blood which is lumped in places to look like blood clots.

Something dramatic happened however when I was making *Immortal.* I was standing very straight and Anthony Ritter (the fabricator) put the plaster on up to my waist, asking if it was "ok to do more", I said "yes", so he started with my back, stomach and arms; suddenly I began to feel strange and when I looked at my toes they were completely blue. I don't remember anything more, I fainted, it was too much for my body. Anthony managed to catch me, remove me from the plaster and revive me. Of course I reflected that if I had died when I was trying to make a sculpture of myself as immortal, that would *really* have been an artwork!

In terms of the blood which is an intrinsic part of my installation, I link that to the story of Henrietta Lack who, during radiation treatment for a tumour in 1951, had two samples of her cervix removed without her permission. Her cells eventually became the HeLA immortal cell line, which is commonly used in biomedical research. So her bloodline is everywhere, she has achieved immortality.

JW: Hers is a compelling story, not only in relationship to ethics but also as you suggest her continuing blood line through research. Does it feel strange having so many earlier selves surrounding you? You have some installed in your studio in Vestfossen, which you see every day.

MV: Yes, it does feel odd sometimes. They also arrive in wooden crates, almost like a coffin so it is an odd sensation when I open them.

JW: Anthony, can we talk about the relationship of the sculptures to Morten and death?

Anthony Ritter: It is an interesting discussion, as for me it is very much about the relationship with death. Morten extensively studied bodies with bones, blood and muscles as well as animals, he knows the inside as well as the outside and I think it hardens you up to certain things. But there is something very strange about having a cast of your own face—the first time you have it done it is like seeing yourself dead, especially when it is the white plaster; the second time you are more used to it. Strange when you think about it, as it is only plaster and the imprint on your face, but it does have an effect on what you think about death, you get used to the idea of seeing yourself as inert and pale. Morten is surrounded by surrogate dead bodies, his own, and *if* you can get used to the idea of yourself being in that state, it is possible for you to go further and think about death in a different way without getting tangled up in the emotional side, it is a kind of freedom. Morten is not afraid of death and I am not afraid of it and I think that helps. I am used to working with the outer shell of the body, which is part of the language of death. The way that waxworks, silicone or resin sculptures are made now have less of a connection to the body in some cases. Now the body can be scanned, which is putting people out of jobs, that is why I concentrate on the heads. It is not as simple as taking a photo and turning it into 3D, there is much more, it is more intuitive. I think there are still plenty of people around who notice the difference and every sculpted head is a synthesis of at least twenty photographs. You amalgamate a bit of this and a bit of that and you recreate what is the essence of the person, I don't think a machine *can* do that.

So I compose each of Morten's sculptures more on intuition than a living breathing checklist. I spend more time on the head as that is where most of the engage-

Opposite
The Scientist, 2005 (detail)
Silicon and resin life-size sculpture of the artist, medical equipment, dimensions variable

ment is happening, the bodies are not the most important part. In different light conditions I take a lot of photos as I go along, since I am trying to extract the maximum life out of the material. What I don't like in waxworks and museums is how dead everything looks and how totally plastic, and I am trying to find ways of getting over that. It is all very complicated and very minute changes will make the sculpture more lively. You can look at things straight on and make a judgment on them, but in the workshop I have them next to me. When I am doing something else they are there and you see something out of the corner of your eye and when it still feels human that is the test, a kind of osmosis, either it is saying something is there or it isn't.

