



Text André Gali Published 01 Jun 2015
Liesbet Bussche: Urban Jewellery.
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André Gali reports from the seminar 'Re-Public Jewellery – Social Potential in Contemporary Jewellery', Munich, 13 March 2015.

Munich's annual Jewellery Week in March offers numerous exhibitions and events related to jewellery as art. The week coincides with the juried Schmuck exhibition. Held as part of the international craft fair, Schmuck is considered one of the most important events in the jewellery-art field worldwide. Munich is also a city where many of the world's leading artists who work with jewellery have studied – with now-retired Professor Otto Kunzli. Here in Munich, the elite of the international field congregate to see what's been happening. Despite a high level of activity and quality, however, Jewellery Week is still considered a phenomenon for cognoscenti – artists, critics and curators – while Munich's general populace and artists in the region have little knowledge of the events. Thus a discussion has started in recent years, about the extent to which jewellery art is struggling to renew itself, and whether it has a communication problem.

In connection with this question, the seminar 'Re-Public Jewellery – Social Potential in Contemporary Jewellery'

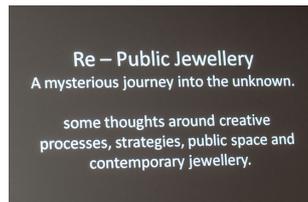
was held on 13 March at Galleri Handwerk in Munich. This gallery is also presenting the travelling exhibition From the Coolest Corner, which features a wide selection of Nordic artists who in various ways challenge the jewellery concept and goldsmithing tradition. The exhibition seems to provide supporting arguments for the claim that there is an exciting jewellery art tradition in the Nordic countries, one which maintains a level of quality that is equal to the best in the international jewellery world, but which also reflects local uniqueness. From the Coolest Corner opened in January 2013 at the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo, and has since travelled throughout the Nordic region and now has arrived at its final destination in Munich – the obvious place for testing the validity and relevance that such an exhibition can have in an international discourse.

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Installation view from Schmuck 2014.
Photo — André Gali



Slide from Nanna Melland's presentation during the seminar.
Photo — André Gali



Installation view from From the Coolest Corner at Galleri Handwerk.
Photo — André Gali

Jewellery art's challenges

In 2014 jewellery art was marked by the fact that the Dutch jewellery artist Ted Noten and the Dutch curator and jewellery theorist Liesbeth den Besten

proclaimed a sort of 'end' of jewellery art as a professional, specialized field. Claims were heard about jewellery art having reached a point where innovation, content, format, material and presentation were akin to an idling motor running on empty. (The article 'After the End of Contemporary Jewellery', which I wrote for Norwegian Crafts Magazine in 2014, discusses some of these issues.) Furthermore, there is the worry that while dedicated jewellery collectors are ageing and dying, no younger collectors are joining their ranks.

On one hand, jewellery art has managed to establish itself as a vibrant field with its own autonomous space of action, discourses, professional milieu, specialized galleries and exhibition venues, all of which distinguish it from mass-produced jewellery that serves a more decorative function. Such developments in many respects elevate jewellery art to being a distinct genre of contemporary art. On the other hand, as a consequence of this development, a gulf has opened up between the professional field and

the non-professional public: if people don't know the specialized discourses, critical issues and history, the risk is that they will not have a particularly interesting experience of jewellery exhibitions. This situation is not all that different from the problems that contemporary art in general grapples with, even though contemporary art does now enjoy a certain reputation amongst the general public.

Jewellery art seems to be challenged by two factors related to jewellery's traditional role amongst the general public, roles differentiating it somewhat from other types of contemporary art. One factor is visibility. The field of jewellery art, despite high level of activity and many practitioners throughout the world, is still a small field, almost an underground movement, of which few people are aware. Only to a small extent is this type of art exhibited in museums and larger exhibitions, and little is written about it in newspapers and journals other than niche publications and blogs such as Current Obsession, Art Aurea, Klimt02, and so forth. The second

challenge is recognition. This has nothing to do with the visibility issue, but more to do with the extent to which jewellery art is valued as a form of expression in a cultural taste-related hierarchy.

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Stefan Heuser's work at 'Lux is the Dealer' at
Kunstpavillon, Munich, 2015.

Photo — André Gali

Then there is the confusion over the very concept 'jewellery art': it necessarily relates, first, to a jewellery tradition, which people today primarily understand as decorative elements worn in order to look beautiful, and secondly, to an art tradition, which people generally associate with a type of meaningful expression that offers reflections on the world or contemporary society in one way or another. The phenomenon of jewellery art can thus be said to be like a gymnast doing 'the splits' between two embankments: on one side is superficial décor that, cul-

turally-speaking, does not have particularly high status; on the other side is artistic and meaningful expression, which does have high cultural status. Art is usually also something people associate with innovation and experimentation. When the general public categorize something as art, it can be said to have achieved a high level of cultural recognition and legitimacy. This is a status the field of jewellery art longs for, at the same time as it does not want to relinquish its ties to the jewellery tradition, its history and the distinguishing characteristics that belong to the tradition – particularly the use aspect and the close relation between jewellery objects and the human body.

