

The power of jewellery

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Contemporary author jewellery is still a rather young phenomenon. Although we can trace its origins back to the days of Jugendstil, its real story starts only some 40 years ago. Under the influence of an increasing economic prosperity things started to gain momentum and especially the last 10 years developments in the field have accelerated: more and more jewellers enter the market, more and more specialised galleries are opened, more and more schools started jewellery departments, more and more fairs present contemporary jewellery. But despite the increase in numbers, jewellery still doesn't count as a serious market where money is made and earned. Author jewellery is not a hot topic - the way design has gained a sexy status. The jewellery scene has a excellent international infrastructure, but on the other hand seems locked up in its self preferred system. There are complaints, especially among the younger artists: it is impossible for every young maker to find a gallery, and how can you make a living out of one solo exhibition every two or three years and some exhibitions abroad? On the other hand galleries present a platform, introduce artists from abroad, their work and ideas, and bring jewellery from here to fairs abroad and collectors far away. But there is always this uncomfortable feeling of isolation, and preaching to the converted. And maybe I am indebted to this situation too. There were other writers who resigned and even makers who resigned - because jewellery didn't seem to make any progress. I stayed and I am part of the system. That is why I thought it would be a good idea to make an analyses of the position of contemporary jewellery today, especially with respect to the market, and to end with proposing possible future scenario's. I have divided my paper in 5 steps.

1st step, kisses

In October 1996 Gallery RA organised the symposium *Passion and Profession - jewellery in past, present*

and future... Every period needs to investigate its future again and again. At the end of the day, the discussion leader, an Amsterdam local councillor, wondered about the future: "What will become of you all? Will it all stay the same, sixty hugging and kissing goldsmiths, or will something happen?". Well, twelve years later we are still hugging and kissing each other, that's true. And you may wonder what happened in between, did something happen indeed? Of course, computerised techniques are now widely applied, we have a very well organised internet information centre called Klimt, but author jewellery didn't break through, it didn't succeed in branding and marketing, the jewellery scene didn't invent a young and fresh art-wise Cartier, or Van Cleeff & Arpels, or an alternative to Prada and Gucci - and the public, the buyers and wearers, are aging.

Therefore questions about credibility and viability recur in cyclic regularity. You may wonder if author jewellery really needs to break out of its secluded niche, and if this kind of jewellery really is a lost case as some people think. You may oppose that its value is precisely in the handwork, in the uniqueness, in the creation of attention, concentration, time and rest. But it depends on how you deal with these qualities and values in how they are received in the outside world. These values are now often seen as repulsive and anachronistic, but they can be changed in up to date, contemporary and progressive.

If we want more, if contemporary jewellery really wants to reach another public, preferably an art public - because art is the thing most of you feel related with - or a design public - especially now design is proclaimed as a new form of art, more attractive, accessible and understandable than most contemporary art - how should you do this, which strategies do you have? How do you kiss and entice the public and shake it awake?

2nd step, faith

We all know the work of Gijs Bakker and Emmy van Leersum, their white elastic suits called Clothing

Suggestions. Those suits and the happening with friends of Gijs and Emmy and the artists themselves showing the suits in an empty gallery in stead of a regular exhibition with objects in a showcase, promised a new attitude towards jewellery. Like the big wearable pieces Gijs and Emmy had been designing since 1966. Those pieces were presented in the very first catwalk jewellery show that was held in the Stedelijk Museum - It took place in 1967, and it was a very unusual event. It took the designers some effort to convince the museum about the necessity of it. For me those events are a highlight in the young history of contemporary jewellery. In a recent exhibition in the V & A in London, called *Cold War* this work is interpreted in the light of fear and anxiety, as armouring for the body, as a protection against unknown but certain attacks from outside. It is an interesting interpretation, but I like to stress the immense positive message of these designs: the advance to sculpture and the fusion of body, clothing and adornment into one thing. It expressed an optimistic outlook. It presented something new and innovative at that time and it is still new today. So where did you get since then and where do you want to be in, let's say, 10 or 20 years from now? What are your "preferred situations" or "desired goals"?

In the past twenty years I have learned some things about jewellers, one is that in general jewellers are not designers, they are not designing the way designers do. Apart from some exceptions to the rule, jewellers are do-ers but slow-do-ers, makers but slow-makers, finders, people trying out, doing things over and over again, people who want to know everything about the materials they use, jewellers are material-boys-and-girls. But it doesn't need to stay like this forever - perhaps now is the time to focus on the market as well, to capitalize your talents - your excellent knowledge of materials, forms and techniques, your capability to work with precious materials. If some succeed in this, others can do it as well.

Another thing I have learned about jewellery is that jewellers are not very communicative. Their work is

not created to tempt their buyers. And also in that sense jewellery can not be compared with design which is overtly designed to seduce the buyer, by its use of colour, form and market strategies. That is why everybody wants the newest i-pod and i-phone - they are designed to overrule all rational decision making, they are bought on an impulse. Jewellery on the other hand, tries to convince. Jewellery is a matter of faith, you have to believe in it before you purchase it. But you can stir this faith by clever communication strategies.

