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**LOOKING AT  
LOOKING AT DRESS**

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Viktor and Rolf Exhibition Symposium presentation  
Barbican Gallery, September 2008

We look at exhibitions of dress through the lens of precisely sequenced rooms: the architecture of the museum or gallery is manipulated to be in keeping with a curatorial brief, or more commonly vice versa, an exhibition is tailored to fit within a predetermined space. 6 rooms, 6 themes, for example. I am interested in what the space surrounding the objects can say about them and their interrelationships.

Exhibitions are forms of free association. They are about objects, but they also work through powerful allusion to ideas that are related to the objects - they conjure and question what floats free of the object. Through choosing to juxtapose one set of objects rather than another the curator is choosing to give them different things in common - shape over colour, or texture, period over style, quotation over continuity; the brief is visually exposed and the narrative clarified in a very particular way.

With exhibitions of dress what (usually) unifies the objects is scale and this is partly why *The House of Viktor and Rolf* designed by the architect, curator and art historian Siebe Tettero is such an interesting exhibition to look at. We usually have an immediate identification with the garment - do we like it, would we wear it? How far does it differ from our taste, style, period, assumptions etc. We may not identify with actually wearing the garment but we know how it works. We use our own dictionary of style to judge the designer's project - is it daring, sexually exciting, glamorous etc. by our own moral code? - and we do this in the way that we cannot do with any other applied Art. And it is usually through our immediate identification with wearing or not wearing the garment that we can read the space around it. We experience, so to speak, the experience of the mannequin. We experience the vertigo of the plinth, the claustrophobia of the crowded cabinet.

*The House of Viktor and Rolf* is bound together by architecture, providing us with clues very early on about the importance of the space, and that we should look out for it, be alert to its power. The relationship between dress and architecture is dramatised from the start and injected with anxiety and tension.

This installation at the beginning of the exhibition's intended route, though one might describe it as minimal is the opposite. White dresses installed in a white space. The designer's project represented by the clothing is frustrated, imprisoned by a glass wall severing sections of the garments themselves. The outside world actively limits the gowns existence, the life of its movement. The plane of glass represents the collision between the garment and the so-called real world. It is the real world mutilating their version of the fashion industry, literally putting a stop to it. As we know Viktor and Rolf are famously ambivalent about the so-called fashion world.

Later the relationship is somehow reversed in *L'Apparence du Vide* of 1995 where the dresses cast material shadows onto the ground in the form of other garments. It is about impact, a tug of war between body and environment. Shadows both haunt and extend the impact, the reach of the silhouette, and Viktor and Rolf transform the shadow into an organza dress. A play of projected light as muse.

And most dramatically visible from everywhere in the exhibition, is the giant doll's house at its centre. Two physical extremes are created immediately - gigantic and miniature - at once larger and smaller than 'life'.

So, if at the heart of fashion exhibitions is the relationship the viewer has with the mannequin - and of the dress giving the exhibition design a sense of scale - then Viktor and Rolf rupture this illusion, this basic visual tool. By using dolls that are scaled down to a third of the 'real' size (dressed in perfectly scaled down Viktor and Rolf garments) we are forced to look at them in a different way.

A Doll's house is particularly evocative. As Susan Stewart writes in *On Longing - Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*:

*'A house within a house, the dollhouse not only presents the house's articulation of the tension between inner and outer spheres of interiority*

*and exteriority - it also represents the tension between two modes of interiority. Occupying a space within an enclosed space, the dollhouse's aptest analogy is the locket or the secret recesses of the heart: centre within centre, within within within. The dollhouse is a materialised secret;; what we look for in a dollhouse and its promise of an infinitely profound interiority. In fact we can see the dollhouse-maker's relative inattention to the exterior of his or her structure as further evidence of this movement inwards.'*

In fact in this particular doll's house we have no external walls - they are absent so the whole house works in section - a house sliced through its sides so it is never clear how far the house might have extended outwards. It is the infrastructure that remains, perhaps the essence of creativity when it is removed from the workings of, the reality of, the fashion industry. It is reminiscent of the nativity scenes, the Neopolitan presepio or manger, where the interior is sacred, extending out towards a secular landscape of animals and shepherds. The dolls are not naturalised within the house, they are not behaving domestically, but examples of each collection are posed looking out as though for a photo shoot. The rooms in section become simple white frames focussing our gaze onto the details of the miniature garments themselves.

The dolls are reproduced in perfect detail

at 1: 3 - a third of their 'real, human scale. The dolls have been made to resemble the models who wore them on the all important dates in the fashion calendar - the fashion shows, the collections. Time stands still - the dolls can't ever grow up, trapped in the frame of their individual rooms; they are fixed in (dressing-up) time. Viktor and Rolf always warn us against believing in the gaiety of their shows, or indeed of the exuberance of fashion.

The doll's house has two dominant motifs, wealth and nostalgia - both powerfully associated with fashion, both associated with Viktor and Rolf's designs. In order to recognize miniatures the motifs have to be recognisably powerful - to have something aspirational about them, unobtainable in the real world.

Adjacent to the doll's house in this exhibition there are rooms allocated to the individual collections (spanning their professional career) that without the doll's house would have made it a retrospective in a more traditional sense.

