

By Maria Kjær Themsen

The tone is set! Rose Eken's art is about rock music. An eclectic genre that is both raw and embracing. There is nothing as emotive as music - both to the individual and the collective, music has a unique ability to evoke the most charged of human emotions: love, hatred, intimacy, injustice - and good old-fashioned *Weltschmerz*. But rock culture also delineates a story of rebellion, revolution and revolt against the sexually repressed bourgeois culture. All of these traits can be found in Eken's artwork; the wild uncontrolled nerve of rock 'n' roll subtly curbed by a sensible disposition. Yet what appears restrained and controlled retains a ring of the fierce and the savage.

Eken's fascination is with the culture surrounding the music itself - a culture which bears witness to mankind's urge to be reckless and destructive and of the intimate equilibrium it maintains between rise and fall, fame and obscurity, success and fiasco. This balance embodies the entire culture and equally reassures and reproaches the musician as well as his fan. The delicate line between success and failure very directly mimics the most basic dichotomy: the balance between creation and destruction. In essence rock culture feeds on its own deterioration.

It is this world of rock music and fan culture Rose Eken has made her subject, the thematic anchor of her artistic practice. Through media as various as ceramics, embroidery, video, watercolour and miniature models she (re)constructs scenarios recognizable from rock music and the culture surrounding it. Her works are never simply one-to-one renderings. Rather Eken changes scale and proportions, skewing and shifting reality. She creates a drum kit as a tiny miniature copy in cardboard - she inflates the grubby, revised setlist as a large cross-stitch embroidery on lush silk fabric. She remodels a roll of duct tape, a beer can in glazed ceramic. She makes a show of the mess and the waste - the cultural debris left behind after a recording session or a club gig. By portraying the rebellious rock culture so zealously and in such atypical materials Eken deprives it some of its masculinity and bestows it with genuine feminine attention in return. She toils with her embroideries, as the guitarist picks his guitar. And she succeeds in transforming the ephemeral and fleeting into art-objects with intrinsic references that go far beyond the individual setlist, can of beer, fag-end or half-eaten kebab.

### **Cross-stitch and ceramics**

Eken initially introduced cross-stitch and ceramics, both by tradition women's crafts, in 2008 - at her solo-exhibition *Song With No Name* at Sølyst Artist in Residency Centre. An exhibition solely dedicated to rock music's instrument *par excellence*: the guitar. The ceramics were raw, unfired, unglazed and thus also extremely fragile, potentially crumbling away. The embroideries were left unfinished, partly drawn. Both stoneware and embroidery rendered the guitar or the different objects used by a guitarist - everything but the actual instrument itself. The ceramic objects represented a guitar cable, a plectrum, an amplifier, a effectpedal and so on. The embroideries imitated the different ornamentations adorning the sound hole on a classical guitar. Also exhibited, the work *Editions of You (100 guitars)*: one hundred cardboard guitars in miniature, all highly detailed reconstructions of an actual guitar. These one hundred small guitars were presented on a four-meter-long shelf of cardboard. Each tiny guitar exclusive and unique - yet due to the overwhelming quantity the individual characteristics dissolved - as notes on the music sheet melt together to form a melody or

when the individual stitches of the embroidery marry to form a single motif. To depict the guitar in such delicate and fragile material as for example unfired clay is a typical trait found throughout Eken's artistic practice: vulnerability is revealed as inherent to the masculine culture of rock music more commonly recognised by its potent ferocity. Eken's ceramic works have since then evolved into more stable, glazed, and colourful objects as seen at her solo-show *Falling & Laughing* at Kunsthallen Brandts (2010). Here, effect-pedals, beer crates, microphone stands and other such musical equipment were moulded in clay, glazed and fired, paradoxically making the objects more solid and apparently real, yet far more twisted and strange.

