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## **A sustainability manifesto for Ann-Sofie Back**

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Dear Ann-Sofie Back,

Congratulations on the award. You deserve every penny and krona of it, as well as the added attention. I want to celebrate you by offering a gift. It is a sustainability manifesto (I noticed you didn't have one). All you need to do now is sign (on the dotted line)!

Dear (other) readers,

Surprisingly often I get the question 'who is your favourite fashion designer?' My answer is always 'Ann-Sofie Back'. I see the confusion on the enquirer's face, 'why isn't she plugging some eco-brand?'. Perhaps this is understandable since my work as educator, researcher and activist has been dedicated to fashion futures of sustainability. Often sustainability is synonymised with issues such as harmful chemicals or labour rights. Neither such concern, or its corresponding strategy, is the reason behind the fame of Ann-Sofie Back. It is probably also still the case that fashion purporting to be sustainable is associated with a certain look, or at least an aura. Again, the body of work of Ann-Sofie Back does not correspond to these.

I would like to use this short text to expand and problematise the definition of sustainability in fashion (and beyond), and simultaneously illuminate the work of Ann-Sofie Back, as a whole and in its aspects, in a way that gives it a kind of dignity that other lenses have perhaps not afforded. I write from the perspective of sustainability 'expert', and a long-time and keen wearer of Ann-Sofie Back's clothes.

### **What the world needs now (fill in from the song if you can bear it)**

First a short contextualisation. The alarming state of our environment, as well as human activities causing it is now formally and globally agreed. (See e.g. Rockström et al. 2009; IPCC 2013) It has also been established that clothing has an impact on the environment that is high in relation to other products. (Chapman 2010) When the Rana Plaza garment factory in Bangladesh collapsed in 2013 (by no means a unique incident), with tragic consequences for individuals and communities, the fashion sector's toll on social systems became a global media topic. Gratifyingly, a growing number of fashion companies are dedicating efforts to form strategies that mitigate both tolls on the environment and humans. Yet, mitigation will at best slow down things getting worse, as the United Nations environmental organisation predicts that by 2050, globally, we will be facing a tripling of annual resource extraction and consumption. (UNEP 2011: xv)

We should and must continue to mitigate environmental and social ill-effects with all the might and creativity we possess. This includes, of course, addressing the product level of fashion through use of better fibres and better processes. It

also includes devising new business models that enable a decoupling of enjoyment of the fashion experience from high material throughput, by, for example, rental, lending, re-styling or mending services. But reversing the negative effects, and moving forward is only possible if we dig deeper, beyond the levels of products and even systems, and explore and challenge the mindsets or paradigms of our societies. This is where we understand and construct the meanings which allow and promote destructive relationships with the things, the resources and the people. And this is where the contribution to sustainability of the work of Ann-Sofie Back lies.

### **Manifesto**

So, voilà, here is your sustainability manifesto, Ann-Sofie Back. It comprises five concise points, elaborated with examples from your extensive body of work. There is only me to blame if I have misunderstood something or everything.

#### *Continuity and longevity*

Amongst Ann-Sofie Back's crimes to fashion, the longevity with which she approaches ideas is notable. This sits in stark contrast to a fashion system normally characterised by capricious shifts in pursuit of novelty, and which doesn't allow or encourage a designer to follow a thought to its perfected endpoint. There is a distinct line from the earliest to the most recent work of Ann-Sofie Back, which enables the 'hoarding' wearer/collector to combine a skirt from 2005 with a jacket from 2013, for interesting new combinations both stylistically and conceptually. The ingenious sleeves that tied around the waist of a skirt already in Autumn/Winter 2003, recur in Autumn/Winter 2014. An exploration into God and religion has a healthy continuation as God 2. This takes tenacity, courage and vision of the designer. I know that the trajectory her work takes onwards will surprise me, yet offer me moments of re-connection with past excellence - and so also my life as it was then, as well as with societal discourses of the time.

