



## **Discourse**

### **A Conversation Between FRANK & Mathias Danbolt**

Danbolt, Mathias; Bugge, Liv ; Storihle, Sille

*Published in:*  
Voluspå

*Publication date:*  
2013

*Document version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Danbolt, M., Bugge, L., & Storihle, S. (2013). Discourse: A Conversation Between FRANK & Mathias Danbolt. In L. Bugge, & S. Storihle (Eds.), *Voluspå* (pp. 48-51). Oslo : FRANK.

The idea of third wave feminism is disputed. If we are to speak of third wave feminism, the roots could be found in the mid-1980s. The third wave of the movement arose as a response to the glitches of second wave feminism. It adopted a poststructuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality, and brought forth a discussion that underlined the many colors, ethnicities, nationalities, religions and cultural backgrounds that constitute the category “women.” While second wave feminism attempted to create a sense of commonly shared experiences, third wave feminism challenges the understanding of an “us.” Mathias Danbolt is an art historian and queer critic that does not leave any gender category untouched. His work aspires to generate a discourse that enables us to think beyond set categorizations of gender, sex and identity.

## DISCOURSE A CONVERSATION BETWEEN FRANK & MATHIAS DANBOLT

**F** In a Norwegian context, you stand out as one of the few people in the academic field combining queer theory and art history. In your PhD dissertation *Touching History: Art, Performance, and Politics in Queer Times* (2012), you open up with public declarations of the “death” of queer theory in the Norwegian media in 2010. A TV-show called *Hjernevask* (*Brainwash*) sparked a public discourse on gender in Norway. Queer theorists were ridiculed, and nature seemed to rule out nurture. How do you explain the fact that a country like Norway, with a high level of gender equality, is so hostile to discussions regarding gender as a social construction?

**M** It is a tricky question, especially since it rubs up against the understanding of social constructivism and its so-called lack of “effects” raised by the TV-show *Hjernevask* itself. Even though the TV program came across as a clear defense for “nature” over “nurture” in relation to gender, and positioned queer theory as a social constructivist fallacy, it initially asked why, in a country like Norway that (supposedly) has been dominated by a feminist understanding of gender as a social construction, women and men still (apparently) behave and desire so differently in their personal and professional lives. By positioning social constructivism as *the* hegemonic model for understanding gender difference in Norway,

*Hjernevask* managed to stage its turn to “proper” science—represented by evolutionary psychology and biology—as a radical gesture of revealing a hidden truth. A truth that showed that social constructivism was nothing but an ideological form of wishful thinking produced by “scholars” whose hang-ups on equality made them neglect the simple facts of biology: that the nature of men and women are biologically and fundamentally different. Turning to “nature,” the program indicated that the differences social constructivists interpret as signs of social inequality and gender hierarchies are merely the logical and normal outcomes of the diverse biological dispositions among the two genders—dispositions that naturally make women *desire* to be caretakers and submissive in relation to men, and so forth.

It is easier and far more comfortable for those in dominant positions to explain gender, sexual, and racial inequality with reference to biological “facts” about embodied difference. And I think one of the main reasons for the hostility towards queer theory in Norway is that thinking queerly demands that one questions the status quo, and this doesn’t necessarily make you a desired figure. It is worth remembering that queer theory has been vilified even within state feminist discourses in Norway. The popularity of *Hjernevask* had a lot to do with the way the program blended many different positions into one big puzzle called “radical social constructivism” with queer theory at the forefront. A quite absurd gesture that neglects the ways in which central tenets of queer theory were developed as a *critique* of radical social constructivism, also in its feminist versions. Judith Butler’s books *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) argue against a simple-minded understanding of gender as a social construction through her nuanced deconstruction of the “inside/outside” logic that structures the debate on the origin of gender in the nature vs. nurture debate. Her suggestion of how the gendered body comes to matter through performative iterations of normative scripts—scripts that perform us as much as we perform them—troubles not only essentialists’ view on the authentic nature of gender, but also social constructivists’ understanding of agency and individual personhood. Queer theory examines the ways in which we are in the hands of the social, and thus highlights that we are for better or worse never alone in the negotiation of our gendered identities.