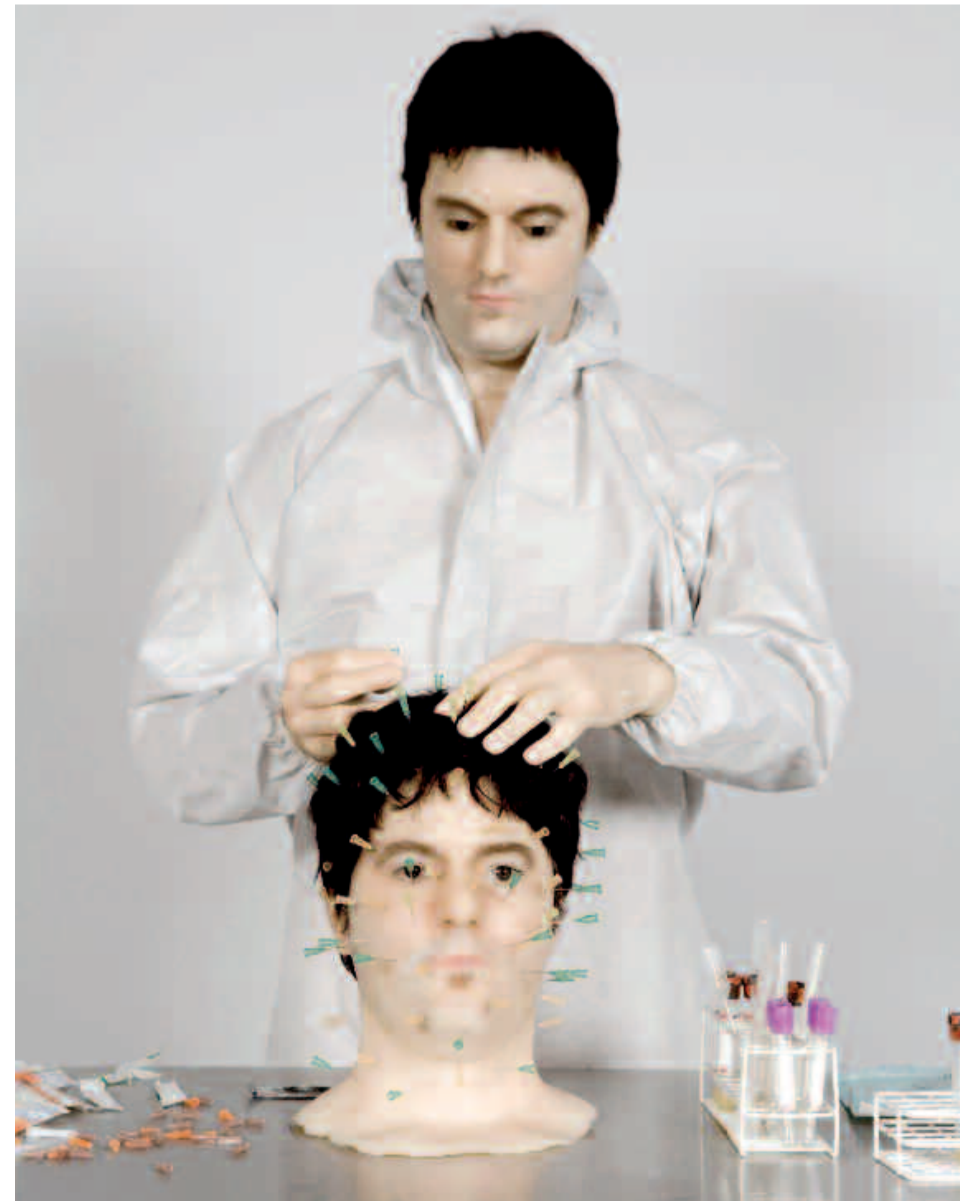
Viskum/Manzoni, 2016
Giclée on watercolour paper, 51 x 42 cm

JW: Morten, in some of your self-portraits you have inhabited religious or controversial figures.

MV: This began with my first installation, which is linked to the *Self-Portrait* series: The work *Believe* (2003) is based on a photograph of myself, and I dress the sculpture as a priest. The installation contains nearly 3,000 pairs of shoes but it can grow or contract, depending on where it is exhibited. The concept is always that same, the spaces between the shoes are always equal and I want it to appear as if the people have disappeared from their shoes. There are the religious connotations of the mosque, Catholicism and observance, and metaphors of a journey. The shoes also relate to my being Norwegian as in our homes you take off your shoes out of respect and to keep the house clean. The huge quantity of new shoes were acquired from an old shoe store that was closed down and soon afterwards the owner died. A new proprietor had rented the place and wanted to sell all the shoes at £3 each pair. I came the first day, and bought them all.

JW: Was the religious commentary important for you, particularly the dogma of the different faiths?

MV: One of the starting points for *Believe* was that in 2003 I would see on television charismatic religious groups, but it felt like a one-way conversation, a monologue preached to a faceless television watching congregation, so that informed my original ideas. However something interesting happened when I installed the work at the 9th Havana Biennial in Cuba in 2006. I sent 300 pairs of shoes, but when I arrived and took off the top of the box, I realised that the shoes on the top were not the ones that I had put inside. So the people that worked at the airport, had swapped their own shoes with the new ones. The installation then contained some of the swapped Cuban shoes. Visitors to the exhibition started to ask if they could swap their shoes with the new shoes and in the first week most visitors did, changing the intention of the installation. The curators became worried that this act might be interpreted by the Cuban government in political terms, that I was somehow "poking fun" or that people were not free to buy what they wanted as Fidel Castro was in power with his Marxist-Leninist Nationalist government.