3rd step, shine

We all know the work of Damien Hirst, and the story of the diamond covered *For the Love of God* which attracted more than 100.000 visitors extra to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam last year. Diamonds are bling bling, and 8601 diamonds on a platinum skull are hyper bling bling. The 'spin' around this work was excellent, starting with the origin of the skull, the story of the making, the spectacular use of numbers (more than 8000 diamonds, the worth of 80 till 100 of million euro and the prize of the making which was about 17 million euro), further the way it was sold (by a consortium of investors and Hirst himself), the merchandising (t-shirts, buttons and the like), and the related sales records at Hirst's Sotheby auction in September (a cool 100 million euro) - just before the financial crisis, lucky for them. Why is this work so successful? I think there are two reasons: the first is that the artist and his team are very good in manipulating the media - *For the Love of God* is a typical information age artwork, it is carried along on a flow of hypes around the artist: the media lap it up and the people love to read about it. Because we live in an age of increasing numbers. We have never had more possessions than we have now, we have never had more stars, VIP's and millionaires than we have now, we have never had more accessibility to hear about the delirious excesses of those who can afford - and we have never enough, we want more: more stories, more comfort, more electronic toys, more money, more diamonds. So Hirst's bejewelled skull is reflecting

the spirit of our time, it was hyped at the right moment, using the best media strategies. The second reason for the success is the artistic quality of *For the Love of God*. It is an excellent piece of art, set with diamonds until the deepest parts of the eye sockets, the nose and the inside of the skull. Hirst didn't choose the easy way, every detail of his work is very well considered, including the use of the real set of teeth with one missing tooth, and the skills of the people from jeweller Bentley & Skinner. In fact part of the attraction of the work lies in its craftsmanship, the magic of all those diamonds set by hand. Above that the references to well known memento mori paintings and objects provide the work with an academic framework - for the connoisseurs who now have an alibi to simply enjoy the shine of this work of art. Rudi Fuchs called it: "a piece of extraordinary, mad artistry". In other words this art object is a great work of art, because it is the most talked about artwork in ages and because it succeeds to entice all ranks in our society.

What can we learn from this? Well, that there are certain things that attract people, things like uniqueness, craftsmanship, shine, and preciousness - things you can easily handle as a jeweller, things you can all deal with as jewellers - when you like.

4th step, fame

A relatively new phenomenon is that of selling your work at the auction. Since some time design is selling tremendously well at auctions and fairs - prizes of more than 150.000 euro for a design chair or cabinet are no exception any more. But prizes have to do with stardom and uniqueness. Old design, dating from the nineteen thirties till seventies, sells because of a famous name and because of its rarity. Young design sells because of fame and uniqueness - a design object in an edition of 7 sells as 'unique piece'.

There are also fine artists now who start to have auctioneering firms as their exclusive dealers, like Damien Hirst and Sotheby's, or Annie Leibovitz and

auctioneering firm Phillips de Pury in London. Sometimes auctioneering firms have a gallery and the exclusive rights of sales, like La Galerie de Pierre Bergé in Brussels. The gallery commissioned Dutch designer Jurgen Bey to design a new collection of furniture-like art objects and sells them as unique pieces in an edition of 2, 3 or 4. Even his *Sheep Jumping over the Fence stool and apron*, made in an edition of 12, is sold as pièce unique.

In contemporary art and design things are moving that is clear. Therefore it is a pity that this relative young development is now surpassed by the financial and economic crisis. Now that the fortune of many Russian, Asian and dot-com moneybags is vaporised, how do auctions deal with this? Last months the atmosphere at the great London auctions was rather tame, and the Frieze Art fair in London, and Design Miami were not very successful as well.

And what about jewellery? Since last year there is a this Brussels auction of Pierre Bergé, who cares about contemporary jewellery and organised two jewellery auctions to date. That's good news - perhaps. Jewellery is collected from the artists, sometimes from galleries but most of the galleries feel no enthusiasm to cooperate and you can't blame them. It has something strange indeed to see recent jewellery in a lousy showcase, while you just recently saw it in a gallery, in a context. It may look like heaven for the bargain hunter as well as for the artists who earn more when they sell at the auction compared to the gallery. But these are all short term successes, auctioneering firms are business, they won't promote young and unknown artists, they only believe in success. And besides, you can't live from one sold piece, once or two times a year. The sales at the second Brussels auction - in December in the middle of the financial crisis - were not spectacular, more than half of the lots was not sold, while the main part just reached the low estimate prize. The sole moments when the room became more active and something like an atmosphere of greed was sensible, was when the last lots came under the hammer, a jewel by Hans Arp (one out of an edition of

100) and one by Man Ray. It was again the old mechanism of the name and fame of the artist that was the main sales argument here.