Crossing simplified binaries of essentialism/constructivism, the queer understanding of gender calls attention to our *interdependence* and precariousness as subjects, and thus pushes us to think differently about conceptions of difference and sameness. Therefore a queer critique tends to be less interested in starting with the question of gender equality between *men* and

*women*—not because of an unwillingness to talk about gendered differentiations—but because questions of inequality exceed the framework of what those two positions can hold and describe. A queer critique would rather interrogate the terms and regulations that make only very limited gendered, sexed, and racialized lives livable, while constraining or omitting so many others. This approach challenges dominant modes for thinking gender equality within state feminist discourses in Norway, since it asks us to develop and establish better conditions for sheltering and maintaining ways of life that resist models of assimilation to a heteronormative binary gender system, to invoke Butler’s argument in *Undoing Gender* (2004).

Focusing on altering the frames of recognition for bodies-in-difference is difficult and demanding, and so far there has been little interest in thinking multidimensionally in relation to questions on the politics of gendering, sexualization and racialization in Norway, where people instead prefer to limit the discussion to a narrow understanding of equality between men and women. The fact that queer thinking challenges both those invested in nature-arguments and those insisting on nurture-only makes queer theory a killjoy figure that people across the political spectra prefer to avoid. A show like *Hjernevask* legitimized this dismissal of critical thinking by framing queer theory as some brainwashed form of gender extremism.

**F** As the title of your PhD dissertation implies, you address questions of engaging with history through art. Why are you so interested in touching history?

**M** *Touching History* engages with artworks that put pressure on unfinished histories of injustice, from the ongoing AIDS crisis to the embodied effects of structural homophobia, racism, and sexism. I use the phrase “touching history” because it highlights some of the complex affective and political operations at play in artworks I have engaged with. On the one hand, the phrase emphasizes the labor of touching historical material central to researching, interpreting, and engaging with matters of the past. On the other hand, the phrase indicates that historical matters can touch us in the present, putting things in (e)motion, affectively and politically. I have found the chasmic relationship of touching and being touched by history in this phrase to be a productive starting point for thinking about how histories of inequality condition our abilities to act in and on the present.

This interest in the politics of history stems from my discomfort with the proliferation of public statements that claim that political critiques and theoretical perspectives with roots in social

movements have outlived their times and are no longer needed in the Global North: “Feminism is a spent force”; “a queer theoretical hegemony is over”; “racism is no longer a relevant topic of concern.” But how do we know when something is over and done with? And who decides? These are some of the questions I try to address in *Touching History* by entering into dialogue with contemporary artists, performers, and theorists who query and queer the political grammar of storytelling.

The project centers on aesthetic practitioners with queer, feminist, and antiracist perspectives that negotiate between desire for alternative histories and a concern for untimely historicizations that risk disarticulating pressing problems from the framework of the “now.” Focusing on the effects of history, the artistic projects I work with disturb the sense and sensation of the “present” by entering into relationships with pasts that are not passé, and with presents that might come across as not really present. By giving space to consider the duration of struggles, the stickiness of history, and the intimacy between the living and the dead, *Touching History* seeks to complicate political chronicles and chronological narratives that move forward by relegating ongoing fights to the dustbin of history.

**F** We have placed this interview under third wave feminism, together with three sculptures. The first was made by the Norwegian artist Sidsel Paaske in 1966, the second was made by Claes Oldenburg in 1987. In 2010 the Danish artist Henrik Olesen made a third one, *Extinguished Match 1987 (after Claes Oldenburg)*. Would you mind providing a reading of this genealogy of extinguished matches?

**M** By placing these three extinguished matches together, you have already created a genealogy that indicates a narrative of appropriation of sorts. Although I do not have any evidence that Oldenburg knew about Paaske’s *Brent Fyrstikk (Burnt Match)* before making his own, there is surely a great chance that he saw the piece in Sweden. In contrast to Olesen, who states his quotation of Oldenburg, Oldenburg doesn’t mention Paaske. Within this staged constellation, this absence of reference can work as a reminder of the long tradition of male masters who appropriated the work of women for their own profit. Olesen’s piece highlights the economy of authority through his appropriation of Oldenburg’s work.