What we have however is something very different - it is as though the rooms are at the service of the doll's house not vice versa - as though we are peering in and manage to get close up - almost as though through a magnifying glass - so the real clothes now look like a blown up version of the miniature dolls - as they retain their doll-like characteristics and proportions. They remain disjointed from the films projected on the back wall of the actual catwalk shows or performances that they were originally. It shows us that exhibition design is about peering into other worlds and learning their always foreign grammar. Ironically the films look almost more remote from reality, more strange within the controlled still of the exhibition.

The collection representing a fashion show (The Fashion Show A/W 2007/8) accentuates the game. Each silhouette represented a self sufficient 'show'.

Added structure - both dress and architecture, boning and cladding. there is another exterior - scaffold - exterior even to buildings (indeed enfolding them, disguising them, propping them up whilst they are being modified, never decorative in their own right. Here they are holding both body and dress,

sound system and lights. It turns the models, or doll, into a total environment that is in tension within the neoclassical interior of the doll's house. In the catwalk show the sound system was playing a different sound for each model thereby totally isolating them - exterior exterior. Again another degree of disorientation. An exterior inside an interior inside an interior inside an exterior etc. This is true of the layering of their garments - insides over outsides - over insides. Shirt collars over shirt collars. The narrative works through this bouncing to and fro of looking that is at the heart of exhibition making and indeed of the history of looking at objects.

We are given the same information three times. The exhibition uses the importance of repetition to narrative, organised curatorially, but also alludes to its Freudian association to trauma. Nightmare and trauma - the trauma of nightmare - never seem very far away from the project. In Viktor and Rolf's vision fashion is itself a both a trauma and an attempted self-cure for a trauma. It opens up alternative readings of the same outfit, which is not described through object and text alone in a way that often closes down the readings of the garments. The repositioning of the same object adds to its eloquence and like a chorus, by the end, they are all familiar objects - we learn the tune and get the jokes.

Exhibition design incorporates its own repetitions and histories, as well as those of the garments themselves, by association. We think of what circumstances have generated miniature couture and miniature display in the past.

There is a move (with the rise of more and more written fashion theory) to make exhibition design more articulate - to incorporate some of the abstract ideas within the experience of the exhibition. Along with this there is an acknowledgment of the naivety of 'minimal design'. A route is a chronology, returns are repetitions: spatial metaphors track and trace our understanding of exhibitions and our descriptions of them. This exhibition asks how can these be literalised, represented in order to be experienced?

There is a sense of claustrophobia in their demonic sartorial repetition. It is the self referential nature of their design - details over and over again are conceptual in a way that say other designers such as Hussein Chalayan might refer to an abstract concept, the silk route, technology etc. With Viktor and Rolf it is as though you can't escape the dress itself trapped in a predetermined language, leaving them free only to manipulate size, repetition, colour etc. It draws attention to fashions palette with nightmarish insistence. And through the virtuoso repetitions and manipulation of motifs we learn the rules, we recognise the rules and regulations as part of the design. We know what oversize bows look like because we have a vocabulary in our minds which incorporates bows - maybe 1950s nostalgic cocktail dresses, for example.

Their Milanese boutique in via sant'andrea designed by Siebe Tettero is the most direct architectural equivalent of their design. A neoclassical boutique turned upside down. We know - almost as children - what neoclassical architecture looks like, though we might not know its name and associations. We know about columns, about arches, about fireplaces and so we know when they are upside down. It is a very clever use of architectural elements in an elementary way. And one that is related to the heart of Viktor and Rolf's project of disrupting the recognisable codes within the fashion industry, its calendars, and branding rules.

In an interview Siebe Tettero said - If I were to turn minimalist architecture on its head it wouldn't work - i.e. if you turn a simple rectangle on its head it stays the same. If you go for the familiar orders of architecture we understand the game - like getting a joke, it is immediate. This is an important point about Viktor & Rolf's dress. There is some thing at the heart of their attitude that works together. It attacks the kitschness of classical design head on.

Similar is the attention to detail - of the agreement that an idea is taken to its extreme logical conclusion, so, for example in the boutique, the doorknob is at eye level, the doormat is above you as you enter the boutique. Inside, the ceilings in two gray-

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painted salons are herringbone parquet “floors,” while the store’s actual resin floor imitates a plain white ceiling. Upended archways, provide curved seating, and neoclassical side chairs jut down from overhead. More appear in fitting rooms, where the chair backs act as hooks for clothes hangers, bottles of Viktor & Rolf’s Flowerbomb perfume are glued upside down on shelves. A white-glazed cabinet houses a TV that plays a loop of Viktor & Rolf fashion shows—upside down.

This is not the kind of parallelism that has typified a lot of the recent linking, or coupling of fashion and architecture. The repetition of historical designs, familiar and transformed, means we get it, we get the project; we can be perturbed, or disturbed, or simply intrigued.

They trap you in a dark *mis en abime* of circular arguments, about the inside and outside of the system, about their love and hatred for clothing, about wealth and virtual wealth that is itself expensive (the collectors of expensive doll’s houses themselves simulated and stimulated wealth). The allusions cannot rest, and that restlessness is the point.