

THE GRAVITY AND GRATIFICATION OF (UN)DRESSING

Anne Karin Jortveit

We cannot imagine our lives without textiles. It is said that we are born and die with them. Certainly they cannot be dismissed as neutral or indifferent territory. Textiles carry layer upon layer of significance, both inside and outside the field of art. For some, it's a "Chanel" label that matters, for others it's a matter of second-hand clothes and rags. While the former are signing lucrative contracts, the latter are lurking in the backstreets. For many of us, textiles are about being able to choose from the top shelf, for many more, they are a question of necessity. And this is just a tiny patch on the vast cultural, social and political backdrop in front of which every textile artist stands. It offers an endless expanse to draw upon, and no one can really claim to know its full extent. Without a doubt, there are more than enough approaches for anyone who wants to explore and work with textiles as their (raw) material.

In the work of textile artist Marit Helen Akslen, this finds expression in an idiom that is both style-conscious and sharp in its social awareness. Her textile creations interweave the dimensions of the sensual, the poetic, the sacred, the political and the sexual. Her works are both visually and textually dense, and carry a significant vein of narrative. She handles fabrics in ways that are simultaneously monumental and intimate. She can cover entire walls yet still evoke a sense of something close-fitting. The result is a kind of disturbing energy that crackles in its underlying layers.

She herself often describes her works as "commentaries". Etymologically, the word suggests reflection or intense thought. To comment can also mean to explain. Through the consistency and clarity of her approach to the materials she uses, she is able to address an abundance of themes in ways that make us reassess both the familiar and the aesthetic. In an essay anthology entitled *Konstruksjon og inderlighet* (Construction and Inwardness) from 2004, the author Trude Marstein writes:

All powerful literature says something about reality at some level, but at the same time it says something more of a different kind; it shifts us away from the real towards the unreal. By this means it achieves still greater reality. Something else

emerges from the combination of the strictly realistic and the unrealistic. The surreal in the real, the real in the surreal.

Akslen's art evokes similar feelings in me. As for example when she uses shirt collars as building blocks – seemingly simple and unproblematic items from the wardrobe. Items we could encounter almost anywhere in the course of a normal day, without giving them a second thought. In this respect, they represent a kind of peripheral field of textiles. In Akslen's work, these ready-made fragments are emancipated from their usual function and acquire an obtrusive urgency. As a repetitive accumulation, they force something bigger into play, something more precarious. For I have never really *looked* at such items of clothing. Not until now.

Signature, axes and links

Since the turn of the millennium, Akslen has acquired a kind of signature among Norwegian textile artists. Her name is often associated with the term “fastening”. In intricate ways she folds and fastens together textile objects such as collars, cuffs, braces and plackets into beautiful, systematic ornaments and reiterative patterns. Akslen turns the simple gesture of handling a cuff into the basic theme of a formal exploration. In her hands, textile elements can be linked together into “endless” systems or stylised objects – taking the form, for example, of a dress, a corset or a type of jewellery. They can also form texts and symbols. Classic braces are woven together, with their metal clips shining like gems. The cuffs of dress suits connote special occasions, shirt collars formal business meetings, while braces recall the dress code of a past era. And when shirt collars are fastened together in the shape of a dress, as in *Gul kjole* (Yellow dress) from 2006, it certainly isn't the latest summer fashion we find ourselves looking at. Both this and her other dress works seem almost to have stepped out of an English costume drama – one based, perhaps, on a Jane Austen novel. They are doorways onto stories, as if time and space were relative dimensions that open out beyond the joins that form the garment.

In his 2011 book *Hva er tid* (What is Time?) the philosopher Truls Wyller writes about the difference between action time and clock time. While the former refers to our qualitative experience of time, the latter is concerned with how time is measured quantitatively. For me, there is an aspect of action time in Akslen's serial processes and methods. The repetitions of interlinked objects are not primarily about the time it took to assemble them. Rather, they

constitute a platform of finely tuned variations, by means of which the artist juxtaposes potentially significant connections between such things as social environments, people, culture and gender. At the same time, her works contains an underlying critical aspect that addresses time as mechanical rhythm. Her potentially infinite ranks of collars and cuffs can be read as images of the machinery of society, and perhaps even more specifically, as that most concrete embodiment of clock time – the assembly line. Read in this way, her wall piece *Unstitched Net* from 2009 contains a detail that takes on major significance. This work consists of tightly and meticulously interwoven shirt plackets. But towards the lower edge, something has gone wrong. The system has begun to unravel, as if the rhythm were faltering. It is as if the work were reminding us that even the most “perfect system” contains a disruptive force that can break out at any time.

As I browsed through the pictorial documentation of Akslen’s production, one thing suddenly struck me: the serried ranks of cuffs and collars *can* remind us of the accumulated skulls contained in catacombs. It’s not an association I intend to pursue, but in a curious way I found it enlightening, because it prompted me to reflect on how her work seems to move along a certain thematic axis. In Akslen’s work we find both a secularised and economically influenced dimension and a belief that what drives the world today is a humanistic mind-set. To use a somewhat well-worn image: her work fluctuates between the financial and the spiritual. On a material level this is patently evident in her early project *Conference Room* from 2001, which mixes a kind of corporate atmosphere with religiously inspired objects.

