

The Art of the Accessory

A tiny clutch-bag, sequined, silver-embroidered and decorated with rhinestones – it gives the impression of being skilfully manufactured, with great attention to every minute detail, right down to the silky lining. Its quality will last for eternity – or at least to the next season. And it is so small that it does not even hold a hairbrush or purse, just a lipstick and some talcum powder at the very most. Fashion is extravagant, transitory, superfluous and purely decorative – no object demonstrates this more clearly than the handbag. Especially those tiny little luxury bags that cannot even be carried over the shoulder and filled with useful things, but have to be held in the hand and merely serve to complement the gauzy dress, which itself can only be worn at raving parties. The clutch accompanies the dress and completes it – in short, it decorates the decoration: a meta-accessory, the icing on the cake, materialised superfluity. And because of this it's essential for creating the perfect image: Clutches are “must-haves”, absolutely necessary dispensabilities.

It is no coincidence that Stephanie Guse's art revolves around these strangely superfluous and opulent fashion accessories, which she approaches with great irony and playfulness as well as a keen eye for fashion and its paradoxes. For fashion is luxurious and volatile at the same time, on the one hand it is extravagant and precious, on the other hand it brings forth disposable products, which in spite of their quality materials and craftsmanship become useless within the matter of a few months. Fashion identifies the present in which a person appears, be it in the street or in a picture. Not only does it stage a body socially – rich or poor, trashy or clad in “power dress”, experimental or conservative – but also in regard to time and era – summer of 2011 or rather outdated 1990s, ironic 80s or the umpteenth 60s-revival. Just a year old and unwearable, or beautifully reanimated vintage. Fashion is a phenomenon that strives to be, but not to last, as sociologist Georg Simmel observed decades ago: To be or not to be isn't the question, for fashion is both “being” and “non-being”, spanning the watershed between the past and the future, and in its prime conveying as strong a sense of the present as only few other phenomena.

In her staging and simulations of accessories Stephanie Guse focuses on this tension between existence and non-existence, between luxury and volatility, superfluity and necessity. Whether it is in the handbag-series my Versace, my Boss etc., in Empresses' Must-haves or the collection of chunky jewellery entitled Paula's Collection – her fake bags, crowns and jewellery, “reproduced” with a certain ironic casualness combined with a subtle feeling for the materials used, show up this specific tension between fleetingness and opulence, brilliant pretence and worthless scrap. What originally was sequined and embroidered with silver threads in Guse's remake suddenly turns to an object of plastic packaging, waste materials, plastic trays from pharmaceuticals or chocolates, candy wrapping paper and plastic netting from fruit and vegetables. Similarly, the coloured plastic shells from children's surprise eggs stand in for gold and gemstones. Disposable waste and recycling. Guse's presentation of her accessories is glamorous and trashy at the same time: with shiny foil as a background on one occasion, with the surrealistic blur of a twirling ribbon on another and with skirting board and electric extension cables on the next. The photos are edited like in fashion magazines, the poses and draping skilfully

conceived, but also of such clarity that the banality of the materials is mercilessly underlined. The cheap materials and modest surroundings comment on the extravagant intention of the fashion fetishes with a gesture of ironic undercutting: “I can have this, too. I can produce this, too”. This gesture strips off the exclusiveness of expensive and luxurious objects, exposing them for what such luxury and fashion items basically always are: superfluous disposables, which might be cherished and appreciated – but only until the next season.

All this may be a mocking commentary on our luxury-, fashion- and consumer world, and as such would not actually constitute anything new, since the fetishism of products and brands emerged with Pop Art. The fact that fashion at all times represents a transitional phase to trash, to parody and to the ironic aspect of appearance is a circumstance well-known to the fashion world itself: material recycling, vintage elements, elaborate manufacturing of inexpensive or unusual materials, wellington boots with mink applications, coats made of plastic film – all this belongs to the standard repertoire of avant-garde designers. Guse’s ironic remakes become really subversive when she applies them to art itself and to one of the most auratic genres of art – the portrait. Portraits are more touching than any other type of picture because they allow the distant glance of the individual to meet with that of the viewer. Over centuries we look into a person’s eyes. We see a unique personality the way he or she presented him- or herself to the painter, the way he or she chose to appear. We see how this person wanted to be seen: dignified, proud, happy, beautiful, arrogant or impressive. We also occasionally see how the painter thwarts his model’s will, when he presents kings as degenerated or depressive, dignitaries as somewhat featherbrained, proud bourgeois families as prim and proper, princesses as smug and noble wives as hysteric prima donnas.

