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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 questions from the last century, such as, "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 loneliness look like?"

These reactions to Dicke are common, but how? What makes her art so special in this regard? She successfully uses visual images to reveal what lies beneath visual images — what they're made of. The 32-year-old Amsterdam native makes art that hides, withholds, 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 looser, 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 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.

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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 away, I tried to look for the deeper meaning — a truth — behind these images. The voids I create 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.”

It’s the nature of her study that makes Dicke’s language sound gnostic. She further ruminates on the problem: “Does it [i.e., aura] 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 if 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 Hiromi 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 from behind: “The plastic is hung a few centimeters above the floor, so that the feet of the visitors are still in focus. 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





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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 scissor 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 2001, during a brief spell 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 drifter, I wandered through 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, Rem Koolhaas, whose book, *Delirious New York*, Dicke is currently (“finally”) reading. The book is a gonzo architectural guide to the unique crazed freedom one finds inside New York's rigid grid. The cut-outs were Dicke'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 Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night*, quoting a dark passage about New York City having a cancer, with advertising as its tumor. Just as she does with fashion, Dicke uses literature to conjure a particular mood. She titled a recent show *Infinitely Suffering Thing*, taking the line from T.S.



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

Eliot. 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 life-style magazines swept in: her work was successively featured in i-D, British Vogue, V, Dazed and Confused, Tokion, 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."

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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, "Sometimes

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 their transformed, spectral state, Dicke's banshees are extremely stirred, extremely pouting, their hair still extremely windswept. They are the suspended definitions of a haunting: ghosts trapped, repeating their actions for eternity. In Dicke's conception of the afterlife, snobbery 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 *Flowers of Evil* (William Aggeler, trans.), in the poem "Heautontimoroumenos" ("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 tortured 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 Amie 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.

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."

You can instantly recognize a work by Dicke. When she jumped from cut-outs to sculpture in her next show, *Private Property*, the results felt familiar. In fact, she was revisiting an exploration of sculpture



she had originally begun in her thesis project in Amsterdam: creating negative casts of the artist's own body parts. "I felt like re-positioning myself after the cutouts.... I chose three positions from photos by Helmut Newton. Somehow, I could never cut his photographs, because the women seem to be personalities. They are strong, long-legged, high-heeled women. The casts were made in plaster and show every detail of my skin and heels. You can see my shoe size in one of the sculptures — a little space under my heel."

She surrounded these casts with furniture from her own home, which she had wrapped (mummified might be a more accurate term) in duct tape — "to keep them private" — and then bound down to the

floor with more tape. She'd found a way to become even more exposed than taking a knife to a picture of herself. Dicke described the personal meaning of the show to me with a quote by Truman Capote that I'd never heard before: "In a world of predators, it is either eat or be eaten. And an artist faces one more danger, that he will consume himself."

One thread in Dicke's work is the use of objets trouvés — found objects. These can be anything from furniture to pages from a magazine. They're time capsules from the age of mechanical reproduction that she personalizes with acts of defacement. She takes the ready-made and unmakes it. She breathes aura into objects by making them her own. "Art started when I was a young girl walking home from elementary school, and during that walk finding things on the street, a leaf or a stone or just rubbish. Something that somebody forgot, lost, or left on the sidewalk became a treasure to me. I still have the tendency to work with found objects, existing images."

In a series of works that is unmistakably Dicke, she bound up reproduction classical busts in plastic zip ties, wrapping the perceived permanence of classical art in disposable supplies from an office supply store. Just like the Mapplethorpe photos of classical statutes that they call to mind, these works conjure sadomasochism and humiliation as a hallowed Western tradition. Many have labeled this sensibility as gothic, though Dicke doesn't accept the term. "I never even thought about 'gothic' until others mentioned it to be part of my work. I think it has more to do with my Christian upbringing. That's where the shame comes from."

In *Connected Isolation*, two particularly poignant pieces show a mother and her baby. The one on magazine paper has the title "Protection" and the one on a postcard of the Madonna is called "Mother and Child". Both hint at a recent development in Dicke's life: the birth of her daughter, Dea Salome. Salome, of course, is the Biblical dancer, a favorite figure among fin de siècle society, immortalized in the scandalous French play by Oscar Wilde, and illustrated by that lonely consumptive Aubrey Beardsley. All of which fits. Beardsley's bold dark lines are eerily akin to Dicke's own cut-outs: bring me the head of John the Baptist. During our interview, she even quotes to me from Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a book about aura successfully being captured from a painting: "The harmony of soul and body — how much that is! We in our madness have separated the two and have invented a realism that is vulgar, an ideality that is void."

Dicke is very forthcoming about how pregnancy and motherhood have affected not just her life but also her art. She's returned to making smaller works, she says, with postcards and ballpoint pens for instance, as larger installations are for the moment impractical. "Getting a child makes you very aware of time", she says. Although, not all the changes that came with motherhood were purely pragmatic. During her pregnancy, she read the *Spheres* trilogy by the contemporary German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. "Connected isolation" is a term coined by the architect Thom Mayne that Dicke found in her reading of Sloterdijk. It's an interesting choice for how to spend one's pregnancy, given that carrying a child is both a solitary and shared experience. Dicke elaborates: "Sloterdijk writes about modern individualism. [P]eople live in their apartments, isolated, but at the same time connected with each other: you'll hear your neighbors, see them, etc. Everybody dwells in their cell, divided by walls, with their own view on the outside world, a combination of closeness and separation at the same time."

The bearing of such thinking on being pregnant was revelatory for Dicke. "Suddenly", she says, "the simple act of leaving your apartment to go outside was a big deal (especially living on the third floor). While experiencing a new feeling of being physically very connected, at the same time a strange loneliness [was] part of me. Although, literally, I've not been alone, I did feel isolated, depending more than ever on the Internet as my quick way to the outside world, which felt a bit like a fake connection."

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Sloterdijk's theories of connected isolation elucidate much of Dicke's work, from its beginning, from her lonely walks through New York City, to the display of her own domestic surroundings in the *Private Property* show. It's an idea of living in the city that's very now, but finds echoes as far back as Baudelaire and Benjamin: the artist alone in the crowd of the city, or looking out of her apartment window, communicating with the billboards.

Nowadays, Dicke is two, daughter constantly in hand. The installation of "Claustrophobic" came in the last weeks of her pregnancy. Dea Salome was born just days after the opening. The show was a success, with attendance high for a building where once war refugees remained hidden in the middle of a city — another contradiction. "Since time can stand still there, they let me say when I wanted to clean the installation. We threw the plastic cover away. And I took Dea with me to be there, since she was there the whole time."

