

Ambiguous wallflowers



Ove Harder Finseth's corsets as displayed at von Echstedtska

Janne Helene Arnesen 2018

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von Echstedtska*

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Abstract

Ove Harder Finseth is in large associated with the wedding dress he designed for HRH, Crown Princess Mette-Marit in 2001. Yet, most of his professional career has been devoted to “painting with needles and beads”, and often on a surface in the shape of a corset - visually quite far from the wedding dress he is famous for.

This thesis looks closer at this practice, and especially in context of the *Glansen ved hjertet, gløden i rommet* exhibition Ove Harder Finseth presented at the von Echstedtska estate in Sweden in 2012. It was the designer’s expressed intent to pick up clues from the wall decorations, and by translating these into decorated corsets also create the illusion of female personas, inhabiting these very rooms. The female personas were present only through the shape of their torso, and they demanded the visitor’s attention on various levels.

The thesis touches upon various aspects of Ove Harder Finseth’s corsets and his way of displaying them. Since the house and its ornate walls is brought into the discussion by the designer, thoughts of domesticity are brought up. The corset is also viewed from a historical and modern perspective, and from different display traditions, and brings the thesis to an interesting question: why is it that this garment, technically created for the human body, seems more evocative detached from the body, abstracted as paintings on the walls - or even as wallflowers?

Acknowledgements

Summoning up months of work into a few well-placed words forced me to consider not just the work on my master thesis, but also the people who has helped me on the way leading up to it. People might not be thanked in the order they deserve, or as much as they deserve, still:

I would like to thank my supervisor Aron Vinegar for challenging me to go for a narrower and more in-depth topic than originally intended, and to push further. Ove Harder Finseth and his 2012 exhibition at the von Echstedtska estate in Sweden has long been one that intrigued me, but I never considered an in-depth view of it. It was also a nice coincidence that the thesis was finished just as the designer celebrated his 20th anniversary as a designer.

A major thanks should be given to my colleague, sparring partner and very good friend Peder Valle, who has not only kept me mentally sane, but also offered invaluable academic inputs on how to approach the material. Stepping into the project in a critical phase was of more value than can be expressed.

Another major thanks to my boss and mentor Ingrid Bjørnov, who has provided words of wisdom when needed, and chocolate when needed. Both invaluable. Also being a most patient boss when I took time off to finish the thesis.

Another thanks to the people who has provided me with their time, knowledge and support. This list could go on for pages, but I would especially like to mention Ove Harder Finseth, Anne Kjellberg, Tommy Gammeltoft, Widar Halén, Linn Christiansen, Trine Nordkvelle, Brynhild Slaatto, Møyfrid Tveit, Wenche Vøllan and Hilde Sporaland.

It goes without saying ones family wonders what exactly happened when a master student disappears for days and weeks at the time. It also goes without saying that their support and their love is invaluable.

Last, but not least, a major thanks to Cathrine Lorange, who saw potential and trusted me when I needed it the most.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction of <i>Ambiguous wallflowers</i>	
1.1. Introduction.....	1
1.2. How to read laced bodies, or the void of them? Existing research and literature	2
1.3. Theoretical approaches.....	4
1.4. Structure of the thesis.....	7
1.5. The many ways to describe our clothes.....	9
2. Von Echstedtska and Ove Harder Finseth’s 12 female personas	
2.1. Presenting the designer and the exhibition.....	12
2.2. The female personas.....	15
2.3. Facing the corsets.....	19
2.4. Useable installations.....	22
3. Women and domesticity: the issue of the decoratitiviy	
3.1. The need of corsetry.....	27
3.2. Women and domesticity in Western history.....	30
3.3. Inside the estate.....	36
4. The absent body	
4.1. The absent female body in the corset.....	44
4.2. The absent as perceived through Rancièrè.....	49
4.3. The meaningful void.....	52
5. Concluding remarks	
5.1. The sensual, the conceptual and the contextual.....	56
5.2. The corset and the conclusion.....	58
Bibliography.....	62
Other sources.....	64
Exhibitions.....	64
List of illustrations.....	65
The illustrations.....	66

1. Ambiguous wallflowers

1.1. Introduction

In 2012, designer Ove Harder Finseth displayed 12 ornate corsets at the von Echstedtska estate in Värmland, Sweden, in his solo exhibition *Glansen ved hjertet, gløden i rommet* - in English given the title *Splendour for the Heart, Radiance for the Room*. Inspired by the decorative aspects of the respective rooms they were displayed in, and featuring lush silks, beading, appliquées and embroidery, the corsets were suspended from the ceiling as torsos hanging in mid-air, forming installations where the corsets echoed and deviated from the painted motifs on the walls. They were both blending in and challenging their surroundings. Hence, the building itself became a vital part of the story.

“Remembrances in the walls”. That is how the designer describes the experience of entering the rooms. All the people who has passed through, or lived there, still resonates when the designer creates pieces of art inspired by it. At the von Echstedtska estate the colourful, thoroughly decorated and painted walls were translated into ornate silk corsets, embroidered, beaded, and pleated. From the walls the shadow of a woman emerged. Or not so much her shadow, rather an echo, an echo of her female torso. Each room was fitted with its leading lady, some even had two, and there were 12 installations in total. This was the expressed intention of the designer, to create 12 personas, 12 female figures as an extension of the building itself. But the exhibition rises as many questions as it answers. It becomes clear we are looking at various degrees of female figures. But it is unclear if they want to be noticed, to stand out, demanding our attention as we pass through, or whether they want to blend in with the wall, becoming the flowers on the wall - or wallflowers, if you will.

Much has been written on the cultural and sartorial history of the corset in the Western world, and some general literature on Finseth’s work as a designer can be found. But little has been written on his specific work with corsets, and especially the way he decorates and displays them. Why does the designer choose the corset as his medium over and over again? The corset was once considered a very private part of the wardrobe, and giving us a glimpse of a dressed woman, and yet reflecting on her undressed state, whether she is about to put on or take off her attire. The corset was a part of the private sphere. In Ove Harder Finseth’s 2012 exhibition it takes center stage.

The corset - or pair of stays, as they were called historically - is often defined as one single practice, with one specific reading. And through this conflation and essentialization, centuries of changing practices, settings and interpretations are muddled into one story.

Depending on the era, region and social strata, the corset could mean many different things, and be used in different ways. To add to this, our modern view of the corset is usually not first-hand experience, but impressions picked up from historical sources, from museums, from books, from movies and popular culture, from paintings. So, when a modern-day person meets an empty corset in a historical environment, what thoughts does it raise, what possible interpretations does it offer?

As most of the corsets displayed at the von Echstedtska were made especially for the estate, the dialogue between the garment and the room is of interest and will be explored further. With corsets placed within in a domestic interior, thoughts lead to theories on domesticity, and also on the house as a way of creating boundaries between humans and nature, not unlike what a corset did. By creating corsets as a representation of a female persona, and furthermore relating them to the walls they are placed in front, it naturally raises ideas of a woman within the four walls of the home. So, the personas and the corsets will be discussed in the historical context of the “Cult of domesticity” and idealization of “The angel in the house”, as well as different theories relating to women’s relationship with the home, and in light of writings on “dressed” buildings and “feminine” interiors. Through these different approaches, as well as photo documentation from the exhibition and an interview done with Ove Harder Finseth in March 2018, I will try and see if they can shed a light on these ambiguous wallflowers presented at the von Echstedtska estate in 2012.

1.2. How to read laced bodies, or the void of them? Existing research and literature

To start with the most prominent figure, there is little literature or scholarship on the works of designer Ove Harder Finseth. Some information can be found in the various exhibition catalogues presenting his work, and of course much has been written about the wedding dress he designed for HRH Crown Princess Mette-Marit in 2001. The wedding dress is usually the selling point whenever he is mentioned in the press or in texts presenting collaborative exhibitions, to the point where it might overshadow the actual garments or artefacts on display. There are furthermore general overviews of his oeuvre to be found, for example in Anne Kjellberg’s book *Mote - trender og designere i Oslo 1900-2000* from 2000.¹ But there is little in-depth work on the designer, little of recent date, and practically nothing on his work with corsets and why he seems to keep returning to the corset as an artistic expression.²

¹ The book was written some three years after he graduated, hence still very early in his career.

² That even goes for the retrospective exhibition «Vanity Fair» at Nordenfjeldske kunstindustrimuseum in 2014.

At the other end of the scale, much has been written on the phenomenon that is the corset, its cultural and sartorial history, and how it is perceived today, in an era where most women have never worn one. Books written by Valerie Steele and Leigh Summers are of special interest here. They talk about different ideas of the corset: as a bodily imprisonment, as a welcome support for the torso, as a moral compass when laced or unlaced, as a privilege as it restricted movement and hence what the body could do, or simply as practical underwear for everyday use. They discuss premises of the garment itself, and premises of the societies in which they were worn. I will in large use the writings of Valerie Steele, and this will provide a framework from which to consider what the corset is and has been, and how it is often perceived by a modern-day viewer.

In addition, I have looked at the doctoral dissertation of Bjørn Sverre Hol Haugen,³ where he discusses aspects of what it meant to lace up, and some different meanings the corset, abstracted from the bodice, might offer. Part of his doctoral dissertation was devoted to the «snøreliv», the lace-bodices, of 18th century Eastern Norway. He is not only discussing their historical context and historical wear, but also how we relate to these garments today. He has chosen the actor-network theory as theoretical platform, or rather strategy, to identify the relationship between the corset and the human. Although my thesis will not touch upon this aspect at all, he manages to pinpoint key aspects of the objects he is discussing and how we relate to them. We may not wear one, but will probably come across corsets in museums, exhibitions or in popular culture, and will add meaning to them both aesthetically and culturally. He talks a lot about the void of the body that is no longer there, the tangible void of the body the garment was made for, quoting other researchers who has dealt with the same issue. These are thoughts that resonate at Ove Harder Finseth's 2012 von Echstedtska exhibition, where the corset was put on display abstracted from the body. An entire section is therefore devoted to discussions on the void in context of corsets and torsos.

Related to the void, Jacques Rancière is of interest, especially his writings on the Belvedere torso in *Aisthesis. Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (2013). Rancière's writes about how the view of the incomplete Belvedere torso was redefined by Johann Joachim Winckelmann in the late 18th century. Artists had for centuries worked on visually imagine the sculpture completed, and proposed different interpretations of it. A sculpture's original, undamaged state had long been the goal, for sculptures in general and for the Belvedere torso in particular. And so many painters and sculptors spent months and years creating artworks

³ Bjørn Sverre Hol Haugen, *Virkningsfulle tekstiler – i østnorske bønders draktpraksiser på 1700-tallet* (Oslo: Det humanistiske fakultet, Universitetet i Oslo, 2014).

completing it in different ways, as can for example be seen repeatedly in Michelangelo's work in the Sistine Chapel. Then Winckelmann presents ideas on how the missing pieces are precisely what makes the torso so powerful, and how the rippling male torso becomes even more masculine and powerful without the limbs and head. How can these ideas be related to how Finseth's corsets, what are the implications where the torso in question is a woman's torso instead of a man's? As will be discussed later on, gender might not be the main issue raised in the context of Rancière's Belvedere chapter, it is rather the void and what the torsos are missing that comes to play.

1.3. Theoretical platform

What we are looking at and *how* we look at it will be a main subject of this thesis. For this I will be using Mads Nygaard Folkmann's book *Teoretiske perspektiver på design* (Theoretical perspectives on design) from 2016:

«At se på æstetik i design er at interessere sig for, hvordan det bliver skabt måder, hvorpå designgenstander henvender sig til os, og som regel i en positiv belysning søger at fremstå attraktive eller tilstræber at udfordre vores sanser eller forståelse. Det er tale om at se design i et kommunikationsforhold, hvor man kan bruge begrebet æstetik til at se på forskellige parametre for, hvordan en genstand fremstår, og hvordan den skal opfattes».^{4, 5}

Folkmann proposes different methods to analyze design; one is the design aesthetics as an analytical model. He divides this model into three main categories, or rather three levels: the *sensual* (sansemessige), the *conceptual* (begrebslige) and the *contextual* (kontekstuelle). This is in large the structure I will be following.

The *sensual* deals with shape, colours, textures, tactility, the atmosphere of a given location, and how it affects the senses, the vision, the hearing, the smell. This relates directly to the object, both in itself and in relation to its surroundings. In its essence, Folkman argues,

⁴ Mads Nygaard Folkmann, *Designkultur. Teoretiske perspektiver på design* (København: Samfundslitteratur, 2016), 93.

⁵ «To look at aesthetics in design is to be interested in how they create ways to approach us, and how they, usually in a positive way, try to appear attractive or aim to challenge our senses or understanding. We are talking about viewing design as a communication, where one can use the term aesthetic to look at different parameters for how an object appears, and how it is to be perceived» (my translation).

it points back to the origin of the ancient Greek word “aisthetá” - what can be sensed. Folkmann furthermore divides this into two aspects to be applied on objects of design and applied arts: in addition to the typical analysis of form, colour and technique, the viewer might have first-hand user experience with design objects. This, he argues, makes the viewer both look at the design qualities in terms of beauty and craftsmanship, and in terms of how the object might be and feel when in use. Ideally these will come together in a dynamic interaction.⁶

Turning to a *conceptual* aesthetics shifts the focus from the sensual, the use of senses, to the understanding. Here Folkmann looks closer at the relation between idea and presentation. He quotes Danish philosopher Søren Kjørup about this level of aesthetics being “mediate”, as a contrast to “immediate”. You might not get it immediately, at first glance. Knowledge and intellectual capacity is needed to decipher and analyze. Designed and applied art is described as having a wide range: from the ones you would never think twice about, either because the design is fairly anonymous, or because it is one we are so accustomed to see, or because the form reflects on the function and no explanation is needed, to the more advanced designs demanding our attention and our thought, being hard to decipher, or the design being obvious yet unique.⁷ In its most extreme form, aesthetics might redefine our understanding and experiences.⁸

The *contextual* moves from an interest in the object itself to an interest in the outer factors. What are the cultural, social and political factors, what and *who* is contributing to our understanding of an object? Of course, Folkmann turns to Jacques Rancière, one of the theoreticians to claim that aesthetics is not so much a quality in the object itself, it is a strategy. It is a realization of aesthetic material being a key to understand and experience the world. It is also a way of exercising power. But if accepting that something is presented as aesthetic, what is the cultural context for this aesthetic experience? Who is presenting it as aesthetic, and what visual tools are used? Folkmann argues that the aesthetic relation between ourselves and our objects is not neutral or isolated, it is a result of the political and cultural world we live in. Question is who holds that power of definition, and what mechanisms they play on. Larger institutions, for example, has the power of definition, and if they deem something as «art» or «aesthetic», chances are the people they reach out to – visitors, buyers or readers – will see it

⁶ Folkmann, *Designkultur. Teoretiske perspektiver på design*, 112

⁷ Folkmann, *Designkultur. Teoretiske perspektiver på design*, 119

⁸ Folkmann, *Designkultur. Teoretiske perspektiver på design*, 120

as just that.⁹

Using Folkmann's dimensions of aesthetics on the Finseth exhibition at von Echstedtska will therefore be a three-level discussion on the corsets on display and the walls they were related to, the rooms these corsets and personas inhabited, and the way they were presented and perceived, with different exhibition strategies.

Women in relations to architecture and home is a reoccurring theme in chapter three and four. I have therefore tried to look into different sources discussing the relationship between a building and its woman. One source is the so-called "Cult of domesticity", dealing with thoughts on 19th century Western women's roles in society and within the four walls of the home. Barbara Welter's article "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860" will be used. After having examined women's magazines, cookbooks and memoirs written between 1820 and 1860, and especially all the anecdotal moral stories to be found in the magazines, she discusses in her article how these sources presented and talked to families, and women in particular. Another aspect is how the industrialization changed the fabric of society, especially in the mid-19th century. It affected where people worked and lived, what they worked with and *who* did the work. An ideal of the era was to have the male head of the family as the main provider, making sure his wife was free to put all her effort into the home, and devoting her hours to the husband and the children. Deriving from this ideal was met with questioning the very womanhood of the offender. The home thus became a way to express oneself, as the physical interior was connected to the woman inhabiting it.

Elizabeth S. Cohen tells another aspect of that story. She discusses the female sphere and the honour of the house in early modern Rome, I.E. the 16th and early 17th century.¹⁰ She has looked closer at how deeply connected a woman seems to have been with the house itself, and the house as an expression of female honour, an honour that could be targeted by targeting the house. This is partly based on her studies on so-called house-scournings, and the numerous court cases where house-scourning has been used exactly to target someone's honour. Women were over-represented in such cases, and the court case appears to have been a way to restore this very honour. In other words, the house and the woman of the house is once again linked. But in his time the physical *exterior*, the architecture itself, was linked to its female inhabitant.

The 12 personas Finseth creates from the corsets integrate with their respective

⁹ Folkmann, *Designkultur. Teoretiske perspektiver på design*, 123.

