



# Contemporary Thinking for Contemporary Jewelry.

---

**Damian Skinner**

---

Unlike Part 1 and Part 2, in which contemporary jewelry is precisely defined and distinguished from jewelry and adornment, Part 3 takes a broader approach. While contemporary jewelry as a special kind of object and practice remains in view, some of these essays deal with conventional jewelry (gemstones, for example, or fine jewelry made in precious materials), or things like accessories or tattoos and body piercing, which more traditionally belong to fashion, design or sociology. How does contemporary thinking in other disciplines help us rethink the field of contemporary jewelry? How is contemporary jewelry being renewed by new ways of thinking about old problems or opportunities?

The present moment has been labeled the third wave of craft, with the first wave being the Arts and Crafts Movement, in which craft was formulated as an antidote to the industrial revolution, and the second wave being the studio craft movement, in which craft became a vehicle for originality and artistic expression. Like much contemporary art, third wave craft seeks to create and foster social relations, networks and communities through the processes of craft. Within the third wave, the high levels of skill involved in studio craft are a liability, a barrier to participation and engagement. The spirit of third wave craft is best expressed in the do-it-yourself (DIY) movement and in craftivism—craft skills engaged in the service of politics, community engagement and social networks. DIY craft, for example, is like studio craft stripped of its romantic associations. DIY craft doesn't believe in truth in the sense that animates studio craft—no truth to materials, for example. It also seeks to collapse distinctions between artist, crafts person, designer and small-business owner.

The distinctive values of third wave craft reveal the limitations of our current models of writing about craft and contemporary jewelry. Craft discussions generally seek to validate the objects and practices they talk about. They favor celebration rather than critical perspectives and are quick to define the objects and processes of craft in an oppositional manner (e.g., not fine art, not design). This type of discussion tends to promote a victim culture in which craft needs to be protected, its traditions and heritage nurtured.

But a growing chorus of voices, including some of the authors of Part 3 of this book, argues that contemporary jewelry should give up trying to be a form of fine art and instead embrace the field of design. There is, of course, no right answer—just a lot of interesting possibilities, each of which involves gains and losses. The authors in Part 3 lay out different issues that might challenge the established ideas about contemporary jewelry, and identify some of the opportunities of the present and future.

The first four essays in Part 3 explore different ways in which jewelry-like objects and practices are operating in a dynamic way in the culture at large. The neurological effects of gemstones (discussed by Barbara Maria Stafford), the cultural life of jewelry (Marcia Pointon), the contemporary jewelry possibilities of accessories and modern technology (Elizabeth Fischer) and the socially charged practices of body modification (Philippe Liotard)—these aren't directly related to contemporary jewelry, but each topic offers a series of histories and ideas that can be used to think differently about the contemporary jewelry field. The next three essays tackle various “others” that contemporary jewelers have been struggling with throughout the twentieth century: conventional jewelry (Suzanne Ramljak), fine art (Julie Ewington) and design (Mónica Gaspar). The final three essays explore the implications of possibilities facing contemporary jewelry, as different ideas or movements, such as relational aesthetics (Helen Carnac) or DIY (Barb Smith), offer new ways to think about contemporary jewelry as a political practice (Kevin Murray).

These essays don't present a comprehensive picture of the challenges and opportunities that contemporary jewelry is facing a decade into the twenty-first century. They represent some of the issues that seem most pertinent for contemporary jewelry to come to terms with, such as DIY, critical design and the relational turn. Other essays seek to bring new perspectives to old questions, asking again what distinguishes contemporary from conventional jewelry, or how contemporary art and contemporary jewelry both relate to the temporality of their names, or how best to understand and take advantage of contemporary jewelry's social significance.



**Laura Potter**  
*You Are Not Special*, 2010  
7 x 5 x 0.5 cm  
Cotton, linen, reclaimed metal  
brooch, cross stitch  
Photo by Matt Ward  
Collection of the artist

# The Jewel Game: Gems, Fascination and the Neuroscience of Visual Attention.

---

**Barbara Maria Stafford**

---

Each time our gaze strikes the surface of any material or substance, a small miracle occurs. That which was nothing before becomes something for a few moments, and then nothing again once our gaze is averted. Looking at jewels makes us aware that we are aware, integrating the mind with the body at a particular instant in time while simultaneously incorporating the nonhuman world into our innermost being. Flow, the cognitive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi remarks, is that mental state when we are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter.<sup>1</sup> Objects in this scenario are scaffolds to support moments of reflection. The present is extended indefinitely, prolonged until it's broken or interrupted.

