

The Notion of the Crowd

By Henriette Noermark

“I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap & still comes out on top. I am for an art that imitates the human, that is comic, if necessary, or violent, or whatever is necessary. I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself.”

Claes Oldenburg

The working practice of the Danish visual artist Rose Eken (b. 1976) recalls comprehensive field studies in culture, history, memory and perception by an ethnographer. Spotting the potential of the immediate and the available, Rose Eken offers unique insights into our popular culture and the times we live in. Wit, personality and an acute eye for details are characteristic of her works and installations. They pique our curiosity and speak to most people. *Afterbeat* is Rose Eken's first solo exhibition in a Danish museum and as the title suggests it is music culture that is the object of the artistic work here.

Rose Eken zooms in on the banal – the things the rest of us overlook and take for granted – when she creates recognizable, matter-of-fact everyday items in ceramics. She thus freezes and perpetuates the memory of the concert, the dinner or the party in a naivistic idiom with an unmistakable element of humour. The balance between the imprecise look of the child's drawing and something clearly recognizable is typical of the clay that has been subjected to Rose Eken's fingers, and a twinkle in the eye is a prominent feature of everything she makes: “The humour isn't something I strive for, it's something that arises unconsciously and which is important if I am to feel it's fun to make,” she says, and for that very reason you take an extra long look at works which take the form of half-empty wine glasses, ashtrays, whisky bottles, egg sandwiches and oysters on a dish, cleaning fluid, rubber gloves and vintage

kitchenware, switched-on computer screens, stilettos, Chanel make-up and whatever else you can find at the bottom of a woman's handbag. According to Rose Eken the clay is actually an undemanding material which in its basic form does not take much knowledge to work, and which many people associate with making Christmas decorations or the workbench of the modelling class. All the same it is one of the materials she loves to use, for between her fingers it is transformed into anything you like, and you can control the form – but never entirely the result and the chemical processes in the kiln.

A recurring device in her ceramic works is to model them life-size, well aware that they will shrink 10-15% in the firing process. At first glance you recognize the objects, but the small distortions of scale and precision make you wonder. When unassuming motifs bordering on the banal are distorted, this challenges our conceptions and imagination, and that is what Rose Eken achieves to perfection: she creates easily decodable visual images and guides us into a recognizable universe with which we ourselves can work further. She sets the scene, but lets the viewer continue with the work. Like a writer of fiction whose main character is described in detail, but of whom the reader forms a concrete picture.

The Danish sculptor Willy Ørskov described the concept of *time* as an important element in the viewing of objects. His concepts of *time existing*, *time becoming* and *time being* can be applied to Rose Eken's works, and one can say that in them time is a quite basic parameter of the experience. To hand-model hundreds of objects, place them meticulously in the kiln, fire and glaze them, or to spend a whole summer embroidering drumbeat marks on silk, requires infinite patience, and most people would give up at some point in the process. For Rose Eken, though, it seems to be a motivating factor to immerse herself entirely in a project and teach herself new methods, so in the end she can present a conceptually strong, comprehensive result which – by virtue of its volume – becomes monumental and usually overwhelming. As a viewer you can spend at least as much time exploring Eken's universe as she has spent hand-modelling the works in clay, painting or embroidering them. There is a vibrant tension between the slow process and the cornucopia of objects that is a central element in her installations. You cannot avoid being enchanted when metre-tall totem poles assembled from colourful kitchen utensils in ceramics take over a space, or when objects become scenographic narratives that insist on being heard.

One example of this is Eken's critically acclaimed solo show, *Resis-*

tance, at the V1 Gallery in Copenhagen in the spring of 2018, which was a hotchpotch of ceramic artefacts that mimed worn-out Dr. Marten boots, a newspaper front page from the time of the Copenhagen squatter occupations of the 80s, cobblestones, spray-cans, jackknives, and literary classics like the S.C.U.M Manifesto, Franz Kafka and Michael Strunge. Objects offered unique insight into the time around the resistance and rebelliousness of the punk movement, and the scene around ‘*Ungdomshuset*’ at Jagtvej 69, to which not only Eken, but many Copenhageners relates. Like a cabinet of curiosities, the exhibition showed a picture of an epoch, a microcosm of objects created from memory and research. In 2015, with the total installation *Tableau*, she transformed the same gallery into one large artist studio – a meta studio with objects that were represented in studios including her own as well as those of a number of international artist colleagues. As a viewer you could give free rein to your imagination and speculate about who drinks quarter litres of milk or coffee from the *Don’t Bother Me I’m Crabby* mug, mixes paints on a Mega Mussel fine porcelain plate, has an overconsumption of painter’s masking tape, brushes in all sorts of colours or a worn denim jacket hanging on the wall. Here too it was hard not to be carried away and seduced by the ordered chaos that arose on the overfilled platform in the middle of the space and the innumerable objects hidden away in corners and behind walls.