¹⁰ Elizabeth E. Cohen, «Honor and Gender in the Streets of Early Modern Rome» in *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (New York: The MIT Press, 1992).

interiors, but also interrupts them. The female figure is also only represented through a shape resembling her, a silhouette made of fabric. One approach to this is issues raised in the writings of Mark Wigley, in particular his *White Walls, Designer Dresses. The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* from 2001. There he argues that houses started as textiles - separating membrans, or tents - and that the solid frame was a mere necessity which has later been expanded on, to the point where the frame became the main building and the textiles just a decoration, a way of dressing the home. He discusses the many links between architecture and dress, and claims that an all white interior is not, as often presented, a bare interior. It is a dressed one - a house clad in a white dress. This is in no way different than historical interiors with their luxurious silk wallpapers, painted or carved panels, chandeliers and mirrors – these have just chosen a more extravagant attire.

Wigley also discusses how architecture eventually and especially in the early modernist era became to be understood as masculine, while the interior was explained as feminine. The interplay of the architecture and the textiles is of interest here. Furthermore, thoughts on background and foreground in context of female participation will be discussed, as will the relationship between architecture and textiles. An aspect not brought up by Wigley but yet resonating in his writings is the “gesamtkunstwerk”¹¹, where every detail, every facet of an interior was designed by the architect or the designer, even down to clothing. In this world the woman was designed and transformed to match the interior and the house, and thus goes from being an active part to a passive one.

What many of these writings underline is that a woman’s role in the house and the home was different than those of a man. Question is if this knowledge will affect our reading of Finseth’s 2012 von Echstedtska exhibition. The exhibition centered around the corset, the female silhouette, contrasted or matched by the interior of a specific historical building.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The main goal of the thesis is thus to take a closer look at Ove Harder Finseth’s corsets in the 2012 von Echstedtska exhibition *Glansen ved hjertet, gløden i rommet* - or as the designer himself named the exhibition in English: *Splendour for the Heart, Radiance for the Room* - and approach it from different angles. Partly to see what mechanisms is at play when doing this kind of exhibition, and partly to define the context and its potential interpretations.

Chapter one thus presents the agenda, and introduces the readers to existing literature on

¹¹ A philosophy striving to unite several art forms, giving them a unison aesthetic appearance. When later discussed, I will in large refer to Dutch Henry van de Velde.

the field, and comments on the research gap there seems to be. A theoretical approach, and some preliminary thoughts on the material, will also be presented.

Chapter two takes a closer look at the von Echstedtska manor itself, and the 12 personas Ove Harder Finseth set to create through the corsets, in his own words. It will go through the main installations in the order they were presented in the exhibition catalogue, with some comments on the overall layout and the specific rooms. It will also discuss in what tradition Ove Harder Finseth might work, or how he can be interpreted, to explain some of the content of the chapters to come. This will in large deal with the sensual, what the senses can perceive, and the physical realities.

I will then discuss some historical aspects in chapter three. One is the historical practice of the corset. What did it mean to wear one, and what are some of the connotations surrounding it? Another aspect is writings and thoughts on women and domesticity. It relates to the designated female sphere, the female realm where women ruled and where they were ruled, according to traditional reading. Furthermore, thoughts on background and foreground, active and passive participation, will be discussed, as will the relationship between architecture and textiles in Mark Wigley's *White Walls, Designer Dresses. The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* from 2001. As discussed in 3.1, Wigley suggests strong parallels between a building and a textile, which is very pertinent in the context of Ove Harder Finseth's exhibition of corsets in relation to its architectural setting. Also brought up in 3.1, this can be contrasted by Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860" and Elizabeth S. Cohen's "Honor and Gender in the Streets of Early Rome" offers two different takes on a woman's relation to her home, with some overlapping and some contradicting views. The exhibition is here seen in context of historical aspects of the corset as phenomenon, and the house and architecture through selected sources.

In chapter four I directly engage with the idea of the female torso and, notably the absence of the female torso, and the absence of the female torso in these bodiless corsets and in historical garments as they are more generally displayed in museums. The void of the body that once was inside the corset becomes all the more present when empty garments are displayed. Their conical or hourglass shape is an echo of the body once inside, or the female shape it is or was meant to adorn. The void can give room for the viewers own interpretations, and in that be more powerful than the full image, as discussed by as different writers as Mark Sandberg, Bjørn Sverre Hol Haugen, Anne Sofie Hjemdal and Jacques Rancière. Rancière devoted a chapter of his book *Aisthesis. Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (2013) to Johann Joachim Winckelmann's thoughts on the Belvedere torso. The suggested perfection of

its mutilated state and the vibrant presence of what is long gone is of particular interest. This chapter will also discuss visual tools used in the exhibition.

Chapter five then interconnects ideas and theories on the corset, domesticity, the torso and the void, in context of the 12 personas Over Harder Finseth set to create at the von Echstedtska, both in how they relate and where they differ from the Finseth and the 2012 von Echstedtska exhibition. It will also discuss how the corset in different ways has become Finseth's medium, through which he creates his art.

The exhibition and its installations will be described many times over, both in the main text and the last chapter, and each time I hope to look at it from a different angle, or add some new thoughts to what has been presented and discussed. Eventually a picture might be formed on what the exhibition was and was not, what it did and what it did not. Part of that will appear a contextualization rather than an explanation, but in this hopefully some answers will still be presented.

1.5. The many terms to describe our clothes

A brief account of the various “dress” terms used in academic texts will be helpful at this point. In the past “costume” was the general term for clothes in a museal and academic context.¹² Today many regard “costume” as a theatrical act, as something worn in the theatre or in movies, or as a part of a performance, and the term can cause confusion as to what is meant. These issues have been discussed by several writers, including Charlotte Nicklas and Annabella Pollen in *Dress History: New Directions in Theory and Practice* (2015) and Valerie Cumming in *Understanding Fashion History* (2004). They are especially concerned about how everyone seems to be using different vocabulary, and that scholars should come to a conclusion of what the preferred terms are. When no two writers use terms the same way it can cause unnecessary confusion.

The term “dress” has been suggested as the most neutral one - at least when it comes to clothes and habits of clothing in academic writings. It is not restricted to the Western world either. The phenomenon of clothes in a secular setting can be referred to as “fashion”, but it often leaves out the folkloric side and gives an idea of more recent history. Fashion is often used to denote something new and desirable, but is not considered as neutral as the term “dress”.

¹² It is also still used to denote dress and fashion in general; as one example, the textile and fashion department of the Chicago History Museum is called “Costume and Textiles”.

When referring to individual clothes, the word “garment” is often used, an expression not bound by time, place or gender. But when referring to a complete outfit “attire” is more precise, as it can also include accessories and items not considered garments. That said, the terminology is not yet fully established in all disciplines, and there will be variations and overlapping practices. In this dissertation I will use “dress” and “dressing” as general terms, “garment” on individual pieces of clothing, and “attire” on a complete outfit – unless stated otherwise.

The same confusion can be seen when talking about corsets. The corset is usually understood as a stiffened pair of underbodice, made of fine or coarse materials, and used to shape the torso. Today a garment often used as in context of fetishism or to underline a historical setting, for example on stage or in reenactment. But in early modern Europe a fundamental part of the wardrobe. In early modern time «stays» or «pair of stays» was the common English terms for boned bodices not meant to be seen, or only partially seen. «Pair of stays» reflects on how they were often two halves laced together, forming a whole. In various European languages they are given names based on what they were made of (whalebones) or what they did (lacing up), and variations on this.

Along the way the French diminutive of a body, “corps”, became the modern term corset. The corset was originally a softer garment, which in the late 18th century could mean both softer and stiffer underbodices. Since then the term «corset» has come to mean all sorts of stiffened bodices primarily meant to be worn as underwear, though occasionally also used as a bodice or plain fashionwear. Corset is the term I have chosen for this thesis, sometimes even in places where «pair of stays» would be more accurate. This because Ove Harder Finseth’s creations are modern even if they are a nod to history, and usually presented as a bodice to be paired with a skirt or a pair of trousers. It should also be added that the invitation for the 2012 von Echstedtska exhibition referred to the pieces on display as “*praktkorsetter och livstycken*” (decorative corsets and bodices), and the designer himself tends to refer to them as «korsetter», corsets.

I have kept whatever term the original author has used when quoting or discussing them. The latter will be the case when discussing the doctoral dissertation by Bjørn Sverre Hol Haugen.¹³ He has used the Norwegian term “snøreliv”, which I in large has translated to “laced bodices” or “lacing bodices”, while I other times calls them “corsets”. Main reason for this is because the Norwegian “snøreliv” historically was a bodice as much as it was

¹³ Hol Haugen, *Virkningsfulle tekstiler – i østnorske bønders drakspraksiser på 1700-tallet* (2014).

underwear, and probably more on display than the continental equivalents. I am hence trying to underline the researcher's preferred term where this difference is of importance, as it reflects on the different use they had. But the main term used throughout is "corset".

2. Von Echstedtska and Ove Harder Finseth's 12 female personas

2.1 Presenting the designer and the exhibition

Ove Harder Finseth, born in Mandal in Southern Norway in 1965, is a Norwegian designer and artist. He started his career in 1990, in the studio of Norwegian fashion designer Kjell Torheim, which meant Finseth learned the tricks of the trade while still in school. He got his formal education at The Norwegian National Academy of Craft and Art Industry in Oslo, graduating in 1997, and with further training at the L'École de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne (ECSCP) as well as Lesage in Paris. At the ECSCP he was considered experienced enough to bypass much of the training, and finished his studies there in a little over a year time opposed to the usual three years.¹⁴ In Paris he also got to work at Maison Christian Lacroix, and picked up clues from the Haute Couture industry. In his own creations, Finseth soon became known for his craftsmanship on ornate details, especially in the details considered too costly and time consuming in mass production of clothes: appliquées, embroidery, couching, beading and other handmade embellishments.

In the late 1990s several of the long-established Norwegian designers closed their business. One of them was Kjell Torheim, where Finseth had started his career some ten years earlier. At the same time many up-and-coming talents stepped into the limelight – amongst them Wenche Lyche, the design collaboration Pikene bak Slottet, and Ove Harder Finseth himself.¹⁵ Finseth launched his own business in 1998, and opened a couture workshop in eastern Oslo in 1999, focusing on one-of-a-kind commissions and unique pieces rather than bi-annual collections.

The designer got a flying start when he was asked to create the wedding dress for the future Royal Highness, Crown Princess Mette-Marit, in February 2001, to be used in the royal wedding in August the same year (*fig. II*). For the Crown Princess he created a corseted bodice hidden under light silk crepe drapes, with attachable sleeves, and a long silk crepe and silk tulle skirt with train. According to the designer the idea was twofold: one key aspect was to make dress reflect on the silhouette of queen Maud of Norway from some 100 years earlier. In this way there would be a sense on continuity in style and tradition. The other was letting the dress and train look and move like sea foam on the shore, as a hint to the bride's coastal birth place in Southern Norway.¹⁶ 125 meters of silk tulle was used to achieve this. The

¹⁴ Ove Harder Finseth, in an interview done in his studio on March 5, 2018.

¹⁵ Anne Kjellberg, *Mote – trender og designere i Oslo 1900-2000* (Oslo: Huitfelt forlag, 2000), 76.

¹⁶ Ove Harder Finseth, in an interview done in his studio on March 5, 2018.

creation was very well received in Norwegian press and also in the international press, as the wedding was covered worldwide. It has since often appeared on lists of best royal wedding dresses. Flying start indeed.

Variations of corseted bodices and flowing skirts has since become one of his trademarks. Another hallmark of his has been the rouleau method, where this traditionally decorative element put on top of another textile is transformed into the construction itself, like a skeleton without flesh and skin. This can be seen for example in his creations *Maud's Espalier* from 1997¹⁷ and in the bustle shaped *Smi en drøm*¹⁸, also from 1997 (*fig. I*). Two jackets from 1993, still experimental in technique, was also made in this manner.¹⁹ Garments from this point in his career²⁰ often features plain and almost anonymous dresses used as the fundament, and with a separate rouleau garment on top. The rouleau garment is in its very structure transparent, with the looping, twisting and turning padded piping braided into itself at every turn, and in the process forming a silhouette and emulating the torso - the female torso. Thus, the female torso is a reoccurring theme in many of Finseth's works, and was to become a key element in his 2012 exhibition at the von Echstedtska museum in Sweden.

The von Echstedtska estate in Värmland, Sweden was once the home of Bengt Ekstedt (1723-94), who fancified his name to von Echstedt when he was granted a title in 1756. The country estate was built in 1762-1764, when it went under the name Smedby gård. It is considered a fine example of Swedish 18th century country estates and manors, with its many wall decorations and its legendary, well-preserved 18th century privy with seven individual seats and a painted octagon ceiling.²¹ In the 1930s there were plans to move the estate to the Skansen outdoor museum in Stockholm, where many elder buildings were resurrected in a museal setting. The estate was then bought by Värmlands Museum in 1939 and kept in situ. After years of restorations it was opened to the public in 1964.

A longstanding tradition at the museum has been the annual art exhibitions inside the main building or in its gardens during the summer months. Ove Harder Finseth told in an interview²² that he first visited the estate in 2007, when fellow Norwegian Gunnar Fon

¹⁷ The National Museum, inventory number (OK-1999-0001).

¹⁸ Nordenfjeldske kunstindustrimuseum (NK2006-001).

¹⁹ Short rouleau jackets of different materials and partially own techniques. Today in The National Museum, inventory number OK-2003-0075 and OK-2003-0076.

²⁰ It should be mentioned that he never stopped making wearable rouleau pieces, but in later years more in the shape of accessories or used as decorations, than creating full bodices, dresses and jackets.

²¹ Johan Cederlund, *Classical Swedish Architecture & Interiors, 1650-1840* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006), 110.

²² Ove Harder Finseth, in an interview done in his studio on March 5, 2018.

exhibited garnet trimmed and garnished with tassels, and the place was stuck in Finseth's mind ever since. In 2012, Finseth was himself invited to do the annual summer exhibition at von Echstedtska. He chose to use the house itself as a starting point, and especially the ornate walls. Many of the rooms display wall paintings or tapestry from the 18th century; colourful, figurative, ornate wall decorations, and different in every room. Finseth created pieces relating to these very walls, in the shape of corsets made of lush silks, with embroidery, beading and couching he «translated» the decorations of the house onto the corsets. The corsets were furthermore displayed suspended from the ceiling, in front of the walls, with connotations of a figure trying to break out or blending in from these walls, or in various ways inhabiting the rooms. As Finseth wrote in the exhibition catalogue, his aim was to create a group of female personas:

“So many rooms have tales to tell. Individuals have moved in and out of them and made traces in history, left remembrances in the walls. The walls, rooms and stories have inspired me to continue telling tales, using my artwork. (...) Each corset also tells a story. Each and every one is a woman who lives in harmony with or in contrast to her surroundings. One has had a wonderful life and has adored getting all the attention she could ever desire. Another feels as if she blends in with the wall and is just hoping that she will be noticed at least once, while a third lady launches a kick towards the wall, to avoid being trapped by it. She has a rebel streak and wants to be noticed.

The embroidery is a piece of history, a painting of threads and beads, colours and different material. Looking at the artwork, each visitor is at liberty to think and form images and stories. (...) The stories of these corsets are inspired by all the impressions that the rooms at von Echstedtska gården offer. I have created twelve different women who have lived their lives on the farm, from fine ladies to young maids (...).²³

So according to Finseth we are facing twelve fictional women inhabiting the house and its many rooms, and who relate to the house and the walls in different ways. Nine were represented through corsets hanging in mid-air, while three were used on mannequins also fitted with tulle skirts and wigs, to make more lifelike representations. These female representations came to be because of the walls, and each room got its leading lady. But how,

²³ «Glansen ved hjertet, gløden i rommet», exhibition catalogue from the von Echstedtska, 2012.

and where, and by what means? To get a stronger sense of the nerve of the exhibition I will give a brief overview of the different corsets that went on display, and the rooms they were exhibited in.

2.2 The female personas

The 12 corsets Ove Harder Finseth ended up displaying were in large made especially for the von Echstedtska estate, though a few had previously been seen at the exhibition at the Nøstetangen room i Drammens Museum in Norway two years before. The Nøstetangen room displays pre-industrial glassware, made between 1741 and 1777, and the glassware is reckoned one of the finest expressions of Rococo splendour in the Dano-Norwegian kingdom. Chandeliers, ceremonial cups, wine glasses, bottles, espergnes and carafes - the hard, transparent glass paired with presumed silkier, softer, more tactile corsets created an interesting contrast (*fig. III*). Yet the sculpted corsets relationship to the hard glass shapes were not as alien as one would first assume. In some ways they even highlighted each other:

*“The decorative corsets that he is exhibiting in a specially-composed installation in the Nøstetangen Room are functional, but which are presented here to be observed, temporarily detached from their use, but not removed from the phenomenology of fashion and feminine beauty. The corsets are hung from the ceiling; we can see that the object’s form may be regarded as abstract, but it is quickly apparent that they should form shells around a woman’s bust and waist”.*²⁴

Aspects of this exhibition, the language of it so to speak, was repeated for the von Echstedtska two years later. The ornate silk corsets picked up clues from their surroundings, and this historical and environmental context lent a backdrop to the stories the corsets potentially created. And as mentioned, some of the previously displayed corsets from the Nøstetangen room were also displayed at the von Echstedtska exhibition.