This observation takes me back to one of the earliest memories of my mother, in which I'm a little girl sitting at her knee in a darkened room in Fort Monroe, Virginia. It's 1947 and we're peering into a leather jewel box. She and I have recently immigrated to the United States from war-torn Vienna with my stepfather. During the often-repeated ritual of opening and closing this box—a veritable memory palace—I relive her past experiences as if they are mine in an intense intimacy that will never come again. We sit alone. She weeps and speaks quietly in German of things I can't understand as she fingers a brandy-colored topaz necklace or a square-cut aquamarine ring or a floral spray of diamonds. Seeing and

doing was undergoing. Old joys and pains were repurposed through pondering and paying close attention.

My mother now lies demented in a nursing home. When she speaks it's a muttered mixture of English and German and, increasingly, strange words of her own devising. On my visits, I bring bright baubles and jingling trinkets and always try to wear something she unfailingly desires: a brass belt with inlaid glass stones, a rope of resin beads, a metal cuff. She reaches out, smiling broadly, and strips me of my jewelry. Miraculously, jewels still attract her attention and remain somehow comprehensible in a cognitively darkened world where all other meaning has fallen away.

Why, when all else mentally speaking is gone, do we still notice bright, shiny, translucent gems? I argue it's because they so fundamentally engage our awareness that whatever's left of self-consciousness comes to the fore as a momentary but total involvement in the present. Individuals live in isolated spheres of incredible cognitive richness that get triggered by special objects. This raises a corresponding neuroscientific question: How does the brain work, say, to visually locate a coral necklace in the tangled depths of a jewel box, or to discern a broken bead of yellow amber on a cluttered table in a darkened room?

While Rudyard Kipling's metaphysical spy story, *Kim*, is about many things in colonial India, it's also fundamentally

**Ben Gest**  
*Jessica and Her Jewelry*, 2005  
163 x 102 cm  
Archival pigment print  
Stephen Daiter Gallery



about the strenuous training of visual perception. Significantly, jewels and gems play a critical role in this acute education of the senses.

Consider this passage evoking the dim curiosity shop in Simla, run by the top British spy master, Lurgan Sahib, where the young boy Kim has gone to sharpen his visual acuity and so, too, become a spy. Kim muses that while his native Lahore Museum was larger, the shop had “more wonders—ghost daggers and prayer-wheels from Tibet; turquoise and raw amber necklaces; green jade bangles; curiously packed incense-sticks in jars crusted over with raw garnets; the devil masks of Buddha and little portable lacquer altars; Russian samovars with turquoises on the lid; egg-shell china sets in quaint octagonal cane boxes; yellow ivory crucifixes . . .”<sup>2</sup> But while “a thousand other oddments were cased, or piled, or merely thrown into the room,” they were mere distractions to be ignored compared to the real work of understanding what to pay attention to.

This evocative passage captures in a nutshell an ancient worldview rooted in magic, technology and optical illusion. But Kipling's gem-studded descriptions also allow us to see jewels as present-day examples of embodied cognition, tokens of mental rehearsal and springboards for hypnagogic imagining. The ability to discern the difference between truth

**John Lockwood Kipling**  
*A Jeweller Wearing a Turban and Glasses Is Seated at a Small Wooden Work Bench Setting Stones*, 1870  
33.3 x 25.4 cm  
Pencil, pen, wash on paper  
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London



and deception is one of the leitmotifs of the novel. As part of the training occurring within the dim confines of the curio shop, Sahib shows Kim how to discriminate “sick” balas rubies or “blued” turquoises from undoctored sapphires and fine pearls. This exercise serves as a prelude to the Jewel Game.

Not unlike contemporary virtual reality tools—electronic gloves, stereoscopic goggles—scintillant gems could act as conjuring devices summoning up alternative realities. The marvel-filled shop in Simla is both the venue and the inspiration for the start of the Jewel Game. As part of his initiation into the clandestine double-life “game” of British espionage in India, Kim and his opponent, the Hindu boy protégé of Sahib, must pore over a handful of stones cast onto a copper tray by the master of the game. After these trifling odds and ends are placed under wraps again, the battle of the competing attentional skills begins.

