

Raf Simons

Andrea Rosen interviews Raf Simons

Andrea Rosen: The format of the Statements project was already set up: a book and maybe a video. So what made you think about doing an installation as your contribution?

Raf Simons: I think the whole situation that I was in at that moment. My doubts about doing another collection. The need to explore other territories. Which I definitely cannot call art. Things like editing an issue of I.D. magazine, exposing myself to more things, doing the book with David Sims. So I thought this would be a different kind of approach from the way I approached my collections. When I started to think about the bath culture thing, I knew that I wanted to do something you don't visually expect when you think about bathrooms or bathroom accessories or a company which is producing these kinds of things. When I think about bathrooms, I think about the cliché of nice photography of nice people in bathrooms. Beautiful bodies and all these things you see in advertising. I wanted to go very far away from that. To find something that was connected to the world I represent. And not clothes, or boys in showers, and things like that.

AR: Obviously the installation has to do with the whole notion of one's obsession with one's own body, how one looks at oneself, one's relationship with the mirror...

RS: Which is also what my collections are about. It is about yourself and your body, and this confrontation of yourself and your environment through the way you dress and the way you look. Except for washing yourself, the bathroom is about undressing and the confrontation with your body. It's the whole thing about being isolated. When you go into this space, you look at yourself completely differently. You see yourself completely differently than you do in other environments with other people, in the street or in the office. And this makes you start thinking about different things. What I do as a designer is deal with the problem of how you make yourself look good so that you feel better. For yourself, in the first place, but also for your environment. I discovered after all these years that people are very proud. I am very proud and people around me are very proud. And the people who deny this are the people who are maybe even more extreme. And that brought me to this kind of person that you maybe do not expect when you think about bathrooms. Not the typical person that you would find in the context of bathrooms. Like these people tattooing themselves. I wanted to imagine how their bathrooms would be. Those people are also people who are in a bathroom every day, being confronted with their bodies. The reason they have this kind of tattoo is that they are sure that it is something that makes them look nicer. And they want to have it on them for the rest of their lives.

AR: But not all tattoos are about being beautiful....

RS: I discussed that with a lot of people...

AR: It's also about personal ownership. About relating to oneself as opposed to attracting other people. It's about body ownership and the right to one's body. If you think about advertising, it's about someone looking into the bathroom. And that doesn't happen. Even when you live with someone, they look at you all the time and in all kinds of ways, but there's something different about when you're standing in front of the mirror

in the bathroom, looking at yourself, and your partner looks at you doing this. You feel invaded, in a way. And usually bathroom advertising denies that feeling. But it's really so deeply personal, this idea of coming to terms with your own body.

RS: Absolutely. That's also the reason why I really decided not to take a photo or make a picture of someone in a bathroom or a direct environment. I just wanted to place elements together with reference to this area and to the person and to see how they would work together. So the mirrors have these tattoos already. I found these Motörhead tattoo things in the internet. And the guy who works with me all the time and who's very inspiring for me has this Sisters Of Mercy tattoo and obsession. So I put these particular tattoos on the mirrors. The mirror is a very central thing in the bathroom because it is how you confront your body, ultimately. So by looking at yourself in these mirrors, you see the tattoos on your body even if you don't actually have them. And the way the installation was set up, when you look in the mirror you also see the reflection of all the other elements in the space. For example, all of the other frames with the tattoos from the internet. The photo is very much about this isolation and privacy as well. In a way it was completely exposed, because the guy was naked and you could see his tattoos. But the motorcycle helmet on his head gave him privacy. I didn't want anybody to know who it was. This privacy was a very important thing for the project.

AR: Does this photo also relate to you?

RS: Yes, because it is really important to me that people consider my privacy in the press. The one and only time I allowed someone to take a picture of me for the press, I wore a motorcycle helmet.

AR: And what about the towel?

RS: The towel is the only reference to clothing, in a way. The people I was thinking about have these kind of denim jackets over their leather. So I thought it was nice to include some kind of reference to the things I am doing, making clothes. The music is something that came up at the very beginning. I like this feeling when you are in the shower and you have music on really loud but it's muffled. It's scary because if you are in a bathroom with the music really loud it makes you very fragile. You're really isolated. You wouldn't immediately notice if someone came in, like in these horror movies. I don't know why but I'm really inspired by this kind of film.

AR: It seems clear that the choice to do an installation was more about creating a whole mood and also something that was much more open to interpretation. And what's interesting about art versus something else is that as soon as you put work, i.e. objects, in the white cube, people feel it's their responsibility to determine meaning for themselves, as opposed to being dictated to. So it's interesting that it was more about people coming to their own personal conclusion about the installation. Also you keep saying it's not about making art, but as soon as you put objects in a room like this and create an installation, you're dealing with every-thing and everyone who's done that before and you have to address the history of all this and the responsibility of making something that ends up being a sort of art object.

RS: The first thing was that I wanted this to be in a non-existing space. I didn't see it in an art gallery. It's very difficult for me because I saw all of these separate objects working together, but in a very imaginary space and if I ever thought about manifesting my imagination it completely doesn't look like an art gallery in which all these things are hanging on the wall. But it's also not something that you can create. It's more if you see all the things hanging in space that you would think about a certain space, you would think about a certain environment, which is maybe non-existing. Of course if I saw the

bathrooms of some people tattooed with Motörheads, they would not look like this and they would also not look like how I would imagine, but that's maybe the whole thing that made it interesting for me.

AR: Right, that's why it's much more interesting. It's more compelling because it's about the necessity to think about the context and to not be too overly descriptive and didactic.

