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Amie Dicke

By Stephen Hoban
Portraits by Isabella Rozendaal

carves through the idolatry of modern life to reveal the beauty of our assumptions, making her a very welcome presence in the art world.

Amie Dicke's art is direct, visceral, and erotic. It's the sort of mixed media display that draws your mind toward certain questions, and not the tired ones, "Is this art?" Rather, the more eternal questions that arose when humanity first began to give a shit about how things looked: "What is desire?" "What is fashion for?" Even — surprising you — "What does kindness look like?"

These practices to Dicke are common, but how? What makes her art so special in this regard? She kneads visual images — what they're made of. The 32-year-old Amsterdam native makes art that hides, with odds, and takes away. It's been erased, it erases itself. There are rub-outs and effacements. Dicke has even had her most well-known body of work

called "cut-outs": images of fashion models, torn from the pages of glossy magazines, sliced down to tendons and ligaments and posed, abstract anatomies. She tells me, "My art has violent aspects, but that violence is infused with concentration. I am restless by nature."

The violence is justified when one learns how great this artist's greater crusade really is. As Dicke explains it, she's actually searching for the aura. Of course, aura searching is a notion that'd make anyone else saying it sound ludicrous — it's what you might hear as someone's justification for quitting a job or taking up hitchhiking. Dicke, though, in her concision, is talking about a specific artistic problem that she's been trying to solve.

Also, the aura that Dicke requires is not the boozey, New Age sense of the term, having to do with the soul. Here it has a stricter meaning, as used by the German thinker Walter Benjamin in his influential essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," to describe what's lost when, with the photography and film, the value of the physical presence of a unique work of art diminishes. Benjamin believed that art still possesses mystical power, just as it did when originally used for cults and worship. Think of wandering into a Hindu temple to stand face to face with the statue of a god, and then think about a picture of that statue in a magazine. The difference is the loss of aura, and the threat is that the copy destroys the original, its value. Benjamin expressed this long before anyone had ever heard of the Internet, and it's not surprising that his influence on artists and critics is greater now than ever in the age of jpeg and .mov files.

“It’s too easy to blame the big powerhouses of fashion and advertising. This imagery is based on everyone’s basic, natural reaction towards beauty and seduction. It’s very appealing, and at the same time superficial.”

Just as with the study of ancient totems, a methodology exists that makes the violence Dicke speaks of seem archeological or surgical: she cites 17th-century anatomy books as inspiration. If art is about surfaces, then Amie Dicke is more interested in the pockets of the unknown once the surface is removed, excavated. As she tells me, “By cutting it away, I tried to look for the deeper meaning—a truth—behind these images. The walls I create give me a place to insert my own questions and feelings as an artist. A wall is maybe never empty. It contains more than my imagination.”