Public space as the primary site for jewellery art

I will leave off discussing concepts and do no more field-analysis here, but simply assert that with the background just sketched, it is natural to see the seminar 'Re-Public Jewellery' as a response to some of the challenges jewellery art faces. It is worth

quoting an extract from the seminar program:

'At a time when the idea of our bodies has become largely generalized and often with commercial overtones, jewellery appears as an art form that has the potential to be relevant for far more people than what seems to be the case today. Although a critique of the institutionalized display forms has been taking place more recently, very few alternatives have been examined. This is the case even though it is in the nature of jewellery to relate to the body and society, rather than to the white cube. Jewellery as an art form opens for the possibility to explore issues surrounding body identity in relation to public space. In the project Re-public jewellery we want to investigate strategies to convey and communicate jewellery art in public space. This project aims to explore a more socially oriented approach to jewellery and return it to the public place where it belongs – RE-PUBLIC jewellery!'

The seminar program thus makes the claim that it is in the nature of jew-

ellery art to relate to the human body and to society, rather than to the white cube, and that jewellery art is therefore an art form suited to exploring critical issues about bodily identity in public spaces. In fact, one claim here is that jewellery art must reinvent itself based on certain inherent qualities of the art form, and that jewellery art belongs primarily in public spaces. In other words, the seminar program makes the claim that something was lost when jewellery art entered the white cube – to wit, jewellery art's presence in public spaces. The seminar's intention, as part of a larger project, is to return jewellery art to its natural habitat.

«it is in the nature of jewellery art to relate to the human body and to society, rather than to the white cube»



Ander Ljungberg
introducing the
seminar and it's
speakers.
Photo — André Gali



One of Sigurd
Bronger's work at
Galleri Ra during
Schmuck 2015. The
gallery 'imported'
his exhibition 'In
Between' from their
venue in
Amsterdam for the
fair.
Photo — André Gali



Liesbet Bussche:
Urban Jewellery.
**Photo — Liesbet
Bussche**

Out of the art institution

In his introduction, Anders Ljungberg, a relatively newly-appointed professor of metal and jewellery art at Oslo National Academy of the Arts and also one of the seminar's initiators, pointed out that the field of jewellery art has hardly begun exploring forms of presentation, and that since the concept of 'studio jewellery' was established, the forms for presenting jewellery art

have become standardized. He didn't go into detail here, but it seems logical to assume that he was referring to galleries and jewellery display cases as the seminar's 'antagonists'. Here it would have been useful to have stipulated what was being included in the concept of 'public space', when conceived as the natural place for jewellery art. In a legal sense, public space points to physical spaces where no one is excluded. Museums and galleries are often reckoned as constituting part of public space, but in art contexts, what usually happens outside the art institution is understood as 'in the public space'. It seems reasonable to suppose that the phenomena considered in this seminar as jewellery art is that which should exist outside the art institution, and which should not to be directed towards the professional field's own actors, but rather to some sort of unsullied public out there – outside the art institution.

To gain a foothold outside of an inwardly focused professional field of connoisseurs was a theme discussed by the seminar's first lecturer: Liesbet

Bussche, who is doing research at the jewellery department of St. Lucas University College of Art & Design in Antwerp. Through the research projects Unscene and Afterschool, she has sought to re-actualize jewellery art outside the context of the art institution.

After completing her MA degree, she realized she was mostly interested in jewellery as a medium – which I understood her to mean in a sort of Marshall McLuhanian sense where ‘the medium’ (Latin: that which is in the middle) is not a neutral channel through which something is sent, but a bearer of meaning in its own right. Against this backdrop, Bussche has developed projects that try to show people the meaning of jewellery in the context of public and social life. An early project she presented was Urban Jewellery. This included, among other things, public sculptures that look like overgrown pearl earrings and a lamp resembling a pearl necklace.

«Bussche has developed projects that try to show people the meaning of jewellery in the context of public and social life.



**MAKE ME party (Afterschool): Jewellery
Design department, St Lucas School of Arts
Antwerp.**

Photo — Liesbet Bussche

The language of jewellery

Another project that set the tone for what one could perhaps call a language-oriented interest in jewellery was De Parel-ketting – ‘chain of pearls’. To create this work, Bussche drove around Belgium and the Netherlands photographing businesses named ‘De Parel’. The route functioned as a ‘chain’ linking the ‘pearls’ together. The project resulted in a tourist-type booklet with 25 postcards of De Parel businesses. On her website, we find a rout-map enabling us to repeat the project ourselves.