Both the exhibition at the Drammens Museum and at von Echstedtska were by invitation, as curators of both locations asked Ove Harder Finseth to add a part of his design universe to these existing historical environments. According to the designer he was free to execute the exhibitions as he saw fit, with few or no restrictions on items to be displayed, and on how they were to be displayed.²⁵ Which indicates that both the red thread of the exhibition,

²⁴ Drammens Museum’s website, information retrieved on October 11, 2017.

²⁵ Ove Harder Finseth, in an interview done in his studio on March 5, 2018.

and the way things were displayed were according to the designer's vision. As I touch upon the aspect of exhibition strategies, it is of interest to establish that the look of the exhibitions was with a basis in Finseth's own intentions. This is the order the corsets were presented in in the exhibition catalogue at von Echstedtska (*fig. V*), and some preliminary thoughts on them.

1. "Spanish Rose". This corset is the first in the catalogue to display the main shape Finseth usually creates; a mildly curved sleeveless bodice-like corset with pointed curves up over the bust and the shoulders, where straps would usually be. This red silk corset was displayed towards a greyish green wall with a painted landscape. The front of the corset has a fully beaded black rectangular field with a floral motif inside it: a highly sculptured display of large and small red roses with green silk leaves, gold leaves and beading. This as a contrast to the muted wall decorations with a landscape, sheep, a dog and a human figure. Yet the green leaves of the roses correspond with the leaves of the painted trees, and the black square field of the corset corresponds with the painted landscape with a square layout, almost like looking out of a big window. So a sense of dialogue, but as a first impression the bright red colour makes the corset appear a huge contrast to the green walls.

2. "Who was she". A Chinese brocade with orange foundation and golden lotus flowers. The front has an oval motif displaying the portrait of an 18th century lady in an orange dress, framed by a golden rouleaus, intertwined, and with contrasting beading and gems in between. The corset was hung next to a golden 18th century wall-hung clock, where the round clock somewhat resonated in the oval portrait. The golden rouleaus furthermore corresponds to rocailles and flowers painted on the walls, but also functions as a picture frame. The portrait itself is of an unknown woman - «Who was she» - which can be found in another room in the manor, where the installation "Daisy" could be seen.

3. "Night Garden". The "Night Garden" installation featured one of few corsets to be paired with a skirt, presented as a complete attire. The main corset is bright yellow, but with an ombre effect with black embroidery gradually «growing» up at the left side, threatening to take over and cover the whole surface. This was combined with a floor-length black tulle skirt. "Night Garden" was placed on a dummy in the grand dining room, and thus not only featured a complete attire, but also a lifelike mannequin. In the exhibition brochure it was however worn by a model, as was the case with several of the corsets when depicted.

4. "Woven Ribbons". This corset differs a bit from the others in being made of coarser materials and overall looking rougher. The main fabric is a coarse silk weave, of different shades but with brown as the dominant colour. Matching silk ribbons of orange, red, blue and

yellow has been woven into the lower half, ending in loose-hanging ends further embellished with floral sequins, beading and brown fur details. The front almost gives the illusion of a small apron. This corset was originally intended for the kitchen areas, and this is also where it was photographed for the exhibition catalogue. But ended up being hung in one of the finer rooms, opposite a bright pink silk one.

5. “White Duchess”. This was the second attire to be paired with a skirt. The corset is made of white silk, with cut-out gold lace appliquéd on the white silk surface, and with floral red-and-turquoise beading on top. Displayed with a floor-length white tulle skirt, it was placed on a mannequin in the grand dining room, similar to the “Night Garden” ensemble. There were thus two lifelike mannequins in complete attires in this room. This was a corset also appearing in the Nøstetangen room in the exhibition Finseth did the the year before, but there only the corset itself and not a complete attire. It was hence adapted to its new environments at the von Echstedtska.

6. “Daisy”. A corset made of raspberry red silk with silvery and pink flowers. A rank of flowers going from upper left half to lower right half, made of rouleaus of crimson and pink shades, and of various textures, was used as a surface for red and white fabric flowers. The flowers were further embellished with beading. This corset was put towards a greyish green wall with only barely accentuated painted acanthus leaves hanging from buquets of flowers. Like the “Spanish Rose”, the colour at first glance makes the corset appear in contrast to the walls, but looking closer the rouleaus seems to pick up the curved shapes of the acanthus leaves. This was the first - and only one of three - to differ from the shape usually seen in Finseth’s corsets. Instead of the pointed shape over bust and shoulder blades, the shape for this was more tubular and straight-cut.

7. “Waterfall”. A third and last to be displayed with a skirt and on a mannequin. The corset is made of teal/mint silk, with a matching tulle draped crossing the right shoulder, over the front bust, to the left back of the bodice. On top appliquées of sequined flowers, and with large fabric flower on the shoulder strap and in the waist. The corset was combined with a matching teal tulle skirt, and displayed in the dining room - Salen - of the estate. The walls in this room displays a darker teal shade and with floral garlands and landscapes in a mock Pompeiian style.

8. “Frozen Water”. An ice green silk corset decorated with various colours of rouleaus intertwined. Like the “Who was she” and “Daisy” corsets, this one combined two of Finseth’s specialities - a boned corset, and a rouleau construction. But whereas the others only had elements of it, as a defined field of decoration, this one has the rouleaus covering the bust area

and much of the abdomen, and in turn it has been further embellished with crystals. It was displayed towards a dark brown wall in the private rooms of the master of the house (in Swedish called Herr Assesorns Rum). On a drawer next to it a large blue and white porcelain bowl was placed, and next to this again a chair with similar colours in the seat. The ice green corset was placed hanging over these items, and the display almost forms a trinity. But that might be more a result of a good display - the corset was not made specifically for the von Echstedtska. It had been one of the centerpieces in the Nøstetangen room the year before. But it is an interesting piece, as it brings Finseth's early rouleau speciality into his new medium: the corset. A meeting between old and new, essentially.

9. "Midnight Blossom". A black silk corset with sculpted turquoise and green silk flowers, and very delicate embroidered silver leaves. Small turquoise flowers were beaded in between. This was put towards a teal wall with floral pattern on the wall, where the flower pattern displays a similar diagonal pattern as in the corset. Finseth's comments on the corsets being created based on the wall decorations comes to mind. But once again, this might rather be a result of a good display than of an actual connection, as this too was not originally created for the von Echstedtska, but for the Nøstetangen exhibition. That said, it certainly found its home at the von Echstedtska.

10. "Morning Dew". A bright green silk corset fully decorated with large crimson velvet flowers and green velvet leaves, and with silvery beading on top and in between. The flowers, leaves and beading almost fully covers the front of the corset. This as a direct response to the walls behind; a greenish base with green leaves and crimson flowers, adorning the bedroom of the lady of the house. In interior photos from the bedroom it was displayed in, one gets the sense of camouflage. Albeit the corset displayed was probably the most ornate item of this exhibition, it perfectly blends in with the room and only when you discover this one shifts the fine balance of the wall compositions does the torso shape become more prominent.

11. "Red Lillies". This white corset was, together with the "Daisy", one to feature a straighter and more tubular shape, constructed without the curves and points. The white satin has white lace appliquéés at the front and sides, and an embroidered motif of green silk leaves, large red flowers - lillies, going by the title - and small yellow flowers. In addition it had polychrome beading on top. This was put towards a wall of mock landscapes with frames indicating either a Pompeiiian style or illusionistic columns. The white was a stark contrast to the muted green and brown walls. Only when looking at the vertical panels in between the large painted landscapes does a similar leaf pattern as on the corset emerge. So again, shapes

are repeated, if you look closer. Another interesting aspect of this display is that the corset was placed next to a longcase clock. Both of them almost appeared as exclamation points in the room, with their white, decorated surface being a stark contrast to the brownish green walls and its discrete landscapes.

12. “Wings of Gold”. A second corset to be made of slightly coarser materials - a rough knitted metallic/grey fabric. But this one was featured with a front panel of shiny gold panel. On this gold panel a bird, caught in flight, created out of rich beading of large and small pearls, metallic embroidery, gold trim and faceted stones. This was hung in the servant quarters of the manor; in front of a black square on a plastered wall. This is the last of the corsets previously displayed in the Nøstetangen room, but reincarnated. In the Nøstetangen room only the front panel was featured, paired with a white silk garment, short in front and long in the back, like a tailcoat. The front opening allowed the ornate beading to be seen, so it functioned like a period stomacher. The silvery and glittering look of this one was nicely accompanied with the 18th century glass of the Nøstetangen room. Yet, featuring coarser side/back materials and placing the corset in the servant quarters at the von Echstedtska transforms it, and also allowed it to adapt into its new environments.

2.3 Facing the corsets

The von Echstedtska estate has offered an array of themes and styles for their annual summer exhibitions. Tattle-decorated garments (Gunnar Fon 2007), modern sculptures (Anders Widoff 2017), outdoor dream houses (Ingalena Klenell 2013), mirror installations (Ebba Matz 2016), ornate hats (Mona Strand 2010) and modern paintings (Kenneth Börjesson 2011) has been some of the themes meeting the visitors. Though many artists have used the manor, its walls, decorations, items and gardens as a starting point, a reoccurring experience is that the items put on display appears purposely disruptive. The visitor is enticed to stop, look and process. In this aspect Ove Harder Finseth’s corset might be an exhibition where the items on display most harmonized with its surroundings - at least at first glance. The idea of the «gesamtkunstverk» comes to mind, where clothing, interior and architecture all harmonize and blends. This will be discussed later on.

The Finseth exhibition spanned from the finest room of the house to the kitchen, and a corset was the main subject. Though what kind of corset? It is a garment that has come and gone in fashion these last 350 years, and with a shape that kept changing, despite having the human torso as reference. From the conical V-shaped 18th century stays to the tubular and bust-lifting Regency stays, from the hourglass shaped Victorian corsets and S-shaped

Edwardian equivalent to softer spandex versions of the 20th century: the corset has been an ever-changing construction updated to fit new ideals. But the purpose has been the same - to in some way shape or affect the body that was wearing it.

In the late 20th century the corset made its comeback in popular culture in general and high fashion in particular, through creations by designers like Jean Paul Gaultier, Thierry Mugler, Vivienne Westwood and Christian Lacroix. But in this it went from an absolute necessity to a fashion statement accessory, from an everyday tool from history to an item of excess in the modern-day world. And this is only some of the aspects a viewer might reflect on. Our idea of the phenomenon that is the corset might differ substantially, from first-hand knowledge after wearing one, to a slight knowledge through a movie once seen. But in its basics visitors would probably first and foremost see it as a garment, with various historical connotations.

The comeback of corsets and crinolines in the 1980s and 1990s has been explained in different ways, as discussed in several chapter in the book *Fashioning the Body*, and especially in the chapter “Corsets, crinolines, and bustles in today’s fashion: drawing creative inspiration from the history of undergarments” by Sophie Lemahieu.²⁶ She writes that it for some designers might come down to their background - Christian Lacroix had studied art history, while Alexander McQueen had background as a costume maker for musicals and theatre, as well was training in London’s legendary Savile Row tailor district, where he specialized in uniforms. Both of them incorporated historical references into their design universes time and time again, in sync with the nostalgia and neo-romantic trends, but also fully displaying that they had intimate knowledge of fashion past. With Alexander McQueen he also seemed to enjoy the changed movements and restrictions such underwear often gives - the corset, the bustle, the challenging shoes.²⁷ With others, for example Jean Paul Gaultier and Thierry Mugler, gender and sexuality has been more in focus. In the words of Gaultier: «*An article of clothing has no sex, unless it hugs the body tightly*».²⁸ If the designer did a corset, it was for sex appeal, or to underline gender.

There is furthermore the 1970s and 1980s tradition where Vivienne Westwood’s first creations saw the day of light - or even has gotten the honour of having kickstarted - where

²⁶ Sophie Lemahieu, “Corsets, crinolines, and bustles in today’s fashion: drawing creative inspiration from the history of undergarments”, in *Fashioning the Body: an intimate history of the silhouette* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015).

²⁷ Lemahieu, “Corsets, crinolines, and bustles in today’s fashion: drawing creative inspiration from the history of undergarments”, 246.

²⁸ Lemahieu, “Corsets, crinolines, and bustles in today’s fashion: drawing creative inspiration from the history of undergarment”», 247.

historical references was deconstructed and put together in new ways. It has been interpreted as an anti-establishment way of commenting on society. Though her focus might have changed throughout her career, there is still elements of deconstructed history in her creations. In other words, three quite different approaches, though a play with history, through a way of challenging the human body, and through a way of expressing anti-establishment thoughts.

Historical-inspired corsets and bodices in high fashion is thus a trend seen across Europe from the late 1970s on, and it is not surprising to see it surfacing in the works of Norwegian designers as well. Relating that to Ove Harder Finseth, his approach might seem conventional at first glance, with curving corsets and rich decorations. But I am tempted to claim that he belongs to a quite different tradition still.

Both historical and modern creations have had a focus on reshaping or even deconstructing the torso. But Finseth's constructions does not appear to aim for any reshaping or remodeling of the body (*fig. IV*). Instead, in his corsets at von Echstedtska all but two of the corsets follow the same basic model - a strapless, boned construction with a mildly pointed, curved front and a matching curved neckline with sharp points in the place of straps. These corsets may be boned, but are not first and foremost made to shape the torso. They rather act like a shell, a decorated shell where he could apply his beaded motifs and tactile surfaces. The corsets are basically Finseth's substitute for a canvas, where he «paints» with lace, beading, embroidery and couching. In the introduction text for the 2012 exhibition he admitted this himself, that he was thinking about his beadwork and embroidery as "...*a piece of history, a painting of threads and beads, colours and different material*".²⁹

This sentiment is something that was pointed out in the Drammens Museum text accompanying the Nøstetangen exhibition in 2010:

*"Ove Harder Finseth is an artist who is faithful to his medium and his metier. The fabrics and sparkling strass are his paints and his palette. Scissors, pins and needles are his brushes".*³⁰

Exploring that thought further, the physical difference between a white canvas and a corset might not be as big as first perceived. The white canvas is in essence linen, fabric, stretched out over a wooden frame and coated and prepared for the finer colours and details. This too could be said about Finseth's corsets, and even corsets in general - linen or another lining

²⁹ «Glansen ved hjertet, gløden i rommet», exhibition catalogue from the von Echstedtska, 2012

³⁰ From Drammens Museum's website, retrieved October 11, 2017

fabric stretched over a stiffened substance, be it using baleen, reed, metal, wood or plastic, “coated” in the top fabric, ready to be decorated. In its very essence the same ritual is repeated in both.

One difference remains, however: the finished result, the shape. Where the canvas is usually flat and often rectangular, with one side visible for viewers, the corset follows the lines of the torso, either one of flesh and blood, or the ideal shape the torso was meant to be moulded into. And it can be viewed from all angles. So when “*scissors, pins and needles are his brushes*”, Finseth’s canvas is a sculpted and three-dimensional surface, with maybe different connotations than the flat surface.

With this in mind it should be noted that the 2012 von Echstedtska exhibition was a sales exhibition. The Finseth creations on display were for sale, meant to be worn, or at least with the possibility of being worn, by a client who would not have the garment custom-made, unless a second version was made especially for them. The latter was an option given. But offering a flattering and fairly uncomplicated shape might have made it easier for a modern-day buyer to envision themselves in the corset, and maybe also fit into it, moreso than a fully boned and reshaping pair of stays that would alter the body substantially and which would need to be tailor made.

2.4 Useable Installations

Question is: would visitors to the estate understand it was a sales exhibition? The corsets were presented as installations, without a price tag or number on the walls. They were presented in a setting and in an environment where they were a part of a larger whole. Though they would probably be understood as garments, the actual wear of the corsets might not have been the first thing coming to mind. Trying to pinpoint Ove Harder Finseth’s various corset exhibitions is also an interesting challenge. The four most prominent ones - at Nøstetangenrommet in Drammen, at the von Echstedtska estate in Sweden, at Huseby bruk in Sweden, and at Grev Wedels plass in Oslo - shows some of the same tendencies: abstracted, strung-up corsets, placed along artworks or in a historical environment. The designer seems to enjoy the flirt with history, or the flirt with art. And though the corsets he makes and exhibits are wearable, it is not their primary mission when on display.

Discussing the line between applied art, fine art and everything in between is often presented as an outdated approach. The need for dividing between disciplines is less of interest than just some decades ago, and can even be deemed irrelevant. However, in practical terms it needs to be taken into consideration. What kind of art you create will affect what artist

organization or union you might belong to, and this organization will deal with issues like managing copyrights, grants and funds. In other words, it can affect an artist's income and rights. It can furthermore determine on what arenas works are presented and displayed, and who is talking and writing about them. In the case of Ove Harder Finseth, it can also affect whether it makes most sense to refer to his corsets and attires as garments or creations, or works of art. It is also an aspect often brought up by visitors viewing the art. The concern on how and when to use artefacts, how they function in use and how they feel when in use is more often than not brought up. And if an artefact is not understood, especially if it looks like something you have at home or something that *should* be able to be in use, it can cause both frustration, fascination, anger or approval. For better or worse, it provokes a reaction.

