

Offers new and surprising perspectives

Every single element, every picture and every article in this book forms one of the threads in a sturdy and meaningful weave. An art book's overriding purpose – to bring us close to the works – is fully realised.



ØIVIND STORM BJERKE

BOOK

Nina M. Schjønsby (Ed.): *Kari Steihaug*

Contributors: Monica Aasprong, Ingvill Henmo, Anne Karin Jortveit, Aasne Linnestå, Halvor Nordby, Kjetil Røed, Cecilie Skeide, Kari Steihaug

Grafic design: Modest (Rune Døli)

arnoldsche Art Publishers, Stuttgart 2022

Published in Norwegian and English editions

Kari Steihaug is one of the many artists who have contributed to evolving contemporary art in the direction of material-based aesthetic practices and artistic careers, with textile as her favoured medium. This has contributed to breaking down art's traditional hierarchies, priorities and notions of what is interesting and important. But what is inferred by the term "textile"? The word points to something that is woven or braided – in a material that is basically formed into a thread. The book's cover photograph is a spool of thread, and the first article in the book is a series of musings about thread, written by Monica Aasprong.

Aasprong has given her texts the heading "Banderole to Kari Steihaug", and in the reading of them, it's as if, with each new paragraph, we unfold a new section of the banner that encompasses Steihaug's artistry. Monica Aasprong's short texts create a linguistic framework that contributes to revealing meaningful interpretations that place the works in new and surprising perspectives. What is commendable about these texts is how close they bring us to the artistic process, to the objects, and how they show us that the work of interpreting is an independent intellectual and artistic endeavour.

Revealing hidden layers of meaning

Via the articles that follow, we learn that Steihaug's art provides abundant hints for interpretation in light of the way her art employs the transformation of existing articles of clothing, via recycling and re-design. Steihaug adopts elements from techniques such as drawing, painting and installation. These are given textile expression and are incorporated into a convincing idea-based and aesthetic whole. The stories that can be associated with the use of textiles reveal hidden layers of meaning that lie dormant in the material and the garments' shape and usage, which is also a theme employed by many of the contributors. Cecilie Skeide and Halvor Nordby write about such aspects as well. Skeide was curator of an exhibition where Steihaug was commissioned to create a work for Lillehammer Art Museum based on vintage textiles in the Maihaugen collection. The authors base their presentation on a perspective that is theoretically rooted in the social anthropologist Marianne Gullestad's use of everyday narratives. The essay encompasses both the underlying story and its transformation into a new narrative. We get a glimpse into how Steihaug tackles the challenge that lies dormant in the completed garments formed by previous generations of women – such as everyday articles – and their transformation into an independent and original artwork bearing her personal signature.



Kari Steihaug: *After the market*, 2009 © Kari Steihaug / BONO. Installation, unravelled garments, skeins, threads, knitted picture after the painting *The Gleaners* (1857) by Jean-Francois Millet. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design. Photo M.Tomaszewicz.

The making of clothing occurs in a cultural, social and financial and political context. Kjetil Røed discusses this in his well-composed and condensed interpretation of aspects we can associate with the labour of love and caring nature embedded in Steihaug's art. As an example, Røed makes use of Steihaug's reworking of Jean-Francois Millet's painting *The Gleaners* from 1857 in Musée d'Orsay into the installation *After the market* (The National Museum, 2009). Steihaug undertakes an artistically convincing interpretation of a historic masterpiece. Incidentally, what I find missing is a mention of the fact that Steihaug's *After the market* can also be perceived as a political contribution to the debate about artistic hierarchies linked to material and technique. The work is catalogued under the National Museum's design collection, yet is a brilliant example of how such institutional classifications fall short when it comes to such a central work in contemporary Norwegian art.



Picture from the book Nina M. Schjønsby (Ed.): *Kari Steihaug*
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Halvor Nordby, Kjetil Røed, Cecilie Skeide, Kari Steihaug. Photo: Jannik Abel

Close to the work process

Via Ingvill Henmo's clarifying interview we gain a close view of Steihaug's working method. We also get a glimpse of the broader artistic context she considers herself a part of. Steihaug provides here a summary of influences that were important for her in her youth. This section might have benefitted from being expanded into an article that placed her artistic career in a broader international discussion about the influence of the existentialist and phenomenologically inspired mindset that characterized artistic practices from minimalism, Arte povera and performance art in the early 1960s. Influences that gained renewed relevance for Steihaug's generation, among other things via a series of exhibitions featuring masters of this art at Kunstnernes Hus. Here I could have wished for an essay that summed up the approaches to an art historical discussion and placement of Steihaug's endeavours.



Kari Steihaug: *The potato bucket* from the series *To clean out a home* (2021-22). Hand tufting, 180 x 135 cm © Kari Steihaug / BONO. Photo Espen Tollefsen

The art historical discourse plays a subordinate role in the book, in favour of all kinds of other perspectives. It reveals the shift in the field towards a more culturally historically rooted understanding and interpretation of visual culture in a broad sense, rather than an emphasis on the aesthetic and artistic content and form in a work and in a practice. What I miss is for someone to go more thoroughly into the question of the relationship between the various narrative voices in the works; those who originally made the textiles for a specific purpose, Steihaug who transforms them, and the heads of the art institutions that determine the rules of the game.

Exemplary editing and neat design

Nina M. Schjønsby's thorough and exemplary editing and Rune Døli's well-considered, varied and neat design and wise choices regarding paper quality, typographic elements and fine reproductions, make the book a pleasure to behold, both for the eye and the mind. Every single element, every picture and every article form one of the threads in a sturdy and meaningful weave. This is a publication that fulfils an art book's overriding purpose – to bring us close to the works.