#### *Personality and identity*

The clothes of Ann-Sofie Back become wardrobe classics, not because of their simplicity or basicness, but because they have a sharp and even wilful identity. Just like we love our friends not for their perfection, but for their little oddities, we love the clothes of Ann-Sofie Back not for their unpretentiousness, but for what they demand of us. They are not immediately congenial companions; they can be spiky, awkward, even burly. But they immediately arouse our curiosity, and strike us with their beauty and wearability over time. Even now, I sometimes put on my black twin-trench coat from Autumn/Winter 2004 upside down. Yet in this little struggle to get ready, I suddenly pay attention and am collaborating with this coat, its idea, design and materiality, rather than it just presenting a surface to the social and weather challenges of my day. We are in it together.

#### *Intelligence and current affairs*

The TV-journalist/the panel moderator smiles, tilts his (or her) head to the side and adopts a sweet, little voice. I examine the screen/the podium for the kitten, baby, Bambi which is undoubtedly about to appear, but no, the prompt does not welcome any such endearing friend; it is 'and now we are going to talk about

fashion'. Despite its status as commercial wonder, and presence on the art scene (both meriting a whole other paper or two), two decades of conceptual fashion, the fashion smirk is alive and well. Such tics as the head side dip and the baby voice reveal a seeming cultural incommensurability of fashion and intelligence. To be fair we fashionistas are not doing ourselves a service as we shrilly shout 'darling' when we meet, call our research 'shopping', or create a safe world where it is ok to pretend, or not even know about human and planetary suffering. Who was to know it is all ironic?

Ann-Sofie Back does not hide and she does not bat an eyelash. She is deadpan serious about her dedication to fashion AND current affairs. As she explores and gives form to uncertainties of our time, such as celebrity culture, pornography, religion, or virtual reality, she reveals the potential epicentre that the fashion endeavour can be, for seriousness and play, materiality and politics, fashion and intelligence. She also shows that it is ok (and possibly the only way) not to understand our world today or what to do with it, and still voice up, from whichever place we have chosen for ourselves or ended up in. The resulting garments are not merely illustrative but also carry agency, should we choose to acknowledge and go with it.

#### IMAGE 1

"I usually look for inspiration in social phenomena that I don't understand or disagree with, like celebrity culture in the past or like this time, porn. I am interested in what I call the pornification of society, how socially accepted porn imagery is to us and how un-titillating and un-shocking. It is not about morals, I don't know what I think, which is probably why I find it interesting."

Spring/Summer 2011 Press release,

<http://annsofieback.com/atelje/collections/s/>

#### *Local anchoring and reality*

Ann-Sofie Back's early work took as point of departure her own experience of life in the Stockholm suburb of Stenhamra, to reveal the pain and embarrassment that is the unavoidable consequence of our awkward and clumsy attempts at bettering ourselves and inhabiting our aspirations. The excruciatingly honest and brutal, yet so sophisticated and tender turning insideout of the fashion moment that she stages is a healthy and significant antidote to an alienation otherwise almost always present in fashion. Indeed, the work of Ann-Sofie Back exposes a profound truth of the human condition, that bravado and dreams live side-by-side with insecurity and fear. I argue, that unaddressed, this conflict is a key contributor to unsustainability, most notably as translated into overconsumption. As the designer has continued to expand her area of exploration to the inner city of Stockholm, celebrity culture or Second-life, her auto-ethnographic approaches continue to convince. The fact that she has *been* a virtual porn star and has *had* her knickers flashed renders the final fashion proposal in 4D. The forth dimension, her sincerity, deep understanding and empathy, is what reaches out to me, giving me confidence to, dressed in the clothes, also dip my toes into the murky water of being me today, my simultaneous smallness and glory. In the secure anchoring in the local and the

known, Ann-Sofie Back commits another crime to the fashion system. It means that she refuses to draw on the exotic, a key or essential companion to the history of fashion pursuits. This is brave as it denies the designer many cheap tricks. There is no easier 'wow' than that which results from a slapdash representation of The Other.