Opposite
The Beggar, 2014
Silicone and resin life-size sculpture of the artist, dimensions variable

JW: It also reminded me of Christian Boltanski's work, *Monument* (1986) or the uninhabited object, clothes or shoes remaining after death. You have also made several self-portraits with religious overtones.

MV: Yes, for example in *Son of Abdullah* (2007) I used the neon sign as the contrast between the modern consumer world and what the religion (Islam) represents, which is looking back to the past. It also relates to *The Garden of the Righteous*, where it is stated that Abdullah bin Umar, when he was travelling to Mecca, got tired of riding a camel so he would sometimes ride on a donkey. The taxidermist donkey is a Danish one. I exhibited *Christ* and the *Son of Abdullah* side by side in the Drammen Open in 2007 (the same place where my father had been the city planner).

While I was thinking about making *Son of Abdullah* I was being filmed by a Norwegian television company in Paris, they wanted to come to Anthony's studio. This was in 2006 after mobs in neighbouring Syria torched the Danish and Norwegian embassies in Damascus and when the thousands of protesters rallied outside Beirut's Danish embassy to make their feelings heard about the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. It was suggested that I should make a portrait of myself as the Prophet, I said "No", that "I couldn't ever do that" but I began to think about how I could make the work from a different angle. So *Son of Abdullah* is where I am Viskum as a Prophet holding up my two fingers in a gesture for peace. The entire installation is also affected by where it is exhibited. There is the relationship between the living and the dead, between powerful beliefs and the relationship with identity and land. I also remember that it was an incredibly difficult pose to hold and my legs went numb.

Gavin Turk
Pop, 1993
Waxwork in vitrine
279 x 115 x 115 cm
Photo by Hugo Gvitrinelendinning

JW: Your *Self-Portrait* series not only reflects your concerns at the time of making them often engaging with current affairs, but also relates to your own history.

MV: Yes, for example in *The Scientist* (2005) you see me as I was when I worked in the animal laboratory with all the materials that we would use. In *The Beggar* (2014) I took on the persona of a homeless person kneeling on cardboard and with a sign that said HUNGRY AND HOMELESS PLEASE HELP THANK YOU AND GOD BLESS. There has been a lot of discussion about that issue in Norway in the previous two years, with the government proposing a law forbidding both begging and giving to beggars which was first been mooted in 2009, in order to discourage the practice. My idea was later to take this work out onto the streets of Norway with its cardboard sign and see what happened.

JW: This reminds me of Gavin Turk's work *Bum* (1998), based on the persona he adopted to go to the glamorous opening of the "Sensation Exhibition" at the Royal Academy in 1997, where he was nearly refused entry despite having work inside.

AR: There is an anecdote about *The Beggar*, as when Morten came to the studio he had heavy cold and could not breathe through his mouth and he said: "Anthony I don't think

Maurizio Cattelan
La Nona Ora, 1999
Polyester resin, painted wax, human hair, fabric, clothing, accessories, stone and carpet, dimensions variable
Installation view: Kunsthalle Basel, Maurizio Cattelan, 1999
Courtesy Maurizio Cattelan's Archive
Photo by Attilio Maranzano

you are going to be able to mould me in the usual way", this was because two straws up his nostrils would not be enough. I had to find a tube so he could breathe very noisily though his mouth and so we ended up with a Morten with his mouth open for the first time—so that is why the beggar is essentially talking or singing, he is doing something in the portrait which was something we had not planned at all.

JW: Do you have a safe word if someone cannot breathe?
AR: Any sign of panic and I always take it off the plaster. You can tell immediately. When you mould people it is a special relationship, people come to my studio and you talk about the process, you reassure, you have the safe words, I may even do a few tests on the hand. People want to know, is it hard? Is it soft? Is it cold? Is it hot? How long does it take to go hard? Once you cover someone's face they are in a world of their own, time changes, it can either be really long or really short: people turn off or they almost go to sleep, others are fighting to get out almost before you start, you can tell though. Morten is the relaxed end of the scale, but it is not easy to turn yourself off I can assure you. Sometimes Morten asks if he can come with a film crew while the process is going on and I always say "no"—it spoils the relationship where you calm everything down, you need that quiet peaceful controlled atmosphere to get the best result.
MV: When I first had my face moulded we used another technique. I had to stay with my face immersed in a porridge-like substance for forty-five seconds without breathing; sometimes it took ninety seconds to set. You also cannot hear anything.

