



Else Skålvoll Thorenfeldt

ON MAISON MARTIN MARGIELA, TEXTILES, AND AGRICULTURE

Else Skålvoll Thorenfeldt is a farmer based in Norway. She also serves as the Head of Communications at International Library of Fashion Research in Oslo. In the 90s, she was a core team member at Maison Martin Margiela, overseeing communications and press from their mythological Paris atelier. Later, she launched her artisanal textile company Crafted & Loomed Textiles, sourcing textiles from India, before founding the small-scale organic family farm Korsvold Gård located in the coastal isles of Hvaler, which she still runs today. As a part of the serial contribution to Viscose by International Library of Fashion Research, Thorenfeldt shares her thoughts on the making of clothing.

In 1985, I left Norway to study fashion in Paris. I was 19 years old. I had my suitcase and my sewing machine and I didn't know anybody at the time. I studied design and pattern-making for three years, and after a year of wondering about after graduation, I ended up at Institut Français de la Mode. It was the fourth or fifth year since IFM's founding; we were 25 students and maybe 15 teachers. Martin Margiela and Jenny Meirens came there to lecture among many other important figures of that time. This school had creatives, commercial people, engineers; it really united the whole fashion industry into one class. It was extremely eye-opening—it was just a fabulous year. At the end of the year, Margiela needed people to help sell their collection, so they asked at the school if someone wanted to work at their house, which was not so famous at the time. However, it was my absolute favorite, because I'd seen this series in *i-D* and I was really fascinated with it. It was totally new, very rock n' roll, nothing like the glossiness of the 1980s. So I said yes, and went to do this interview with Jenny. At that time, I had no experience whatsoever. They asked me if I'd sold collections before. I told them, *I'm sorry, but no*. She then asked if I spoke Italian, to which I responded, *I'm sorry, I don't!* She finally said, OK. *You can start on Monday.*

I remember that the first thing that struck you when you entered the office was that everything was covered in white cotton fabric. The people working there, the furniture, the clothes rack—even the chandelier was covered in white cotton. It was everywhere. All the furniture in the studio was from local flea markets, casually covered in white cotton or painted white. When we had shows, we simply served red wine backstage—not champagne—and if you stained red wine all over the place, that would be OK. Maybe that would become a detail on a garment one day. The idea was very nice because it was not meant for people with a lot of money. The white lab jackets that the team was wearing were similar to those worn in traditional couture ateliers in the old days.

Martin played with garments' own objecthood all the time. You can find it in the permanent pleats that aren't supposed to be ironed out, in the pre-wrinkled clothes. We had so much joy playing with this. Printing garments onto another garment, making puppet's clothes in real size so that the buttons would be disproportionately big. He turned garments inside out; he made skirts and dresses from the fabric usually used as the lining of a traditional jacket, and turned it into something exclusive and elevated. It was very democratic in the Margiela office—this was something totally new at that time.

We were a very small

team at the beginning, I think we were six or seven people when I first started. Very soon the fashion press started to talk about the brand, and Martin himself didn't want to be in front. He didn't want to see the press, so they had to meet with me instead. It was really smart because it gave him more time to do the only thing he wanted, which was making the collection. He was really into his work, and to deal with the press was a big disturbance to him. He was really into showing the garments and not himself; it was honest. Of course, later, his anti-approach to branding became very conceptual and very smart because everybody knew that if you had the four stitches at the back of your coat, you had a Margiela garment. But in the beginning, the idea was that he wanted people not to look at the garment and think, *oh it's Martin Margiela, then I will buy it*, but for people to look at it and think, *wow this is a really beautiful piece of craft, this is a really beautiful shape, I'd like to have this garment.*

In the first show, there was a white piece of cotton fabric placed on the floor, and at the end of the show, the models would walk in red paint with their Tabi shoes and leave marks on the fabric. In the following season, he made a gilet out of that same piece of textile. He would take posters and make garments out of them, he would take broken white old china (cups, saucers) and wire it together to become a garment. Of course, this isn't an easy garment—it's an object, it's a wearable object. Same thing with the plastic that is placed over the garment when it arrives from the factory. It's typical Martin when he would take such an object and say, *Hmm, this is interesting. Let's make something.* He was playing with the object.

After three or four years, I felt that I had to move on. It was my first job after school. I liked being there, but I wanted to create something on my own. I wanted to do textiles as well as go to India, so I made that combination into a small textile company. I called it Crafted & Loomed Textiles. I was really drawn to Indian textile history, so I just went alone to India and I didn't know so many people. It was a pretty spontaneous decision.

I was quite obsessed with the incredible beauty of what is not "perfect." You find that in handmade material, but also in machine-made stuff when the machines are old. I've toyed with some modern textile companies in Japan, but their approach was super perfect, which I was less interested in. In India many craftsmen and craftswomen still had the traditional skills at that time. I was not interested in the ethnic part of it, but the beauty of these techniques where you can still feel and see the hands of the craftsperson on the work.

There are some imperfections, but it looks really beautiful. When I started Crafted & Loomed Textiles, I was offering my tiny collection of fabrics to a group of designers. I had a big network from my experience with Martin, and I was collaborating with and sharing office space with the people behind *Purple Magazine*.

It was a whole scene in Paris at that time, so I had easy access to the designers there. It turned out that they liked the fabrics too. I was responsible for sourcing certain fabrics if the designers requested a specific print, and I would even create it for them at times. I was working for Vivienne Westwood, Balenciaga, Susan Cianciolo's RUN, Comme des Garçons Homme, Ann Demeulemeester and a lot with A.P.C. I pretty much survived thanks to them. It was not always easy to import from India, and I supplied my fabrics from various sources. I met a girl in Bangalore who had suppliers in Hyderabad, Bombay, and Bangalore, but I also traveled a lot to find small suppliers across the country, and she followed up everything. It started to be an issue to make products that were more environmentally friendly already back then. It is more than ever important today.

I think there are a lot of things that are comparable between the business of fashion and the business of agriculture. They are two money-making businesses that neglect their workers as well as the environment. I hope that new generations will ask more about the source of their food, and the source of their clothes. Martin was ahead and committed to this. In the atelier, they were transforming old clothes into new clothes. They went to a lot of flea markets and found a lot of jeans from the 1970s, ball gowns from the 50s, and old silk scarves, and transformed them into skirts, jackets, and coats, for the Artisanal Collection. The idea was to mix garments from all the collections; nothing was ever done and then forgotten. I think it's just as relevant today as it was thirty years back. The quality of the clothes is superb—I still feel very good wearing thirty-year-old Margiela. I think fashion should learn a lot from this approach.

What we did at Margiela, I brought it with me to the textile industry, and later, to the way we built up our family farm. When we started, we had no farm experience. I just wanted organic food and my kids to grow up in nature. When we built up that farm, it was all about image-building too—we presented our crops the same way we presented our collection. In a way, it's all about presenting moods. It might sound a little strange to frame agriculture in that sense, but the way of thinking is identical. When you farm small scale you get food with soul, also here the great taste and beauty lay in the perfect imperfection you can't find in mass production.

The same feeling you get when you look at an analogue photo versus a digital print. And a printed magazine versus a digital one. Which brings us to what we do today at The International Library of Fashion Research. I was irritated at the conventions of a designer but I suppose I was never really working as one. When you are young and work with someone like Martin, it becomes really hard to change course after that.

As told to Jeppe Ugelvig

With thanks to The International Library of Fashion Research