De Parel-ketting shows a clear ‘route’ through Bussche’s ideas about jewellery, namely, that words related to materials and qualities of jewellery permeate our language. This idea resurfaces in the ongoing project After-school. It involves a research team who study cultural entrepreneurship. After a number of interviews with people involved in the field of jewellery art – interview themes are MAKE ME a future (the beginning), MAKE ME work (multiply the unique), MAKE ME show (tell your story), MAKE ME a face (create an identity) and MAKE ME

money (professionalize your skills) – the team created a performance: MAKE ME party. This party was construed around concepts from the jewellery world, but where everyday consumer products such as cups, wine, snacks, music, dinner-napkins and toilet paper were chosen because their names related to the traditional world of jewellery: silver, gold, rubies, diamonds, shine, glimmer, beauty, costliness, vanity. Not surprisingly, Parel beer was served. Thus the jewellery-related vocabulary permeated the party, which was not an exhibition or presentation of jewellery art. According to Bussche, the use of these concepts, when linked with low-cost products, reveals the ‘magic’ logic of consumer culture, where language serves to give objects a semblance of superiority and high value. In this way, the party pointed to the fact that the language of jewellery infuses our everyday lives, analogous to how businesses use the name ‘De Parel’ (pearls) to create the feeling of being unique

Jewellery art as an expanded field

Bussche works in what can be called the expanded field of jewellery art. In the years since 1979, when Rosalind Krauss published her seminal essay 'Sculpture in an Expanded Field', it would be correct to say that all art forms now have expanded fields. Krauss' point is that the then-relatively new phenomenon of land art could best be understood as based on but extending beyond the concept of sculpture. Land art would thus involve extension into space and the body's relation to the work, but on a different scale than we normally associate with sculpture. From a Wittgensteinian perspective, one could say that understanding the phenomenon of land art would involve looking through 'sculpture glasses', that is, through an interpretive framework and a terminology borrowed from the field of sculpture. Returning to Bussche's works, we could say that she reads the world through 'jewellery glasses' – through a conceptual apparatus borrowed from jewellery art.

The same is the case for the Japanese-born, Berlin-based artist Yuka

Oyama, who gave the seminar's second presentation. Her projects are often relational and performative. Oyama explains that she explores an expanded concept of jewellery art, focusing on conveying 'the subjective dimension through the relationship between a person and a wearable object in the private/ public sphere'



Glue Glossy (UnScene): Jewellery Design department, St Lucas School of Arts Antwerp. Photo — Liesbet Bussche



Glue Glossy (UnScene): Jewellery Design department, St Lucas School of Arts Antwerp. Photo — Liesbet Bussche



Glue Glossy (UnScene): Jewellery Design department, St Lucas School of Arts Antwerp. Photo — Liesbet Bussche

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In her performative project Schmuck Quickies, Oyama takes her portable jewellery workshop to places such as hospitals, train stations, libraries, art galleries and private homes. There she creates unique, personalized pieces of jewellery. The objective is to make contact with different people, to discuss with and learn more about what people associate with the idea of jewellery. Jewellery, she has learned, can have magical abilities to make people beautiful, more lively and powerful. Jewellery tells about people's social roles; it can be a symbol of friendship and love. It can masquerade, strengthen or conceal. This insight Oyama has inculcated into subsequent projects where she, among other things, uses the activity of making jewellery as a means

for generating solidarity between people.

An example is the project Berlin Flowers, in which Oyama invited people to participate in decorating three locations in Berlin. About 500 people showed up and made wreaths and garlands as decorations for buildings. The factor that seems most of all to distinguish Oyama's practice from Bussche's is that the latter to such a great extent allows her projects to be steered by the idea of 'reaching out' to non-professionals and to use the jewellery concept as 'spectacles' through which to view the world. Oyama's practice seems to be more about how her artistic process emanates from experiences she has had while working with jewellery in public spaces. The relational aspect in Oyama's art is not necessarily linked to jewellery as an object or concept. Nor does it seem that public space per se is particularly interesting to her: her projects are primarily about creating solidarity through art.

The space between the collective and

the individual

The relational aspect is also strong in Nanna Melland's work *Swarm*, which consists of thousands of flat, mass-produced aluminium aeroplanes. These are quite affordable for the public to purchase. Melland, who was the third presenter at the seminar, told about exhibiting *Swarm* in Oslo's main public library. The library as a public space is especially interesting because it serves an edifying function. It is meant to make knowledge available to everyone, regardless of social status. In this respect, Melland's *Swarm* is a paradigmatic example of how one can address problems and issues related to public spaces outside the art institution.