### **The subversive stitch**

When an artist chooses to work with such materials as ceramics and embroidery he or she inevitably also addresses the history of women, art and of gender politics. In the introduction to her recently re-published book about embroidery and gender Roszika Parker notes: "To know the history of embroidery is to know the history of women."<sup>i</sup> In other words this craft, this art form is automatically written into a highly charged history of gender and art-discourse. The first generation of feminists fiercely disputed how to (re)define the new role of women both in domestic life and in the perspective of art history. Embroidery was seen as being emblematic of the domesticated and of submissive female - a sign of repression - the very yoke feminists were trying rid themselves of. If looked upon in an art historical context, embroidery was also a pervasive symbol of women's exclusion from the History of Art itself. The creative development of women within the field of embroidery and needlework had never before been considered fine art; rather it was considered in the context of traditional handicraft. One faction of feminists fought to obtain the same level of recognition and regard for women and their work as men received for their paintings and sculptures. Another faction, on the contrary, believed that it was imperative to break free from traditional conventions and so make way for new uncharted terrain to be explored.<sup>ii</sup> No bra, no slaving away in the kitchen and for God's sake no '*Home Sweet Home*' or old-testimonial embroidery!

Taking this into account, it is in itself interesting when a young female artist this day and age takes up embroidery, bringing history to life with each stitch. It is still quite impossible to escape what embroidery once signified. A man taking up either sewing, knitting, crochet or embroidery will to this day raise questions about his sexuality. Embroidery is still seen as a feminine expression *par excellence*. So when does the stitch become subversive rather than affirmative? And how can one challenge the inevitable connotations related to this pastime? This is possible when you, as Eken does, use embroidery to convey something quite different to what has been seen before. Traditionally women's pursuits, such as embroidery and needlework, were the very quintessence of *female appeal and prettiness* – i.e. the uncorrupted and controlled. In short the epitome of the bourgeois. Yet Eken manages to keep her composure through the serenity of the actual (needle)work whilst she applies something gritty and volatile - prompting a very different set of connotations than *prettiness*. Consequently one might be tempted to suggest that the artist gives a rebellious finger to all that relates to this craft, while she also - and in an ever-increasing respect for needlework and what it represents, takes on the pastime and makes it her own. The laborious, time-consuming element remains, but the *prettiness* is eradicated. As such Eken reverses what previously functioned purely as adornment – she uses the tiny cross-stitch to depict the raw, raging volatility of rock music. With each minute stitch she merges the brutality of the music with the infinite femininity indicative of needlework. By doing so she harnesses the raw power of rock 'n' roll on her own terms.

## Time out of Mind

At her solo-exhibition *Sindet har Ingen Tid (Time Out of Mind)* at Overgaden - Institute of Contemporary Art (2010), a series of embroideries were displayed which, in content, had nothing in common with traditional cross-stitch embroidery - no landscapes, no bible quotes, no delightful ornamentation. Eken had stitched a series of setlists; the scrap of paper that lists the sequence of songs played at a given concert. The setlist is usually left somewhere on the floor or taped to a monitor on stage during the concert - and more often than not, this is where it stays until someone cleans it up and throws it out. For more than a year, Eken has collected setlists - often grubby notes, which she then reconstructs as large scale cross-stitch embroideries on the finest silk fabric - including hand-stitched beer stains, the countless revisions made by the band, the printed lines of the A4 sheet and the tattered holes along the edge of the paper. In this way the setlist is transformed into a work of art and the embroidery ridden some of the prettiness intrinsically associated with this line of work - a slow and transformative process assigning both embroidery and setlists with new interpretive potential and meaning.

The central work in this exhibition was a seven-minute long video-piece *Because the Night (belongs two us)*, comprised of three synchronous large-scale video projections. Nine different soundtracks by nine different musicians were composed to this film-work. As such, one could watch the same film nine times in a row, each time accompanied by a new and different soundtrack stressing the strong interdependence between sound and image. The visual composition stayed the same but the different musical soundtrack altered the experience each time. Another part of the exhibition was an actual stage - complete with instruments, musical equipment, stage curtains and sultry lighting. Through the duration of the exhibition the musicians each performed a live concert on this stage. Otherwise, it was left abandoned - paused. As was the real-scale bar-installation Eken had created out of cardboard: a sleazy bar complete with barstools, pint glasses, draught taps and beer barrels, filled ashtrays, spilled drinks and kitschy wall decorations maintaining the disproportion and inconsistency of her miniature models. A bar that just waited to be crammed with life - which in the gallery space became the very symbol of the rowdy world intrinsically associated with a public house - the nocturnal and unruly space which lures its costumers in with the beguiling promise of a much needed break from the nitty-gritty of everyday life.