But this is only one way of interpreting the relationship between the works, as the extinguished match is itself a loaded—and sexualized—figure. A match is an object inscribed with a specific function, which is to light or fire something up. It is often a means to something else, rather

than an end in itself. The active life of a match is relatively short: it fires, burns and extinguishes all within a relatively short timespan. Its status as a mass-produced object also makes it exchangeable: the match is a quick fix. It is surely tempting to read Paaske’s large-scale burnt match as a feminist comment on the teleological and simplistic logics of masculine sexuality with a quick turn on, a short period of fire, and then a sudden death. By turning the phallus into a commodity that is used and thrown away, the extinguished match exhibits the paradoxes of the male ego. While Paaske’s burnt match may read as an ironic comment on the frailty of male sexuality, the materiality of the work suggests that there is also a certain poetic beauty in this dead corpse. When you look closely at the black felt that comprises the “burnt” areas of Paaske’s match, you see sparkling glitter in the creases of the fabric.

If Paaske’s match is large, Oldenburg’s is enormous. But if Paaske’s match highlights the blown-up masculine ego in a way that retains a certain tenderness for the exhausted and useless corpse, Oldenburg’s large-scale pop art match is far more slick in its texture and appearance. Oldenburg’s burnt match ascends upwards, like an erected but frail penis. It is precisely this ambivalence between power and impotence, the hard and the frail, that is at the forefront of Olesen’s monumental match. Entering into Olesen’s series of appropriations of works by white, heterosexual male artists, this extinguished match works as a reminder of how the male ego, even in states of vulnerability or crisis, manages to keep his position at the center of attention: the fallen man as the new hero.

**F** There is one thing that seems to stand out as a crucial aspect of Norwegian society, which is the drive towards *sameness*. The belief in equality seems to be confused with a pressure to assimilate any form of difference. Norway might be one of the most gender equal societies, but also a strictly homogenous and normative one. Have you had similar thoughts regarding Norwegian society?

**M** I share your criticism of the assimilationist logic that privileges certain forms of sameness in Norwegian political contexts. If certain forms of cultural difference have been looked down upon as a problem, the answer has often been to ignore or neglect the issue as if this makes the effects of difference disappear. The desire for assimilation can also be seen in the institutionalized politics of the lesbian and gay movement in Norway, whose focus on gaining access to the dominant heteronormative institutions, such as marriage, has displaced more radical critiques of the normative organization of

everyday life. The push towards assimilation does not only relate to gendered and sexual difference, but also to questions of racialization. Surely, the word “race” is not a popular word in Norwegian cultural debates. The term gives associations to tragic chapters in recent history that many wish to relegate safely to the past. Motivated by a politics of equality, the Norwegian debate has often favored a colorblind approach where one chooses to not “see” or verbalize race and racialized signs, such as skin color, with the hope that this makes the problems of racialization disappear. This colorblind strategy has been considered part of antiracist politics. But such an ideology of colorblindness—despite its possible good intentions—has made it difficult to discuss and track the ways in which race still operates as a biopolitical medium that produces and reproduces frames for understanding bodies in difference.

The ideology of colorblindness is thus one example of how the framework of equality risks displacing and masking the operations of difference in ways that support a white dominant system. While I do not seek to fetishize difference, it remains important to create a more nuanced vocabulary that can speak against the homogenizing tendencies of assimilationist logic, which underlie so many debates on gender, sex and race in Norway.

**F** As an exiled queer academic and activist, how do you see the Norwegian art scene? It is quite apparent that you do not discuss any Norwegian artists in your PhD.

**M** The use of the term “exiled” in your question is a bit too dramatic for my taste, as it gives the impression that I was forced to leave Norway without a possibility to return. Surely one of my main motivations to move from Bergen to Copenhagen eight years ago was to be closer to a community of queer activists and theorists that I felt was lacking in Norway. This was especially the case at the university, and within the field of art history where I encountered quite a lot of hostility towards my investment in queer politics.

I find it difficult to deliver a proper diagnosis of the Norwegian art scene. This is not only because I have been living abroad for so long, but also because it seems difficult to demarcate the borders of a national art scene, since so many Norwegian artists work in an international context and quite a few international artists are based in Norway. Of course there has not really been much of a visible and public discussion or community around queer issues within the art scene in Norway, at least not before initiatives like FRANK came along. I am reluctant to read the absence of Norwegian artists in my PhD as a direct symptom of this, as my selection of projects was not based

on geographical and representational parameters. I chose art projects with which I shared a theoretical and political interest, ones that examine questions of queer temporality and history that I encountered in different queer related art contexts in the US and in Europe. But then again, if there had been a broader dialogue around these issues in Norway, my conversation partners in the project would probably have been different.