This was an interesting aspect when landing a theoretical platform for the *Glansen ved hjertet, gløden i rommet* exhibition. As this and later chapters show, though I refer to Ove Harder Finseth as a designer first and foremost, defining him and this particular exhibition offers more than one answer as to what he is displaying. It is clothes, yes. But they are also abstracted from the human body, abstracted from their perceived use. A main idea was to try and define what we are looking at and *how*. I could refer to Ove Harder Finseth's corset both as applied art, as clothes, as art or as installations, and I would be able to defend all of those approaches. But I wondered what answer I might find if looking at the material through newer theories of design. Both looking at the shape, materials and artistic nerve of an object, but also discussing the aspect of use and of what kind of meanings, of context, that might be applied as well, and what strategies the designer might turn to. I wanted several approaches. For this I have looked to Mads Nygaard Folkmann's book *Teoretiske perspektiver på design* (Theoretical perspectives on design) from 2016.

Folkmann discuss if design is the process or the finished product, and proposes different methods to analyze it; one is the design aesthetics as an analytical model. He divides this into three main categories, or rather three levels: the *sensual* (sanselige), the *conceptual* (begrepslige) and the *contextual* (kontekstuelle), which looks at different levels of design, or different angles to view it from. This will cover both the artefact, its surroundings and the context in which it is used, displayed, discussed and made meaningful.

The *sensual* deals with shape, colours, textures, tactility, the atmosphere of a given location, and how it affects the senses, the vision, the hearing, the smell. This relates directly to the object, both in itself and in relation to its surroundings. Folkmann furthermore divides this into two aspects to be applied on objects of design and applied arts: in addition to the typical analysis of form, colour and technique, the viewer might have first-hand user

experience with design objects. This, he argues, makes the viewer both look at the design qualities in terms of beauty and craftsmanship, and in terms of how the object might be in use. And these comes together in a dynamic interaction.³¹

Folkmann also turns to the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky and his *Art as Technique* from 1919. Shklovsky is quoted by Folkmann on writing that:

*“The technique of art is to make objects «unfamiliar», to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty in length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged”.*³²

Shklovsky’s thoughts on “ostranenie” - defamiliarization - is picked up by Folkmann, who in turns asks how we can successfully achieve this prolongment. What makes a viewer stop and sense, experience? Is it related to forms, shapes and colours? Is it the objects that literally screams for our attention, or can it be any object? Does something happen in our interaction with said objects, be it a sound or a smell, or maybe a tangible texture?³³ Different approaches might be chosen, and different results might be achieved, but both to Shklovsky and to Folkmann the prolongment is desirable, it is a quality to aim for.

Turning to a *conceptual* aesthetics shifts the focus from the sensual, the use of senses, to the understanding. Folkmann also looks closer at the relation between idea and presentation, the intention and the finished product. Knowledge and interpretations is needed – he quotes Søren Kjølrup about this level of aesthetics being «mediate», as a contrast to «immediate». You might not get it immediately, at first glance. Knowledge and intellectual capacity is necessary to decipher and analyze:

*«Det analytiske spørgsmål er, hvad designerens idé er, og hvordan designet i sin form og materialitet iscenesætter eller forholder seg til denne idé, og om idéen så at sige restløst går op i designets udformning, eller om idéen indeholder en form for betydningsoverskud, et ‘mere’».*³⁴

Folkmann uses *Juicy Salif* as an example, as the citrus squeezer by Philippe Starck in no

³¹ Folkmann, *Designkultur. Teoretiske perspektiver på design*, 112.

³² Shklovsky, quoted in Folkmann: *Designkultur. Teoretiske perspektiver på design*, page 112-113.

³³ Folkmann, *Designkultur. Teoretiske perspektiver på design*, 113.

³⁴ Folkmann, *Designkultur. Teoretiske perspektiver på design*, 118.

way reveals its function at first glance. Instead, Folkman argues, the extravagante design is ambiguous, and problematize its own role as a citrus squeezer and underlines its uniqueness.³⁵ There is a degree of aesthetic self reflection in its design. It could in this be argued that citrus squeezing is not its sole purpose, and that looking cool on a kitchen counter is just as important a component. But to Folkmann the *Juicy Salif* is in one end of a design spectrum ranging from the ones you would never think twice about, either because the design is fairly anonymous, or because it is one we are so accustomed to see, or because the form reflects on the function and no explanation is needed, to the designs demanding our attention and our thought, being hard to decipher, or the design being obvious yet unique.³⁶

In Folkmann's third angle, the *contextual*, he moves from an interest in the object itself to an interest in the outer factors. What are the cultural, social and political factors to consider, what and *who* is contributing to our understanding of an object? Not surprisingly, Folkmann turns to Jacques Rancière, one of the theoreticians to claim that the aesthetics is not so much a quality in the object itself, it is a strategy. It's a realization of aesthetic material being a key to understand and experience the world. It is also a way of exercising power. If we are accepting that something is presented as aesthetic, what is the cultural context for this aesthetic experience? Who is presenting it as aesthetic, and what visual tools are used? Folkmann argues that the aesthetic relation between ourselves and our objects is not neutral or isolated, it is a result of the political and cultural world we live in, and also a result of someone defining a given setting or object as aesthetic. Larger institutions, for example, has the *power of definition*. Meaning, if they deem something as "art" or "aesthetic", chances are the people they reach out to, be it visitors, buyers or readers, will see it as just that, and not question the claim.³⁷ In turn this can define the value or the prestige of said object or artist.

Garments are usually praised for their ability to make the human body look good, or even spectacular, or at least make the wearer stand out from the crowd. But on display in a museum or gallery, or as abstracted wall hangings as was the case at the von Echstedtska, they are presented as pieces of art, removed from what is considered their primary mission: submissive to the human body, a tool for this body, for the person wearing it, to express something about the occasion or the wearer's role. In effect a museum or gallery display and a window display in a shop might not look vastly different. But their goal is often quite different, as one setting invites you own the item, to buy and use it, while the other invites

³⁵ Folkmann, *Designkultur. Teoretiske perspektiver på design*, 118.

³⁶ Folkmann, *Designkultur. Teoretiske perspektiver på design*, 119.

³⁷ Folkmann, *Designkultur. Teoretiske perspektiver på design*, 123.

you to reflect on its meaning, use, value and history. Where something is displayed thus matters.

Folkmann's proposal of analyzing through the sensual, conceptual and contextual will therefore be a three-level discussions on the corsets on display, as well as the rooms they inhabited, and the way they were presented and perceived. In this discussion I will also try and touch upon some exhibition strategies or exhibition mechanisms at play. In the exhibition catalogue Finseth presents us to female personas he has created for the estate, or the tangible presence of the shadows of women in each room. The shape of the torso was hovering just above the visitors, hung in front of the walls, and appeared to almost break out of the wall it was put in relation to. In choosing the female torso and linking them to walls and the building itself, thoughts on domesticity and women's role in society springs forward. An own chapter will therefore be on women and domesticity in a historical context to try and see if history might give some clues on how to read this exhibition.

3. Women and domesticity: the issues of decorativity

3.1. The need of corsetry

Having looked closer at the exhibition, it becomes clear it borrows a lot from history. From the choice of the historical garment we know as the corset to the 18th century location, the exhibition is in the realm of bygone eras. The relation between a woman and her home, the von Echstedtska estate and its interior and walls, was the starting point of the designer, and his expressed intention was to translate this into female personas. In the Western world a woman's body has often been interpreted as more fragile and vulnerable than a man's body. Women are often smaller in height, and thus perceived to be more delicate. Women's bodies could even be described as so weak they had to be supported daily by the corset, or would at least benefit from it. This was not necessarily a male claim imposed on women. As dress researcher and director of New York's Fashion Institute of Technology Valerie Steele points out, the corset was condemned by many educated men, yet women kept wearing them. It was a way of achieving that desirable and youthful hourglass figure, and was used as a tool to create their desired persona.³⁸ When lacing up, women took on a silhouette and a style known by the bourgeoisie and upper class in the Western world, hence stepping into a desired level of society. Furthermore, it was considered a much welcome support of the body in a time where child births were frequent and physical consequences common.³⁹

Madame Roxey A. Chaplin, an English corsetière, wrote in 1854 that:

*"It never seems to have occurred to the Doctors that ladies must and will wear stays, in spite of all the medical men of Europe. The strong and perfect feel the benefit of using them; and to the weak and delicate or imperfect, they are absolutely indispensable".*⁴⁰

The same Madame Chaplin quotes an unnamed French doctor, who had complimented her corsets: *"Madame, your corset is more like a new layer of muscles than an artificial extraneous article of dress".*⁴¹ The corset is here sold off as a natural extension of the body, and a beneficial one for both the strong and the weak.

³⁸ Valerie Steele, *The Corset. A Cultural History*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 2.

³⁹ Britta Hammar and Pernilla Rasmussen: *Underkläder. En kulturhistoria*. (2008), page 129.

⁴⁰ Madame Chaplin, quoted in Steele, *The Corset. A Cultural History*, 41.

⁴¹ Madame Chaplin, quoted in Steele, *The Corset. A Cultural History*, 42.

In contrast, modern studies have shown that even wearing a moderately laced corset will cause shortage of breath, as the corset forces the wearer to approach a shallow upper-diaphragmatic breathing. In short, changing a natural breathing rhythm to a forced one. Valerie Steele suggests that shallow breathing, in combination with heavy evening gowns and physical activity like dancing, would make women more likely to faint - which in turn underlined the idea of the fragile feminine body. The instrument that would help strengthen and support their torso could also be what made them weaker.⁴²

It was also thought that children, boys and girls alike, were to be shaped and polished to achieve their ultimate potential. Thus, from they were born they were swaddled, and later they were fitted with corsets from a young age: “*Making a child wear whalebone stays or a corset was the evidence, in the context of the times, of the care lavished upon him or her. The infant was considered to be weak, fragile, and incomplete*”.⁴³ It was thought the skeleton needed to be controlled and shaped, first by means of swaddling and then corsetting, or else it could become deformed. So controlling the skeleton and the torso from a young age was not just a matter of being prepared for a future with restricting clothing, it was also primary a way of raising healthy children. But while swaddling and corsets were a daily routine for both boys and girls in their early years, boys would stop wearing corsets when reaching a certain age - exception being for military use or otherwise special needs. Girls, however, kept wearing them for the rest of their lives, as a part of their daily routine.

Contrary to modern belief, the idea of wearing corsets was not necessarily to make the waist as narrow as possible, but to make the general body of a woman presentable in a given social setting. This is an often ignored part of what it meant to wear a corset, along with stiffened underskirts and heeled shoes. By its very nature it immobilized the wearer, or at least challenged them in their movements, and mastering this from a young age would immediately reveal the rank of the wearer. You could not simply buy these items and fake it. A woman donning the corset was expected to handle its eventual restrictions, or else make a fool of herself. Other historical periods and cultures show glimpses of a similar mindset, albeit in more extreme form: foot binding in the Song and Ming dynasty in China, enlonging neck coils amongst the Kayan people in Myanmar and cranial modification amongst historical natives in the Americas. The modified skeleton would in itself be a sign of privilege, often implying the person in question was not a manual labourer, and that they had exercised the

⁴² Steele, *The Corset. A Cultural History*, 70

⁴³ Anaïs Biernat, in Denis Bruna, *Fashioning the Body. An intimate story of the silhouette*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 129.

modification or restriction from a young age. But those forms of skeleton manipulations would also affect the person's movement. The beauty would be both in the actual altered look, and in the new movements they dictated.

In the Western world it was usually the matriarch who oversaw that the females of the family were clothed and trained in a way suitable for the family.⁴⁴ Preparing them for a hopefully prosperous or safe future meant both providing the skills required for this future, and the tools to achieve it with. The corset was a key component in this orthopaedic education: it would add to a girl's virtue and her beauty, and offer the necessary visual impression of the level of training and skills she had, and what strata of society she belonged to.

Olivier Gabet, director of Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, writes in the preface to the 2015 book «Fashioning the Body» that the book touches upon “...*the bourgeois discipline of controlled bodices and domesticated figures*”.⁴⁵ He talks about social body in contrast to physical body, and describes corsets as “*tools in the manipulation of the body*”, transforming it from a physical body to a social one. The corset has been variable in terms of the silhouette it creates, and in materials it could be made of. There are endless variations of the same theme, and substantially different shapes if comparing say a conical pair of Rococo stays with the S-shaped Edwardian equivalent. One could argue the corset is socially flexible, as it comes in a variety of shapes, but all largely with the same functions. Denis Bruna argues in the same book that “*There is no natural body, but only a cultural body. The body is a reflection of the society that presided over its creation*”.⁴⁶ Meaning that whereas there surely is a natural body, it has little or no place in a civilized society. The body is a means and technique used to shape and reflect on the role a person plays in a society, and thus shaping and clothing it in a suitable manner is essential. One might say the exact shape of the corset is not the main issue, but rather what the corset will do for the body and what the body is used for. So, for most women, their social bodies were partially achieved through the corset, with all its implications. And one of the central stage for this performance of the social body was the domestic environment.

⁴⁴ Steele, *The Corset. A Cultural History*, 51.

⁴⁵ Oliver Gabet, in the preface of *Fashioning the Body. An intimate history of the silhouette*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 15.

⁴⁶ Denis Bruna, *Fashioning the Body. An intimate story of the silhouette*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 21.

3.2. Women and domesticity in Western history

From Medieval times, a woman's relation with the house was visible in the keys she carried in her belt. They were visible for the world to see, and they would also audibly remind the world that the woman was intimately linked to the building the keys were meant for. This was a sign of status, as it showed that the woman in question was married and the daily manager of a bigger property. A well-run home was as financially important to the family as the man's enterprises outside it. According to old Norse laws, the person in charge of the keys - the *lyskilsberari* - was also responsible for the content of anything locked with these keys - a minister of treasures, if you will. In English there is another word indicating a similar story: *châtelaine*, once the name of the mistress of the castle, today the name of waist-hung keys and/or tools.⁴⁷ The *châtelaine* was the only one with keys to all areas, to the gates, to the food chambers, to the drawers and the vaults. She decided who had access to what, and when. She was in all aspects of the word a key person of the household. The *châtelaine* gradually became a fashion item in the 18th and 19th century, thus losing its strong ties with the position of power it once symbolized.⁴⁸ Yet the idea of a woman's role in the home became all the more tangible, with the *châtelaine* now carrying sewing tools and items she might need for female activity around the house.

The 19th century instead saw the rise of what is referred to as "Cult of domesticity" or "Cult of true womanhood", discussed in the aforementioned article by Barbara Welter, and which here will be discussed further. She based the article on the reading of multiple publications from between 1820 and 1860 and targeted at women. In these publications she found many moral anecdotes and many words of wisdom that seemed to be based on the belief that a woman should avoid higher education and an eventual profession, and devote her life to staying at home to the comfort of husband and children. A woman should cultivate domesticity, as well as piety, purity and submissiveness.⁴⁹ Pursuing a profession or an independent intellectual sphere was in the most extreme case equalled to being a "*mental hermaphrodite*".⁵⁰

Thus, in the context of "Cult of domesticity" a family depended on the man as main provider. A social change might be the reason behind this. Where families of the past may

⁴⁷ Genevieve E. Cummins and Nerylla D. Taunton, *Chatelaines. Utility to Glorious Extravagance*. (Suffolk: Antique Collector's Club Ltd, 1994), 11.

⁴⁸ Today the word "chatelaine" simply means the actual ornate object hung in the waist, meant to carry keys, small tools, or a watch.

⁴⁹ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860" (*American Quarterly* 18, 1966), 152.

⁵⁰ Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860", 173.

have been smaller family businesses or farms where everyone contributed, many of the paid jobs in the 19th century were in big cities, for big companies, where the workers were just a small part of the machinery. And this was first and foremost a man's world, and it was a man's job to provide for his family, while it was the woman's privilege to maintain the home. Though this era also saw the rise of women in paid professions, a working woman was more than once blamed of taking the job from a man who needed it to support his own family. Women were thus encouraged to embrace domesticity both for her own sake, for the sake of her husband and children, and for the sake of other men and other families she might otherwise steal a job and income from. In some instances, companies had rules against employing married women. Only single women in need of income would be considered, and only until they married and were provided for. There is thus the notion of female domesticity as a natural way to run a household and a family, because it was the man's job to take care of the financial means.

In this social situation, the corset was now seen as a tool that could visually be a reminder of it, as seen in Olivier Gabet's comment on "*...the bourgeois discipline of controlled bodies and domesticated figures*".⁵¹ A skilled wife would understand such obligations, dressing both according to the expectations of society and the pleasure of her husband. Her controlled body and pleasant appearance would reflect back on and honour her home and husband, and on the level of control and moral in their home. That is not to say that women were encouraged to indulge in excessive fashion. That could communicate that she might forget her domestic duties and spend hard earned money that could have gone into the household. But dressing carefully, with torso laced, hair perfectly arranged, basically with her virtues on display, but controlled, would underline her role as the «angel in the house». Only in very private settings would a woman not don the corset.

