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Interview: Astrid Helen Windingstad

Interview with Katharina Bjelland, English version:

(click on link above to see the original interview in Norwegian with images)

The artist Katharina Bjelland's exhibition COLLABORATIONS X IMITATIONS is currently on view at Arkivet. The exhibition consists of a series of silkscreens made from photographs of shopping bags and luxury bags. Bjelland works intuitively and conceptually. In this interview, she talks about several of her projects with commercial objects, packaging and slogans, as well as about the originality of art objects.

When I visit Bjelland in her studio, my first impression is that she likes to shop. Scattered around the room are shopping bags from various stores such as the Spar and Carrefour retail chains. There are also shoe boxes from the brands Nike and New Balance. Some are intact shoe boxes, others have been unfolded and processed. Influenced by trends as I am, both when it comes to fashion and interiors, I recognize many of the logos, colors and patterns that have dominated the trend image for a while, both nationally and internationally. I wonder how all this is part of Bjelland's artistic practice.

**Astrid Helen Windingstad:** You live in Stavanger and have an education from the Art School in Stavanger, but you were born and raised in Germany. Can you tell us a little about your background and why it was precisely Stavanger and the art school here?

**Katharina Bjelland:** I have lived in Stavanger for the past five years. I moved with my family from Shanghai in China. Before that we lived in London for a while. I have always had a passion for creating things and seeing art. I saw the move to Stavanger as a chance to change my career path away from business administration and rather follow my passion - art. I started working at Kunsthall Stavanger and was the assistant to the Stavanger-based artist Cory Arcangel. Then I suddenly found myself in an environment where I could talk about my own practice. It was Margrethe Aanestad, artist and guest teacher at the Art School in Stavanger, who encouraged me to take my interest further and study at the art school. It was a wonderful opportunity for me to learn new techniques as forms of expression, and not least, to learn to talk about what I do. I really liked having different artists as teachers at school, that's how I met many artists. One of my teachers was artist Mona Orstad Hansen. She introduced me to printing and the graphic workshop at Tou Trykk here in Stavanger. During my time at art school, I was able to see and accept myself as an artist. After graduation, I was finally able to "come out" as an artist.

**AHW:** The conceptual approach to art permeates your entire practice and you make extensive use of "found objects". You often use everyday objects with references to our consumer culture, and you use consumer society's own products. An example of this is the Italian company Mutti's tomato products. You also use shoe boxes, shopping bags and bags from different brands and store chains. It can be well-known shoe brands and branded clothes, and food chains. Can you say something about the concept in your works? Mutti canned tomato cans are used in many kinds of compositions and combinations. Not just the box, but the graphic profile. Do you see all of these as independent works or are they part of a Mutti series?

**KB:** I work very intuitively. My ideas are often triggered by something commercial I find, such as an object, packaging or a slogan. I am also interested in psychology and like to observe people's behavior and trends. Over the years, the Mutti box has become a tool for me to explore challenges related to motherhood, and to question role distributions, stereotypes, and power distributions in society and in families. In one of my Mutti works I turned an oil drum into an oversized Mutti can and called it "ÜBERMUTTER" which is a German word. The word "Über" is combined with the word "Mutter" which means mother. The prefix "Über" can be interpreted as an idealization of the mother's role and which puts "mother" on a Madonna-like pedestal. It can also be read as "over-mothering" in the sense of the psychologist Sigmund Freud's "Über-ich" (super-ego) which plays the critical and moralizing role in our psyche. My father is a psychotherapist and I have always had an interest in the conscious and subconscious.

The Mutti series is also an observation of what happens to many women when we become mothers. I see a box as "a vessel". During pregnancy, a woman's body becomes "a vessel". For me, the Mutti box has become "a vessel" that contains expectations mothers can meet. An expectation that comes from ourselves that a mother always needs to be available and "take care". These expectations combined can lead to a kind of utopian supermom ideal. When I enlarge the box, it becomes a symbol of the gigantic expectations many people have for motherhood.

So I would say yes, all my Mutti works are somehow connected and I'm not done with that concept yet.

**AHW:** A similar project to the Mutti series is a shoebox project I've been following on Instagram. This differs from the Mutti series mainly in that you use puns to a greater extent - in both English and Norwegian. Can you tell us a little about it?