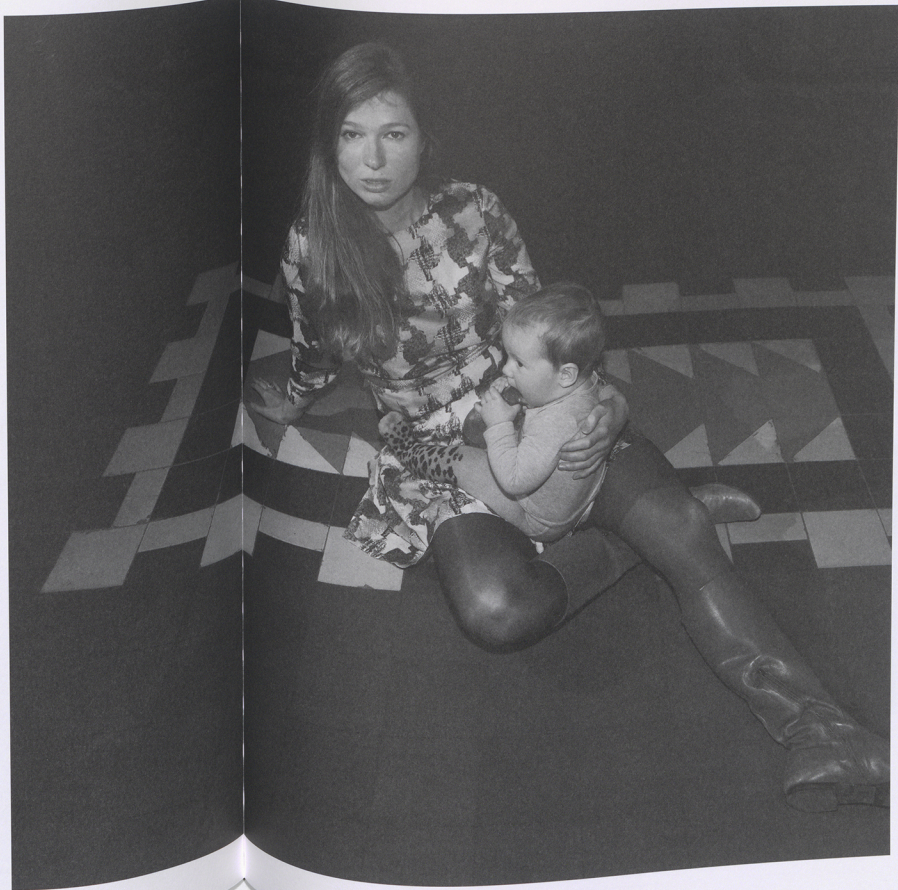
It’s the nature of her study that makes Dicke’s language sound grimy. She further ruminates on the problem: “Does it [i.e., *warz*] exist? How to capture it? When you try to put your finger on it, it disappears.” It’s a concept that Dicke engaged with directly when she was recently invited to participate in a show at Herengracht 401, a 17th-century building in Amsterdam. The space was a hideout for German Jews during World War II that later became—as by squatter’s rights—a residence. A small number still live there today.

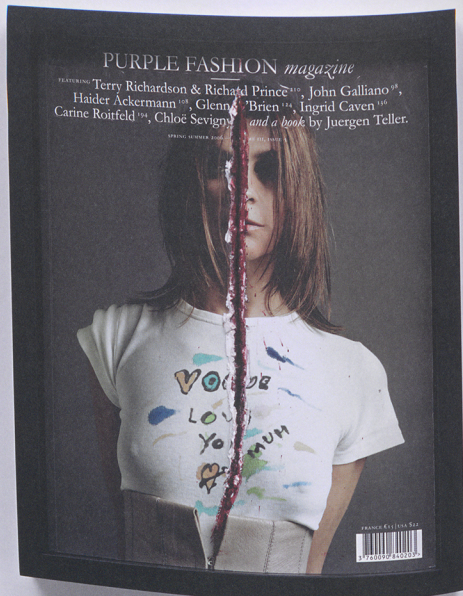
In advance of the show, Dicke learned that the apartment of Claus Victor Bock was to be vacated. Bock had hidden there as a boy and returned to live there from the 1960s until his death in 2008. His belongings had remained in place. At their first chance, Dicke and an assistant got to work covering in plastic every last surface of the dusty and decaying

apartment, from the furniture to the special edition books Bock had collected later in his life as an eminent professor and author. Then she let the movers take the furniture as planned, leaving behind a ghost of the room in plastic. The physical object was gone, but the installation—she named it “Claustrophobic”—was a trap set to capture the aura of a dead man of historical importance.

Dicke’s most recent show, *Connected Isolation*, at Hiroshi Yoshii gallery in Tokyo, takes her intervention of Claus Victor Bock’s room and applies it to her own art. She hides her work behind a scrim of plastic hanging from the ceiling to the ground. When visitors force themselves into the hallway, they are pressed up close to pieces that have been defiled—the surfaces have been scratched, sanded, cut, and torn. Equally important is what’s going on above the floor: The rest of the viewer will be vague when they are looking at the works. In a way, the viewer will disappear with the works: “It’s a room that turns visitors into ghosts.”