The corset as a symbol for the virtuous woman is however only half of the story. The *hidden* corset, in proper context, might convey one message, but the display of the corset in plain sight convey an altogether different story. Due to its private nature hinting at intimacy, and its ability to at the same time conceal and reveal the female torso, the corset was considered highly erotic. In the late 19th century Paris in particular the corset starts appearing in artwork with ambiguous messages, or blunt sexually charged messages. A woman in underwear, lacing or unlacing her corset while being observed by a man, became a popular motif in 19th century French painting and literature. One such example is Edouard Manet's

⁵¹ Olivier Gabet, in the preface of *Fashioning the Body. An intimate history of the silhouette*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 15.

Nana (1877), another is Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's *Woman in Corset* (1896).⁵² The implications seem clear - the man watching the woman in a state of undress must somehow have a sexual relationship with her.

The connotations of the corset in this context is mobilized through “the male gaze”; the idea of the passive woman objectified for and through the heterosexual male gaze, and where the loosened stays also tell something about the wearer's sexual availability.⁵³ Modern expressions such as “unlaced” or “loose” are indicative of these erotic and indeed salacious connotations. “Loose” refers to easy sexual access via a link to unlaced underwear. The shapening corset and its state of relative lacing or unlacing, visible or invisible, would be seen as a visible sign of class, virtue and moral compass. Neither the physical body or corset garment alone bears any definitive meaning; rather, the question is what kind of interaction there is between the body and its relative context. In the article «The Ancien Règime of the Body» Michel Delon calls the corset “*A negotiation between fabric and skin*”.⁵⁴

When displaying Ove Harder Finseth's corsets in the Nøstetangen room, the curators at Drammens Museum noted that in the right setting these corsets can be seen as abstracted shapes related to the backdrop of ornate glass, if only for a brief moment, until you are reminded of the female torso the corset is supposed to hug and enhance. Textile and body have an overlapping story in the Western world, and the corset's ability to both conceal and underline the body is a primary site for this articulation.

In the book *White Walls, Designer Dresses. The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* from 2001 Mark Wigley draws different, but equally interesting connections between textiles and shapes. Drawing on the architect and art critic Gottfried Semper (1803-1879), he discusses how the original houses of humans could be defined as various versions of fabrics - textiles, animal skins and carpets - hung on more solid fundamentals, marking the difference between the outside world and the private sphere. The tent is suggested as an early form of the textile house. These solid frames, with textiles stretched in between, were merely expanded, such that the frames themselves became the architecture, while the textiles became a supplemental addition; a decorative element that could be removed without affecting the structure. Buildings progressed from the temporary to the fixed, and presumably that also

⁵² See illustration VII.

⁵³ A satirical drawing from the mid-19th century shows a presumed husband unlacing his wife from the stays, with the comment “*How extraordinary! This morning I tied a knot and this evening there is a bow*”. The corset had been unlaced, hence the wife had been unfaithful. See fig. VIII.

⁵⁴ Michel Delon in *Fashioning the Body. An intimate history of the silhouette*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 93.

changed their use. When architect and author Le Corbusier (1887-1965) introduced the non-structural and non-load bearing «curtain wall» in his own architecture, one could claim he was rather re-introducing the idea of flexible, foldable wall. And this relation between the fixed and the flexible, architecture and textile, is brought up by different writers time and time again in the 20th century, and their writings is the basis for Mark Wigley's book. Wigley is especially concerned with the many parallels between dressing a body and dressing a house, and goes as far as saying:

*“Public buildings, in the form of monumental architecture, are seen to derive in the fixing in one place of the once mobile «improvised scaffolding» on which hung the patterned fabrics and decorations of the festivals that defined social life. The space of the public is that of those signs. Architecture literally clothes the body politic. Buildings are worn rather than simply occupied”.*⁵⁵

Wigley also writes about how the “naked” white houses and rooms in modernist tradition are not naked at all, they are simply dressed in a plainer dress than before, removing applied pattern, colours and ornaments. But despite the absence of ornament and colour, they are still dressed. The «pure» and «honest» modernist architecture is thus presented as a myth, to some extent. Expanding on this, he shows how architectural publications of the late 19th and early 20th century condemned the whimsical notions of fashion itself as feminine. The term “fashion” here is, of course, not just to be understood as clothing, but also the hunt for anything new and thus modern. Modernity, it was argued, is not a specific look, and trying to look modern is not modern. Rather, *“The modern is an unconscious effect of new conditions”*⁵⁶ - when you live after new principles, it brings new results, and this is what makes something modern. It is a consequence, not a goal. On the other end of the scale, fashion, the hunt for a modern look, was considered pointless, fruitless, dishonest, and also feminine. Albert Loos is famous for having written that:

“Whenever I abuse the object of daily use by ornamenting it, I shorten its life-span, because since it is then subject to fashion, it dies sooner. Only the whim and ambition of

⁵⁵ Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses. The Fashioning of Modern Architecture*. (New York: The MIT Press, 2001), 12.

⁵⁶ Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses. The Fashioning of Modern Architecture*, 71.

*women can be responsible for this murder of material”.*⁵⁷

In this he echoes the 18th century architect Germain Boffrand’s thoughts on the then new style Rococo: “Ornamentation has (in the work of Guarini and Borromini) passed from the interior decorations of houses, and from the carved woodwork for which delicate work is suitable, to exteriors, and to works in masonry, which require to be worked in a more vigorous and masculine way”.⁵⁸

So, from prominent architectural writings of the 19th and 20th century we can read that the architecture or building itself, though originating from textiles, was considered masculine, but that the “dressing” in forms of interior of said building was feminine, or at least a significant aspect of the feminine taste and sphere. Modernist architecture sought to free itself from these whims and ornaments, or at least control them.

This sentiment is echoed in the aforementioned philosophy of the “gesamtkunstwerk”. Clothing in this genre, and especially in the hands of Belgian artist and architect Henry van de Velde (1863-1957), was supposed to be an integral part of the building and its interior. It was a matter of combining different forms of art and out of this creating a whole where the clothing and the human body was one of many elements made to fit in. Henry van de Velde is another to touch upon the short-lived phenomenon of fashion, and express admiration for women who has seen through this cynical industry. He also suggests three “modes” of dressing: one for the home, where the personality of the wearer is allowed to shine through, one for the streets and public life, where a more neutral habit is preferable, and finally one for the great occasions of life, where tradition and situation must be observed and honoured.⁵⁹ In the case of van de Velde an interesting aspect is that the person he dressed was his wife, Maria Sèthe (1894-1943), through reception dresses, tea gowns and house dresses with the same lines and decorations as the rest of the interior. Although he expressed in his writings that the home was an arena to express ones personality through clothing, his wife was in effect clothed and designed to fit with the interior and wall decorations (fig. IX).

As discussed by Wigley, modernism was perceived as a natural result of following new principles rather than trying to look modern. But in this instance the body was made to follow principles of the interior, and in its most extreme case it made the human body akin to further

⁵⁷ Albert Loos, quoted in Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses. The Fashioning of Modern Architecture*, 76.

⁵⁸ Germain Boffrand, quoted in Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses. The Fashioning of Modern Architecture*. 77.

⁵⁹ Henry van de Velde, *Das neue Kunst-Prinzip in der modernen Frauen-Kleidung*. (Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration Band 10, 1902).

ornament in the room. It is not entirely unrelated to what Ove Harder Finseth did with the corsets at von Echstedtska. But it could be argued his starting point was quite opposite. Where following new principles in all aspects of the design process was necessary to create a new and unison look, Finseth started with an existing and historical environment and borrowed from that when creating his corsets. By this appropriation one could claim the house contributed to giving the corsets their body, and the female personas their look.

Interestingly, while many architects and theorists has defined and explained the many aspects of architecture as masculine, Elizabeth S. Cohen redefines the house itself as one directly tied to a woman and her honour, in the article “Honor and Gender in the Streets of Early Modern Rome”. She talks about the house as a representation of inner family life, especially in the context of house-scornings. It was a practice, or rather a ritual, where the aim was to shame enemies by staining their house or breaking down the barrier between the public space and the private sphere. The mildest and most common strategy was soiling doors and windows with ink, dung or other means. The effect of staining the house was to show the world a displeasement of the ones living there. This was effective, cheap and easy to get away with, but could rapidly be cleaned off. Another approach was to make noise, either through throwing stones at window shutters, or standing outside the house, yelling insults, singing obnoxious songs, or making rude suggestions. All of this would gather spectators, and hence the shame would be audible and rumours could spread.

An even more dramatic method was to physically break down the barriers between the outside world and the private sphere by smashing doors or windows, or even entering the house to do damage inside. The doors and windows of the house were small openings between their private sphere and the public world, and they were considered erotically charged: “*the doors and windows of early modern Rome were exciting places, emotionally and sexually charged*”.⁶⁰ It is from these liminal spaces that youngsters flirted and lovers slipped in and out unnoticed. But it could also be a way of damage a family’s reputation, or that of a specific person in the household. Cohen writes the violation of the thresholds were akin to a kind of displaced rape that assaulted the woman’s honour. Restoring that honour, preferably at court, was therefore vital. Through these intersections between architecture, legal procedures and feminine domesticity, she offers a plausible explanation for why an assault of the house was an indirect assault of the lady of the house. By this she also defines the house, and as such the architecture, as feminine, or at least directly tied to the feminine

⁶⁰ Cohen, “Honor and Gender in the Streets of Early Modern Rome”, 603.

role, while the city, its street and the public life is what is defined as the masculine sphere.

Through different sources a woman's relation to the house has been discussed: through the house-scornings of the Renaissance, through the idea of the «Cult of domesticity» in the 19th century, through the “gesamtkunstwerk” where the human body and especially that of the woman of the house is giving the same design treatment as the furniture and wall hangings, and through Wigley's parallels between the house, the textile and the «dressing» of the building. A woman's identity is in all four cases partly linked to or explained through the notions of domesticity and private dwelling spaces.

3.3. Inside the estate

What then if the strangers are invited in to the house? At the von Echstedtska this is exactly the case. Present day visitors were invited in, not just into the usual official rooms and the representational chambers, but also the bedrooms, the kitchen, and the hallways. They are invited to step into the private sphere, and to get a glimpse of the private sphere of ladies and maids inside the protective walls of the house. And inside the house, during Finseth's exhibition, the presence of the corsets was tangible. Suspended from the ceiling, hanging in mid-air, and in front of the walls, they are defined torsos given shape through the sartorial richness of silks, beadings, embroidery, and pleats. As this becomes clear, it raises more questions than it answers: why are they there? Are they adorning the walls, or are the walls their backdrop? Are the corsets meant to blend into their surroundings, like shadows on the walls, or wallflowers, hiding, trying to not get noticed, or do they in fact demand our attention, like figures stepping out of the wall, or in some cases even like exclamation points in front of the walls? And why the corset, why the relation to the walls?

As discussed previously, the modern corset and its many historical antecedents have attempted to tame and cultivate the body, both to make it more beautiful and to create the “social body”. These stays, as they were called, would usually manipulate the shape of the torso, either by giving it a specific tilt or narrowing or lifting it. And although corsets were also worn by youngsters and by men, it has become so deeply associated with the female body. It was women who wore them all their life and it was their body who would undergo the biggest transformation to be socially acceptable. But in addition it was also seen as a tool to support and strengthen the body, especially one that had frequently given birth. The corset was then abandoned in the early 20th century, usually explained by various women's liberation strategies, and especially that of freeing the female body. When the corset was brought back into high fashion in the 1970s and 1980s, the historical practice was in large

abandoned. It was rather used as a way to comment on or selectively emphasise issues of gender and sexuality historically associated with its use.

This is the backdrop for the corsets and the installations made by Ove Harder Finseth for von Echstedtska exhibition in 2012. As discussed in chapter 2.3, Finseth's work with corsets can be seen in context of the revival of the corset in the late 20th century; a revival which included designers such as Christian Lacroix, Alexander McQueen, Vivienne Westwood, Jean Paul Gaultier and Thierry Mugler, and where references to the historical equivalents were borrowed, expanded on, or picked apart. I would claim Finseth belongs to the nostalgia tendency within this revival, as his corsets are lush, richly decorated, and constructed with a clear admiration for a historical sense of style, but yet with a modern touch. In the von Echstedtska exhibition he displayed 9 slightly pointed models, and 3 straighter models, all strapless and with a smooth and continuous front not split by any kind of lacing, busk or closing. These corsets are not made to reshape the torso or challenge it in any significant way.

We can argue Finseth and the whole «corset revival» borrowed elements of the history of the garment and went for the feeling of the corset, but not its practical and social implications. Visitors might still perceive them as historical construction, or they may have gotten their basic corset knowledge from history. But a closer look at the exhibition's corsets would soon reveal they are not. The main detail to look at here is how the corsets are meant to be put on or taken off. Historically, stays and corsets would often be closed both in the front and in the back, the origin of the expression «pair of stays», and the closing would often be visible, even decorative, through lacing or a busk, and sometimes both. The way a corset was put on or taken off is the act most closely connected with the garment, and the way you control the body inside it. It is significant that all of the von Echstedtska corsets are closed in the back or side with an invisible zipper, leaving the means of closure hidden, and thus leaving the front smooth and ready to be decorated with beaded and sculpted flowers, rouleaus or even a portrait.

The latter was the case with the **“Who is she”** installation. The portrait of an unknown woman used as decoration is particularly interesting, as it underlines the notion of the corsets as being Finseth's canvases, with the prepared fabric put on a frame and with decorations on the front. This was however not the designer's immediate intention.⁶¹ By using the portrait

⁶¹ Ove Harder Finseth, in an interview done in his studio on March 5, 2018.

and placing it in a specific location he is trying to connect the corset with the environment and thus trying to draw out a portrait that goes beyond merely likeness or image. The golden tones and swirling decorations were repeated in both wall and corset. The round shape of the portrait, framed by intertwined rouleaus, were also echoed in the wall clock next to the corset: the portrait face and the dial – the face of the clock – is in dialogue. When the designer was asked why the corset was not hung next to the actual portrait in the estate, it was explained as a deliberate choice. It was meant to give the visitors a feeling of someone following you through the house, like a hostess, or a familiar face, when you meet the same face throughout the building.

The “**Spanish Rose**” installation also seemed to play with the idea of the corset substituting for the canvas. The crimson corset was put towards a greyish green wall with landscapes, and had gotten a rectangular black motif in the front. And inside this motif Finseth had again “painted” with needle and thread, with beads, silk and fabric flowers. The decorations were kept inside the black rectangle, where it naturally evokes thoughts on a painting on a wall.

A key aspect of Ove Harder Finseth’s introduction text in the exhibition brochure is the female personas placed in the rooms: “*The walls, rooms and stories have inspired me to continue telling tales, using my artwork. (...) Each corset also tells a story. Each and every one is a woman who lives in harmony with or in contrast to her surroundings*”. These personas gradually step out of these walls, and in various ways inhabit the rooms. The defined shape of the corsets themselves were reminders of a familiar shape: the female figure, the female torso, and thus the female figures Finseth set to create. And this shape resonated with the ornate decorations on the walls. Which brings us back to the discussions on architecture and textile, and the female role in context of architecture. As shown, from early modern times in Europe and well into modernist writings on architecture there has been attempts to describe and analyse architecture in context of gender. Some has been explored through Barbara Walters “Cult of Domesticity”, through Elizabeth E. Cohen’s “Honor and Gender in the Streets of Early Modern Rome” and through Mark Wigley’s *White Walls, Designer Dresses. The Fashioning of Modern Architecture*. The notion of the “gesamtkunstwerk”, especially through the article on dress written by Henry van de Velde, also shed some light on various ways to analyse architecture, interior, textile and dress.

In the von Echstedtska exhibition the line between architecture and textile seemed intentionally blurred. The torso-shaped corsets were sartorial translations of the mood, or even

the distinct look, of a room. They could even be called textile memories of the ancient house. If architecture is to be perceived as the solid frames, and the textiles only adorning these frames, the fabric corsets are like a memory of the textile past of architecture. At the same time, the installations which in part relied on the interior and in part relied on the corsets, touches upon Folkmann's level of aesthetics. On one hand, there was the sense-appealing details, in forms of textures, colours and decorations, and in artefacts and rooms typically perceived as beautiful. It was an aesthetically pleasing display. On the other hand, there was the feeling of something meaningful that could be deciphered or begged to be analyzed. The correlation between artefact and room, and what figures and ideas this presented, triggered the imagination and went from something assumingly beautiful to something also filled with meaning. In this the exhibition can be seen both through Folkmann's aesthetic level and his conceptual level.