JW: In 2008 you made a very different self- portrait which presented another set of challenges.
MV: I was inspired by the concept and title of the exhibition "Everybody Counts" in Vestfossen in 2008. In response I made one of my birthday self-portraits, *The Perfect Sculpture* (2008). I decided to make a copy of myself as Arnold Schwarzenegger from when he was Mr. Universe (in 1969), where he almost looked normal and rather nice compared to the monster bodies that body builders have now. Then I thought that my silicone sculpture should be more contemporary and I found a picture of a German body builder called Gunter Schlirkamp. I gave the pictures to Anthony to begin the modelling process and it is only the face, teeth and hands that are from my body in this instance. The sculpture weighs more than the others as there is more resin and Anthony added an all-over spray paint to achieve the oiled tan. I am surrounded by mirrors and there is a trophy with my name on it. I did extensive research into the whole process of body building, particularly the products that people use to alter their physique. I wanted to buy the body building proteins for my installation and I told the suppliers that I didn't care if they are out of date and that I wanted to buy cheap old or empty containers, but they wouldn't sell them to me. Of course the title is ironic as it is not the perfect sculpture and not how I want to look.

Norway, 2009 (detail)
Resin life-size sculpture of the artist, steel letters from a cruise ship, dimensions variable

JW: In *Scarlet* (2010), you also deal with the altered self, combining body politics and gender identity in a huge installation.
MV: I bought one million pieces of plastic jewellery, so yes, it is an enormous installation. When I was young I often thought about transvestites and clowns in terms of inhabiting a different persona and body. So I am Scarlet, the name my mother would have given me if I had been a girl, sitting in front of the mirror in the corner of the bedroom surrounded by all her supposed jewellery and some clothes and shoes and he or she is overwhelmed from buying all these *things*. There is all the preparation just to *appear*, the shaving of the hair and makeup.

JW: As Warhol said in his book *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again*, "I'm fascinated by boys who spend their time trying to be complete girls, because they have to work so hard—double time—getting rid of all the tell tale male signs and in drawing in the female signs… What I'm saying is it is really hard work".
AR: Yes, Scarlet was an interesting self-portrait to make because I felt it was important to leave quite a lot of masculinity in Morten's face, I didn't want to make it too pretty. I even put some beard in it. It was really a man trying to be a woman, so it was important

Opposite
The Perfect Sculpture, 2008 (detail)
Resin life-size sculpture of the artist, containers and polar bear fur, dimensions variable

that I did not go too far to make it successful, you needed to see how hopeless it was to try so hard, but somehow still be unconvincing, so it was important to have a wig rather than Morten's hair.

JW: Several of your works relate specifically to Norway and your identity, such as *Norway* (2009), but there also seem to be references to works such as *La Nona ora* (1999) by Maurizio Cattelan, where the Pope is felled by a meteorite.
MV: The sign used in Norway had an interesting history. It came from a cruise ship, originally the *SS France*, that when built in 1960 was the longest passenger ship that had ever been constructed. When she was purchased by the Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL) in 1979 the ship was renamed and called the *SS Norway*, then it was finally sold for scrap in 2008 and I was able to buy the very heavy steel sign. I took the R away and then it was No Way. This was after the Lehman Brothers and the financial crisis, and I am collapsed under the R of the sign. I also tell people that the answer to the financial crisis is contained in the suitcase which I am holding. When people ask "can we open it" I tell them "then you destroy the artwork".

JW: Did the financial crisis have an effect on you personally or were you interested on the interdependency of the financial world?
MV: It did not affect me personally but in retrospect it did, as it affected the art world and many people. It was also a difficult sculpture to model, as it was hard to lie in the position for the time it took for the fabrication, so the modelling had to be done quickly in sections and then reassembled.