**KB:** Yes, precisely puns in different languages such as English, Norwegian and German, actually. Language plays a big role in my life. German is my mother tongue and I did not speak English fluently until I moved to England in 2006. I preferred French to English at school. I have tried to learn Norwegian since we moved here, but often struggle to express myself in Norwegian. I somehow don't quite find myself in the Norwegian language. I tried to answer the questions for this interview in Norwegian, but had to switch to English and translate back to Norwegian afterwards. The three languages, German, English and Norwegian, are part of my everyday life. English is my working language and I speak English with my husband and friends. I speak German to the children, my parents and German friends. At the same time, I try to handle everyday life here in Stavanger in Norwegian. I don't necessarily separate the 3 languages in my head, or at least not consciously. The language I think and speak in depends on the context I am in.

The shoebox project summarizes this in the sense that I use the language I feel best fits the shoebox's brand, slogan or design without questioning my choice. The project is not just about words, but about the graphic aspect of the boxes. It started with me liking the shape of an unfolded flat shoebox. I'm talking about the shoe boxes that come with the lid attached to the box. They are basically a piece of cardboard carefully folded in like a box and the whole thing is held together by a clever locking folding technique. The shape of an unfolded flat shoebox has become an inspiring canvas for me. I like the

challenge of finding a box and coming up with a suitable text, or vice versa - that the text idea comes first and then I spend time getting a box with the right brand. Here, generous shoe stores, as well as Finn, have been of great help.

**AHW:** It is not only the conceptual aspect of the works that drives you. You had a guest stay at Tou Trykk which resulted in your solo exhibition COLLABORATIONS x IMITATIONS at Arkivet, which are silkscreens of shopping bags. In this exhibition, it is just as much the aesthetics - the form and the graphic expression that interests you?

**KB:** The exhibition COLLABORATIONS X IMITATIONS is a screen printing series. They are actually screen prints of luxury bags, at least some of the designs ;-). In many of the works I used photographs of bags from the luxury fashion brand Balenciaga and turned them into screen prints. Some of the photos I found on fashion websites, others I took myself. In the printing process, I transformed and "hacked" the design as well as staged collaborations. When using screen printing techniques, images are divided into different layers, each layer has one color. I used this technique to transform and change the bag design. I also combined different designs, for example half a fashion bag together with half a shopping bag.

Balenciaga's fashion director Demna Gvasalia has an interest in everyday objects and often re-contextualizes them. Under his leadership, many Balenciaga leather bags were produced based on the shopping bag designs of well-known department stores and grocery stores. One of these design appropriations was, for example, the iconic Ikea shopping bag that Balenciaga reproduced as a leather bag. I read an interview with Demna in which he referred to the iconic Ikea bag as a "ready-made".

So back to your question: yes, the shapes and the graphic expression played a big role in the printing process. I tried to reproduce something on paper that is close to the original of Balenciaga and Ikea. The idea was to create a work where it is not clear to the viewer whether it is a plastic bag or a leather bag, whether it is a disposable plastic product or a luxury material, whether it is an original or a copy. That's why I liked that you called them shopping bags ;-)

**AHW:** You clearly find inspiration in everyday consumption, but do you have any artists or works from contemporary art or art history that inspire you?

**KB:** I feel inspired by many artists. I grew up in a small town in southern Germany on the border to Switzerland, near the art city of Basel. As a child I played in one of the kinetic sculpture fountains of the famous Swiss sculptor Jean Tinguely. In 1997, the art museum Foundation Beyeler opened in Riehen, a short distance from my hometown. Not long after the museum had opened, artist duo Christo and Jeanne-Claude came to wrap all the trees in the museum's garden as one of their large-scale site-specific art installations. I skipped school to go to the museum and see the work. I also skipped school during the Art Basel art fair once a year.

In one way or another, Joseph Beuys has been with me all along. My favorite question is still: "Ist das Kunst oder kann das weg?" Which means: "Is this art or can it be thrown away?". This has stuck with me because someone told me when I was younger that someone in a museum cleaned away part of Beuys's art installation while cleaning the

museum. For me, who works with packaging and other "use and throw away" materials, this is a real question in my everyday life.

Other big names from art history that have influenced me are definitely Barbara Kruger, Andy Warhol and Marcel Duchamps. I am also very inspired by some of Louise Bourgeois' works and Jenny Holzer's text works. I have just seen an exhibition of Louis Bourgeois curated by Jenny Holzer at Kunstmuseum Basel.

It's nice to see connections in my sources of inspiration. I also find inspiration in a number of German artists. One is the conceptual artist Gregor Hildebrandt who is also a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich in Germany. I like his work very much. For example, he creates works from old cassette tapes and cassette boxes. He has also made a "pawnshop" of pawns from chessboards. I like the play on words in this work. I could well imagine being a student with him. He had a collaboration with the brand Louis Vuitton not so long ago. He and some other contemporary artists were selected to transform one of Louis Vuitton's bag designs into a limited edition bag, like a kind of sculpture.