But what takes us at least a second glance to become aware of, are the props the models portrayed use to stage themselves. The signatures of time, which unmask great historic robes as little more than what they actually are: whimsical fashion creations made by some tailor in 1865 or 1901. In the portrait, however, fashion is not the issue: Here the robes, the backdrops and ultimately the tiny accessories acquire a grave symbolic meaning, thereby enhancing if not constituting the individual’s aura. Thus the diamond-studded, star-shaped hair clips, adorning Sissi’s hair in Franz Xaver Winterhalter’s famous portrait of the Austrian Empress, serve to symbolise the impressive embodiment of power through female beauty. They underline the extravagance of her hair-do and the arrogance of her slightly forced smile which she gives the viewer with a stilted look over her cold, naked shoulder. Of all imperial portraits of Austrian empresses it is this famous one that Stephanie Guse chooses for her radical remake treatment – similar to her Versace- and Hugo Boss-bags. We ostensibly see the accessories of yet another regal setting: a brown velvet dress, a pearl chain necklace, heavy looking curtains draping the background, the sitter’s stiffly held upright position complemented by a very serious look, meaning to express dignity. And once again the glimmering hair clips in the golden hair. But then comes the surprise: the clips are photo clips, the throne an office chair on wheels. A cheap rip-off of Sissi! Recognising the diamond star clips in their humorous remake-version suddenly makes the whole setting transparent: It is not her personal beauty and her dignity that define the empress – it’s her accessories! What would Sissi be without her star clips? But they need not necessarily be made of white gold and diamonds as Guse shows. Royalty is thus exposed as a mere staging which, if need be, can be achieved with the simplest of means: a do-it-yourself Sissi. Guse quite lucidly deconstructs the in-

tended effect of the famous Sissi-portrait, namely to express political power through female beauty and splendour. The classical portrait of the ruler, which according to Louis Marin does not merely depict but actually is the ruler him- or herself, disintegrates into absolutely affordable components. The joyful democratisation of regal monumentalism that Guse achieves with her disrespectful remake has a reciprocal effect on the original which is being mocked: We suddenly see the props of the time which make out the whole glamour. The empress's dress becomes a fashionable outfit (summer collection 1865), the star clips an accessory, which in cold daylight actually seem "slightly over the top".

Guse's remakes of portraits are highly ironic and playful, but also quite subversive treatments of this genre, which do not leave it unscathed. The remakes of Paula Modersohn-Becker's self-portraits, for example, expose the apparent nakedness and vulnerability with which Modersohn presents her body and face to the viewer as a quotable pose. Guse reinterprets Becker-Modersohn's strikingly big necklaces as extra-chunky, multi-coloured plastic jewellery, made of the shells of children's surprise eggs, thus underlining the central theme "children" once again. Modersohn's stooped posture in her *Selbstbildnis zum 6. Hochzeitstag* (Self-portrait on the occasion of the 6th wedding anniversary), signifying a certain simplicity and artlessness, in Guse's version (who actually really is pregnant in the picture) gives way to the elegant contrapposto of renaissance models. It is precisely this, the original portrait's claim for authenticity with its implication that we are not only looking into the model's eyes, but much rather direct into her soul, that Guse's parody unmasks as fake. It's all poses and decor, Guse's pictures are telling us: With a little plastic and lipstick we can achieve the same.

However, this still isn't the full truth yet. The general approach of Guse's art may be ironic and parodic, but behind all the staging, remakes and costumes – at second or third glance – a certain blend of seriousness becomes apparent which lends her portraits a strange power of fascination. This fascination continues and transforms into sheer surprise when we realise that the magnificent ornamental robes à la Gustav Klimt or Max Kurzweil actually consist of translucent plastic ice-cream spoons or chocolate wrapping papers, scraps of glossy paper and strips of material finely laid out on the parquet flooring. Once we have accepted this surprise effect and learnt that splendid robes can also be made of trash and imperial grandeur and vulnerability are nothing but artfully adapted poses, our attention wanders back to the model's face. Guse's serious, penetrating look as Sissi, Paula Modersohn-Becker or one of Klimt's society ladies in the Viennese fin de siècle attracts the look of the beholder longer than the skilfully crafted and ornamented dresses would lead one to expect. Katrin Funcke's clear and slightly taunting facial expression as she stands in as Max Kurzweil's *Woman in a Yellow Dress* (*Dame in Gelb*), elaborately covered with translucent ice-cream spoons, indicates an insightful knowledge of the tension between trash and staged presentation behind the ostensible glamour. For the very reason that the precious and stylized dresses have disintegrated into cheap and witty visual deceptions, for the very reason that we expose everything as "mere" staging, the person, the face and the look suddenly emerge with a new significance. It is the look of actors and actresses winking to the audience: "I'm just acting. I'm not even trying to be the person I'm playing. I'm not caught in my role." The looks from Guse's portraits may be serious and concentrated, but at no time do they forget that they are parts of certain roles, elements of self-confident fake-presentations. In these portraits no fashion-victims are to be found, such as Sissi, who was obsessed with her own perfectionism regarding hair-dos, slenderness and clothing. Guse and her models are well aware of the fact that it is noth-

ing more than fashion and that “must-haves” are the very objects one needn’t necessarily own. From Guse’s ironic portraits we meet the look of eyes that are always cleverer than the pictures they belong to: For they know about the art of the accessory.