JW: Your self-portraiture is of course made up of time and duration, of reaction and reflection, each one is combination of ideas; this is shown particularly in *The Clown* (2012).
MV: Yes, this is a complex work where my face is painted like a clown but the hair style and trimmed beard are of the Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik, who killed eight people by setting off a van bomb in Oslo, then shot dead another sixty-nine participants of a Workers' Youth League at a summer camp on the island of Utøya in 2011. I thought very carefully about my representation over the next few months as it became obvious to me that I needed to make a work about that terrible and tragic event. It was such a momentous act and it had a huge effect on Norway. It has highlighted our prison service and how we adopt a humanitarian approach of rehabilitation. The maximum sentence is twenty-one years and you can be out in fourteen with good behaviour, although the new penal code has reviewed that for his type of crime, so already it was a very sensitive subject. I did not want to dress Breivik as a recognisable figure that he would possibly be proud to be represented as, such as Adolf Hitler, but to defuse and diminish him by showing him as a clown. I hoped he wouldn't like that as he would never have expected to be compared to that figure. With a clown the smile is not a smile, there is a sadness, there are mixed messages. Of course there were also technical difficulties with the sculptural balloons as they could not float, so we had to support them, we also used secondary colours. Anthony told me that he liked the idea of making fun of Breivik with the clothes. From a distance it looks like Breivik but close up it changes into me. It was interesting because before people saw it and

An Artist is Born, 2016 (detail)
Silicon and resin life-size sculpture of baby (based on a photo of the artist from 05.02.1965) and nurse

I told them about my idea, it was: "Oh no, this has really gone too far", but afterwards when they saw the sculpture they understood. There is obviously connection between *The Clown* and *I am Charlie* (2015) as both tackle a national as well as international trauma.

JW: *I am Charlie* was a particularly significant work for you?
MV: *I am Charlie* (2015) was not originally the work I was going to make for my 50th birthday, a significant milestone for me as I have now outlived my father. So on the 7th January, when the *Charlie Hebdo* incident occurred at the magazine offices in Paris, I was very shocked like many people. The phrase, "I am Charlie" was subsequently adopted by supporters of freedom of expression who were reacting to the shootings. I felt very connected because my friend Lars Vilks was associated with the Stockholm bombings in 2010 as his cartoons were sited as the inspiration for the attacks and then there was an attempt on his life in the Copenhagen Café in 2015 just after I made my *Self-Portrait*. Lars had also taught me at the Art Academy, so I was already aware of the terrorist connections to satirist drawings and I did not want to add more fuel to the fire about the Paris shooting. I then began thinking about how I might make a political work using Charlie Chaplin because he made the film *The Great Dictator* in 1940 without being arrested or killed, and it was such a strong satire that when I think of Hitler I also think of his filmic characterisation. It struck me that perhaps I could use him to comment on the *Charlie Hebdo* situation. So I exhibited myself in 2015 at the Saatchi Gallery as Charlie Chaplin with the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine under my arm, so you just see the green cover that has become such a symbol. I also have made some works with the magazine, which I exhibit separately, where I have covered the cartoon and painted it with the dead New Hand. At a distance Anthony felt that you see "Charlie", but closer it was very "Morten" and he explained that it doesn't always happen like that.

JW: You also have installations exhibited in your studio in Vestfossen that relate to other traumatic events and have sinister undertones, such as *Why isn't Thomas at school today?* (2004).
MV: Yes, there is an arrangement of old school desks and chairs as well as teddy bears that have been coated with animal blood. The maps that cover the walls are old and from Norwegian schools, so there is also an agenda about how Europe and other countries have changed their borders and names, sometimes with very bloody consequences. It is about how children are, or can be, bullied at school, so that some of them sometimes do not want to attend. This installation was made in the autumn 2004. In late December we got the huge tsunami in Asia, where also a lot of Norwegian children died. They talked about the empty chairs in the schools the first day after the holiday. The bears are there because they are cute and cuddly, but in reality they are a dangerous animal. It is important for the installation that it is not immediately obvious that the small chairs have animal blood that has dried on them.