The Jewel Game is simple but the skill set required of the players is not. The two competitors must recall and describe precisely how variously patterned stones looked: their mineral composition, flaws, colors, cracks, chips, size, shape, inscriptions, age, veining and imagery. The winner has the most commanding technique, the most perfect recall. To put it scientifically, the Jewel Game is an attentional and detectional experiment requiring subjects to find and identify

**Unidentified photographer**  
*Crystal Ball in the Hall of Gems and Minerals*, pre-1958  
Smithsonian Institution Archives: Image # 2009-2187



singular forms in a complex visual field. This test of perceptual and recollection skills seems to suggest that only a highly focused awareness is capable of attaining the real. What becomes clear, however, is that this power of luminous spatial arrays to attract and transport us owes less to mysticism and more to a fundamental discriminatory task of the primate visual system: the basic human need to search a cluttered visual scene for objects of interest.

By asking what holds vision (as in, what fascinates)—despite the nonstop conflicting information bombarding all of our senses during the course of everyday life—I want to shed light on integrative consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Noticing signifies cognitive receptivity, the careful absorption in mindful seeing.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, we should remember that engrossing gems have long protracted our attention spans, combating perpetual and endless distraction.<sup>5</sup> Observing or watching brings something to the center of our attention to the exclusion of all else.

The theory of fascination, founded on the power of suggestion and the supposed ability of natural or engraved gems to attract or repel cosmic influences, is thus newly relevant. The belief in the occult ability of individual colored stones to confer their virtues on the wearer and to transmit them at a distance through the force of concentrated vision raises key neuroscientific questions about consciousness

**Unidentified photographer**  
*View of the Lahore Museum in Pakistan*, ca. 1890  
Alinari Archives via Getty Images



and the functions of our attentional networks. Like the art lover who succumbs to his discoveries and becomes an ardent collector, the “gem watcher” can become a practicing gem wearer.<sup>6</sup>

The production of fascination, or the artificial compelling of “awareness, concentration, consciousness and noticing” has a venerable history inseparable from the rise of optical technologies.<sup>7</sup> It’s common to crystal ball scrying and divination rituals based upon staring into sacred wells, glass mirrors, globules of quicksilver, polished steel, level water and pools of ink to spot or discover something important that is otherwise invisible.<sup>8</sup> These ambiguous glossy surfaces serve “to attract the attention of the gazer and to fix the eye until, gradually, the optic nerve becomes so fatigued that it finally ceases to transmit to the sensorium the impression made from without and begins to respond to the reflex action proceeding from the brain of the gazer.”<sup>9</sup> In short, as George Frederick Kunz, an early cultural historian of gems, remarks, the vertiginous effect of prolonged gazing is that the internal impression appears to be externally projected, seeming to originate outside the beholder’s body.

Sparkling stones were long believed to mirror what computer scientist Jaron Lanier calls a “biorealistic” universe of wonders.<sup>10</sup> That is, their watery depths and

brilliant surfaces were much more than reflectors of their surroundings. Old legends tell of the unsettling effects wrought by ominous and luminous stones, patterned minerals, sacred charms, symbolic signets, astrological tokens and prophylactic talismans on highly sensitive nervous systems.<sup>11</sup>

Gems and jewels thus exceed both their ancient role as magical artifacts as well as their contemporary incarnation as consumer products—expensive rocks bought or sold “because they are pretty,” fashionable ornaments directed at arousing our drives and desires. Instead, we should view them primarily as controlling phenomenological experiences commandeering our visual attention.<sup>12</sup> Launching viewers into spatial exploration, these beautifully colored sighting and eye-tracking stones prove what neuroscientists studying the more than three dozen visual areas of the brain are showing, namely that to see is to attend.<sup>13</sup>

This hypnotic power of gems reveals the brain-mind’s selection of physical features, such as shape, from the flow of distracting sensory events. But it also helps illuminate the enigma of the evolutionary purpose of color vision. Kipling’s evocation of the riveting emotional as well as chromatic cues moving the eyes and grabbing the notice of the players (“all red and blue and green flashes” or “the vicious blue-white

spurt” of a diamond) makes the case for the essential role played by brightness and color in fixing the attention in a complex environment. Recall the high-arousal conditions operating in Lurgan Sahib’s shadowy and dappled curio shop—an establishment, we are told, more cluttered than the Lahore Museum. Like a shock threat, each precious object flashes in the gloom.

Kim’s attempt to combine and separate complex sensory signals coming from motley objects in the world is an externalization of the more general problem of visual sense. Vision’s mechanisms are coded along a number of separable dimensions: color, orientation, shape, brightness, direction of movement. These features must be synthesized to form a single object, bound together and fixated by attention. While debate continues to swirl around the question of whether we first behold an object or its characteristics, jewels and jewelry suggest the primacy of the qualities (size, hue, faceting, brilliance) over the recombined representation.

