

Anna-Sophie Berger

Fashion is fast

Intervju av Geir Haraldseth

Emerging fashion designers have to pay close attention not just hemlines, swatches and color palettes if they want to get by.

The fashion system itself has to be scrutinized, but few have the balls to bombard this structure with as many questions, doubts and insights as Anna-Sophie Berger. Berger just finished her diploma in Vienna at die Angewandte and her degree collection has caused quite a stir and we want to know why!

GH: Congratulations on your diploma and your collection! Your collection Fashion is Fast (a/w & s/s) is densely packed with concepts and ideas. The concepts in themselves might be simple, but it takes a dedication to see those concepts through to the end and not get sidetracked. BY FASHION! Could you give us a brief introduction to your collection and the different ideas that you wanted to tackle? Maybe you could start with the overarching concept of «Fashion is fast»?

ASB: The phrase «fashion is fast» came to me much earlier than the actual collection itself. It somehow summed up all my doubts and fears, as well as my immense attraction to fashion. The paradoxical relation between being appalled by an over-commercialized and irrational system called fashion, and the attraction to the sociological aspect of «fast» distributed items, used by people. I was busy with more abstract research on trend as a phenomenon, reading Roland Barthes and becoming aware that I was not interested in creating another collection that played with more or less innovative inventions of shapes and functions. Of course I am very influenced by my fine art practice. I spend months sorting out footage from Google image searches, where I look for types of pants, collars, hemlines, or historical outlines of dresses. Or I search for: «What is fashion?» I guess the real effort was to become aware of where my impact as an artist and designer would be in this mess. In a way, you could understand the collection as a reference, referencing all given skirts, referencing all necklines, but I think that won't do it. It's more like an illustrative consolidation of what fashion is in its basic idea. While dealing with the skeletal structure of fashion, core elements like knitwear, skirts, dresses, and such, I took the

liberty to play with graphic ideas taken from mainstream daily culture, such as Internet colors, Internet syntax, online images, appropriated footage, and so on. «Fashion is Fast» clearly references commerce, low-end production, and cheap items that pop up and that are only distinguishable to the consumer through a change of color. Serial production comes into play and I decided to have four identical dresses appearing next to each other, the sole difference being color and print, while at the same time raising the question how determining these subtle changes are on a visual level.

GH: Well, there is indeed quite a richness to the project, also in quantity of the concepts presented. With all these questions on the table and with a conceptual approach to colors, angles, shoes, commercial display of clothes and sizing, how did you manage to balance all these interests in one cohesive collection? And do you think the fashion world will be able to digest this collection as fast as it does other collections?

ASB: How I managed this is one of those questions you cannot really answer. You work and work on a collection, not seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, and suddenly it all makes sense. Colors play an important role to understanding, but I grouped the concepts and changes in fours, making it easier to connect the different items and references. What I wanted was to break with the underlined rules of collection-making, like deciding on a few materials, on a mood, or sticking to one silhouette. I am still a little amazed that it came together as a coherent statement. Then again I think it's the concept that keeps it together.

I cannot really predict the fashion industry, which I don't perceive as a clear entity anyway. There are a lot of things going on online, far away from actual retailing of clothes, a lot of discussions, that in my opinion are done on the grounds of imagery. By that mean for instance the fact that I experienced the impact my last collection had, without it ever having been reproduced or sold. I personally don't intend to digest this collection quickly, I feel like the production was only the start of my work and I am very excited to explore all different fields and medias with the collection. If the question addresses a sort of commercial conventional approach to this collection, like how

would I produce and/or sell it, I have to tell you that I am still working on an answer to that, and how fashion world will deal with it then remains to be seen.

GH: Well, I was thinking that any critique of a system, such as the art world or fashion system, seems to be embraced to some extent and enveloped into the system it was critiquing in the first place. Like Institutional Critique or ephemeral practices within the art world. One such project might be your scarves, featuring prints of Angela Merkel and Condoleezza Rice. They seem to have taken on a life of their own and have raised questions of representations of race. Could you explain the idea of the scarves, and what you think of the way that they are distributed and talked about?

ASB: I was not aware of that at all since I only presented the collection two weeks ago. I did not see the scarves as a distinctly different media then the rest of the garments, but it is an interesting question in terms of consumption. I am noticing how people react to accessories; they feel a greater ease to buy them, rather than a specific garment that will really dominate their appearance.

As for the aspect of race: my choice of two politicians, one German, one American had to do solely with the aspect of female power in public spheres and politics. That Condoleezza is a person of color is not relevant to the question I am asking, her being who she is, is implicit to the fact that she is part of a public domain, as a political person is.

I was exploring dress code – suits mostly – as gestures of women in powerful positions. These women are constantly photographed. I liked the contrast these two ladies present given their national-political backgrounds, their traditions, rhetoric and lifestyles.

GH: Well, I usually gravitate towards accessories myself, as they don't have to fit to my body type. My personal collection of bags and unused fanny packs is quite large. Which again comes back to another aspect of your collection, which is its crossover potential in the art world. I first came across your work in an art exhibition at JTT in New York City, curated by New York based artist Zak Kitnick. The pieces caught my attention and I was wondering what your experi-

ence has been taking part in the art world? What's the difference or similarities to the fashion world? Do you think they have different things to offer you as a designer? Or an artist?