More is more in Eken’s universe. Since the beginning of her artistic career varied repetition has been an integral part of Rose Eken’s work and process. Some of the first projects she went to work on involved recreating musicians’ instruments in miniature versions. In 2008-2009, she recreated hundreds of guitars and drum kits down to the smallest nerdy detail in cardboard, and *Edition of You (100 Guitars)* and *Untitled (100 Drum kits)* marked her entry on the Danish and international art scene, and since then music as a phenomenon has been a recurring focus. Her solo exhibition *Afterbeat* at Horsens Kunstmuseum similarly revolves thematically around music, time and rhythm and shows a number of embroideries created regularly since 2011.

Music as an identity-creator and bearer of cultural capital is something that Rose Eken thinks a lot about; this began back when the walls of her childhood home resounded with opera singing, a subject her mother teaches. As a teenager she worked as a stage technician and with lighting design at punk concerts, so music has been omnipresent from an early age – and has become an inevitable feature of her universe. Music affects us in ways visual art is unable to, thinks Rose Eken; its liberating immediacy and the fact that everyone relates to it appeal to her. She does not consider growing up in the milieu around the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen and her visits to the heavy

metal festival Copenhell to be diametrical opposites – rather the contrary. For although the public act differently, the story of *the crowd* is the same: you arrive, listen, experience, interact and leave with more than you came with. Like an anthropologist Eken makes close studies of the culture around the concert as a collective meeting place and event; as individual experience, surrounded by the material remains subsequently abandoned.

To the rhythm of a drummer Horsens Kunstmuseum's visitors are guided through three spaces which pay tribute in turn to the audience, the concert experience and the musicians in installations that represent three very different parts of Rose Eken's artistic practice: tinsel painting (painting on glass), ceramics and embroidery. Ceramics, tinsel painting and silk embroidery are not things we traditionally associate with rock history, but that is exactly what Eken distorts and changes with *Afterbeat*.

In the first room of the exhibition a series of large tinsel paintings hang. The special tinsel technique was introduced in Renaissance Italy and later spread as a domestic craft among American women between 1850 and 1890. Eken became fascinated with the techniques during a visit to The Folk Art Museum in New York in 2012, and later introduced the medium in her practice. In minute detail she paints a reverse image on the back of a glass plate, leaves areas transparent and adds coloured, glittering tinsel. Then the subject is built up as layers in reverse order, working from the outside in. While the motifs traditionally consist of botanical items, flowers and fruits, these are replaced in *Afterbeat* by crude, decorated battle jackets, as an ode to the symbols of the punk and heavy metal fan cultures. *Jacket with Green Sleeve* from 2018 is a leather jacket with studs, badges and painted references to the English punk band Subhumans, exemplifying her fondness for the scene surrounding the Youth House in Copenhagen and the time before it. For Eken the way the unpretentious, skewed and anti-authoritarian punk music, literature and the related culture were manifested in the 1980s and 1990s is not exclusively a personal journey, it is something most people have an attitude to. And that is what music can do, she thinks: remain ingrained in us long after an experience and become both our own personal and a collective memory. For we recognize it. We have just been there. Alone and together with hundreds, maybe thousands of others. Collectively we have danced, sung and been present in the now. It sits inside us, the concert, which is defined as “a performance of music, normally in the form of an extended event in a public space” and is linked with an overwhelmingly auditory impression.