Gems and jewels, then, create an interactive environment composed of affecting things. Because their purpose is to be noticed, to command interest, they enable us to be in someone else’s mind. By scrutinizing them, we make someone’s activity the center, object or topic of our attention. As portable devices for creating an intense kind of

connectedness and communication, efficacious gems shed light on the neuroscientific problems of attention, memory and reflection. They also tell us a lot about visual illusion. Seeing can block thinking, just as thinking can block seeing.

The primal belief in performative substances that lure and allure—such as carved or engraved talismans, spell-averting or procuring amulets, shimmery hypnotic moonstones, animated eye stones and binding love charms—surprisingly intersects with contemporary questions about how we orient our conscious and unconscious mental processing toward sensory stimuli, activate ideas from memory and maintain ourselves in an alert or contemplative state.<sup>14</sup> Gemstones have always been extensions of our senses, bodies and minds. Today, however, we can also understand them as tools for focused thinking, for demonstrating the connection between attention and consciousness.

**Dorling Kindersley**  
*A Collection of Colourful Gemstones*, n.d.  
Courtesy of Dorling Kindersley / Getty Images



**Günay Mutlu**  
*Yellow Diamond in the Dark*, n.d.  
© Günay Mutlu/Getty Images



## Notes

1. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).
2. Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (New York: The Modern Library, 2004), 153.
3. See my "Crystal and Smoke: Putting Image Back in Mind," in *A Field Guide to a New Meta-Field: Bridging the Humanities Neuroscience Divide*, ed. Barbara Maria Stafford (Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 49–58.
4. For more extensive explorations of the phenomenon of attention, see my *Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images* (Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), chapter 6; and *A Field Guide to a New Meta-Field*, introduction.
5. For a summary of recent research on mobile technologies ushering in an age of distraction, see Cathy N. Davidson, *Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn* (New York: Viking Press, 2011).
6. Robert Wyndham, *Enjoying Gems: The Lure and Lore of Jewel Stones* (Brattleboro, VT: Stephen Greene Press, 1971), 13.
7. M. R. Bennett and P. M. S. Hacker, "Attention, Awareness and Cortical Function: Helmholtz to Raichle," in *History of Cognitive Neuroscience* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 44.
8. See my *Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting* (Cambridge, MA / London: MIT Press, 1999), especially chapter 3, "The Magic of Amorous Attraction."
9. George Frederick Kunz, *The Curious Lore of Precious Stones* (Philadelphia / London: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1913), 176.
10. Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).
11. Isidore Kozminsky, *The Magic and Science of Jewels and Stones* (New York / London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1922), 18–71.
12. Colin McGinn, *Mindsight: Image, Dream, Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 68.
13. Steven Yantis, "To See Is to Attend," *Science* 299 (January 3, 2003): 54–55.
14. Paul E. Desautels, *The Gem Kingdom* (New York: A Ridge Press Book Random House, 1976), 12–30.

## Further Reading

Bennett, M. R., and P. M. S. Hacker. "Attention, Awareness and Cortical Function: Helmholtz to Raichle." In *History of Cognitive Neuroscience*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.

Gazzaniga, Michael S. *The New Cognitive Sciences*. Cambridge, MA / London: MIT Press, 2000.

Kosslyn, Stephen M., and Olivier Koenig. *Wet Mind: The New Cognitive Neuroscience*. New York: Macmillan International, 1992.

Kunz, George Frederick. *The Curious Lore of Precious Stones*. Philadelphia / London: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1913.

McGinn, Colin. *Mindsight: Image, Dream, Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Posner, Michael I., Charles R. R. Snyder, and Brian J. Davidson. "Attention and the Detection of Signals." *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 109, no. 2 (June 1980): 160–174.

Stafford, Barbara Maria. *Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images*. Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

———. *A Field Guide to a New Meta-Field: Bridging the Humanities-Neuroscience Divide*. Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

———. *Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting*. Cambridge, MA / London: MIT Press, 1999.