To repeat a question raised earlier: are these corsets and these installations demanding our attention or are they wallflowers, trying not to get noticed? Are they Walter's ornament in the house, van de Velde's "gesamtkunstwerk", where they are subordinate to the interior and the house? Or are they taking center stage and use the walls as a mere backdrop? Finseth is after all telling us that his corsets were inspired by the walls and the interior at the von Echstedtska estate. And indeed, some of the corset installations appears to be sartorial versions of what is seen on the wall. Colours, shapes and motifs are repeated. This was especially tangible in the "**Morning Dew**" installation. The bright green silk corset picked up clues from the green walls, and where the walls offered rocaille frames with rich red flower garlands and bouquets, the corset seemed to explode in a cluster of crimson flowers with layers and layers of silvery and green beading. On one hand this appeared to be the perfect camouflage, and on the other it made the painted walls come alive in three-dimensional shapes. This installation was furthermore placed in the bedroom of the lady of the house, underlined by a huge curtained bed rendered in a green shade similar to that of the corset. It might have been the most excessive corset in the exhibition, with its highly sculpted flowers and rich beading. At the same time, it so perfectly emulated the environment, and it was also placed near the entrance of the room. According to both the designer, and to visitors, it meant several missed the installation when strolling through the building. She may have been the lady of the house, but she does not appear to wish to be seen. It thus fulfilled its mission as a "wallflower", one of those easily missed despite all the fineries.

This installation might be lacking Shklovsky's "ostranenie", the defamiliarization. This is one of the elements pointed out as desirable by Folkmann, a quality making people notice a distraction and stop to ponder. So, whereas it might fulfill Folkmann's category of the "sensual", with its soft silk, bright colours and extremely luxurious beading and appliquéés, and whereas the room also added to the tactility and luxurious nature of the corset, the installation did not "make forms difficult", as Shklovsky put it. It was an overall pleasing and aesthetic display, achieved by perfectly picking up clues from its surroundings, to the point where some visitors might not even notice it.

A corset very much contrasting its surroundings was the "**Daisy**". The bright raspberry pink, floral corset was placed towards a greyish green wall, and the green of the wall highlights the corset hanging in mid-air. At first this seems like an exclamation point in the room. This is not a «wallflower» trying to blend in, this is the lady in red getting all the attention in the room. Only when looking closer is it possible to see that there are elements of communication between the walls and the corset. The latter has gotten rich rouleau bands from upper left to lower right side, made of different materials and in different colours. On top of that large bright pink and white flowers has been sprinkled. And this is just what is found on the walls – looping, twisting bands in the shape of slender acanthus leaves, with a dash of flowers. Patterns are repeated, for the viewer to discover. This is a corset with ties to the wall, but not tied to it.

One that was made to harmonise with a specific wall and then subsequently moved was the "**Woven Ribbons**" installation. This was the only to be moved from its intended surroundings. The corset was made of coarser materials with a multicoloured brown weave and with polychrome silk ribbons and fur braided into the front. The coarser brown fabric with its checkered pattern stood in relation to the terracotta tiles on the walls of the kitchen, where it was originally intended to be hung. The room was to have two "kitchen maid" personas presented by coarser corset fabrics, but with finer details. But along the way the "Woven Ribbons" was moved into the main sections of the house, placed in one of the finer rooms, opposite a bright pink corset; the aforementioned "Daisy". The reason for this change was, according to the designer, to get the feeling of a maid moving around the house, doing her chores, moving around like a shadow. Would this be understood by the viewers? Was their narrative to go along with the exhibition? The introduction of silk ribbons, floral sequins, fur and colours might seem like a distraction. At the same time it resembled the look of an apron, with the connotations of a maid that an apron and the rougher materials might imply.

The kitchen maid persona to stay put in the kitchen was the installation called “**Wings of Gold**”. This was partly a repetition from the Nøstetangen room. The front panel, with its sculpted bead embroidery of a winged creature on golden silk was on display there. But originally it was combined with a white silk frock, short in front and long in the back, like a tailcoat. At von Echstedtska it was given a new context, presented as a corset made of a knitted metallic grey fabric, and was hung in front of a black square, a hatch, on the plastered wall. The transformation of the beaded bird on gold cloth from one attire to another resembles the period “stomacher”. These were triangular pieces inserted into the front of gowns or jackets, to be replaced at will, depending on mood, occasion, or also on body size. The front panel could be used and re-used with different garments, and mixed and matched as the wearer saw fit. But this new “Wings of Gold” corset also alludes to the title of the exhibition: *Splendour for the Heart, Radiance for the Room*. The winged creature, made of pearls and glittering stones on a golden fundament, is like a symbol of what may live inside the maid. The wings of someone wanting to break free, perhaps. The dream of fineries.

The “Woven Ribbon” was thus moved from its original location, and by moving it from the kitchen it was removed from the wall it got its colours and patterns from. Yet, the corset was successfully installed in a new room, and got a new and expanded story to tell. A similar example is one not especially made for the von Echstedtska, namely the “**Midnight Blossom**”. This black corset with sculpted green and turquoise flowers and silver leaves in a diagonal pattern on the front was first displayed at the Nøstetangen exhibition in 2010. In the Nøstetangen room it was placed in front of large engraved glass cups and rather functioned as a disruptive element. At von Echstedtska it was placed in front of a greyish green wall with a diagonal flower pattern, where the corset’s flower suggested the same movement and shapes as the wall. Here it rather blended in, if not like a camouflage pattern then at least as one in dialogue with and with reference to the wall pattern. This is interesting, considering it was made for a completely different location. When I asked the designer about this coincidence, he found it puzzling as well.⁶² But he admitted an immense love for the von Echstedtska building and its interiors, going back to when he first visited the estate in 2007, and he has revisited the place many times after that. Maybe it was the memory of a pattern once seen, or maybe it was pure luck that the two matched. But it goes to show that when two pieces of art are placed together, the human mind is quick to try and decipher why they are there, what the

⁶² Ove Harder Finseth, in an interview done in his studio on March 5, 2018

similarities and differences are and what a potential message may be. Whatever the case, this corset certainly found its home in the 2012 exhibition at von Echstedtska.

The installations seem purposely ambiguous in what they chose to tell us. But ambiguous or not, visitors to the estate might not have felt the corsets as too interruptive, given the overall decorations of the house. You would meet many faces when wandering through the halls and rooms. For example, the aforementioned unknown lady, whose portrait hangs in the house and who was depicted a second time on one of Finseth's corsets. Another room is famous for its grenadiers, the uniformed elite soldiers, painted on each side of a passage leading into the private chambers of the lord of the estate. With their blue, white and red uniforms and visible weapons they both welcome visitors and guards them, looking directly at them. Even if stopping by the privy – the historical privy, that is – guests would find the original lord and lady of the house looking down at them from the octagonal ceiling. The estate is inhabited by characters, by painted figures, onto which Ove Harder Finseth could add his personas.

In this regard, it is interesting to observe that Ove Harder Finseth often has displayed his corsets in context of art. It is what he did in the Nøstetangen exhibition in 2010, where the corsets were put in dialogue with 18th century glass objects. It is what he did for the 2012 von Echstedtska exhibition, where many of the corsets were designed with a base of the look of the walls of the 18th century building. And a similar display strategy could be seen in the 2015 *Korsetten är kastad* exhibition at the Huseby estate, where his corsets and creations were combined with floral installations by Gunnar Kaj; the most spectacular ones being displays with Finseth's corsets and flower skirts made by Kaj. Furthermore, in the 2016 Kulturnatt exhibition at Grev Wedels plass, his corsets were placed in between a selection of artworks by Norwegian artist Edvard Munch. Sometimes the point seems to be to create a dialogue between the corsets and the other works of art, either because details are picked up or because the corsets comes off as intentionally disruptive to its surroundings. This could be a way of establishing the corsets in an environment or with artefacts which has already been defined as art by someone with the power of definition. It would be in sync with Folkmann's "contextual" aspect, where display is described as a strategy, and often with a set effect in mind.

Ove Harder Finseth's corset exhibitions are usually also are sales exhibitions, where the potential client is not just one collecting art, but also one wearing his corsets. Visitors would have no problem understanding how the corsets work, how they are worn, and how

they would probably look in use. It is a garment easily understood in terms of how they are to be worn. But an interesting aspect of the designer's exhibitions and especially the von Echstedtska display is that the corsets appear at its most poignant and interesting when they are abstracted from the body. The three installations with mannequins at the von Echstedtska could be used as an example of that. These did not only feature the ornate corsets, but complete attires with tulle, placed on mannequins fitted with styled wigs. This was the white **"White Duchess"** and the teal **"Waterfall"**, both placed in the grand dining room with its fully decked dining table and teal walls. In addition, there was the black and yellow **"Night Garden"**, placed by a window in another room, between a bed and a writing table, facing the window. Here, the installations seem to be less evocative and have less stories to tell than when hung from the ceiling in dialogue with the walls, room colours and furniture. At first, one would think it was opposite: that the corsets first come alive when worn on a body, clinging to the lines of the female torso. So why did the opposite seem to be the case? That brings me to the last and final main chapter, where the torso, the absent female body and its void is discussed.

4. The absent body

4.1 The absent female body in the corset

Looking at the von Echstedtska exhibition from a historical perspective might be useful for understanding some of the components, especially how the building itself was a main premise, and how the historical corset has been linked to health, honour, beauty and allure. Though as discussed previously, 350 years of corset wearing is often perceived as one single story, one single practice, while we in fact are talking ever-changing practices. Each decade, each era, each region and each society had their ideas of this garment, and the garment itself has also transformed in shape and materials.

From the late 16th century on it became the norm for women to wear three layers of clothing - the shift, the stays, and the outer garment. The shift is the garment people washed at a frequent basis. The outer clothes were rarely washed; rather spot cleaned and mended when needed. The corset was somewhere in between these two, and in between the private and public sphere, seldom touching the skin but very much connected with the torso, sometimes visible, often hidden, and all in all a vital garment for European women between 1550 and 1900. It is possible to talk about corsets in general terms, but it is also vital to have in mind the ever-changing practices of wear and of understanding the garment, and how, even in one given location, at one single time in history, it might have meant different things, depending on the context. The historical backdrop can be useful in this context. But I also want to take into consideration display practices, and especially how we meet them at von Echstedtska: faceless, armless, legless, with no body inside the corset, no torso to support it or to be moulded.

Dress historian Bjørn Sverre Hol Haugen devoted a chapter of his doctoral dissertation *Virkningsfulle tekstiler - i østnorske bønders draktpraksis på 1700-tallet* to the historical corset, the stays, or the snøreliv - the lace-bodice - as it is more commonly called in Scandinavia. One of the reasons was a desire to place the surviving examples from Eastern Norway into a more defined context than what had been done before, and to add some thoughts to who wore them and what it meant to wear them. He is especially commenting on the void of the body that once wore the corsets, how it becomes all the more present when facing the corset without a body, especially in a museal setting. One might measure and recreate the body through meticulous calculations, but only the body as it was when wearing

the corset, and never the actual, “free” body of the woman.⁶³

He also quotes dress historian Elizabeth Wilson on garments being more like a fluid dance than a static chair. Meaning, garments come to life through wearing and through movement, such that they are just as much a result of movement as they are an artefact. Because of this, he argues, if you are to understand these garments, you need to understand the body inside, or the body they were made for and the movement of that body.⁶⁴ That is not to say the corsets will not make sense without the body or the movement. The garments themselves tells a lot of the life the person lived, and their outlines, and the role they wanted to assume. Haugen calls it “temporary bodies”; bodies the Norwegian 18th century women took on for various occasions.⁶⁵ When the farmer and burgeoise women took on their lace-bodices, they assumed a shape shared by most women on the European continent - the conic female torso, a body controlled and ready to be presented.

Anaïs Biernat writes that: “*Getting accustomed to having her body constrained was thus a gradual process, from early childhood into adulthood*”.⁶⁶ Curator Anne-Cécile Moheng conveys similar thoughts in an article about whalebone stays and paniers: “...*they were not meant simply to make a woman of high birth attractive; they also allowed her to be recognized as such in her mastery of the necessary carriage and gait, which in turn indicated her social status*”.⁶⁷ They needed to master the dance, so to speak. And indeed, this sentiment is repeated in a period account, where Madame de Gentils described her makeover from child to young girl at age six in 1752:

“...I was given a whalebone corset which squeezed me excessively; my feet were imprisoned in tight shoes, in which I could not walk (...) I was made to wear, for the first time, a hoop (...) Finally, I was very surprised when they told me that they were going to give me a master to teach me (what I thought I knew perfectly well) how to walk”.⁶⁸

⁶³ Hol Haugen, *Virkningsfulle tekstiler – østnorske bønders draktpraksiser på 1700-tallet*, 224.

⁶⁴ Hol Haugen, *Virkningsfulle tekstiler – østnorske bønders draktpraksiser på 1700-tallet*, 221.

⁶⁵ Hol Haugen, *Virkningsfulle tekstiler – østnorske bønders draktpraksiser på 1700-tallet*, 234.

⁶⁶ Anaïs Biernat in *Fashioning the Body. An intimate story of the silhouette*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 136.

⁶⁷ Anne-Cécile Moheng in *Fashioning the Body. An intimate story of the silhouette*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 109.

⁶⁸ Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims. Dress at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette* (Yale University Press, 2015), 46-47.

As I noted previously, the goal was not to achieve the narrowest waist, or at least not primarily so, but to make the female body presentable in a given social setting. By its very nature the corset, the hoops and the high heels immobilized the wearer, or challenged them in their movements. Mastering these restrictions, and even making them look effortless and elegant, was a sign of having been trained from childhood. It revealed your breeding, your family background. That was at least the consensus.

What then when we only have the corset without the body and when the body of the woman who trained a lifetime to master it is long gone? Within museums the modernist norm has been to display garments more or less detached from the human body. Where museums in the past used all effects possible to recreate the complete human shape, with necessary accessories to match, the then new 20th century way of displaying clothes focused on individual garments, on headless and limbless frames. The ideal was to *not* reproduce the actual human body, rather “...a technology with the purpose to support the displayed dress, give the garments body, and accentuate the displayed dress”.⁶⁹ At its very basic this often meant just a torso. When The Museum of Decorative Arts and Design in Oslo embraced this in 1952, it got favourable reception in the press:

*“The headless mannequins are so filled with character that one can easily imagine the missing faces with their hairstyles and hats”.*⁷⁰

Museologist Anne-Sofie Hjemdahl has written several pieces on dress display practices in Scandinavian museums, and the display history of specific garments in these museums; how they may be interpreted differently based on the context given and the way they are displayed and presented to the visitors. She refers to the body both as the the human once wearing the garment, and the actual shape - the garment - they have left behind, which is then filled with a substitute in the museum.⁷¹ The void of the body becomes a body of its own, so the original body is both present and long gone. Valerie Steele confirms that interpretation: “The word *corps* referred both to the body itself, and the stays that shaped it”.⁷² Corps in this context being the origin of the word corset.

⁶⁹ Anne-Sofie Hjemdahl, “Exhibiting the Body, Dress, and Time in Museums: A Historical Perspective” in *Fashion and Museums. Theory and Practice*. (London, New York, Sydney, New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 117.

⁷⁰ Dagbladet, October 17, 1952, quoted in Hjemdahl, «Exhibiting the Body, Dress, and Time in Museums: A Historical Perspective», 108.

⁷¹ Hjemdahl, “Exhibiting the Body, Dress, and Time in Museums: A Historical Perspective”, 110.

⁷² Steele, *The Corset. A Cultural History*, 28.

Hjemdahl also discusses the writings of media theorist Mark Sandberg in context of his book *Living Pictures, Missing Persons*. There he expresses similar thoughts and argues that the viewer, faced with a story half-told, mentally or physically, will fill in the blanks, just like they would when reading a book. He even argues that the void can be a more powerful tool, as it gives room for the viewer and their «potential presence»: “*The display creates missing persons on both sides of an imaginary divide; it encourages spectators to be border dwellers, both inside and outside the display*”.⁷³ But, as pointed out by Hjemdahl:

“...he is not concerned with to what extent an embodiment or how any degree of embodiment affects a meeting between the public and the dressed figures. He discusses either the presence or the absence of the bodies, not the in-between positions”.⁷⁴

And the in-between position is often what meets visitors when clothes are put on display – so also in the 2012 von Echstedtska exhibition.

Museums following the modernist display tradition seemed wary of stepping into the theatrical arena or the effigy tradition, where the goal has been to produce a lifelike display of a specific person, by the use of whole attires fitted with wigs, jewellery, shoes, gloves and props, even individual faces. In the then new exhibition strategy this was to be avoided. The garments should be free to speak for themselves, as unique pieces with their own story to tell. And yet the tangible sensation of a missing body is an issue to be dealt with. Hjemdahl raises issues about the mortality of the human body, in contrast to the clothes that dressed them, which are not allowed to die. According to her, museums “*keep them artificially alive almost like ghosts*”.⁷⁵ Traces of wear and tear, of folds and wrinkles and stains in the fabric fabric makes it even more apparent that the original owner is not there, and thus haunts the garment like a ghost.

