

**A reflection on humans, machines, and textiles
— and on the exhibition as a space for inquiryⁱ**

After the exhibition *Maskin Makt* (Riksställningar 1977)

48 years later.

Written by Evelina Hedin

Pause for a moment.
You've reached a turning point.
There's no way back.
And the future is still unwritten.

This is how it is right now:
We're flung like projectiles
around the factory, chased
not by foremen
but by blinking lights.

These lines opened the sixth room of *Maskin Makt*, a touring exhibition produced by Riksställningar (the Swedish Exhibition Agency) in 1977. The room, titled Computer-Controlled Production, illustrated the most recent stage in the technical development of the textile industry at the time.

Maskin Makt was an exhibition on the history of technology, tracing developments in textile production in seven rooms along a timeline, from the 19th century to the 1970s. The seventh and final room, titled "The Future," invited visitors to reflect on how the development might continue. *Maskin Makt* explored how technological progress had shaped society, using weaving as a lens through which to tell that story.

I came across a brief mention of the exhibition in a book about Riksställningar, *Kultur i Rörelse*, at the Konstfack library in the autumn of 2024. As a textile artist and curator interested in the relationship between humans and machines, *Maskin Makt* immediately caught my attention. The exhibition stood out for its ambitious and carefully considered design, and for the ambiguous perspective it offered on industrial development and the role of the computer in relation to the human worker. I drew parallels to the machines of our time, and to today's discourse around artificial intelligence, gig work, and precarity. The labour issues of late capitalism: our own blinking lights.

Despite the attention the exhibition received when it was shown according to the information I found, I had never heard of it before. I texted my friend, the artist and researcher Frida Hållander, whose doctoral work partly focuses on the labour movement's organising within the textile industry of the Sjuhärads region, the very context that Maskin Makt took as its starting point. Frida, who also grew up in that region, hadn't heard of the exhibition either.

The feeling of stumbling upon a path that is both unexpectedly rich and strangely overlooked is nothing new to those who follow textile histories, movements, and forms of knowledge. Stories that ask to be told, reflected on, and reconsidered. This is a text about the exhibition Maskin Makt, the artistic and curatorial choices that shaped it, and the significance it held in its time. It is also a reflection on the exhibition's continued relevance, a revisit from a textile point of view, on how its themes resonate today. I came to see that Maskin Makt still has much to teach us, by drawing connections to contemporary experiences of alienation in relation to labour, production, and collective organisation. But also from a curatorial perspective, through its innovative ideas about audience participation, its touring format and links to democratisation, and through what may be its most distinctive yet least explored aspect: the artistically cohesive exhibition form shaped by sculptor Lars Kleen.

Rethinking the Labour Movement

"I wanted to make a more honest exhibition about the rise of the labour movement," said producer Eva Persson when I visited her at her kitchen table in the spring of 2025, almost exactly 50 years after work on Maskin Makt began. "I also wanted to show the workers' shortcomings in the face of industrialism."

Maskin Makt came after the acclaimed exhibition *Land du välsignade* (Land, You Blessed, 1975), also produced by Persson and Riksställningar. She continued: "Land du välsignade was a story of the labour movement, an accelerating force that ended in triumph. It aligned with the 1970s belief in the potential of collective organising. But I felt there was a kind of doubt that couldn't be voiced in that format. Maskin Makt was darker, somehow. It also addressed the uncertainties of the future."

While *Land du välsignade* focused on the rise of the Swedish labour movement from a historical perspective, 1850-1915, structured around a linear, narrative-driven format that culminated in the triumph of collective struggle, Maskin Makt took a more experimental and open-ended approach. Through its focus on the mechanisation of textile work, Maskin Makt explored the social and psychological consequences of automation, raising critical questions about the future. Placing the final room of the exhibition in the present day heightened the sense of uncertainty; no one had the answers yet about what automation would lead to.

Eva Persson was the first permanently employed exhibition producer at Riksställningar, the Swedish Exhibition Agency, 1967-1989. Riksställningar was a government institution with the mission of developing and supporting exhibitions across the country, often by producing touring shows that could reach audiences beyond the larger cities.

During her time at Riksställningar and later at the Museum of Work in Norrköping, Persson explored ways to reshape how exhibitions could be made. She moved away from traditional display techniques, aiming instead to create experiences that invited reflection and response. Her work often emphasized the perspective of workers and everyday life, placing social questions at the centre of the exhibition format.