The world in a tiny object

I first discovered Akslen’s art during a casual visit to Trondheim Kunstmuseum a few years back. I remember virtually stumbling into an enormous pincushion with the eloquent title *Den asiatiske nålepute* (The Asian Pincushion). I was immediately spellbound, because I myself had once owned an object just like this. A little spherical cushion, surrounded by a ring of tiny figures – men with a twee Asian look. This pincushion of Chinese origin is said to symbolise the world. And the tiny men? Well, they are supporting the world, of course (!) But in light of recent shifts in the global power structure, the object seems to get a new foothold on reality. By enlarging the pincushion into a sizeable sculpture, Akslen reinforces this impression. And in the middle of her version, there is a kind of embroidered cacophony of familiar fashion labels. Such influential brand names remind us that the world has opened up to finance and manufacture on a global scale, but what the pincushion reveals above all

else is where the centre of clothing production – in both its material and human aspects – is now to be found. When it comes down to it, *Den asiatiske nålepute* from 2004 is a genuinely political work. It is specific and topical, almost “local”, yet relevant even so in a truly global social context.

Akslen picks up on an issue relating to the textile industry in her compact wall piece *Uten tittel* (Untitled) from 2006 (which, incidentally, is bristling with the “titles” of brand names). This work consists of the familiar Nike slogan followed by the equally famous swoosh formed from black labels. But here the phrase “just do it” becomes something more than a tempting, seductive appeal from a consumer brand. In combination with an array of other familiar and less familiar fashion labels, these words become a kind of flashing, ironic warning that reminds us of the need to keep the economy and ethics of production under constant scrutiny. In a paradoxical way, the actual brand name is both made conspicuous and obscured. It is an ingenious effect – almost impossible for the eye to sort out. For ultimately, no one can actually claim ownership of those words. We are all free to use them.

Parts, wholes and gender

In literature, a *synecdoche* is a familiar rhetorical figure that uses a term that refers to a part of something to represent the whole. A common example is the word “wheels” used to designate an entire car. Similarly, the “white collars” in Akslen’s textile works imply something more and bigger. Not only does a collar suggest the entire garment from which it is taken, it also symbolises a person, and perhaps above all it evokes the image of the masculine role in the business world. When Akslen replaces fixed collars with the detachable variety, other terms that immediately suggest themselves are white-collar crime and money laundering. In her ornamental works, this is an aspect that is allowed to resonate as one of several thematic possibilities, but in a work such as *Money Short Cuts* from 2004, she focuses more directly on the shadier parts of the global economy. Here we see an array of dress-shirt cuffs arranged in a steady transition of shades from innocent white to jet black.

The use of clothes inevitably raises questions about the significance of gender. In Akslen’s work, the notion of gender is not as clearly defined or demarcated as her choice of “gender-typical” textiles might lead one to expect. Masculine and feminine items are interwoven, becoming impossible to separate, as when men’s collars are turned into women’s dresses, detachable dress-suit collars into corsets, women’s collars mingle with the more masculine,

hard-edged minimalism of men's, shirt collars mutate into jewellery. The boundaries between these two conventional gender categories thus become fluid.

At the same time there definitely is a perspective of feminine irony woven into her work, as in *Imperial Eagle* from 2005. The eagle is a powerful and complex symbol with a long history as an indicator of power. Many countries feature the eagle in their flags or coats of arms. In weaving a stylised heraldic eagle into a wall installation of shirt collars, Akslen is using the juxtaposition of the material and the figure to underline the symbolism of power, and perhaps even to disrobe it, as seen with a feminist gaze. Here we find an interesting link to *Gloria Patri*, a 1992 project by the American artist Mary Kelly. Using medallions and shields loaded with military allusions, Kelly parodies the heroic portrayal of masculinity by means of violence and war. By foregrounding such stereotypical symbols, she reveals – as does Akslen in *Imperial Eagle* – how conventional imagery of this kind is used to obscure opposition and criticism.

Satire, dystopia and reflection

Akslen works with the gaze of the satirist. Satire is well suited to commenting on social issues. Humour and ironic goods serve to criticise and expose aspects of society and power. This is beautifully illustrated by *Stola (Coca Cola)* (Stole (Coca Cola)) from 2003 – not least in the rhyme of the title. The work consists of a priest's cassock with a stole that is exquisitely decorated with what turns out to be the soft-drink logo. Satire is not just entertainment, it is also politically caustic and direct. The humour in Akslen's works is never superficial. The power of humour to expand meaning is evident in her choice of titles. There is something undeniably touching about the helplessness of the masculine shirt collars all arranged in strict lines in a work such as *Neat and Clean* from 2004. And when considered as satire, titles such as *Well Connected* and *Hidden Agenda* also become somewhat troubling. In her use of satire, Akslen forges productive links to other socially critical forms of expression. Turning to contemporary literature, it is as if her textile works contain implicit traces of both Henrik Langeland's satire of the corporate world, *Wonderboy*, and the dark vision of Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*.

In a solo exhibition at Kunstnerforbundet in 2006, the end walls of the exhibition room mirrored each other with two variations on the shirt-collar theme: *Against the Wall*, which consisted of white collars fastened together, and *No Way Out*, in which the title is “inscribed”

as an arrangement of black collars against a white background. The words seem to flow across the surface like an LED light display, as if they were there to comment on, or to amplify, the work on the opposite wall, or perhaps they were addressed to the viewer. On the one hand, the words are those of a common information sign. And it's perfectly obvious that no one could walk through the gallery wall. On the other hand, they sound like some grim, dystopian warning of impending doom. It is understandable that today's artists should be attracted to dystopian themes. We live in a world that stands on a range of different brinks – ecological, economic and humanistic. There is an undeniably gloomy streak in Akslen's art as well, not least in *No Way Out*. But it does not end there – at a pessimistic impasse. If she has become known for her fastening systems and the visual and aesthetic qualities of the strict serialism this allows her to achieve, her works also show an underlying current of critical yet sensitive political awareness. At the furthest extreme, her work manifests a fine existential balance between destruction and survival. After all, those same works show a commitment to beauty and the good – a determination to pursue change. At its deepest level, Marit Helen Akslen's textile project is ethical in nature.

It's good to know that to comment means *to think intensely*.