Similar thoughts have been expressed by Amy de la Haye, in the book *Exhibitioning Fashion: Before and After 1971*. There, she discusses the phenomenon of «dead» and «alive» clothes. In the article “A Biography of an Exhibit and Other Museological Narratives” she writes about how clothes are fully alive on a body and technically “dead” once they enter a museum and its restrictions. But then they are resurrecting when exhibited. In this she echoes

⁷³ Mark Sandberg, quoted in Hjemdahl, «Exhibiting the Body, Dress, and Time in Museums: A Historical Perspective», 110.

⁷⁴ Hjemdahl, «Exhibiting the Body, Dress, and Time in Museums: A Historical Perspective», 110.

⁷⁵ Hjemdahl, «Exhibiting the Body, Dress, and Time in Museums: A Historical Perspective», 111.

an observation done by German philosopher Theodor Adorno: “*Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association*”. But de la Haye means there are ways to resurrect clothes, and points out that traces of previous owners will eventually help bringing the clothes back to life. She is especially concerned with clothes that has been used and have a connection to a body, as evident by a scent, stains, a distinct shape, tears and creases that are powerful symptoms when trying to bring a garment or attire back to life.⁷⁶

So, on one hand you are left with a “dead” garment, the ghost of the wearer that once was, and on the other hand this very garment evokes images and ideas in the viewers head, so that a body and a personality comes to life in the void of its physical display. And this mechanism can be similar whether the garment is old or new, whether seen in a museum on a shop window. It is also an element that can be played with when putting garments on display.

When asked why he often makes ornate corsets paired with plainer skirts, or no skirt at all, designer Ove Harder Finseth expressed two different thoughts on the matter. He calls himself a “needle painter”, and it is also how Drammens Museum presented him in 2010. Another aspect, less frequently commented on, is how he has a wearer in mind when making corsets and attires. Although they might be displayed as independent pieces of art - and that is indeed how he has sold several of them, as abstracted pieces intended for the wall - the starting point is still the human body, and usually the female body in all its dimensions. And instead of expanding the decorations all over the garment or center it or down on the skirt or in the back, it is usually concentrated on the front of the corset or bodice. Thus, the viewer’s attention is primarily drawn to the torso, then eventually the face of the wearer. So according to Finseth the garment itself – if worn - is not the main point he is making, it is the person inside it.

In this he is expressing two at first glance different views. The corset might very well be a centerpiece of its own, displayed as an abstract shape, in the shape of a torso but not indexially dependent on it. It is a sculpted shape which suggests how the void itself can be a powerful tool when exhibiting garments. It is thus rendered as a strangely autonomous work of art that is simultaneously a fragment and a totality that can be compared to a painting when hung on the wall. Making corsets not commissioned by a specific person is how clothing is usually made today, opposite to tailor-made pieces of the past. But it also underlines the autonomy of the piece, where it is not a reply on a specific demand, but rather a piece the artist wanted to create. On the other hand, Finseth does have a wearer in mind, and express

⁷⁶ Amy de la Haye: “A Biography of an Exhibit and Other Museological Narratives”, in *Exhibiting Fashion: Before and After 1971* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), page 83.

that garments are meant to lift the gaze up towards the head and the face of the viewer. The garment is secondary, the wearer is the main feature. From this we can interpret that the corset or attire on its own takes center stage and is the main attraction, but once a human body is put inside it, the garments is no longer the one to play the leading role. Now it becomes a supporting role for the person who dons it.

Finseth also raises another more poetic dimension in regards to the construction and appearance of his corsets. He claims that everything starts from the heart, and radiates from there. Covering this area with gems, beads, sequins and gold underlines that radiance. It almost goes back to the catholic tradition of «The flaming heart», a heart shrouded in flames, to show the glowing passion and the love of God. The notion of a radiating heart was, in the words of the designer, the reason behind the title *Glansen ved hjertet, gløden i rommet* – or in English *Splendour for the Heart, Radiance for the Room*. Quoting Siri Hustvedt, it is worth bringing into the discussion the intention of the artist to “...understand what the artists think they’re doing”.⁷⁷

4.2. The absent body as perceived through Rancière

The corset in a museum setting and the void that it calls attention to is an important aspect of their displays, and offers a more complex take on what the isolated and abstracted torso might be trying to accomplish. Here it is worth bringing into the discussion Jacques Rancière’s writings on the Belvedere torso, as he too brings up the presence of the absent. In *Aisthesis. Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* from 2013, Rancière discusses the Belvedere torso in the context of Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s writings from 1764. Rancière cites this text as an important shift in how to think about art and aesthetics, as well as a new-found interest in the imperfect. In particular, he discusses how the incomplete torso was given a new interpretation by Winckelmann in the 18th century, through which he overturned the idea of the completed and organically whole artwork as the exemplum of perfection and beauty. In doing so, he breaks with the long-standing tradition of trying to complete and restore ancient sculptures that were lacking limbs, thus arguing that ancient sculpture’s incomplete and fragmented state was what made it perfect. This approach marked a significant break with traditional aesthetics, where the completed and perfected human body had been the ideal of beauty. As Rancière writes: “*Instead of compensating for the lack, he transformed it into a virtue*”.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Siri Hustvedt, *Kvinner som ser på menn som ser på kvinner* (Oslo: Aschehoug forlag, 2017), 1.

⁷⁸ Rancière, *Aisthesis. Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, 2.

The Belvedere torso came into the Vatican collections in the early 16th century, and was placed in the Cortile del Belvedere, from which it got its name. It is a fragment of a once large male sculpture, and today only the torso and thighs remain, on a hide-clad base where the name of the artist is written: “*Apollonius, son of Nestor, Athenian*”. The dominant question since its discovery, and in the centuries to come, was how it had looked originally, and who it had depicted. Several 16th century artists used the incomplete Belvedere torso as the basis of a central figures in their own paintings. This was done both to display knowledge of art from antiquity, and to build on it as a way of suggesting how it once might have looked.

Winckelmann, on the other hand, saw the inherent and absolute qualities in the fragment as it was. That is not to say he did not envision the sculpture in its original state. He too proposed what it might once had been, by envisioning it as a work depicting Heracles just after the completion of one of his twelve labours, sitting on the skin of the Nemean lion:

*“The artist has presented in this Hercules a lofty ideal of a body elevated above nature (...) He appears here purified from the dross of humanity, and after having attained immortality and a seat among the gods; for he is represented without the need of human nourishment, or further use of his powers”.*⁷⁹

But it was not a proposal to restore the sculpture to its former glory. He would go on to claim that it had to remain just as it was.

Traditionally a damaged sculpture was one lacking. It was no longer able to convey harmony and proportions, the key ingredients of the aesthetics from the early Renaissance and of which so many European artists still lived by in the 18th century. The harmony between the perfection of the individual elements and the perfection of the whole was what made good art. Many of the damaged sculptures from antiquity had their missing arms and legs restored or replaced. In some cases, heads were put on statues they didn’t belong to in order to “complete the image”. In this art regime a mutilated sculpture, a mere torso and thighs, had no place. Or, insofar it had a place, it was as an incomplete object of which artists drew inspiration for their own completions of it. Michelangelo’s work in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican seems to be endless variations of the torso, both in the ceiling (1508-1512) and in The Last Judgement (1535-1541). Another example is Agnolo Bronzino’s enigmatic portrait of duke Cosimo I de’ Medici as Orpheus (1537-1539).⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, quoted in Rancière, *Aisthesis. Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, 1.

⁸⁰ Philadelphia Museum of Art (1950-86-1).

Winckelmann's starting point for his approach was defining the missing pieces as a quality, and then to add meaning to the void of these missing pieces. To Winckelmann Greek antiquity was the ideal. And not just any Greek antiquity, but the classical era, "*the academic Greece of 'calm grandeur' and 'noble simplicity'*".⁸¹ This was the era of the finest art, the best buildings, the most well-founded ideas, of democracy. He was writing this in a time where ancient Greece had been a part of the Ottoman empire for centuries, and where there were growing attempts in Europe to recreate the independent, proud Greece; a Hellenic state.

This idea of liberating Greece and restore its classical roots echoed in Winckelmann's attempt to «liberate» European sculpture from the excessive Baroque style. And to Winckelmann, the Belvedere torso was, in its complex way, the key. Winckelmann as interpreted through Rancière shows that the Belvedere torso represented the golden age of Greek art, it must hence also represent the golden age of Greek freedom. He is a product of a free state, a free mind, a free and elevated people. Thus, he represents the ancient Greece that made him.

Though, as Rancière points out, this was a constructed past used as a political tool in the present day, it was a "*German Greece, sister to the Rome dreamt of by French revolutionaries*".⁸² But in the writings of Winckelmann, because the sculpture is incomplete, he is complete, he is perfect. What is not there is just as present, if not more present, than what is there. The torso alone speaks of all his virtues, his contemplative state, his qualities. He can become the symbol of whatever the viewer want him to become a symbol of.

The torso is described in a way that underlines its masculine qualities. Winckelmann talks about the rippling muscles in the mutilated torso, the strength forever preserved though the main action is long gone, and the presence of the absent:

"Abused and mutilated to the utmost, and without head, arms, or legs, as this statue is, it shows itself even now to those who have the power to look deeply into the secrets of art with all the splendor of its former beauty (...) In this position, with the head turned upwards his face probably had a pleased expression as he meditated with satisfaction on the great deeds which he had achieved; this feeling even the back seems to indicate, which is bent, as if the hero was absorbed in lofty reflections".⁸³

⁸¹ Rancière, *Aisthesis. Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, 2.

⁸² Rancière, *Aisthesis. Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, 15.

⁸³ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, quoted in Rancière, *Aisthesis. Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, 1.

From the torso alone a sort of superhuman nature still radiated, in Winckelmann's version, giving the viewer ideas of how it might once have looked. In this very void it could be appropriated and become a more potent symbol than if it had been complete. It could be the visualization of the free Greece that once was. It could be a symbol of hard human work in general, one everyone can look at and identify with. But these interpretations depend on what is not there. Though the sculpture itself is the premise, the reading of it, through the glasses of Winckelmann and Rancière, depends on the missing pieces, the void, and only then will the sculpture fulfill its potential.

Though not discussed in Rancière's text, the missing pieces may even have become essential in our recognition of some of the most iconic sculptures from antiquity: *Laocoön* (The Vatican Museum), *Venus from Milo* (The Louvre) and *Nike of Samothrace* (The Louvre) is known to us in its incomplete state. There have been many a theory on how they would have looked originally; *Laocoön* even saw different restorations on the arm of the adult man in the group, and the altering of this arm was perceived as altering the whole dramatically. The incomplete sculptures is not only what we physically have, it is also how we came to know them, how we basically built a cult around them. Because of how we are used to see them, a Venus with arms or a Nike with head would be alien to us. The fragment is our whole, and from this fragment we are free to enjoy the shape as it is, or mentally fill in the missing pieces as we see fit.

4.3. The meaningful void

Having looked at different ideas on the museal view of «dead» garments and modernist display traditions, and on the Belvedere torso and its incomplete state giving way to new interpretations, it becomes clear that the void, the missing pieces, contributes to the whole. And not only do it contribute, but it is sometimes even considered an integral part. And this is of interest when viewing the corsets on display at the von Echstedtska. They too seem to depend both on what is there and what is missing. What is there - the rooms, with its ornate decorations, and the corsets hung in relation to these decorations - seems at first to be the main point, or indeed the only point. They are the premise. But once the premise is set, other mechanisms kicks into action. Unlike the “neutral” environment of a museum - I write “neutral”, as every space made to tell a story through items on display can never be neutral - it is worth mentioning again that Ove Harder Finseth took cues from the rooms themselves, and considered that a key element. His starting point was not neutral, but ornate and rich, and with already set moods. A museum setting will, on the other hand, often present garments towards

non-patterned walls, with muted light and minimal interference. This to make sure the focus is on the single item on display. Especially a corset, which was once a tool to make other garments looked good, but which is now are displayed in their own right. Will their role appear different when we are allowing the corset take center stage, and putting it in dialogue with richly ornamented walls? It appears to have been the belief of the designer.

A green room with pink flowers and rocaille framework has been translated into a green corset with pink flowers, green leaves and silver beading. The corset becomes a continuation of the room, of the walls. In another room a black corset picks up the delicate turquoise and pale floral pattern of the wallpaper. The corset is placed in a way that makes it seem the flowers of the diagonal lines of the wallpaper simply grows into the corset, a natural continuation. The flat wallflowers appear to be transformed into sculpted figures laid on a silk surface. It is the same story in every room - the colours and patterns of the walls is translated into the corset in front of it. We are given clues, but not the full story. We only get a sense of the female personas. Returning to Ove Harder Finseth's presentation of the exhibition in the catalogue, he writes that:

*“The stories of these corsets are inspired by all the impressions that the rooms at von Echstedtska gården offer. I have created twelve different women who have lived on the farm, from fine ladies to young maids. Each one is different from the other and wants to display her personality and strength. (...) Each corset also tells a story. Each and every one is a woman who lives in harmony with or in contrast to her surroundings. One has had a wonderful life and has adored getting all the attention she could ever desire. Another feels as if she blends in with the wall and is just hoping that she will be noticed at least once, while a third lady launches a kick towards the wall, to avoid being trapped by it. She has a rebel streak and wants to be noticed”.*⁸⁴

So again, he tells us that the corsets are inspired by the rooms, and that they represent either a woman “...who lives in harmony with or contrasts her surroundings”. But we are not told which women, which corsets, are given the respective roles. And this is where the void becomes an element of the exhibition. What is not seen, what is not there, leaves room for the viewer to participate in the imaginative process. When visitors are faced with the missing pieces, they will use their imagination and fill in the missing pieces. And since this offers

⁸⁴ From the exhibition catalogue at the von Echstedtska in 2012.

room for their own mental images and their «potential presence» the void can be even more powerful than a full theatrical display of the human body with wig, face, arms and legs. When corsets were displayed with skirt, once visitors met a mannequin seated at a table decked with fineries, dressed in an ornate silk corset and matching tulle skirt, with matching hair ornament in the red wig⁸⁵, the visitor were presented with a full image. This was the case with three of the von Echstedtska installations, and it left less room for the visitor's own ideas. The story was in large already told. The most successful displays depended instead on what was not there, and the stories one can then insert into that void, as previously argued in 4.2.

One example is the “Wings of Gold” installation, hanging in the kitchen, partly overlapping a black, rectangular hatch on the wall, and offering a combination of coarse brownish grey materials and gold with ornate beading in the shape of a bird. The placement, combined with the materials, may evoke curiosity. Why the heavy mix of materials, why the very rich gold and beading in the kitchen area, why the symbol of a bird? Is the mix of fine and coarse materials supposed to tell us something about the qualities in the female persona created, or is it just the designer's way of creating a rich display? Having Ove Harder Finseth's words on “*every starting in the heart*” in mind, and this personification having a bird covering her heart, does she want to fly away, to escape, and does this mean we should take the immobile, strung-up position into account?

Then you have the curious case of the previously discussed “Morning Dew” installation. It was hung in the grand bedroom of the lady of the house, and perfectly imitating the painted green and red flower arrangements of the walls. It might have been the most extravagant and lush corset on display in the exhibition, and yet the one most perfectly blending in with its surroundings. But as mentioned previously, he observed that some visitors didn't even notice the addition to the room⁸⁶, and this was indeed confirmed by others visiting the estate. Because it was too close to the entrance, or because it too perfectly simulated the walls, like camouflage? Because it was a lady not demanding attention? Or simply the designer's way of looking at the room and the floral pattern on the wall, and translate this into a sartorial display, a garment with decorations? But what then when it is in the shape of a woman's torso? Do we here have to relate to the female persona?

It may appear that the rooms, the installations, the corsets, was not the only components of the exhibition. They are the elements everything center around, and bring with them different ideas of the history and plausible interpretations of the corset, and aspects of

⁸⁵ «Waterfall», see illustration III.

⁸⁶ Ove Harder Finseth, in an interview done in his studio on March 5, 2018

architecture and the home and a woman's traditional role: domesticity, honour, definitions on masculine and feminine. But when all this is digested, it is not what seems to create the different stories after all. They are a vital component, they are the premise. But as discussed by Bjørn Sverre Hol Haugen, Anne-Sofie Hjemdahl, Mark Sandberg and Jacques Rancière, the maybe most poignant stories appear when the display leaves room for additional thoughts to be added, when you are given some elements and is free to add to them. So albeit ornate, rich and captivating in execution, and albeit the rich creations and respective rooms was the whole premise of what is discussed, the 2012 von Echstedtska exhibition by Ove Harder Finseth also depended on the void, the missing pieces. A void that resisted meaning, or one that could be filled with meaning.

5. Concluding remarks

5.1. The Sensual, the Conceptual and the Contextual

Key elements of this thesis has been Ove Harder Finseth's exhibition *Glansen ved hjertet, gløden i rommet* at the von Echstedtska estate in 2012, looking at it from different angles, and especially through historical aspects touched upon in the exhibition. Using Folkmann's design theories, more specifically his model of design aesthetics through analyzing *The Sensual*, *The Conceptual* and *The Contextual*, has been both a theoretical framework and loosely also the overall structure of the thesis.