For Maskinmakt, Eva Persson invited the artist Lars Kleen to design the scenography. She had previously collaborated with artists and viewed the exhibition format as a space where artistic practices could bring more than illustration. For Persson, it was crucial to involve people who were imaginative, who could think both spatially and conceptually. She believed that artists were uniquely equipped to create environments that engaged both body and mind, and to challenge the conventions of exhibition-making. “It surprises me,” she said, “that museums don’t experiment more with visual artists, who are used to analysing concepts like space, time, image, and representation.” Kleen’s work on Maskin Makt embodied this approach, treating the exhibition as a sculptural whole.

Lars Kleen also joined us at Eva’s kitchen table. It was fascinating to listen as they pieced together memories from the production of Maskin Makt. They had met through the project, which became the foundation of a friendship that continues to this day. “Being invited by Eva to work on Maskin Makt was incredibly important to me,” Lars said. “I felt like, finally, I could be of some use as an artist. To escape the daily doubt in the studio, that feeling that no one really cares. Maskin Makt meant being part of something bigger.” Lars Kleen compared it to the commission of making the art for Sundbyberg metro station in Stockholm that he did in 1985.

Shift Toward Participation and Public Engagement

The 1970s in Sweden was a time of intense societal transformation, shaped by rapid industrialization, expanding welfare policies, and a belief in public education as a tool for social equality. State-funded cultural initiatives aimed to democratize access to knowledge and artistic expression. Riksställningar’s mission was to explore new exhibition formats that emphasized accessibility, participation, and experimentation. Traveling exhibitions reflected this decentralization, reaching beyond urban centres. The curatorial approach of the time merged art, science, and political discourse, encouraging dialogue rather than passive consumption.

This decade was pivotal in reshaping museum practices, particularly in how institutions engaged with audiences. Sweden was at the forefront of this shift of making exhibitions more participatory, with examples like *Modellen* (The Model, 1968) by Palle Nielsen at Moderna Museet and *Upptäcka, Uppleva* (Discover, Experience, 1966) by Riksställningar. Maskin Makt emerged from this climate. It challenged the conventions of museum display, merging artistic interpretation with an educational, socially engaged curatorial approach. The visitor was invited into a system, confronted with machines, historical shifts, and ultimately, their

own position within industrial structures of society. The audience-centered perspective continues to shape museum practices today.

Every Detail an Expression

I visited Lars and Britta Kleen on a spring day in 2025 in their apartment in Stockholm, where they've lived since 1969, next to Lars's studio and workshop. They had prepared for my visit by bringing out working materials from the Maskin Makt exhibition, an impressive selection of handwritten synopses and drawings. Britta, who is an architect, has created all the construction drawings for Lars's artworks throughout his career, Maskin Makt included. Exquisite, delicate drawings on tracing paper, based on Lars's scale models.

Lars and Britta Kleen are artists who leave nothing to chance. Every detail carries meaning and becomes part of the story. But this approach was not without its challenges in the work on Maskin Makt. The commission got off to a turbulent start when Lars clashed with the studio director at Riksställningar. The agency's strict system for building foldable exhibitions, designed to fit the transport truck, did not align with Kleen's vision. His artistic credo, that "technique and material also express emotion, and that every construction detail, like joints, angles, corners, beams, moldings, is an expression of intent," stood in contrast to Riksställningar's standardized aluminium frames and panels.

The situation became so tense that Eva Persson had to negotiate removing the studio manager from the project to be able to proceed with the production. She and Lars Kleen formed a separate working group together with Riksställningar's technicians, and even the office clerk was brought on as a prop maker. It was the first time she had been invited to work hands-on with a production. The work could continue, but since Kleen's visions continued to diverge significantly from Riksställningar's standardized procedures, many discussions and negotiations followed along the way. In a 1979 evaluation text about his collaboration with Riksställningar, Lars Kleen described being met with a patronising attitude regarding how and with what materials an exhibition should be built. "If everything is standardised," he wrote, "the goal becomes to build an exhibition factory."



An Exhibition in Motion

Maskin Makt unfolded across seven rooms, each focused on a stage in the history of textile production. Materials and interiors reflected the period depicted. Even the lighting in each room was carefully thought out to create the right atmosphere, typical of the time. “The lighting technician came in with loads of standard exhibition lamps, but I removed them all,” Kleen recalled. There were interactive elements where the audience could test weaving techniques, like a handloom and the flying shuttle. In the 1930s–40s room, Kleen had constructed a large mechanical loom, belt-driven by a steam engine. The weaving hall was rendered with realism, showing how new technologies accelerated and fragmented the work process, among them, the automatic bobbin changer and warp monitor, which tripled production capacity. The exhibition text described how this was the era when the weaver became “mechanised and automated.” The room included a soundscape recorded in a factory with automatic looms. It reflected how the workers’ resistance to mechanisation was fierce and closely linked to criticism of the working environment. The deafening noise of the weaving halls, the dust, the humidity, and of the ever-accelerating pace.

