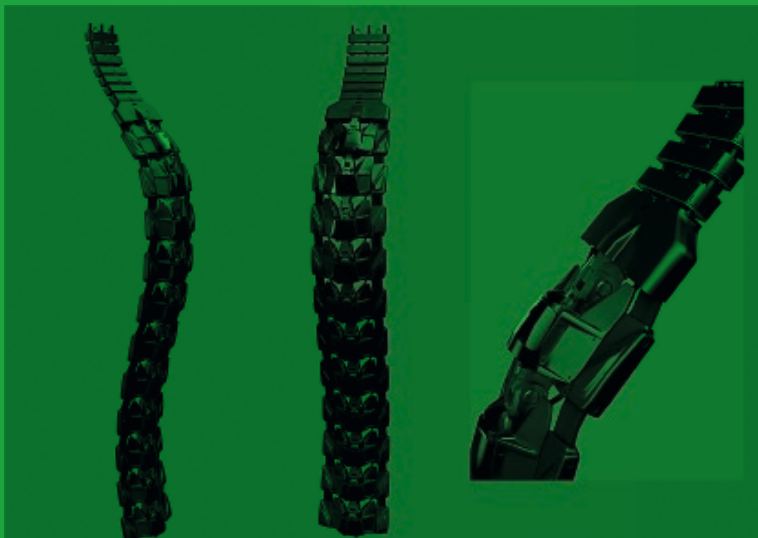# LIMITED EDITION

Fashion, Fetish, and
the Female Form in the Work of
Hanna Stiegeler

by

CHLOE STEAD

My mother always told my brother and I that it was rude to look inside a lady's purse. Examining Hanna Stiegeler's grainy, black-and-white screenprints of women's handbags, I have to assume that she never received this particular nugget of parental wisdom. Titled "Content Creation," the artist's 2019 series depicts a collection of hand, shoulder, and crossbody bags unzipped and splayed open like spatchcocked chickens. It almost goes without saying that there is something incredibly vulvic about the gaping 0s of these smooth leather objects, which are often, as in Content Creation (AFT121702) and Content Creation (AFT121702)_3, kept in place by a single gloved hand. I'm reminded, in turn, of safe-sex pornography, trips to the gynecologist, and crime-scene investigations.

The genre-crossing aspect of Stiegeler's images comes, in part, from their origin as product photographs, taken during the artist's brief stint as an in-house producer at a major e-commerce company based in Berlin, where she lives. Given a table, lighting, a camera, and a memory card, Stiegeler was tasked with photographing a range of products from a checklist of angles, which she was expected to dutifully hand over to management at the end of the day, rescinding the copyright that she would have been entitled to if working as a freelancer. Instead of simply turning over the digital files, however, she duplicated some of them, transforming these commercial photographs into 32 densely layered screenprints, titled after their original file names. No longer fit for purpose as product images, these works not only demystify women's handbags, which the artist calls "objects of speculation," but also expose the labor behind this ubiquitous form of online content.

The circulation of images is a recurring theme for Stiegeler, whose work almost always begins with photographic material, even if its ultimate form can span photography, film, text, sculpture, or textiles. She's especially drawn to advertisements, particularly those found in the glossy fashion magazines that were discouraged at the alternative school she attended as a child. Early works in this vein focused on the written word, such the 2014 artist book Consumer's Poetry, which saw Stiegeler string together words and phrases from print ads into quirky poems, reminiscent

of those by the German Dadaist poet Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, my favorite of which, "Limited Edition", reads: "Sexy amber/Deep in love broken vapo/Only the brave/Addict cugar [sic] skin." Similarly, Stiegeler's publication Fendi Mag (2014) takes as its starting point the advertisements of the high fashion brand Fendi, which it combines with conjugated forms of the Italian verb fendere (to disrupt).

In later works, however, glamour gives way to the tawdry world of tabloid photography, first in the series "Disguise" (2018)—pictures of female celebrities hiding their faces from waiting paparazzi with masks, balaclavas, hoods, and, most notably, a Chanel scarf fashioned into a burka—and then in "Il figlio mistero" (The Mystery Son, 2019), which depicts illicit photographs taken of stars rumored to be pregnant. Acting as a precursor to Stiegeler's "Content Creation" screenprints, which are strewn with deliberate technical "mistakes," the latter series is created by printing the same photograph several times onto a single sheet of paper, leaving an image that appears to have been double- or triple-exposed. It is in the depicted women's blurred outlines that these prints distinguish themselves from their source, obscuring what was intended to be exposed.

By including images of both the 1960s Italian actress Tamara Baroni and American reality-television star Kylie Jenner, Stiegeler traces a timeline of for-profit speculation on women's bodies that spans decades. Heightening the voyeurism implicit in this misogynistic practice, each woman is framed by a simple arch, printed directly onto the glass, which overlays the image like a peephole. Shown at the Goethe-Institut Paris in 2019, as part of the group show "Ici et là-bas," these works were sandwiched between images of elaborate ornamental fences that the artist photographed from pictures found in technical books on iron smithing. For Stiegeler, this addition, which echoes her photographic series featuring an instructional book on growing rose hedges ("Privilege and Privacy," 2017), speaks to the ambiguity of these beautiful items, which shield and protect while simultaneously inviting the gaze of passersby. Both fence and woman, like Stiegeler's handbags, are "objects of speculation"—pull them apart and photograph what's inside.

The artist's most recent series, "Curiosity Gap" (2020), similarly exploits the space between, Stiegeler tells me, "what we know and what we want to know." Her starting point was a number of screenshots of clickbait advertisements, a form of online marketing that uses sensational —and, at times, downright misleading—images or image and text combinations to entice the reader to click an embedded link. Playing on insecurities —"#1 Reason for a Big Belly" or "Miracle Pill from Stanford University Medical Laboratory That Completely Cures Erectile Dysfunction"—these links often only lead to more links, thus revealing the internet as "an interlaced space," according to the artist, in which "doors open onto yet more doors." Seeing herself as a "mediator" rather than a "creator" of images, Stiegeler turns this ephemeral, volatile digital imagery into physical objects, digitally manipulating each jpg to create a three-layered screenprint. Without text, these motifs—flowers, pills, a woman's manicured nails—are further abstracted from their sources while retaining the ability to simultaneously attract and repel: a winning combination in both click-bait advertisements and contemporary art.

Chloe Stead is a writer and editor based in Berlin, Germany. She is assistant editor of frieze magazine.