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# Consuming Beauty

A Conversation with

## Amie Dicke

BY ANA FINEL HONIGMAN

Amie Dicke has been the subject of countless articles in the fashion press since she began to exhibit in her native Amsterdam. Ironically, her work is not, as many art critics argue, a traditional feminist denunciation of Western beauty standards. Instead, Dicke offers a profound, existential exploration of the self even more at odds with the ethos of fashion than any explicit rejection of the beauty industry.

The cutouts that initially brought Dicke critical attention are customized pages from fashion magazines and posters-sized ads that she sliced and carved with X-Acto knives, slicing into the models' features and their clothes until only their hair and upper lips remained intact within beautifully Gothic designs of slender strips of paper. Although they appear violent, these carefully and skillfully produced interventions were driven by Dicke's sincere love for fashion.

She first responded to fashion's lure as a young girl in Rotterdam, transforming her bedroom into a glossy cocoon with collaged pages cut from magazines covering the walls and door. Her admiration blossomed into its current creative form in 2001, during six months in New York, on a grant from the Dutch government, a year after completing her degree at the Willem de Kooning Academy of Fine Arts in Rotterdam. Alone and lost in an intimidatingly glitzy and driven city,

she felt taunted by the unobtainable glamour and found comfort in the ubiquity of familiar faces preening in fashion advertisements. Iconic beauties became saint-like guardians to the lonely 23-year-old artist, offering a sense of stability and guidance in an otherwise alien and overwhelming city. Eventually, the works inspired by Dicke's associations with these beautiful strangers brought her the attention and admiration of fashion insiders who wrote about and bought her art.

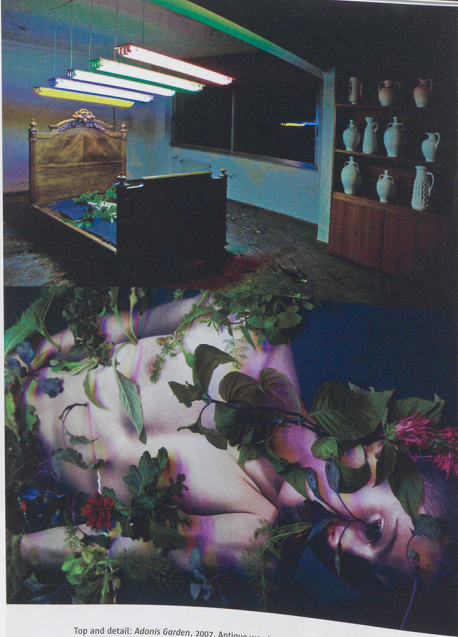
Dicke officially created her last cutout in 2005. The final pieces became a mural for New York's Visionaire Gallery, located in the lobby of V magazine, from which she culled most of her source imagery. Dicke has since taken magazine photos and pierced them with nails and pins, as in *Nondi* (fetish sculpture, producing a tragic second skin in what can be seen as a sisterseries to the cutouts). She has also started concentrating on large-scale sculptures.

As a student, Dicke became interested in how women sit and move in public. To explore these conventions, she cast the space between her legs, from crotch to foot, in marzipan while she was sitting or standing. She then covered the pillars of sugar in icing and named the fragile and short-lived sculptures *how sweet is the space between my legs?* Many of her recent sculptures continue this Surrealist exploration of the products and symbols associated with female beauty. But Dicke's work moves beyond a focus on the assumptions, expectations, and associations imposed on beautiful women to explore profound and intimate issues of personal and private identity and the frequent disconnect between our social, philosophical, and psychological selves. In these works, mannequins' tape, plaster, and carpet, dimensions perfectly curvy plastic legs replace

*Private Property III*, 2006. Couch, tape, plaster, and carpet, dimensions variable.







Top and detail: *Adonis Garden*, 2007. Antique wooden bed, soil, photograph, plants, and fluorescent lights, dimensions variable.

chair legs, black ink runs down the face of a vintage disembodied mannequin head, and the exterior of an antique cabinet is coated in black tape, while its glass doors reveal a hoard of vintage fur stoles piled over each other like cuddling animals.

The 2007 installation *Deflect the Searching Gaze* exemplifies Dicker's new work. The torso paint, faces a framed found painting of a warped, expressionistic face recalling Francis Bacon. Both the mannequin and the painting are distorted versions of the same species, about its own existence and inspired in the world.

**Ana Finel Honigman:** What inspired you to return to sculpture after a prolonged period producing two-dimensional work?

**Amie Dicker:** I never saw the cutouts as two-dimensional. I believe that their shadow aspect was very important.

**AHF:** Important for the visual effect or the conceptual content?

**AD:** For me, the visual effect and the conceptual content are entangled. I never know which comes first.

**AHF:** More recently you have begun piercing magazine pages with metal pins. Are the cutouts intended to appear violent?

**AD:** My art has violent aspects. But that violence is infused with concentration. I am restless by nature. So, I am constantly making things. Before I realize what I am doing, I often find that I have made something. But I can also be particularly sensitive to certain objects that surround me, in the sense that I have to respond to them in such a way that their presence can sometimes lead me to feel annoyed or curious. Curiosity is always an essential part of creation. Curiosity, combined with frustration, is the starting point for my work. Sometimes the combination creates the exact type of energy that I need to do something "stupid." And an impulsive, direct, uncontrolled action like that can be seen as violent. Stupidity can inspire discovery. And ironically, it can produce a beautiful feeling. It makes me think of a statement by Georges Bataille: "Truth only has one face, that of a violent contradiction."