“The factory hall was the most affecting room,” Eva recalled. “We had planned to keep the sound running continuously, but we weren’t allowed to.”

The exhibition design was intended to be adaptable, allowing variations from the original layout depending on the conditions of each venue. Floor plans were sent to Britta Kleen for every new location, and she reconfigured the rooms accordingly, providing precise drawings

and assembly instructions. Sometimes the rooms were arranged in a single sequence; other times, the exhibition was split across several spaces.

One of the few places where the exhibition was shown exactly as originally intended was in Kiruna, but the response there was mixed. A report noted: “Due to a misunderstanding, the town hall management believed the exhibition would consist of a few panels, but it turned out to be a large ‘monster’ that filled so much of the hall that other planned activities had to be cancelled.”

Maskin Makt toured 27 locations between 1977 and 1983, not only across Sweden but also in Denmark, Finland, and Norway.

Exhibition Texts and Public Backlash

“It was the exhibition texts that made the show so heavily criticised,” Eva Persson said at the kitchen table. She had initially written the texts herself. “I thought what I’d written was pretty good, but it was you, Lasse, who inspired me to ask Åke.”

“I remember he wanted 5000 kronor,” Lars replied.

Åke Olsson, a journalist, was commissioned to write the texts. One poetic and thought-provoking paragraph per room, applied directly onto the walls in large-scale typewriter style.

The opening quote of this essay is an example of Olsson’s contribution. His texts were ominous and direct. Eva Persson emphasized how they shaped the reading and experience of the exhibition: “The work should be done like this, by someone who knows how to write. Just like bringing in an artist for the exhibition design. The result is stronger.” She spoke of her respect for craft in every part of the exhibition and agreed with Lars that an exhibition should ideally function as a whole, like an artwork. “Museum professionals are often too traditional and don’t dare to explore the exhibition medium. No one defends being critical, museums won’t do it.”

Maskin Makt provoked strong reactions, particularly in the textile region of Sjuhäradsbygden. When shown in Borås, representatives from the textile industry criticized the exhibition for offering a one-sided, negative view of technological development. One debate included voices from the Textile Institute and industry, arguing that the show “slandered technology” and ignored the progress and efficiency brought by automation. One speaker insisted Maskin Makt had “missed the beauty of the machines.”

Plans to make Maskin Makt a permanent installation in a former cotton mill in Rydal also faced resistance. Several local companies declined to participate in the museum, claiming the exhibition misrepresented the industry.

Despite the controversy, Maskin Makt continued its tour, becoming a rare example of an exhibition that sparked public debate around industrialisation, labour, and the politics of display. The exhibition contributed to the development of workers museums in Sweden. Like

many of Riksställningar's productions, it also helped inspire a shift toward more immersive and interactive museum experiences.

Epilogue

Even today, traces of unresolved conflict remain. Many of the exhibition's physical components, several of them artworks, are missing, with open questions about their whereabouts and ownership. Until recently, Maskin Makt was still on view at Rydals Museum. But during a renovation in 2022, the exhibition disappeared. According to the original agreement with Riksställningar, all material was to be returned to the artists after the tour ended. However, as the exhibition gained what seemed to be a permanent place at the museum, and Riksställningar was eventually dissolved, those agreements lost their legal standing.

Lars and Britta Kleen have contacted Rydals Museum about reclaiming the material, only to be told that it had been handed over to a former municipal employee, now unreachable. Alongside Lars Kleen's sculptural work, the exhibition included contributions from other invited artists, such as wall paintings and sculptural details. The original scale model, gifted by Kleen to Eva Persson after the premiere, is also missing. It had been lent to the museum but was never returned.

ⁱ *Message to the reader: This text remains a draft. I have much more material, and the research is ongoing, with further interviews planned with the people involved in the exhibition. The aim is to continue developing the themes and questions introduced here, finalizing a text for Maskin Makt 50-year jubilee in 2027. Looking back, Maskin Makt invites connections to current debates: Is the museum a kind of factory? Produced within a state-funded cultural system, made to travel and adapt, the exhibition itself mirrored some of the industrial structures it set out to critique. It also points to early forms of participation that today raise questions about whether audience engagement is a format or a genuinely transformative process. Maskin Makt blurred the line between exhibition and experience, an approach still central to curatorial practice today.*