Time was already inscribed in the title of the exhibition. The underlying motif was music, but thematically the entire exhibition specifically focused on *time*: on the recital of song, the interlude, intermezzo, hesitation - on the suspension of place and space(s) waiting to be filled (the stage, the venue, the bar, the queue) - and on the astonishing amount of time each individual work displayed had demanded in creation. Thus, as a whole, the exhibition can be summarized in a few words: resonance, the reverberation of time.

The video itself unfolded the notion of time in several different ways too. In addition to portraying well-known film clips from our collective memory of modern music history, of great idols and their rise and fall (screaming fans in front of The Beatles' hotel, Yoko & John in bed, Elvis' death on the front page of the newspaper etc.) the video consisted of footage of Eken's own constructions and miniature spaces. Eken had created more than twenty dioramas - small-scale models of real space in three-dimensions for the video: a scene from a hotel room, a hotel corridor, a bar, pool hall, venue, backstage, etc. These spaces were created in miniature - small worlds that were filmed and in turn projected on a large scale. This way of shifting proportions; shaping in miniature, enlarging the small - zooming in and

scaling up, as well as mixing these small-scale cardboard animations with actual footage from the real world created a highly strange and jarringly 'out of sync' effect. In addition this imbalance was maintained within the cardboard models themselves - each cardboard element in these miniature worlds did not register fully with real proportions, rather they were created from recollection and hence uphold a highly subjective aspect ratio, which in turn made the experience of this constructed world even more dizzying. Eken's manner of (re)constructing the world around her is both out of balance and proportion, resulting in an odd inversion of the classical mimesis problem because the world she imitates is exactly characterized by this discrepancy: rock 'n' roll-lifestyle *is* a construct and a fiction - usually far more distorted and absurd than the reality it is born of. Where hyper-realistic documentation could come across as farcical, Eken's oblique imitation truly captures this irrational world.

### **Miniatures en masse**

To work in a tiny format, changing scale and repeating the process almost indefinitely by way of serialized productions - with slight alterations - of the same object is an essential part of Eken's artistic method. *Editions of You (100 Guitars)* and *Untitled (100 Drum Kits)* are the two works where the serial element is most evident. Two works that respectively consist of one hundred guitars and one hundred drum kits made from cardboard. When you take a well-known object and either enlarge it (as in the work of Jeff Koons for example) or as Eken, minimize it, something happens to the object. The guitar has in *Editions of You (100 guitars)* lost both its primary function as well as its original size, and the one hundred tiny cardboard instruments stand now merely as a catalogued reference to the actual instrument. Each instrument, every guitar and every drum kit is, as mentioned, replicas of actual instruments. True fans will recognize Jimi Hendrix's guitar or John Bonham's drum kit. In this way a particularly subjective musical register is compiled - one in which Eken's own fascination and passion for music is reflected through the delicate making of the individual instrument.

Repetition, the ceremonial and the sequential are pivotal in Eken's work. Every little billiard ball and each bar stool or cigarette is handmade. Part of the fascination with Eken's endeavour is to be found here: one can't help but marvel at the artist's patience and dexterity - the miniature worlds she creates mimic real places down to the smallest beer-stain detail. Paramount is her love for the world she portrays and how she chose to do so - idiosyncratic and neurotic, perhaps neo-romantic and definitely erotic. Within these small, quirky worlds Eken conjures up there is a peculiar dark, unnerving, and uncanny aesthetic, created by her affectionate and obsessive custom of compressing the very comprehensive world of music - of 'Sex, Drugs, and Rock 'n' Roll' - into miniature scale. She succeeds in portraying this world truthfully and realistically exactly because she so intensely evokes the very illusion of which the myth of rock 'n' roll is born...

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<sup>i</sup> Roszika Parker: *The subversion Stitch - Embroidery and Making of the Feminine*. I.B. Tauris, p. ix

<sup>ii</sup> Amelia Jones (ed.): *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. Routledge, 2003.