ASB: That's a tricky question. I describe myself as an artist, working with different media. I am of course trained as a designer, which brings with it a knowledge of codes of a certain system. On the other hand, I was always surrounded by fine art, as my school is an art school and I also study transgressive art. I am very focused when working in a certain field and I like to work inherent of media. I think there is no clear answer to this question. What I can say is that I disagree with a highly commercial routine of production that is counteracting my aims and ideas within my work. I want my consumers, be it those of art or those of design, to indulge me in my ideas. I want to take the liberty of working with my pieces as long as it pleases me and as long as I find that necessary. So yes, it seems as if the art context allows for these things more than a traditional fashion context. But I am not naïve, there are problems on both sides. I strongly believe in transmedial approaches and it seems to me that the distinction is becoming less important. What matters is an understanding of my work and practice, and I will have to decide how and where I will let commercial aspects enter. It may be a web shop or a gallery, but the package, that is the art piece or the garment, will remain equally enhanced through my idea.

GH: My initial response to your collection is one of excitement, especially since it combines the rules and regulations that were apparent in your work at the show at JTT, but it manages to also speak about representation, not just in the aforementioned piece with Rice and Merkel. What are your concerns when it comes to representation? And I don't necessarily mean representation as in the 1980s and 1990s representation of gendered or socially constructed bodies, but an updated version of representations flourishing in the art world, and also at this year's Venice Biennial, in the work of Camille Henrot, Ed Atkins, Helen Marten and perhaps even Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch.

ASB: I am very happy you are drawing this line. I attended the opening of the biennale, it was one week before I showed my col-

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lection. All the artists you name here, and above all «La Grosse Fatigue» by Camille Henrot, really blew my mind. It somehow all made sense. I was star struck by Henrot's subtle and visually light aim to explore the over-floating mess and vastness of possible sources while magically clearing it all up, selecting and presenting it as a question. I think that is exactly what I was dealing with in my collection. I am constantly busy with questions of virtuality versus reality, or what we can actually distinguish as subjective reality in times of real time representation of daily trivia. I think when I will address the issue of production; these aspects of a shifting from physical object to digital representation will play a deciding factor. I am actually considering starting the production of merchandise before even considering the production of my collection. I might sell labeled t-shirts that stand in as variables for my collection and ideas. What I deal with is the enhancement of objects through a concept, a sort of intellectual notion that can just as well develop into a simple feeling of distinction. These shirts may communicate the same thing, while representing a collection that is reinforced and made stronger through digital representations and channels.

GH: You have talked a little bit about your education and your relationship to art, through school and so on. How has this interest affected you, your thinking and your output?

ASB: All my theoretical knowledge of art and design came through my studies. Before there had always been aims and undirected creative outputs, but all the real conceptual, fulfilling ideas were created at and through university. That is to say that the university served as a framework of boundaries, not necessarily always providing the best answers, but making it possible to define and see myself in relation to it, to answer, and eventually oppose it. I sometimes think that these days, even though my fine art approach made me sometimes collide with fashion class' standards, it might have been vital to my development. It helped me succinctly define at an early stage what I wanted. Enrolling in a fine art class at the same time made me realize that both systems are very similar while often just operating with different terms. In the end, art school is mostly about learning to organize yourself, drawing from the right sources, sucking information and discussions from people who provide input that could be useful for you. As we lack

a universal truth, a measure for what should be, the exercise is about reflecting and contextualizing yourself. I always liked it. Also the different disciplines united in one house as it is in my university really influenced my transmedial approach.

GH: The collection you have presented seems to have been getting a lot of great response, especially from the world of fashion. Do you think they are seeing your collection as critical to the industry or just supplying it with a new perspective on things?

ASB: I don't think I can answer that question. I think commercialization of critical ideas while reducing them to mere aesthetics always goes hand in hand with understanding. The lines are blurry as much in fashion as in art. What I aim for is to try to have my point transferred. I noticed that now with the new collection I could already draw from a certain level of attention to my concept. It seems like people got used to me wanting them to listen and understand. Of course not all of them, and I still think it is OK if some are just interested in shapes and colors, but in the long run I do feel its possible for me to educate my audience even within a fashion context.

GH: How do you see your future? Do you think you can manage to create as you wish or do you see yourself adapting to distribution systems, either of the fashion world or the art world?

ASB: Ha-ha. Who can tell? I am not generally opposed to the idea of selling and producing. I like the concepts of commerce on a theoretical level, and I am also willing to experiment with them. What I am not interested in is to lose a feeling of my interests while being dominated by purely commercial decisions. I do not want to become a «house» or an atelier that caters to others on certain very strict rules. In terms of my fashion, I am interested in either very high, specialized production for interested consumers, or in easy large-scale production of simple designs, as a sort of merchandise for my ideas. I imagine that that way I can either focus on the product, or on the aspect of commerce while being having a say in matters of ethics of production.