**AHF:** When you mark the magazine images, mannequin heads, or other objects representing physical human beauty, do you then think of these objects as debased by your intervention?

**AD:** I like to add extra layers to the images. By removing or adding layers, I am trying to search for a deeper meaning. I am looking for a truth. I am trying to look through the objects. I want to expose the inner life of these inanimate objects. I am seeking out a history and a story. To "debase" something is to fit it into a hierarchy, and through that process to reveal the layers of that hierarchy. But I am interested in the transition, where apparent opposites meet, like male versus female, private versus public, life versus death.

**AHF:** In the works that reference fashion imagery, are you using these images to represent the fashion industry or fashion as a form of art? Are these images intended to represent femininity and wider concerns about women's identities and roles?

PHOTOS ABOVE: ANNE HONIGMAN; COURTESY PETER PROJECTS; BELOW: GUY ARIËVSKI; © THE ARTIST

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**AD:** It is much more of a personal choice than any of those alternatives. All of my work can be read as a self-portrait. I project my own feelings on those images. I like to be a parasite. I want to insert my own personality into the images.

**AHF:** Your sculptures seem deeply indebted to Meret Oppenheim and other Surrealists. Is Surrealist philosophy part of your conceptual practice?

**AD:** I am just starting to comprehend this process in my work. I am enjoying this discovery immensely. Although I am not physically part of a creative community, my conceptual practice does feel very much connected to Surrealist philosophy. I think that the Surrealists were more aware of each other as members of a movement, or as part of a group. Compared to their practice, I feel like a broken-off piece of something larger. I feel like a fragment, because I work alone.

**AHF:** Are there other contemporary artists with whom you feel conceptually compatible?

**AD:** I don't know about conceptual compatibility, but I can name a few artists whose use of existing images or found objects appeals to me, whether remote or directly appropriated. I like this aspect of works by Urs Fischer, Louise Bourgeois, Goshka Macuga, Francis Upritchard, Thomas Hirschhorn, Friedrich Kunath, Mark Manders, Aqathe Snow, Wolfgang Tillmans, and Robert Gober.

**AHF:** Do you distinguish between inspiration and appropriation?

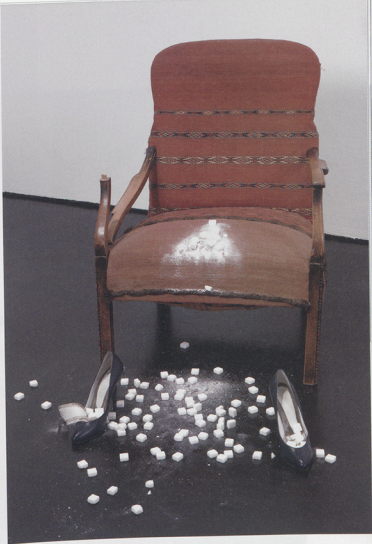
**AD:** What is it to be inspired? Inspiration can be about recognition. Maybe being inspired is an act of egocentrism. For instance, music is easily appropriated by people for their personal soundtracks. They use it to aid and express their personal emotions. Images function in the same way. For me, adapting and appropriating is connected to inspiration. We project all kinds of private thoughts or feelings on our surroundings. Maybe inspiration is the exact point when we insert our longings or fears?

**AHF:** Is your form of borrowing related to consumer buying of similar objects and images?

**AD:** I suppose it may be. Both acts ask the same question: When does an image, text, thought, or style become your personal possession or belonging? When can it even become your identity? I like the word "consuming." It means to destroy or expend through use. It means to use up, to absorb. Buying the object is not enough. That's too easy. You have to understand or feel the object or the idea that you consume. Alternately, you need to do something to it. You need to transform it. Then it becomes your own. My form of borrowing or stealing or sharing is part of an invisible, if not unconscious, process. I'm trying to understand it for myself.

**AHF:** What does the black masking tape that you wrap around the objects signify? It's as if you were covering your things in a chador.

**AD:** The black tape does stand for a certain combination of censorship and protection. Through it, I am keeping the objects, which are my personal furniture, private. And I am securing the memories attached to them. Protection can be very soothing. With the tape, I forced the table, chair, and vanity piece to stay in position. I've literally taped them to the ground. It is an expression of me trying to hold on to memories without giving them away.



*Dissolving the Floors of Memory*, 2007. Chair, sugar cubes, and high heels, dimensions variable.

I am trying to keep them to myself. That's why they are my "Private Property," the title of the exhibition.

**AHF:** Yet you are willfully presenting these objects for strangers to view and possibly purchase. Do you feel conflicted about offering your personal property, with its private connotations, to others?

**AD:** The moment a price is put on art is always conflicting. The conflicting behavior of offering personal property for public consumption is imbedded in our whole society. For me, a good example of this conflict is the gossip magazines. In these magazines, seemingly private photographs are made public.

**AHF:** It is funny, but I can't help thinking of the tense, awkward self-consciousness that I feel when I see a guest examine my bookshelf. How is offering your private property different from exposing and selling any of your art? Do you feel that this transaction is somehow more vulnerable? Or is it only as vulnerable as anything an artist does for public display?

**AD:** To show the works is very important. Quite literally it is just about placing. By exhibiting the works, they become placed in