**AHW:** In this context, it is natural to talk about when or whether a work of art or art object is real or not. Is it something you are interested in? One of the reasons why many people are interested in authentic is because objects often have a greater value when they are the original product, and not an imitation or reproduction. The cultural critic Walter Benjamin wrote about this in his theory of "auras", as something connected to an original work and thus giving it a value, in contrast to imitations and reproductions which do not have an "aura". Postmodern theories, on the other hand, have a different perspective on authenticity because they see this as a modernist perspective. Postmodernist theories are more concerned with eclecticism and a more "anything goes" aesthetic. Then Benjamin's concept of "aura" becomes redundant. What do you think about it?

**KB:** I'm not interested in originality from a financial perspective or a resale point of view. Unlike Walter Benjamin, I am less interested in the aura of an object and more concerned with the history of a created or found object. Maybe the story will be the aural? I loathe the idea of copying something to create the exact same object, a cheaper version of the original. But if the imitation and the process becomes part of the story, I'm very much in favor of that way of doing it.

For example, the artist Jonathan Monk's painting Andy Warhol's Chairman Mao hand made in the Peoples Republic of China (oil on canvas, 2008) is an appropriation of Andy Warhol's work Mao (silk print and acrylic on canvas, 1973). Monk adopted Warhol's work more than 30 years later - by changing the technique from silkscreen to paint and expanding the title of the work, Monk makes it his own. Monk created a new original work in a new era with new aspects. There is a big difference in how the politics of Chinese leader Mao Zedong were perceived at the time Warhol produced his work in 1972 - America had just lifted its travel restrictions to China - and when Monk produced his work in 2008. Monk knew much more about Mao's radical politics, and China was on its way to becoming one of the world's largest economies. Another aspect is that Monk did not paint his work himself. He commissioned someone in China to paint a copy of Warhol's work. Warhol was known to have produced work for Monk, so Monk's "outsourcing" and the reproduction of Warhol's work can also be seen as a commentary on just that and perhaps even a critique. That's what I mentioned earlier about the

history of a work. Monk's work is not a copy, it is a new work with its own history and Warhol is part of that story.

In relation to my current exhibition, I chose the title COLLABORATION X IMITATION with care. Titles in general are very important to me and often part of the work. I wanted the title to show that I am very conscious of what I do. I use a fashion company's designs as motifs for my works, using images from their website as "found objects". To demonstrate this awareness and show my respect for Balenciaga's creative output, I sent one of the prints to Balenciaga's head office in Paris to inform them of this series of prints and the ongoing exhibition.

I think originality in the context of art is difficult, but very interesting. I like Barbara Kruger's take on it. She sees the reuse of images as re-contextualizing - a challenge for the viewer to renegotiate the meaning of the original in another, more relevant context. That aspect is what I'm interested in when it comes to the question of originality.

**AHW:** One last general question: Do you enjoy shopping yourself? We are not getting away from an environmental issue here. Is it something you think about a lot?

**KB:** Yes, I like shopping, but knowing that I can "afford" something is more important to me than actually getting it. I am also interested in the psychology behind our shopping behaviour. I find it very interesting how people act when they buy something. For example, my parents never showed me a new clothes purchase. In my family, we would sneak a shopping bag with a newly purchased garment into the bedroom, and talk about it as something private, almost with a sense of shame attached to it. That feeling stays with me to this day - that I don't like to be seen with shopping bags. I feel quite conflicted when it comes to shopping.

Another aspect of shopping that fascinates me is online shopping. I had an exhibition dedicated to that theme a few years ago in the exhibition space Salongen in Stavanger. I turned Barbara Kruger's statement "I shop therefore I am" into "I am therefore I shop" and questioned the ambivalent role of the consumer today. A series I made in this context was called "Reason for return". I used general return reasons from online stores, changed them to extreme, humorous return policies. The various reasons why an item is returned make for interesting claims when taken out of context. To me, they represent the expectations of our society. If something isn't good enough, we don't want it. This behavior can also be transferred to other situations, such as food, relationships (divorces) or choosing a partner (Tinder). To summarize; I like shopping but feel conflicted about it. This is also why the subject of "Fast Fashion" continues to appear in my practice and I have at least two ongoing projects about "fast fashion".

Katharina Bjelland talks about her art practice with the utmost naturalness and it is clear that it is a large part of her everyday life and the way she thinks. It is therefore a paradox that she apologizes for saying that she is not very used to talking about her art practice, but adds that she has become more used to it recently. I'm sure she could have talked much longer if we had more time.