# The Cultural Meanings of Jewelry.

## Marcia Pointon

"AHHH My beauty...past compare, these jewels bright I wear! ... Tell me was I ever Margarita? Is it I? Come, reply!...Mirror, mirror tell me truly!" Lovers of Hergé's series of classic comic books featuring Tintin and his grumpy friend Captain Haddock will recognize this as the fragment of libretto (from "L'air des Bijoux" in Gounod's *Faust*) sung by Bianca Castafiore in several of the adventures. The Milanese diva is the owner of the Castafiore emerald, the theft of which is the centerpiece of the book of that title; Bianca is stout and matronly, and wears a lot of prominent jewelry.<sup>1</sup> This vignette of the aging and no-longer-beautiful celebrity anxiously examining her reflection in the mirror and carrying along priceless items of jewelry on her travels is a hybrid that encapsulates many of the cultural relations that jewelry and its ownership exemplify: the unchanging beauty of gemstones in contrast to the depredations of old age (against which they also serve as a defense); anxiety and loss; the way that jewelry can comprise extreme wealth in a small, readily transportable artifact; vulgarity, in-your-face taste and self-dramatization; self-delusion, desire and cupidity; the naming of jewels; and social disruption—the thief responsible for lifting the emerald turns out not to be the Roma gypsies who are the suspects, but a magpie, and we are thus reminded that speculations surrounding the possible thieves of famous jewels may underscore assumptions about class and race.

Hergé (Georges Prosper Remi)  
*The Castafiore Emerald*, 1963  
© Hergé / Moulinsart 2012



In autumn 2011, the jewelry of Elizabeth Taylor attracted record visitors prior to its auction. As with other famous assemblages of jewelry (the Duchess of Windsor's, sold in Geneva in 1987, went for \$50 million), there are certain pieces that, like the Castafiore emerald, are understood to embody the life story of the owner and are named accordingly.<sup>2</sup> The Taylor-Burton Diamond, referencing Taylor's fifth marriage, to Richard Burton, is one such. Jewelry acquires value from this kind of provenance. In the early eighteenth century, the Duchess of Marlborough wrote memoranda about her jewelry, specifically registering, for example, "the fine large pear [i.e., pearl] drops that were the queen of Bohemia's."<sup>3</sup> The Lennox jewel was acquired by Queen Victoria in 1842 for her private jewelry collection. A locket commissioned by the Countess of Lennox, almost certainly in memory of her husband, who died in battle in 1571, it had been one of the most prized objects in the collection of the eighteenth-century connoisseur Horace Walpole.

Named jewelry, then, works as a sort of archive or register; bodies that have owned, worn and touched the artifacts leave a phantom imprint. Clothing does something similar, but this is readily accounted for by the fact that garments shape themselves to accommodate the particularities of an individual body. Jewelry, however, is always to some

degree or other hard and resistant: while materials vary (with diamonds the hardest mineral of all), the setting with jewels mounted in it doesn't normally shape itself to the body but is superimposed onto it. Furthermore, jewelry can be readily dismantled and the more valuable the stones it contains, the more susceptible it is to rapid transformation by thieves. In contrast, Vermeer and Rembrandt paintings get stolen but no one can turn them into raw material for resale, nor do they carry with them an aura of their previous owners.

To name something is to claim ownership in a public act of affirmation: it's a social gesture as well as a kind of descriptor or cataloging device allowing that item to be distinguished from others in a collection. The names survive even if the events or alliances that gave rise to the names do not. Moreover, giving a precious stone a name overwrites its complex origins, often erasing a history of theft, bribery, murder and corruption and thereby presenting the gem as pure value, aesthetic and financial. The egg-shaped Orlov diamond, for example, with its 189.60 carats cut into approximately 180 facets, originated in India, where it was looted in the eighteenth century by a French, or perhaps Afghan, soldier. In a sequence of events involving a double murder, the stone eventually reached Amsterdam, where Count Orlov, a Russian nobleman who had orchestrated

the assassination of Catherine the Great's husband, Peter III, purchased it. Orlov had been Catherine's lover, but he'd been cast aside and hoped to buy himself back into her favor with the gift of this immense stone. Catherine accepted the gift but didn't welcome him back into her arms. The Orlov diamond was mounted in the Imperial Sceptre, which is displayed in the Treasures of the Diamond Fund at the Kremlin.<sup>4</sup>

To attach your name to a precious stone is to advertise your power to acquire something of immense value. Thus, when London jeweler Laurence Graff paid more than \$46 million for a rare pink diamond, he immediately renamed it the Graff Pink.<sup>5</sup> When he bought it, the 24.78-carat pink diamond was mounted in a ring, but this was of no interest to observers and presumably not to its new owner, either.