Especially interesting in Melland's lecture was to hear about studying with Otto Kunzli in Munich. She and her fellow students worked continuously with creating exhibitions and discussing the exhibition format. Some of the examples she presented could, with a good conscience, be repeated within institutional frameworks such

as museums and galleries. It was also interesting to hear about how Swarm took shape as a reaction to no longer being linked to an educational institution and collaborating with creative fellow students. What do you do after school is over? You leave the art space completely, and you make something entirely different than what you were making while a student.



Encapsulation Suits
(2012 – present)
Photo — Attila
Hartwig



Encapsulation Suits
(2012 – present)
Photo — Attila
Hartwig



Encapsulation Suits
(2012 – present)
Photo — Attila
Hartwig

**«Jewellery tells about
people's social roles; it**

can be a symbol of friendship and love. It can masquerade, strengthen or conceal.»

Swarm challenges the jewellery concept in many ways; it is mass-produced and thus stands in contrast to unique objects; it is inexpensively made, in contrast to precious materials; the aeroplanes do not cost much, in contrast to the jewellery art we find in galleries. The intricate aspect of Melland's work is how the simple underlying concept has become such a complex project with so many layers. The theme also seems especially well suited for discussing in relation to the seminar's emphasis on jewellery art as a medium in the public sphere. Thus it also touches on a precarious question in the jewellery discourse: to what extent is jewellery's primary function that of being an identity marker, or can jewellery also serve a larger ritual or

collective function? Melland's project is about creating a community of persons through wearing one of her pieces of jewellery, and about the new roles jewellery can play through being worn.

The fact that when Melland went outside the art institution with her jewellery and linked the jewellery discourse to a larger public discussion – about democracy, the relation between the individual and the collection, the relation between material value and interpersonal value, etc. – means that she, in many ways, functions prototypically as a jewellery artist who plays a role in the wider public sphere.

Different contexts

While Melland's presentation clearly exemplified the seminar's core theme – jewellery and the public sphere – it was more difficult to grasp the British artist and curator Helen Carnac's angle on the topic. She began by establishing that she had not come to the seminar to talk about jewellery art, and

that even though she has a jewellery-art education, she no longer works with jewellery. Like Oyama, her presentation primarily concerned her work process, and the public sphere per se was not perhaps a central aspect. Carnac discussed this processual focus in connection with the project Side by Side. She and the dancer Laila Diallo were invited to create an archive of the processes involved in a work's coming into being. But what about the public? The public were not allowed to enter the room where Carnac and Diallo were working, but could look through a window and write notes on sheets of paper which the two could read. In this way, a form of interesting and unintended communication arose.

Eventually Carnac and Diallo took their project to other rooms, first to dance contexts and thereafter galleries. Ultimately Carnac's lecture was about the realization that where and how you present something steers how that phenomenon is perceived by a public, and that the project always changes from venue to venue. Her presentation

reminded us that public spaces are never neutral situations. There are always frameworks and guidelines for how we should behave and how phenomena in the space are to be perceived.

«Melland's Swarm is a paradigmatic example of how one can address problems and issues related to public spaces outside the art institution»



Nanna Melland: 687
Years
Photo — Nanna
Melland



Nanna Melland:
Swarm in Oslo's
main public library
Photo — André Gali



Nanna Melland:
Swarm, detail
Photo — Nanna
Melland

Way forward

Sofia Björkman moderated the concluding panel-discussion, which included the lecturers, Anders Ljungberg, Knut Astrup Bull from the National Museum in Oslo, and jewellery artist Sigurd Brogner. Here questions about the public sphere were raised – clarifications that would have been helpful earlier in the seminar – most especially in Ljungberg's introduction. One such question concerned the relation between the public sphere and the white cube, which was only minimally addressed in the seminar's pro-

gram. The seminar went quite far in setting up a dichotomy between, on one hand, the public sphere and relational jewellery art, as represented by the featured lecturers, and on the other hand, the white cube and sculptural jewellery, as represented by Bull and Brogner.

While Bussche and Melland gave vivid examples of alternative modes of working and presenting jewellery art, thus pointing to possible ways out of the 'impasse' in which jewellery art finds itself, the panel discussion to a large extent repeated the theme of the white cube's dominance as being the big problem. In my opinion, a more forward-looking discussion about strategies for establishing new arenas and perhaps new visual languages for jewellery art could have been just as interesting a conclusion to an otherwise exciting seminar.



Panel discussion. From left to right:
 Moderator Sofia Björklund, Ander Ljungberg,
 Helen Carnac, Nanna Melland, Sigurd Bronger,
 Knut Astrup Bull, Yuka Oyama and Liesbet
 Bussche.

Photo — André Gali

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