

The Principle of the Hairnet
On Jytte Høy's Hairnet Geometries

a lightness in it all, a likeness in it all

Almost like spiderwebs, the fine-mesh hairnets Jytte Høy uses to make her wall sculptures are that delicate. The first time I saw them, at Den Frie's 2017 Spring Exhibition in Copenhagen, they instantly triggered in me an odd sensory collapse of tight, geometric art and the scent of my grandmother's bathroom.

Høy first started making sculptures out of hairnets during a 2015 ISCP residency in New York. In a succession of "small sculptures," mostly untitled, she has used other entirely ordinary and aesthetically almost invisible materials, including light bulbs, rubber bands, paper, cotton pads and cigarettes. One piece simply constitutes the meeting of an awl and a hairnet (*Untitled*, 1997). Høy has a singular eye for such small, humble everyday objects, turning them into wall sculptures that void the object's original function in favour of a Concrete sculpture possessing a new metaphor. The metaphor is formed in the merger of the material's intended purpose and the sculpture's new composition, as in the loose hairnet impaled by an awl, sparking a flurry of associations: construction worker meets fragile woman, eroticism and violence as two sides of the same coin.

The symbolism and associations of hairnets are inextricably linked to women's lives and bodies. That grandmother scent. In Denmark, hairnets are quite thin and delicate, barely distinguishable from a clump of dishwater-blond Scandinavian hair, a dust bunny or hairball. In New York, where Høy began this work, hairnets have different textures. Thicker and darker, they curl up in your hand like a tuft of African hair, a tumbleweed. In the States, hairnets also allude to another hidden female sphere – illegal Mexican restaurant workers, who have to keep their hair out of the food, and wig-wearing orthodox Jewish women. Hairnets in those contexts are linked to a sphere of women on the margins of society, hidden women who, like their hair, preferably should not be seen. Hair, of all things, is a symbol of freedom. In the everyday object of a hairnet, a number of loaded symbols lie latent and are released depending on the eye of the observer. Hairnets as such are not supposed to be seen. Ideally, they should be as invisible as the women who wear them. Only their function is essential – hiding and holding together unruly hair. Loose hair is still a direct sign of freedom. Millions of women the world over are still expected to keep their hair demurely out of sight. As the Bible (1 Corinthians 11) says,

Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered. For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man.

In the early 20th century, it raised eyebrows when the public spaces of Paris were adorned with posters by the Czech artist Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939), featuring life-sized female figures with long, flowing locks. Loose hair was, and remains, a symbol of bodily liberation, capable of provoking outright outrage. Apart from women with free-flowing hair, Mucha's decorative style, which came to be known as Art Nouveau, was characterized by an abundance of serpentine greenery, flowers and patterns inspired by Byzantine art, Japanese nature studies and arabesques. The merger of nature, flowers and aesthetics expressed a sensual, almost euphoric hedonism. Some decades later, the style proved a perfect fit for the hippie and flower-power movement, which unabashedly appropriated and augmented the Art Nouveau look. For the flower children, long, loose hair was likewise a symbol of freedom, passion and lust, an element in the resistance against uptightness, staid tradition and oppression. No hairnets here, please.

falling like manna there existed a simple sketched design

The hairnets in *Hairnet Geometry*, do not hang limply, like the one stabbed by the awl. Stretched to maximum capacity in a great variety of geometric shapes, they are presented in a rectangular grid on the wall. Behind the hairnets, a few simple pencil lines can be made out, indicating the logic of orientation by which the grid unfolds. A web on top of a logic in a grid. The logic is as simple as can be. A central, mirroring axis enables perfectly symmetrical reflections, as the hairnets attain maximum extension. The act of viewing simple, symmetrical shapes produces a terrific feeling in your body, a basic meditative calm. Although the symmetrical figures are all different, setting the eye in motion, they radiate complete stability as the space allows *being* instead of *thinking*. We do not need to figure them out. They compute, in symmetrical balance and perfection. Among the symmetrical rows of stable markers, however, freer forms are seen to be at play. Certain hairnets are not neatly mirrored across the central axis but freely and wildly unfurl in complex layers and folds, seducing your mind. Here, thought must intervene. The calm has been disturbed. The eye, and thought, has been aroused. How do these shapes fit in, how are they made, what do they represent? While the symmetrical figures have an almost meditative effect, the asymmetrical ones take us on little trips of thought.