The first part has been devoted to the designer himself and the corsets he created and displayed, presenting the estate and each corset installation, trying to pinpoint their allure. Part of the idea was to place the designer into a more specific context than what is usually done, and see if this context was relevant in the von Echstedtska exhibition. This part of the thesis largely focused on what we see, shape, colours, textures, the atmosphere, the artefacts themselves. In short, what appeals to the senses - *The Sensual*, as described by Folkmann. The use of rich materials in abundance, set towards the backdrop of an old country house, leaves little doubt the Finseth creations - and indeed also the von Echstedtska installations - has a strong aesthetic nerve and appeals directly to the senses. And this also seems to be the tradition Finseth has worked in throughout much of his career. It is also one way of looking at his creations, but not the only way.

Folkmann describes a second approach, building on the first one: *The Conceptual*. The mediate opposed to the immediate, going from using the senses to heading for an understanding through thoughts, through knowledge. In part looking at relations between the idea and the presentation, and in part trying to achieve an understanding through a historical gaze, on things known from the past. *How* and *what kind of* knowledge can be used to interpret what we see? Having looked at some historical aspects of domesticity, of the male gaze typically brought up in context of the female body in art, and of different readings of the corset viewed as a historical construction has allowed me to put the material into context. And yet historical conditions and a potential woman's role may be more misleading than enlightening for this specific exhibition, as it borrowed from history but didn't live after specific historical principles. Thus it might better have served as a way of telling what the exhibition was not. Taking Ove Harder Finseth's expressed intentions behind the von Echstedtska exhibition into consideration, it might lend a hand, but it does not fully answer

the questions raised. His female personas sprung out of the walls were the starting point and a tool, they may even have initiated the exhibition. But along the way I reached the conclusion that the female personas the designer meant to place in each room might not have been the key element of the exhibition after all.

In the last part the text looked at some of the display strategies. So far the items on display and their surroundings have been enlightened from different angles, looking at the objects themselves and placing them in a context of historical framework and different views of architecture and domesticity. But a third aspect, a third possible approach, is the one Folkmann describe as *The Contextual*. Who is presenting us this exhibition, and what visual tools are used? Folkmann quotes Ranci re aesthetics not always being a quality within the object, but just as much a strategy, or a way of understanding and experiencing. Finseth is not only offering us an aesthetically pleasing sight, but also entice spectators to relate to the building itself, and the context of the corsets on display. In the last part I thus discussed some of the display strategies typically seen in Ove Harder Finseth's exhibitions, and in the von Echstedtska one in particular.

It has been interesting to observe that although Ove Harder Finseth is first and foremost considered to be a designer of clothes, the use aspect of his creations and especially his corsets seem subordinated. His garments are beautifully crafted and fully functional, with zippers and lining and a plausible human shape, and can very well be worn. But the corsets are seldom made to accompany full attires, and they are often presented abstracted from the body. And they are also often put on display in relation to historical environments or other and different pieces of art. Abstracting the garments from the body by making installations, and often where the corsets have been put in relation to pieces of art, seems like a strategy that has proved a good match for Finseth's creations. And thus he is maybe rather making works of art himself than garments primarily meant to dress a human body.

As discussed in chapter three, the most successful installations at the von Echstedtska was not necessarily the mannequins dressed in full attires, presented as women, almost as effigies. Instead, the real star is the fully abstracted corsets, suspended from the ceiling, lightly mimicking the torso of a woman but not being dependent on it. These installations were creating stories both through the physical objects that were there, and what was not there: the void, the missing pieces, the vacant space. The void adds to the whole and invites the viewer into a story that is not fully told, and where the viewers own thoughts can be added into the story. Although I cannot claim the use of the void was a conscious strategy, a visual tool used by Ove Harder Finseth, it became a factor in the exhibition he created, much in sync

with how garments are often displayed in a museal setting.

5.2. The corset and the conclusion

When I first started the work on this thesis, I was surprised to discover there was very little written material and especially academic texts to be found on Ove Harder Finseth. This despite the fact that he has been in the business for some 20 years, and despite him doing multiple exhibitions throughout Scandinavia, in museums and galleries, or as was the case at von Echstedtska and Huseby: old country estates. He has also been responsible for some prominent attires. The wedding dress for HRH Crown Princess Mette-Marit in 2001 is the one he is most deeply associated with, and though considered highly artistically successful it might not *stylistically* be his most typical work. The dress, albeit sculpted in look and with a focus on the torso, seemed on the surface to only rely on the fabric itself. What is more often seen from his hand is ornate surfaces where there is a high level of embellishment in forms of bead embroidery, appliquéd lace and flowers and so forth. So there seemed to be room for writing about the designer and his oeuvre, discussing what traditions he belongs to, and creations typically seen from his hand, at least those displayed in his exhibitions. And then looking closer at different display strategies in these exhibitions, and especially the 2012 von Echstedtska one.

Of particular interest was Ove Harder Finseth's work on the corset and the torso in various stages of his career. It is present all from his graduation collection in 1997, where he experimented with rouleaus in the shape of female torsos and garments, to his most recent exhibition at the von Echstedtska in the summer of 2018. Obviously the 2018 exhibition is not covered in this thesis, as the exhibition opened well after the thesis was finished. But previous exhibitions, and especially that in the Nøstetangen room at Drammens Museum in 2010, has been viewed in context of the 2012 von Echstedtska one. Because many of his exhibitions shows a similar tendency: displaying the corset without a body, hung from the ceiling, in front of a wall, and placed in context of pieces of art or in a historical environment.

His retrospective *Vanity Fair* 2014 exhibition at Nordenfjeldske kunstindustrimuseum in Trondheim, Norway, was not brought into the discussion. Maybe this will appear a surprising choice, seeing this exhibition dealt with his whole career and the many facets of his creations. However, in context of what has been discussed, and especially the 2012 von Echstedtska installations, the *Vanity Fair* was curated by the museum, and with their exhibition strategies at play. Discussing that exhibition would in large be discussing their interpretation of Ove Harder Finseth's work, while the other exhibitions has been the designer

himself responsible for all aspects, from the actual making of the sartorial creations, to how they were put on display.

The corset as phenomenon has been discussed at length, from historical practices and revivals at the end of the 20th century, to different meanings applied to the garment. Main reason corset history was brought into the discussion was to highlight both historical and newer connotations of this garment, and link this to Finseth's own corsets. The revival of the corset in the 1980s and 1990s was the result of a renewed interest from multiple designers and with different results. Albeit borrowing from history, these creations did not mimic museal displays; instead the designers played around with the phenomenon that is the corset and approached it from different angles, thus adding new connotations and new histories, and once again transforming the meaning of the garment. Part of the corset discussions was also to try and pinpoint further what tradition Ove Harder Finseth's corsets belonged to, if any, and how that was expressed at the von Echstedtska in particular.

The tangible lack of a body in the corset started as a minor observation. But the more I looked into it the more I realized it explained questions I had on the 2012 von Echstedtska displays, as well as how we usually see Finseth's creations exhibited. And I was thrilled to discover that there was much material to be found on the phenomenon: the meaningful absence, the powerful void of a body not there. Many writers have discussed the importance of this void, and discussed the role of the "body-less" garments in museums and on display. It has also been discussed how a sensibility to the void can be of use when we «resurrect dead garments», as Amy de la Haye was previously quoted on.⁸⁷

There have been different traditions in exhibiting the history and practice of dress, ranging from the effigy-like reconstructions of a specific person, complete with wig, face, hands, feet and gestures, to focusing on single garments, suggesting an attire or shown out of context of an attire, maybe even out of context of the human body. And though these various traditions are successful in different ways, Bjørn Sverre Hol Haugen, Anne Sofie Hjelmdal and others points out the lack of the body, the lack of limbs and hair and a face, as potentially more powerful than a full display. Because just in that void, there is room for the thoughts and the imagination of the spectator. In other words, when the visitors at the von Echstedtska estate in 2012 wandered through the house and saw the various corset installations in the rooms, they were freer to create their own stories, and maybe even insert a bit of their own life into the garments up in front of the wall, than what they were when facing the fully

⁸⁷ de la Haye, *Exhibiting Fashion: Before and After 1971*, 83.

clothed and styled mannequin seated in the grand dining room.

Another aspect discussed at length is the house, the home, the building. Ove Harder Finseth used the von Echstedtska estate and its interiors as a starting point for *Glansen ved hjertet, gløden i rommet*, and also described how female personas literally stepped out of the walls. When the exhibition opened in the summer of 2012, the visitors met corsets suspended from the ceiling, hung in front of the walls. And they were not two different spheres, they were in dialogue with each other, sometimes even looking alike. In places the corset and the wall appeared almost as two different materials expressing the same idea. In other rooms they were accenting each other, or even appeared dismissive of each other. But common for them all: the building was a component to consider, from the physical presence to the more abstract thoughts on what a house means. Different aspects of architecture were therefore explored - parallels between architecture and textiles, parallels between architecture and women's role, and the «gesamtkunstwerk» as an artistic expression, and some of its implications when those principles were to be transformed to the human body.

So what was Ove Harder Finseth's agenda with this exhibition? Though he talks about his female personas and the different women in their respective rooms, it comes off as a more abstracted notion when on looking closer at the exhibition. As written for the Nøstetangen exhibition in Drammens Museum two years before, the corsets are functional, they are possible to wear and presumed by a woman, but when on display they are "...temporarily detached from their use, but not removed from the phenomenology of fashion and feminine beauty".⁸⁸ The forms are both abstracted and in the shape of a woman's torso. Though the corset is often used as a tool to affect the human body, either through re-shaping the body, distorting it, playing on sexual connotations, on fetishism, or recreating a desired historical setting and a historical female role, in this case the corset might merely have served as a tool for the designer.

The corset appears to have been his medium, the corsets itself functioning as his canvas, onto which he could «paint» with beads, sequins, lace, appliqués and gems, substituting brush with a needle. And in this the corset seems freed from the sexual, if not sensual, aspect it is often given. It is not the corset seen through the male gaze, it is not the historical creation with all its implications. It is not the corset put in a context where the body that would carry it is the central aspect. The woman, through the female torso, with its commonly depicted hourglass shape and allure, seems surprisingly little present here. I write surprisingly, as Ove

⁸⁸ From Drammens Museum's website, information retrieved October 11, 2017.

Harder Finseth made several references to the women he created, the personas that were to exhibit the rooms. But the corsets appears autonome works of art in their own right, “...*detached from their use*”,as Drammens Museum wrote. In an interview in March 2018 Finseth admitted that he was utterly delighted when someone would buy his corsets just to display them, hang them on the wall. This seems just as much his goal as it is to dress a woman.⁸⁹

Though he creates these ornate corsets made of lush materials and decorated in striking ways, appealing to both the senses and the mind, he is in some ways also aiming at creating wallflowers. Though not in the traditional sense of the word. He is not going for anonymity. But he treats the corsets as a painter’s canvas where he can add his rich floral designs, and thus giving them an ambiguous status.

⁸⁹ Indeed, this is how some of the corsets from the von Echstedtska exhibition in 2012 ended up, as wall-hung installations in private homes.

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Interview with Ove Harder Finseth, done in his studio in Oslo on March 5, 2018.

Using the online search of The National Library of Norway, going through books and scanned papers in order to get an overview of what has been written about the designer.

Ove Harder Finseth's exhibition catalogues, especially the one made for *Glansen ved hjertet, gløden i rommet* at von Echstedtska (2010), but also the *Vanity Fair* at Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum (2014).

The website of Drammens Museum, first visited on October 11, 2017:

<http://drammens.museum.no/english/ove-harder-finseth-in-the-nstetangen-room>

Exhibitions

2018: När andan väcker gömda minnen (von Echstedtska, Sweden)

2016: Kulturnatt (Grev Wedels Plass, Oslo, Norway)

2015: Svevende hatter (Bogstad gård, Oslo, Norway)

2015: Korsetten är kastad (Huseby bruk, Grimslöv, Sveden)

2015: Maler med nål og tråd (Kunsthåndverkerne, Oslo, Norway)

2014: Vanity Fair (Nordenfjeldske kunstindustrimuseum, Trondheim, Norway)

2014: Kunstbanken (Hedmark kunstsenter, Hamar, Norway)

2013: Fra det kongelige hoff til Stavern (Krutthuset, Fredriksvern verft, Stavern)

2012: Glansen ved hjertet, gløden i Rommet (von Echstedtska, Sweden)

2010: Ove Harder Finseth i Nøstetangenrommet (Drammens Museum, Norway)

2006: Kunstbanken (Hedmark kunstsenter, Hamar, Norway)

2006: 5 Crossing Borders (Livrustkammeren, Stockholm, Sweden)

2006: 5 Crossing Borders (Doga, Oslo, Norway)

2001: (Risørbank, Mandal)

List of illustrations

- I Collage of the 1997 creations *Smi en drøm*, from Nordenfjeldske kunstindustrimuseum, Trondheim (NK2006-001) and *Mauds espalier*, from The National Museum, Oslo (OK-1999-0001). Photos from the respective museums.
- II Ove Harder Finseth's design sketch for the royal wedding dress, 2001.
- III Photo from the *Ove Harder Finseth i Nøstetangenrommet* exhibition at Drammens museum in 2010. Photo by Werner Zellien / Drammens museum.
- IV Collage of an 18th century court bodice, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (C.I.46.42.6) and Ove Harder Finseth's *Morning Dew* from 2012.
- V Collage of the 12 corset installations at the von Echstedtska estate in 2012. Photos by Kim Müller / Värmland Museum.
- VI An early 19th century waist-hung châtelaine with various tools, The National Museum, Oslo (OK-04821).
- VII "Woman in Corset", 1896, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, The National Museum, Oslo (NG.K&H.16761).
- VIII Presumed satirical illustration from the mid 19th century (source unknown).
- IX The back of a reception dress by Henry van de Velde, 1902. Presented in *Das neue Kunst-Prinzip in der modernen Frauen-Kleidung* in 1902.
- X An "empty" 18th century corset in a museal setting. From The Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2013. Photo by Janne Arnesen.
- XI The Belvedere torso as displayed in The Vatican Museum in Rome. Photo by wknigh94 / Wikimedia Commons.
- XII *Wings of Gold*, 2010/2012, Ove Harder Finseth. Photo by Miras Mirakel (blogg).



FIG. I: A collage showing the creations «*Smi en drøm*» (left) and «*Mauds espalier*» (right). These creations, made by Ove Harder Finseth in 1997, was later purchased by Nordenfjeldske kunstindustrimuseum in Trondheim (NK2006-001), and Kunstindustrimuseet in Oslo, today a part of The National Museum (OK-1999-0001). Photos from the respective museums.



FIG. II: HRH Crown Princess Mette-Marit's wedding dress. Design sketch by Ove Harder Finseth (2001).



FIG. III: Detail from the 2010 «*Ove Harder Finseth i Nøstetangenrommet*» exhibition.

Photo by Werner Zellien / Drammens Museum.



FIG. IV: Collage of a conical 18th century bodice, and a corset by Ove Harder Finseth.

Left: Court bodice from The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (C.I.46.42.6).

Right: «*Morning Dew*» by Ove Harder Finseth (2012).



FIG. V: Overview of the 12 corset installations at the 2012 von Echstedtska exhibition.
Photos by Kim Müller and Värmland Museum.

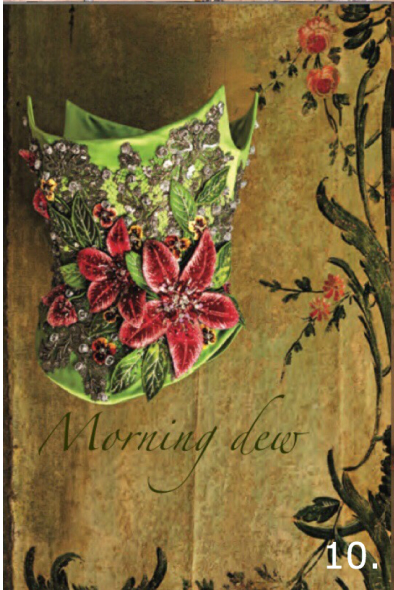




FIG. VI (left): Waist-hung châtelaine with various tools, early 19th century, unknown maker.
From The National Museum in Oslo (OK-04821).

FIG VII (right): «*Woman in Corset*», Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec 1896
From The National Museum in Oslo (NG.K&H.A.16761).



from the French: "How extraordinary! This morning I tied a knot and this evening there is a bow."



FIG. VIII (left): Presumed satirical illustration from the 19th century.

Unknown origin.

FIG. IX (right): Back of a reception dress by Henry van de Velde.

Published in «Das neue Kunst-Prinzip in der modernen Frauen-Kleidung»,
Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration Band 10 (1902).



FIG. X (left): 18th century stays on display in the V&A Museum, London.

Photo: Janne H. Arnesen.

FIG. XI (right): The Belvedere torso in the Vatican Museum, Rome.

Photo: wknight94, Wikimedia Commons.



FIG. XII: «*Wings of Gold*» as displayed at the von Echstedtska in 2012.

Photo: Miras Mirakel (blogg).