Why isn't Thomas at school today?, 2004 (detail)
11 teddy bears covered with blood, 12 desks and chairs covered with blood, dimensions variable

JW: You have also often worked with leftovers or detritus. Interestingly, Warhol said he always liked to work with leftovers and of course his *Times Capsules* are a huge artistic installation, an effective method of dealing with all of his "stuff".
MV: When my grandfather died I had already promised to take care of all the things he left behind, particularly his papers and books. After the rest of his children had taken what they wanted, I took the rest. I didn't throw anything away, I even kept food—but not fresh food—so my installation *Oddgeir Hagen Viskum 1904-2002* (2012) contained many things that nobody wanted, it also contained things that had been of interest to my grandfather when he was alive but were just considered detritus after his death, so it is a very personal work but is also one that many people can connect to. Another work related to a personal history and to death is *Rest in Peace* (2013). This was made in remembrance of a friend, Rolf Arild, who was a taxidermist that I used to get some of my animals from. We talked a great deal and it transpired that he had liver disease and he wanted to donate his organ to me when he'd had a transplant, so I could use it in an artwork. This was a big issue in Norway because I was not sure if you were able to donate your organs for *art*. I suggested he got a lawyer and consulted his wife. In the end his illness was such that he could not have the operation. However, when he died his wife knew his wishes and I was sent to the hospital to pick up his liver, but it turned out they had sent the wrong organ. I was thinking "could this be true!", as it was his biggest wish and he could not fulfill it. So

An Artist Collecting Art 1986-2013, 2013 (detail)
Silicone and resin life-size sculpture of the artist (looking at a photo by Hermann Nitch), dimensions variable

I made an installation with all his remains and his taxidermy animals with an Albatross that he had especially prepared for me flying across it.

JW: Another work which directly relates to your identity both as a self-portrait and to your Vestfossen Kunstlaboratorium is *The Collector* (1913).
MV: That was a very interesting sculpture for me, as I am holding the large brown book that had just been published about my own collection, comprehensively covering the years from 1986 to 2013. I was not so happy with the way that I looked. I tell people that sometimes the strain of preparing for the self-portraits works can show on the day. There is ten years difference between my first one (*Immortal*) and this and I am shocked when I see the comparison.

JW: Your *Self-Portrait* for your 51st birthday is also a very significant piece. Can you tell me why you chose to have yourself cast as Donald Trump for your work *Make America Great Again* (2016)?
MV: The presidential primary elections and caucuses in the USA are always interesting and important for the rest of the world. My birthday on the 2nd of February 2016 was early in the run for the Republican and Democratic nominated candidate. My guess is that Donald Trump will be the candidate even with his very strange ideas. Does anyone believe he is going to make America "great again"? So my sculpture has Trump as me holding a microphone entertaining the world, next to my sculpture of the Statue of Liberty.
AR: As usual the face is most important. Trump has a very mobile face with a whole range of corny expressions, whereas Morten hasn't! In this kind of situation, I try to see how far Morten can go to resemble the portrait personality, and I never try to go any further during the sculpting process, otherwise this is exactly the point where things can go wrong. It is also the part which interests me the most, being the key to a portrait which looks both like Morten and also like someone else, depending on the distance, the viewing angle and the lighting, not to mention the hair, makeup and clothes! We took a series of photos with Morten holding the pose and expression, and I made quick moulds of frowns or raised eyebrows for reference. The portraits are becoming more expressive over time, at least when the personality calls for it.

JW: Why is casting this political figure important for you Morten, the title is also provocative?
MV: So much is happening in the world at the moment, but I think that Donald Trump is someone we will remember from 2016 historically. How can a man like that be a president? This selection is so unusual! The title is from his campaign banner, the clothes were taken from his media and campaign images, the characteristic dark blue suit and red tie and of course his characteristic "comb over" hair, so that element of the double take, you see Trump and then as you get closer you see me.

Make America Great Again, 2016 (detail)
Silicon and resin life-size sculpture of the artist, American flag and Statue of Liberty made in painted styrofoam, dimensions variable

JW: You now have also begun to rewind and begun making self-portraits from when you were a baby, is this to confront ageing and to link it to important milestones or events in your life?
MV: Yes, *An Artist is Born* (2016) shows me as a newborn baby being held by a Danish nurse in the hospital at the point when she is bringing me to my parents. This is the first real departure in my *Self-Portraits* from myself as an adult. I am small and wrinkled with a surprising amount of black hair. I found some good quality images from 1965 which Anthony could use and we made a decision to have one of my eyes open—which it is not in the photograph—in order to give my face more life. It also took time to decide on the pose with Anthony which is modelled on his sisters and daughter in England.

JW: Do you intend to continue making your *Self-Portraits* until your own death?
MV: I am not sure what the last one will be, it depends on how I die…

The above conversation took place between Jean Wainwright and Morten Viskum in several locations—Oslo, Vestfossen, Venice, Paris and London—over a number of months in 2015. Anthony Ritter was involved, too.