Connected Isolation is the latest development in a career obsessed with removing easy gratification from what’s beautiful. Dicke’s fame began in a way with fashion, by absorbing and then demolishing it. The fashion photography that became her cut-outs





"A main topic in my practice is shame. Being humiliated or embarrassed is the highest state of self-consciousness."

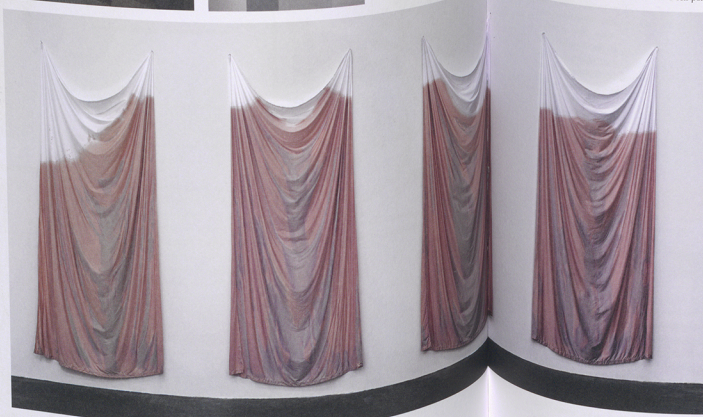
had the form's desire and longing already built in it; her slicing away added an additional haunting layer to their effect. She says of the cut-outs, "It's the simple act of putting ink and then a knife or scissors into the magazine paper. The created voids in the cut-outs give some space to project your own questions or thoughts into. This gives the images the possibility of personality."

She began making the cut-outs in 2000, during a brief stay in New York City, after graduation from art school in Amsterdam. It's a well-known story among her fans. She found the American metropolis to be a lonely place, and she'd wander its streets, taking in the fashion billboards and bus stop posters and their images of young women. "New York is a city that totally absorbs you," she says. "I was stuck in the grid; the city overwhelmed me. Almost like a passive driver, I wandered through it, just trying to find my way, trying to get to know it, just trying to find my way, trying to get to know its energy and be a part of that." Her words recall those of a famous fellow Dutchman, Ben Koolhaas, whose book, *Delirious New York*, Dicks is currently "finally" reading. The book is a genre architectural guide to the unique crazed freedom one finds inside New York's rigid grid. The cut-outs were Dicks's reaction to this rigid freedom, this absorbed loneliness, the contradictions.

*When I ask her about her time in the U.S., she turns to Collins's *Journey to the End of the Night*, opening a dark passage about New York City having a cancer, with advertising as its tumor. Just as she contends with fashion, Dicks uses literature to conjure a particular mood. She titled a recent show *Infinately Suffering Thing*, taking the line from T.S.*



Above: "My Split Self" (2010). Photo by Hans Georg Gsell. Opposite page, clockwise from top right: "Into the White" (2010). Photo by Hans Georg Gsell. "Gisela Wants Out" (2003). Photo by Bob Sorenewagen. "Once a Dream Wears a Shade" (2004). Photo by Bob Sorenewagen. Courtesy of Peres Projects, Berlin and Diana Sieber, Amsterdam.



Elia. She tends towards the melancholy canon when describing her life and work. It comes across as a charming holdover from before the age of mechanical reproduction.

The cut-outs were an instant hit. Fashion and lifestyle magazines swept in; her work was successively featured in *i-D*, *British Vogue*, *V*, *Dazed* and *Complex*, *Takson*, *Flaunt*, *Marie Claire*, *Elle*, and others as fast as it was picked up in art circles. This is no mean feat for an artist still in her twenties.

