

Bleach Inscriptions

Amelia Groom



200 Sisters Souvenirs. Image: Robert Hamache.

Rebecca Stephany's '200 Sisters Souvenirs' is a multi-limbed research project that resulted in a line of merchandise including keychains and eyewear straps; a collection of bespoke upcycled clothing; and a publication that combines fashion photography and archival collaging in the form of an advertising brochure.

The project began on the occasion of the two hundred-year anniversary of The Baden Art Association in Karlsruhe, which is one of the oldest Kunstvereins in Germany. As part of her explicitly feminist programming, the current director Anja Casser invited Stephany – an artist-designer and professor of visual communication at Karlsruhe University of Arts & Design – to research and respond to the archive, which contains hundreds of catalogues, monographs and flyers related to the association's history.



200 Sisters Souvenirs. Image: Roos Quakernaat.

Immediately picking up on a conspicuous lack of female artists throughout these materials, Stephany's response to the archive proceeded from questions about what was missing from it, and why. This sensitivity to the absences that the archive delineates then opened up into strategies of rereading and misreading that which *is* granted presence, to try to chip away at the surfaces of the dominant narratives and see what other possibilities have lived underneath them.

The concern with erasure – as a function of historical oppression as well as a possible tool of critical intervention – can be traced in one of the specific figurations of the project, where household bleach was applied throughout the upcycled garments, so that inscription happened paradoxically in the removal of ink.

In these bleach-inscribed garments, gaps in the visual field take on a positive presence. Gaps can stand as material evidence of enforced exclusions, while also inviting other ways of seeing; '200 Sisters Souvenirs' was not about filling-in the archive's gaps by bringing everything into the same field of visibility; it was about also working with the gaps, allowing them to puncture the

existing surfaces, and even allowing them to be actively carved out as spaces of retreat and refusal.

The word *bleach* has relations with the words *blank*, *blanket*, *blind*, *blend*, *bleak*, *blond*, *black*, *blemish*, *blaze* and *blush*. In all these words is a Proto-Indo-European root – *bhel* – which relates to notions of *glowing*, *shining*, *flashing* and *burning bright*. So already in the idea of bleach we are dealing with the co-incidence of illumination and vanishing: we're between the fire that provides a glow for you to read by, and the fire that turns what you're reading into a pile of ash.

In her use of bleach on the second-hand garments that she assembled for this project, Stephany found that its effects can be surprising. For instance, an army green-coloured jacket became bright pink in the areas where the bleach arrived – probably the result of multiple dyes having been used to achieve the original colour, with some of them reacting to the bleach's destructive presence more quickly than others.

So the technical process for the '200 Sisters Souvenirs' bleach-inscriptions always had an element of unpredictability. Similarly, the broader methodologies of archival excavation and *revelation through removal* remained open-ended, because it was about seeing what latent realities were allowed to show through when some of the archive's upper layers were dissolved away.



200 Sisters Souvenirs. Image: Roos Quakernaat.

Early on in her research, Stephany started to ask what happened when she ignored the captions that were attached to pictures of people throughout the archive. In one of her collections of image reproductions, drawn mostly from early twentieth century portrait paintings that appeared in various catalogues and monographs, she deliberately removed the captions, allowing the depicted bodies to re-appear, without being gendered or otherwise classified.

The language of the caption is ostensibly neutral, but there can be a violence in the way it pins images and bodies down with fixed categorisations

that direct particular ways of seeing, and particular ways of not-seeing. Stephany's removal of captions can be understood as a sort of strategic bleaching, which then allowed the images to spill out from the official identifications that had sedimented around them.

Like hot pink concealed as a component of army green, surviving by hiding within the historical record.



200 Sisters Souvenirs. Image: Roos Quakernaat.



Warehouse FOCUS provides in-depth reflection on Warehouse projects through the lense of guest authors.