In the second room of the exhibition Rose Eken works site-specifically with

the voluminous space of the museum, which provides the opportunity to take a radical spatial approach and create one of the large total installations with which her name has now become synonymous. Here, garbage is elevated to an artistic composition where objects found and recreated from memory are formed in clay. A jumbled aesthetic of decay and a crowd of figurative ceramic works formed as security barriers, plastic mugs and cigarette packets testify to the moment just after the band has left the stage and the concert is over. The work, devoid of human presence but atmospheric, shows the detritus of the concert as a snapshot in time and space. On the ground lie trampled plastic cups, test-tube shots, lighters, cigarette butts, water bottles, a lost iPhone and somebody's cap that has probably been thrown in over the crowd in a moment of sheer enthusiasm, side by side as archaeological remains which, like a *trompe-l'oeil*, appear at once true to life and strangely disproportionate.

It was a Slayer concert during the Copenhell festival in 2017 that inspired Rose Eken to make the installation. While most of the festival-goers moved in a throng over the dry grassy field towards the exit, she hung back for a while to document the accumulated rubbish and the story it told. The quantity in particular is fascinating, she thinks, for it becomes grandiose when several hundred objects are suddenly heaped up, like hundreds of Royal plastic mugs, 7-Eleven's whole range of colourful BIC lighters and generous handfuls of test-tubes of Jägermeister bitter. Like the repeated bars of the music, the tempo of the tunes and the musical breaks, in this exhibition Eken too revolves around repetition and the processual. Just as the musician in tireless concentration practices a specific riff or rhythm, Eken forms her objects with the same persistence. By creating an abundance of the same objects she punctures the ideas of exclusivity and star status. With the installation she points to the preceding relations that are present during the concert and around the music, and picks open the schism between cultural linkage or separation through genres. Rose Eken draws on our collective experience and popular-culture codes when she conjures up the states and moods that the music leaves. You can almost smell the euphoric atmosphere and the sweat of the dancers in front of the stage, and hear the sound that resonates through all the corners and bodies. With apparently simple devices she more or less encapsulates the sound, transforms it into something visual, and by changing the scale and the material it comes to be about essence and narrative rather than the object itself. It becomes a feeling, a new and evocative way of perceiving our surroundings.

From the grass and the point of view of the audience, we move to the third and last space of the exhibition, dedicated to the musicians and the embroidery.

Since 2011 Eken has collected the drumheads of well known drummers and transferred the individual beat marks left on the skins to delicate silks, stitch by stitch. The coating of the drumhead is worn off by use, but applied to silk these marks on the paper-like silk material are transformed into something exclusive. The embroideries become images of beats, rhythm, motion, energy and sound. A repetition of someone else's repetition – an *afterbeat*. They portray the drummer and are an abstraction from a quite concrete action as frozen imprints of the beat of a whole concert. Over the years, drummers both Danish and foreign from bands like Metallica, Slowdive, Sort Sol, War on Drugs, DAD, The Raveonettes and Radiohead have given Eken their worn drumheads, and now they are presented for the first time as one collected work series. The project raises the repetitive aspect of Rose Eken's practice to a new, extreme level, and the embroidery is the most time-consuming, nerdy and minutely detailed she has yet embarked on. Equipped with needle and thread she neatly copies the beat marks from drumhead to silk, as a close dialogue between the masculine and the feminine. A swarm of small dots form a pattern and become an individual, abstract portrait of the drummer in question and his or her movements – different and yet interlinked at one and the same time.

With her conceptual installations Rose Eken tells a collective story with a starting point in her own life. As the multifaceted artist she is, she sees the large in the small and goes exploring in the details and memories – she takes us by the arm to the Easter lunch, the after-party, the night out on the town, the concert, to the kitchen and to where work is being done in the studio. Like the Swedish-American Pop Art sculptor Claes Oldenburg, she sharpens the viewer's senses by displacing the volume and pointing to something recognizable. While Oldenburg maximized his works, Eken moves down in scale and monumentalizes instead via her voluminous tableaux of objects. In *Afterbeat*, with a thematic starting point in the shifting tempos that surround rock music and fan culture, Rose Eken stages a recognizable scenario that opens avenues for reflection, nostalgic conversation and emotions. Eken does not resort to perfection, precision and accuracy; she wants to have fun while she is creating the works, and instead serves up poetic emblems and objects that inspire us to continue with our subjective narrative and history. Closeness, identity and authenticity are the key words; the scene is set, the rest is up to the associative powers of the viewers.