It was inevitable that such work would seem critical of fashion, but Dicke has always denied that that was the case. She speaks admiringly of designers, especially names such as Martin Margiela and Dries van Noten. "The critique has always been towards myself and never directly towards the industry," she says. "I still see the cutouts as a self-portrait.

They were necessary for me to make and, in a way, very personal. It's too easy to blame the so-called big powerhouses of fashion and advertising. This imagery is based on everyone's basic, natural reaction towards beauty and seduction. It's very appealing, and at the same time superficial. I prefer the word shallow — skin-deep. Sometimes, you have to explore the surface to be able to go deep."

It is a career obsessed with removing easy gratification from what's beautiful. Her fame began with fashion, by absorbing and then demolishing it.

you have to show a little skin. This reminds boys of being naked, and then they think of sex."

The cut-outs have a magical quality, beyond their being breathtaking to behold. Her simple process of removal reveals the contradiction — the repulsive attractiveness — of fashion and beauty. To achieve this, Dicke works within certain rules. She cuts through any part of the clothing or body but leaves certain parts untouched: hands, lips, hair. In her transformed, spectral state, Dicke's hunches are extremely stirred, extremely poising, their hair still extremely windswept. They are the suspended definitions of a haunting: ghosts trapped, repeating their action for eternity. In Dicke's conception of the allright, nobody does not die. "When I made the cutouts, I did have a few preferences for the image. For instance, the nostrils were important. Preferably the model's head tilted backwards, which emphasizes an arrogant look — looking down at us."

I thought Dicke might be in an ideal position to comment on the increasingly blurry line between high art and high fashion these days. When I ask her about it, she quotes to me Baudelaire: "I am the wound and the dagger / I am the blow and the cheek / I am the members and the wheel, / Victim and executioner." It comes from Baudelaire's *Essays of Gustave de Noailles* (William Aggeler, trans.), in the poem "Innocentisme" ("The Self-Tormentor"), and the words may have more meaning for Dicke than for art and fashion audiences. The title alludes to an old Latin comedy, but it calls to mind Dicke's tormented figures, her self-portraits. She is the cut-out and the X-Acto.

The cut-outs eventually went from being theoretical self-portraits to a real one. In 2005, *V Magazine* invited Anja Dicke to sit for a portrait with Mario Sorrenti. The resulting cut-out, presented in the pages of that magazine, revealingly amplified the very properties of Dicke's previous creations, and for the artist it felt like a fitting moment to put that body of work to rest.

Dicke continues: "The ambiguity starts with buying the magazine. I love fashion and I love leafing through the pages. But at the same time, it gives me an empty feeling. By cutting away, I've tried to look for the deeper meaning, a truth, behind these images. To look for the shadow side. The voids I've created give me a place to insert my own questions and feelings as an artist. A void is maybe never empty, it contains more than my imagination."

At its most basic, you could say that fashion is just like the stock index. Hemlines go up, and hemlines go down. Where will the edge of fashion be this season? What will designers hide or reveal? The cut-outs are all edges, and perhaps this is what gives them their revealing, erotic power. Viewing fashion this way, I'm reminded of Roland Barthes, who said the most erotic portion of the body is where the garment gapes. I'm also reminded of Alicia Silverstone's character in *Clueless*, who says, "Some-

After the cut-outs, Dicke expanded her practice to other mediums, but she didn't let go of the central themes that drove her early success: "Shame, disappearance, beauty versus decay, the visible and invisible, dualism and hypocrisy." Her work has always dripped with a feeling of exposure or vulnerability, and she's found a way to translate this into a signature style: "A main topic in my practice is shame. Being humiliated or embarrassed is the highest state of self-consciousness."

Above, clockwise from top: "Dante's Vision / Infinitely Suffering Thing" (2008). Photo by Hans Georg Geißl. "Abduct" (2008). Photo by Hans Georg Geißl. Courtesy of Paves Projects, Berlin and Diana Stigter, Amsterdam.

