Artwork

Frida Hållander and Åsa Norman

Sewing Factory Sisters!

Öxabäck IF – Without You No Tomorrow

Sewing Factory Sisters! Öxabäck IF – Without you no tomorrow was an exhibition held at The Labour Movement's Archives and Library by Åsa Norman, textile artist and Frida Hållander, Ph.D., craft artist, during the conference Long term perspectives on home-based work.

The exhibition had its origins in a common interest in how struggles have been formulated by and through women in textile rooms, with a focus on the textile industry and sewing factories, as well as in women in industrial home-work in Sjuhäradsbygden, a rural textile area in the southwest of Sweden. The exhibition consisted of three textile stories that originate from three different places and from three different times.

The exhibition began with archival documents from the Swedish Textile Workers Union depicting the struggles of workers. The agitation pamphlets *Textilarbetare! = Ut till frihet! Fram för frihet* [Textile Workers! = Go out for freedom! Get ahead for freedom] from 1910, reads: "If we do not put our own interests first, and if we do not see ourselves in them, we are and will remain the bottom line of the working class".¹ Among the archival materials there were also two agitation poems that describe the union struggles: *Vi väva, vi väva och Vi spinna, vi spinna* [We weave, we weave and we spin, we spin] from the early 20th century. The archive tells us about the difficulties for textile workers had in organizing themselves. In the memorial publication from The Textile Workers Union's from 1923 we can read that "more than anyone else, the textile workers have fallen to resignation and powerlessness".² It was a work-force, including

1 Translated by Norman & Hållander from: *Textilarbetare! = Ut till frihet! Fram för frihet* (Norrköping, 1910) 1904–1924. Archive: Sv. Textilarbetarförbundet box: 2769/1/169 The Swedish Labour Movement's Archives and Library.

2 Translated by Norman & Hållander from: Gustaf Janzén, *Svenska textilarbetareförbundet: Minnesskrift 1898–1923*, Norrköpings boktryckeri (Norrköping, 1923) p. 13.

FIGURE 20.1 Exhibition at The Labour Movement's Archives and Library, in Stockholm: Sewing Factory Sisters! Öxabäck IF – Without you no tomorrow, by Åsa Norman and Frida Hållander, 2018

PHOTO FRIDA HÅLLANDER, 2018

homeworkers, that consisted mostly of women, and that endured long working hours and low wages. The book *Svenska textilarbetareförbundet 1949–1971* [Swedish Textile Workers Union 1949–1971] published in 1991 describes how textile workers have always been the proletarians of the proletariat; poorer and sicker than everyone else.³

One of the central works of the exhibition is based on women who worked in a sewing factory in Sjuhäradsbygden, during the 1960s and 1970s. It tells of how these women organized themselves by starting a football team: Öxabäck IF. The team was formed in 1966 in the village Öxabäck in Sjuhäradsbygden – a region in which the textile industry and industrial homework existed since the seventeenth century. Thanks to Öxabäcks IF's constant pressure on the Swedish Football Association, first official series in women's football in Sweden was founded in 1968. The women in the team met in Öxabäck Sewing Factory. At the factory they sewed their own shorts and shirts to play in. The team also recruited new players from southwestern Sweden by giving them work in the sewing factory. Norman's and Hållander's art work *Öxabäck IF – Without you no*

3 Majgull Axelsson, *Svenska textilarbetareförbundet 1949–1971* (Stockholm, 1991) p. 12.

FIGURE 20.2 Öxabäck IF, Courtesy of the Öxabäck IF museum. Photo Sigge Bengtsson, 1968.
Reproduction: Frida Hållander och Åsa Norman 2016

tomorrow underscored the influence of the team Öxabäck IF's on the Swedish women's football, and also re-activated a text *On banners and banner making* from 1909 by the British suffragette and the artist Mary Lowndes (1856–1929).⁴ The work examines the processes of textile making in different times and spaces revealing that making can be understood as embodied experience and knowledge, conditioned, but not always bounded, by societal structures.⁵

The exhibition also showed two other works. Hållander showed a pair of jeans she sewed herself, with the title *The broken line: Jeans – I sew the best I could* (2018). It was based on her experience of growing up in a textile village in Sjuhäradsbygden. It is a work that reflects the lives of her relatives who worked in the industrial homework and in the sewing factories from the beginning of

4 Mary Lowndes, "Banners and Banner-Making" in Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907–1914* (Chicago, 1988), p. 262–264.

5 Frida Hållander, *Vems hand är det som gör? En systertext om konst/hantverk, klass, feminism och om viljan att ta strid* [Whose Hand is Making? A Sister-Text about Craft, Class, Feminism and the Will to Contest], (Stockholm, 2019) p. 191–232.

the 20th century to the end of 1980s. The story-telling narratives came from her own experiences and from the stories of her relatives, as well from archives. The “broken line” refers to the textile industry’s restructuring process, a process that affected the textile and clothing industries in Sjuhäradsbygden. The crisis, which began in the 1950s, ultimately resulted in a large proportion of textile production being decommissioned around 1980. The work explored how knowledge about sewing a pair of jeans cannot be found in Hållander’s craft skills; she doesn’t know how to sew or how to make a pair of jeans – a story of a broken line.

The third place visited in the exhibition was Manchester’s silk industry in the early part of the 20th century. In the art work *Bombyx Mori, well fitted for women?* Norman examines how the resistance to wage cuts and other exploitative practices was formulated and organized by the many women who worked with silk at home. In her artwork Norman also addressed the question of how working with an exclusive material influenced the image of the women who worked in the silk industry, in contrast to the image of the women who worked in the cotton industry. The women silk workers made many different textile accessories: socks, buttons, bands and fringes. Accessories that surround, frame, highlight and visualize, but which could be described as being on the periphery, and easily manufactured at home. The art work consists of a silk banner with pearl embroidery.

Hållander and Norman’s works addressed issues such as how the textile material and textile making intersect over the question of women’s subordination. The order between the sexes is present in all dimensions of doing. These reasons have led Hållander and Norman to questions about what it means to be a sister from a feminist perspective?

Factory Sisters! is one of Hållander and Norman’s borrowed concepts.⁶ Being a factory sister was a profession in women-dominated industries around 1900. The factory sisters, who were employed by the factory, helped the women workers with the administration of pension and sick funds, and other benefits. It was a complicated concept, as the factory sister had a lot of power. For Hållander and Norman the term has lost this historical connection. Instead the term has come to suggest a personal or political relationship between women – a feminist perspective on sisterhood whereby sisters support a struggle. At the same time, it urges the questions on a reorientation of feminist practice toward solidarity work and anticapitalist struggles.⁷ A feminism without borders, fully engaged in with the realities of textile production.

6 Gerda Meyerson, *Arbeterskornas värld. Studier och erfarenhet* (Stockholm, 1917) p. 70–80.

7 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without borders: decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity* (Durham, 2003).