

sculpture

March 2009
Vol. 28 No. 2
International Sculpture Center
www.sculpture.org

**Artists as
Mythographers**



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 poster-sized ads that she spliced 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 *Nkondi* fetish sculpture, producing a tragic second skin in what can be seen as a sister-series 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' 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 Dicke's new work. The torso of a child mannequin, propped on a pedestal and painted with a slush of multi-colored 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, as the three-dimensional being seems to be looking at the framed image for answers about its own existence and status in the world.

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

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

AFH: *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.

AFH: *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."

AFH: *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.

AFH: *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?*

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.

AFH: *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.

AFH: *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 remade or directly appropriated. I like this aspect of works by Urs Fischer, Louise Bourgeois, Goshka Macuga, Francis Upritchard, Thomas Hirschhorn, Friedrich Kunath, Mark Manders, Agathe Snow, Wolfgang Tillmans, and Robert Gober.

AFH: *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?

AFH: *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.

AFH: *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 suffocating. 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.

AFH: *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.

AFH: *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



space and time. And then, I can almost look at my creations as if I were a stranger because of the strangers' looks. It helps to move on and to let go. Some of the works become more than I could have imagined. That is when it starts to be art.

AFH: *Are you saying that they become art because you are exhibiting them in a gallery?*

AD: When I say "to show," I do not necessarily mean in a gallery or museum. I can feel that I am showing them even if they are only on view in my home or studio. My taped furniture in "Private Property" was also a part of the show because I wanted to create a private environment for three plaster sculptures of the space between my legs. With these sculptures, I was forced to position myself. And this process made me question where definitions of property, or personal belongings, begin and end. I wanted to ask, when is something truly yours? In a way, showing art is always about positioning.

AFH: *Do you consider what you do to be criticism of beauty standards and fashion? Do you subscribe to the traditional feminist belief that ideals of beauty oppress women?*

Left: *Dante's Vision*, 2007. Plaster and zip ties, 50 x 57 x 78 cm. Above: *My Vanity*, 2006. Vanity, plaster, tape, and private objects, dimensions variable.

AD: I would like to quote Meret Oppenheim's much-quoted speech from 1975 when she was awarded the Art Prize of the city of Basel: "I am tempted to claim that the spiritual-male side of woman has so far been forced to wear a cloak of invisibility. Why? I think it is because men, ever since the patriarchy was established—that is, ever since the female was devaluated—have projected the female side of themselves, which they regard as something of lesser value, on women. For women, this means having to live their own female life, as well as the female life men project on them. Thus they are woman times two. That is much too much."

AFH: *Do you believe that this is still true?*

AD: I do not necessarily agree, but I find the idea of "projecting" interesting. Everyone is projecting their own longings, thoughts, and feelings onto their surroundings and themselves. In that sense, I do think that everyone is living two or more lives, but I don't think that the number of lives they live is too much. It is often necessary to do this to get what you want or to survive. Mostly we project our own uncertainties on each other. This is true for both men and women. The element I think is lacking in Oppenheim's comment is recognition that women also project onto men, men project onto other men, and women onto women. It is simply human behavior.

AFH: And what about the expectations or assumptions that we internalize?

AD: I am always critical of myself. I think that certain confrontations with images, or with other people, can create a higher state of awareness. But, for me, a main topic in my practice is shame. Being humiliated or embarrassed is the highest state of self-consciousness.

AFH: Aren't beautiful women always forced into a heightened state of self-consciousness? Do you think that physical beauty is liberating or restricting?

AD: Beauty is only what it is. Oscar Wilde said, "Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods. Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. When it shows us itself, it shows us the whole fiery-colored world." So, if physical beauty were to be liberating, then that liberation would express nothing.

AFH: Are you surprised by the fashion industry's support of and interest in your art?

AD: In the beginning, I was surprised, but recently I have started to understand that the fashion industry is only interested in seeing more of itself. It consumes itself; it even consumes images that reveal it as a self-consuming industry. It is very difficult to insert personality, because they want to move too fast for contemplation. That's why it is so superficial. The fashion industry always seems to be in a hurry. It is like the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*. He is afraid of standing still and looking around. Perhaps, if he does that, he will evaporate. That's why I decided to stop making the cutouts after getting close to the source material.

AFH: Is there a different audience for your sculptures than for your cutouts?

AD: The cutouts created the beginning of being able to go deeper. It's like I entered into the voids of the cutouts, into the shadow parts. For me, the sculptures are like the other side of the mirror. People who really felt attracted to the cutouts will be able to follow the sculptures, but I guess some are caught in the cutouts' web. *Here we are at the Threshold* somehow expresses the same feeling. The vintage screen reminds me of the cutouts, and the wax octopuses hanging on it



Here we are at the Threshold, 2007. Screen, wax, pins, and images, 195.6 x 76.2 x 182.9 cm.

stand for memory, because they can remember things and thus find it difficult to lead a repeated life.

AFH: Do you consider the cutouts and the sculptures conceptually akin to each other, or do you think of them as significantly separate?

AD: I believe that every work of art can be read as a self-portrait. The first cutouts were very personal. The "space between my legs" sculptures reflect the same duality of the visible and invisible. My newest sculptures are akin to that behavior. Lately I have been using a lot of wax. It is a very beautiful material because of its re-usable quality. And it will find its shape, even when you do not use a mold. The fluid or drippy lines are similar.

AFH: Are the items in the "lost memories" series related to your own childhood or personal biography?

AD: They are, but it would be wonderful for them to relate to the personal biographies of others—then the lost memories will be shared.

Ana Finel Honigman writes on contemporary art for a number of art and fashion magazines and Web sites. She is based in Berlin and London.