

TOBIAS KASPAR: REPEATING AURA

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In 1981, at the Beijing Hotel, Pierre Cardin held the China's first foreign fashion show since the founding of the People's Republic. It is easy to see how this show would have made waves at the time. At the time, the people of China thirsted for release from the drab clothing of their country, but were afraid of being "led astray on the capitalist path," and of facing unpredictable punishment for "freedom." At this moment, Pierre Cardin smelled a great business opportunity lying beneath the surface of this conundrum. Instead of storming straight into the elite circles of French design, he pivoted to open a new front in the East. He understood that markets and mass culture went hand in hand, and that in the minds of people whose eyes had been blinded for so many years, novelties from distant lands would glow with a dazzling aura no matter how much they had overrun their own homelands.

Now, in 2019, it's been years since anyone clamored for Pierre Cardin. The aura has faded, and the brand can only bask in its past glory. Artist Tobias Kaspar found a Swiss company that exported embroidered clothing patterns to Asia from the 1960s to the 90s, and photographed their once highly sought-after samples. In the photographs, we see women wearing ballet costumes, the famous YSL Mondrian dress, street scenes of London or Paris, and polo players, markers of the aspirations of Asian consumers toward Western lifestyles. With the use of photography, a method for capturing images with a sense of distance, he has produced pictures with bright colors and clean, simple forms and is now "re-exporting" them to Asian countries in the name of art.

The medium of photography, and the use of the word "aura" above, call to mind Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura" in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. When Kaspar enlarges these photographs to a certain size, the inherent disenchantment properties of mechanical reproduction are enhanced. The threads and wrinkles below these images are a reminder that they can be infinitely reproduced by sewing machines. Meanwhile, the light and shadow on their surface is captured by another machine that theoretically capable of infinite reproduction. In Benjamin's writing, the work of art that had once lived for religion, ritual and offering, was no longer rare or precious. It had become an image that could be enjoyed by the masses. The ritual function of art had been displaced by exhibition value. This fall from grace is perhaps echoed by the story of Pierre Cardin in China. In 1980s China, the cultural signs locked into that clothing announced the headlong surge of the era of Reform and Opening, and thus it carried a political function—the art of the "new era" that Benjamin had predicted in the 1920s and 30s was also built on this dimension. Though the former and the latter had different political connotations, for both of them, reproduction served as a medium for disseminating a certain idealized ideology.

Reproduction implies two kinds of outcomes: one being cheapness and the overproduction that it brings, and the second boredom. Though reproduction can satisfy almost infinite demand, it is not a concept that possesses creativity, which is to say that if it cannot create new demand, reproduction can only result in fatigue. Capital needs another kind of "aura" to lead fashion trends in order to maintain the cycle of production and consumption. We often ascribe the act of consumption to people's desire, but in fact, since there are limits to what people need to sustain life, the eternal question for reproduction is how to produce compelling fantasies that spark and expand desire. When Kaspar took those photographs, he captured the moment these illusions were casting off their skin, that moment the "aura" faded, and fixed it in place. That critical instant, as one can imagine, is in a liminal state, neither magical nor substantive, but wavering along the boundary between the two. Thus, this process of capture must be completed by the distant audience: when our gaze meets these somewhat dull textile patterns, they are at once distant (patterns from the Western fashion world decades ago) and familiar (these images were rapidly accepted by the masses upon import). Once they were no longer popular, these images were tossed into the rubbish bin of history, but they never completely vanished. Kaspar has found these seemingly forgotten objects and dusted them off to display them once again.

In Beijing, Tobias Kaspar collected birdcages—these cages used for raising and enjoying birds by Qing dynasty elites can still be found among Beijing's elderly in 2019, and are now attracting the interest of a new

generation of youth—and adorned them with elegant, fashionable “new clothes.” In the artwork *Delivery*, the vehicle and symbol of express package delivery, that indispensable facet of commercial circulation, has been draped in cotton. Tobias uses concealment to render it visible, while also beautifying this concealment, as if he is showing pity for them. In such works as *Chanel Boy*, *Aspirin* and *Marlboro Gold*, the artist picked up packaging waste off the streets of Caochangdi and created nearly identical, life-sized replicas in copper. Scattered around the exhibition space, they resemble so many empty shells that have been drained of their spirit.

In contrast to the diminished state seen in these artworks, Tobias Kaspar has named this exhibition “Horn of Plenty.” The “Horn of Plenty” is a symbol of bountiful harvest from ancient Greek and Roman mythology. It often appears today in Western mass media, filled with fruits and flowers around the Thanksgiving holiday. “Horn of Plenty” was also the title of Alexander McQueen’s 2009 Autumn/Winter fashion collection. In this landmark runway show, the fashion designer turned a critical eye on the excesses of the fashion industry. McQueen incorporated waste materials into his scenes and clothing designs, but the result was still alluring.

McQueen idealized that “compelling fantasy” described above, reproducing and magnifying this fresh new “aura” on the media stage. Freshness can counter the listlessness brought about by reproduction, but it does not amount to creation. Sometimes, the “new” is just the same old cliché under a new guise, and cannot pull people out of the old logic. In drawing our gaze onto long-forgotten things, Kaspar is not trying to spark a nostalgic trend. Instead, when we look at these things, he wants us to see the repetition in this process of obsession and oblivion, and the sense of predestination wrapped up in this repetition—people falling over each other for the bright “aura,” and when it is extinguished, they cast it aside, and set out on the quest for the next one.