RS: What I do like about it being in a gallery is that as well as the pieces being hard and black, I also wanted it to be very clean, because it is about bathrooms.

AR: But how did you feel about translating an installation into something that will exist in photographs in a book?

RS: When I see the photos I'm really happy with it because I get it, because I know the project. But then when I had the opening in Paris, I saw how for most people it became much clearer when they were seeing it in the space than when they saw it in the photos, because in the end, there were elements that you had to experience outside of the photo, like the noise for example. So in the end I have to admit that the best thing to do was to set it up in the space there.

AR: Yes, but you have experience with this. Like your presentations for your collections, you come up with a total concept for your presentations and make a huge effort before you ever see the presentation. You have a way of being able to manifest something in a physical world that's just in your imagination.

RS: Even still, you always have to choose a possible way in between. When I was doing this other collection, it was a lot about horror movies and this kind of inter-zone or non-existing dreamspace, like in the Freddy Krueger films. I really like to create these kinds of nonexisting zones or I don't even know how to explain them. But very often I find that it's very difficult in the context of what I'm doing now, like doing fashion, doing shows, etc. It would be much easier, for example, in film or in video. And very often the video of the show is how it should look, and the video is thought about much longer. The video often more accurately reflects my feelings, much better than with the show itself. But the people that see it don't think like that, which is because... I mean, they can really like the show but they don't see it properly.

AR: One of the amazing things about presentations is how fleeting and momentary they are; that they're this experience that you either have to remember or you don't remember and it's gone. And they require this huge amount of effort. And what's interesting is that when you think about your presentations you not only think about this fleeting moment, but you, Raf, think about how they project onto something that will record them permanently. It's a really interesting dilemma when you're an artist, between the fleeting moment and this desire to record or manifest it in some permanent form. I think in some way it's a strength and in some way a weakness to desire this kind of permanency, but it's interesting that you've already pre-thought it to the point of how it's going to look recorded on footage. The tape is a wholly different finished product. And that's one of the things that's always interested me about you – how purposeful everything you do is: between the nature and the feeling of the clothes and what it means to wear clothes versus the presentation and what it means to have this kind of fleeting experience, and then the nature of the tape, that has a wholly different feeling. I think within the limitations of what one thing can be, one has to find its greatest depth of meaning and even the meaning of its limitations.

R: I think it has a lot to do with inspiration from visual material. Visually I've always been very inspired with these kinds of zones – like in "Twin Peaks" or in films by Kubrick or in kitsch horror movies – zones that you don't get, you don't know what it is or where it is.

It's about fantasy, about something that doesn't exist, something imaginary and something that you maybe consider to be perfect, or not perfect but very new and interesting to discover.

AR: With film there's all these things that can be left out. One of my complaints about contemporary film is that one doesn't even realize how much can be left out, how much can be left unsaid, how much can just be perceived with this psychological feeling. It's also with film that we have this incredible desire to suspend disbelief. It's about a place that is totally fictional, not like walking into a room. But I do have to ask you if you feel the fleeting experience of your installation for the project, that one night, would have been enough? Or do you feel it has to be recorded?

RS: I don't feel it has to be recorded, I don't feel it has to be photographed.

AR: It would have been enough to have had just that one night presentation.

RS: Yeah, for me absolutely. For myself, even one second. I feel this very often with things. I'm building it up with a couple of people and then we see it finished and we're really happy with it, but then what follows... we're really happy with it during that moment...

AR: The other question, what do you see happening to these individual objects? Do they just exist for this installation and now they're gone, or do you see them as permanent pieces that should remain in time, which someone should own?

RS: I haven't thought it over but I definitely think they should stay together. It's a very important thing.

AR: Do you see it as a piece?

RS: Yeah.

AR: You said before that this is not art, that it's just an installation. But I know that making art is something that you've thought about and I understand now that you're thinking it's not about becoming an artist or becoming an editor, it's about making the most of each opportunity. But as soon as you make a permanent object that remains together and that someone owns, isn't this art?

RS: I get you completely, and it's not that I would not like to make art because I think I would like to do that. I just think that if I did like I would still like to combine it with other things. Because it's something that if you're considered to be a fashion designer, you really think that people think you could never do this or that, because you're a fashion designer. I don't like this kind of stamp. But the reason why I don't consider this project to be art for me or an art piece for myself, is because I would only consider it to be art that I did when the whole starting point is coming from me and not from an external project.

AR: So what do you think these are, just remnants from an installation for a project?

RS: Yeah.

AR: If you're working in the format of a magazine, even if it's just a one-off project, it's still a magazine that compares to every other magazine in the world. And it's the same with an installation. The fact that it was commissioned makes it a little different, but not that different. And as you said, they never gave you any specific limitations.

RS: No that's true, they gave us total freedom, but I think the limitations are in your head. You still feel in a way that you have to do what you really want to do with the project, but is it really what you want to do as an artist? How do you actually see it?

AR: I don't know. I think if you were to ask Duchamp, art is art because an artist says it's art. That is the premise of modern art; it's art because an artist says it's art. So if you say it's not art, then I believe you that it's not art. Although for me this leads to another

question. You were given different opportunities, for instance, to edit I.D. magazine, or to do this project, because of what you've accomplished as a fashion designer. So it's not like you have to start over every time. All of your information and your expertise and your experience doesn't get lost when you take it to another arena; you bring that with you. But it's interesting to think that you have the freedom to do what you like. But freedom is responsibility and that's the problem.