5th step, luxury

But how can you possibly stimulate your sales then? A position you can take is that of the underdog, you reconcile to the situation: so you agree you are not famous, you say you don't like and need to be famous and you try to conquer another market, the one of the broad public. To do this successfully you need to do concessions, you can't present a gallery collection just like that on a fair, it needs an explanation, it needs little incentives that invite people to come nearer: a specially made edition, a colourful or shining 'take-away' jewel that is like a treat. I think it is perfect to work like this, but take care, it is not easy at all, and the jewellers who are in this position know exactly what I mean.

Others address to the world of fashion, which is a fascinating and interesting market. The fashion world is interested in experiments, in innovative materials and typologies. If you really go into it you will see that here are striking similarities between fashion jewellery and 'our' kind of jewellery, and that there is a world to conquer. Like fashion, jewellery can be presentational. The British Naomi Filmer did catwalk collaborations with different and prolific British fashion designers like Hussein Chalayan. In 2001 she designed glass and silver balls to fix the hands of the models on their back while showing Alexander McQueens fashion collection - with the aim to make them assume the posture of a flamenco dancer. Her approach is conceptual and she also worked with video, photography and sound, with chocolate and ice. Besides that she works as a designer for companies such as Armani and Burberry. There is nothing adventurous about that work, but Naomi knows how to work on different tracks, getting her work published in fashion, art and jewellery publications.

To infiltrate the world of conventional jewellery is a new option, that finally - after having been dismissed by the art jewellery scene for decades -

seems accepted now. We all know that people are like magpies who love sparkles. People are even willing to transform the ashes of their beloved ones into a diamond - diamonds are big business. Why not convert to the diamond? There are cautious signs of a new approach, coming from this other world of luxurious jewellery: jeweller Lyppens here in Amsterdam wants to work with Ted Noten on a new line of black diamond jewellery, this is a brand new initiative that is still in its infant stage but has the smell of new and fresh.

Some years ago a South African diamond mine owner and former architect called Hilton Judin, started a project introducing a new line of diamond jewellery *Very Lustre*, partly designed by people from our scene: Dinie Besems, Marc Monzo, Hilde van der Heyden and Karl Fritsch, and partly by interesting designers like BLESS, Studio Job and Adam und Harborth. The idea is to be both "exclusive and accessible, bold and withdrawn, valuable and ordinary". As Hilton Judin stated *Very Lustre* is: "A common standardized but intricate collection of diamond jewellery based on concepts and statements, produced in collaboration with several independent authors". It is a pity that you can't find much information about this new jewellery collection. After meeting Hilton Judin some years ago at the Milan Furniture Fair where he showed me the first prototypes of Marc Monzo, I have never been able to reach him again. The designers I spoke with have experienced the same: the last news they heard is that the jewels are sold in *Comme des Garçons Guerrilla Shops*, and that Hilton Judin is still going on with this project. Anyway, this fusion of diamonds, fashion and design, of luxury and concept, is a fascinating example of how worlds can merge in today's society.

If the diamond is not your thing, you can also focus on other gems, synthetic or natural. Like Truïke Verdegaal is doing with her *Maria Lux* line of 'prêt-a-porter' jewellery, that she once started on the incentive of Lilian Driessen, a fashion and accessories designer in Amsterdam. In all these years Verdegaal has learned not to expect too much from

having her own label, but she also experienced that the moment you really start working on it, and you enter the world of the glossy's, things can really go fast. Than it is the power of numbers and multiplication that counts.

I am convinced that our boxed in jewellery scene will start changing pretty soon. It can't stay the way it was the last 40 years, our society has changed and so the jewellery scene will change. In the near future jewellers will work on different tracks: for the gallery and for their own label, the fair, internet sale, house sale parties or any other initiative. The jeweller as a businessman, why not? But therefore connections between artists and galleries and clients should be more rational and businesslike. A jeweller is an artist, who creates a product and wants to sell it. He/she has something unique to offer, something handmade, thoughtfully made and carefully made, in very small editions, or more often completely unique and made from precious or special materials. This is your capital. I strongly believe in what fashion designer Alexander van Slobbe, the new artistic director of the design Academy in Eindhoven says: "The new luxury is that of the small-scale, the hand-made, and permanence."

The gallery is the salesman in between, who wants to sell this luxury product. This is business, not an altruistic affair. Perhaps it once was, but times have changed and it is now time to re-invent author jewellery. The numbers of jewellers, galleries, fairs, and other initiatives and opportunities are growing - complexity will grow with the numbers. And so you will have to rationalize your connections, and look for new collaborations. You need contracts, clear agreements, more openness and room for negotiations, and initiatives of the artists that go beyond the confines of the gallery. You should try to work on different tracks. In the end all parties will profit from it.

Complexity opens up new possibilities. I think it is time to step out of the comfort zone and make yourself seen.