### *Gender politics*

Although there are also other problems, it is actually true that it is not easy to be a woman with a career and a life today. There are some practical challenges, but I would say most of them are paradigmatic. So while the many brands purporting to cater to the modern urban woman have a point, the superficiality of their claims is often cringe-worthy. They also miss a real opportunity to meaningfully address "the radical idea that women are people". (Shear 1986). This is no (lazy, stylish, organic – ANY) picnic. I believe gender equality to be one of the most significant factors in the realisation of futures of sustainability, and the UN agrees, as this constitutes one of eight Millennium Development Goals. While even in Sweden women earn less than men, the global perspective offered by the work of Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, demonstrates how women's social and financial empowerment is vital for sustainability.

Through the themes that Ann-Sofie Back addresses and the clothes she designs, she exposes a suite of societal crimes to women, and commits yet a crime to the fashion system. The work of Ann-Sofie Back is dual-action, it penetrates and attacks stains both outwards and inwards. Like the child in H.C. Andersen's tale the Emperor's New Clothes, she exposes, or rather forces us to see, what may seem to be ok, because of their ubiquity or obvious political incorrectness, but are actually shameful societal tendencies. Isn't it crazy that women are photographed with their knickers hanging out of their skirts? Yes it is. Ann-Sofie Back shares, frames, and with a subtle sense of humour disarms my personal experience of shame as I fail to present the perfect woman that I should be (such as when my underwear is visible through my dress the wrong way). In these quieter embodiments of her deep understanding of what it is to be, or be constructed a woman in our world now, she lends ability to women to retain and expand a sense of dignity and integrity. As I am about to receive yet a patronising verbal, subliminal or physical pat on my head (or worse), I take courage from wearing what amounts to beautiful, fun, and razor-sharply subversive clothes by Ann-Sofie Back.

The work of Ann-Sofie Back takes us to new frontiers of gender politics. Please, when will you start designing underwear?

### IMAGE 2

"All designers say they make clothes for women who have their own taste or are independent... but I think the true answer is that they make clothes for really insecure women with lots of money. But actually with my own clothes I think the opposite is true, that the customers that buy my clothes, they really are original, they dress for themselves, they don't dress for a man. I start out thinking I have to have a solution, but at the end I almost have to give up, and it is more of an aesthetic reference rather than I can solve world problems."

From Hall of Femmes: Design Talks, 16-17 May, 2013  
<http://halloffemmes.com/events/speakers/ann-sofie-back/>

(The dotted line) .....

### **Conclusion**

There is of course the risk, Ann-Sofie Back, that you will not feel like signing this gift-manifesto. The word sustainability provokes a gagging reflex in many true fashionistas (but you are more than them!). The aura of danger and destruction, which I believe is intrinsic to or even essential to fashion, is what is paradigmatically difficult to reconcile with sustainability. (As if the threat of the end to humanity should not be scary enough.) Perhaps fashion is about fear management by staging palatable dares.

Of course aspects of the manifesto above can be found in other designers' work, often inspired (such a gentle word) by the maestra herself. Yet, as a whole they are unique, evidencing the ingenuity, courage, vision and wilfulness of Ann-Sofie Back.

This is of course no note of exemption for any fashion house to address the product or system levels of unsustainability, with all the imagination they should possess or could hire in. After all, this is where fashion life, in fact all human pursuits end unless we pull up our elegant sleeves to the very armpits. Yet, (now its time to turn up the sound of the music again) contributions to sustainability must count, in whichever form or guise they come, and however they are termed (or not termed), if they are deeply sincere, and if they have the potential to affect real change.

I believe that the work of Ann-Sofie Back is truly paradigm disturbing. Her clothes are Trojan horses, her clothing opens up cans of worms, and we are, individually and collectively, better for it.