Altogether, the dynamic hang of hairnets – in a structure somewhere between symmetry and asymmetry – creates a readable syntax of sorts. Dot, dot, dash, dash. The simple hairnets become points in a notation system, an alphabet, a structure, inducing movement in the body, eye and mind, while the physical makeup of the hairnets themselves constitute a physical counterpoint to the simple line drawing. As a result, a kind of language emerges in the rows of repeating and varied forms, compelling the eye to move from one to the other, reading and decoding.

In their visual vocabulary, the geometric hairnet patterns tie into the Western tradition of Concrete art characterized by geometric shapes, lines and pure figures resting in their own logic of form, without inspiration from real life or the expressive inclination of the hand and spirit. Unlike Abstract Expressionism, Concrete art was interested not in unrestricted, free play but in having a set of rules according to which the conscious mind could create and work. In his manifesto of Concrete art, the Dutch artist Theo van Doesburg wrote, “A work of art must be entirely conceived and shaped by the mind.”

Høy has worked with line, figure and repetition before in a number of ornamental drawings, in the form of independent works or as ornaments around photographs, as in *Non-Interpretable Thoughts* (2009), a total of 10 drawings/photos arranged on the wall. In the drawings, the patterns almost turn into arabesques, ornaments inspired by Arab aesthetics, but the basic device is the same, a specific structure generating the creation of a pattern. These are not freehand drawings, just as the hairnets are not randomly, wantonly placed. A guiding principle underlies it all, lending rhyme and reason to the creativity. The device drives the work and liberates the creative process, which soon picks up speed and looks like it could go on forever.

an equation, an open and transferable expression

Perhaps the manufactured appearance of the hairnets is why, from a distance, they resemble digital graphics or computer animations, angular, linear structures recalling the generic technological shapes of digital architectural models and games. Only when we draw nearer, do we notice the webs and the fine threads that produce the shadow effects of closely overlaid hairnets forming reliefs. In some of the geometries, the elasticity of the webs produces an almost 3D-like, wire-frame effect. From the initial experience of the geometries as flat, graphic expressions, closer inspection reveals the material's tactility, spatial formations and relief-like structure.

In the tradition of art, geometric shapes, as mentioned, are associated mainly with Concrete art, which sought to produce a separation from familiar phenomena by painting figures and shapes that in themselves had a meditative formula and pure cohesion. Formal compositions were paramount, as artists strove to rid their pictures of anything extraneous, anonymizing the style, while still aiming for spatial effects in the balancing act of short and long, triangle and rectangle. The artists in the Cercle and Carré group, which for a period counted the Danish artist Franciska Clausen (1899-1986) among its member, cultivated a geometric, constructivist look that nonetheless involved

1980) among its member, cultivated a geometric, constructivist look that nonetheless involved energies and spatiality, in particular a kind of synergy between the shapes. Such fundamental notes recur in Høy's *Hairnet Geometries*, whose balance between symmetry and asymmetry creates a dynamic energy that makes the work a living experience.

The texture of Høy's hairnets adds a new physical dimension to the clean lines of Concrete art. The free-flowing energies generated by abstract shapes are instantly pulled back to the body, to the senses and the mind. Hairnets, as mentioned, have a specific connection to the female sphere and body. The inherent tactility of hairnets mimics not only hair but also the hollows, folds and membranes of a woman's body. As sensual reliefs, the clean constructivist lines become both more spatial and more "impure." Høy creates a kind of impure constructivism, an impure abstraction, not unlike the efforts of the Minimalist artist Agnes Martin, whose repeated lines also mimicked Concrete art while endowing it with spirit and manual sensitivity, a liberating simplicity that is not mechanical but refers to the body.

While the modernist abstract tradition used geometric shapes to create distance to the familiar, ordinary world and instead abstract it, Høy uses it as a jumping-off point to a new language that ties directly into a female sphere of hidden dimensions, body and buried life. In the collapse of the Concrete art tradition and the material expansion of ultrafine, delicate hairnets, a new, loaded symbol emerges.