*Jewelry* is a tautological term. With an etymology that goes back to the Middle Ages, it refers to what is made by a jeweler, or to ornaments sold by a jeweler. Likewise, a jeweler is one who sells jewelry. Jewelry is also a collection of jewels, and has traditionally referred especially to items in which precious stones were mounted.<sup>6</sup> While jewelry made of non-precious materials may have immense personal value as a receptacle for memory, as a nonverbal record of an event or as possessing a talismanic quality that its owner believes will be magically effective, it is precious stones mounted in

jewelry that produce this unique configuration whereby the setting (with all its artistry and craftsmanship) may be simply overridden by the compelling value of the gemstone. One explanation for this is that the mount originates in a period and has a particular style and may therefore be regarded as unfashionable, whereas the stone never changes.

This oscillation between the timeless and the time-bound has been a source of great fascination. Only in static collections like treasuries—the best example is perhaps that of the Habsburg Empire now in the care of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna—are we likely to find precious stones in their original settings. The idea of a private collection of jewelry is always relative. Collectors of paintings, wine or corkscrews don't appear publicly with them on their bodies. But jewelry occupies an uncertain ground between personal adornment, work of art and financial investment, and at the end of the day (as the sale of Elizabeth Taylor's jewelry demonstrates) it is financial value that triumphs. The collection is dispersed, the stones may be renamed and remounted, and they will in all likelihood disappear from sight. Inherited heirlooms are by definition supposed to remain unaltered (the owner has custody for his or her lifetime only) but the line between heirloom and personal jewelry often gets blurred, not least in royal collections.<sup>7</sup>

**Unidentified maker**  
*The Darnley or Lennox jewel*, ca. 1571–1578  
 6.6 x 5.2 cm  
 Gold, enamel (émail en ronde bosse, émail basse-taille), Burmese rubies, Indian emerald, cobalt blue glass  
 Supplied by Royal Collection Trust / © HM Queen Elizabeth II, 2012



**William M. Vander Weyde**  
*World's Great Diamonds: Nassau / Grand Duke of Tuscany / Orlov*, n.d.  
 16.5 x 21.6 cm  
 Negative, gelatin on glass  
 Courtesy of George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film



We might consider jewelry in two categories: the useful and the affective. When we think of jewelry today, it tends to be personal adornment that comes to mind. The rapper Nelly, posing in lots of bling, demonstrates the use of jewelry as affirmation of the wearer's status and ability to purchase expensive consumer goods, and draws attention by its glitter to his fine physique. Owning glittering jewels has never, however, been a prerequisite to benefiting from them. When the stars at the Oscar awards photographed for tabloid magazines appear in diamonds loaned by Bulgari, De Beers, Harry Winston and others, both parties profit by the advertisement.<sup>8</sup> This wouldn't have surprised Mary Delany, a bluestocking who became famous for her correspondence, flower drawings and collages. In 1729, she attended court "in all my best array, borrowed my Lady Sunderland's jewels, and made a tearing show."<sup>9</sup> What matters in these instances is that the stones are not only real, but are known to be so. The imprimatur of Lady Sunderland (whose jewels would certainly have been recognizable), or of famed American jewelry company Harry Winston, guarantees their authenticity and thus their enhancement of the wearer. Valuable jewelry worn in public is useful to the wearer insofar as it reminds people of the wearer's purchasing power (direct or indirectly through gifts), but it is also affective in that it arouses feelings

in viewers—whether of awe, envy, admiration or a subliminal desire to emulate.

Authentic jewels were described by the sociologist Georg Simmel as "super-individual." He argued that "the appearance of the 'genuine' consists in the fact that it represents, in every respect, more than its mere outward appearance, more than this appearance shares with a fake."<sup>10</sup> So the important thing with fake jewelry is for no one to know it's fake. In the eighteenth century, when jewelry was often the only capital over which women had control, it wasn't uncommon for fakes to be substituted for genuine, even mixing authentic and imitation in the same setting, perhaps because a gambling debt needed to be paid. Today we are told, "Replicas take away the worry." Rapper Jay-Z proposed to singer Beyoncé with an 18-carat flawless diamond ring worth an estimated \$5 million, but also gave her an imitation version to wear in public.<sup>11</sup>

The idea of jewelry functioning exclusively as adornment is relatively new. Throughout the early modern period (ca. 1600–1800) and on through the nineteenth century, any man with claims to gentility would have had his own personal seal or set of seals, which were often attached by a ribbon and displayed prominently rather than being tucked inside his breeches. Unlike Nelly's bling, seals had a practical use:

their imprint in warm wax, sealing an envelope, guaranteed the identity of the correspondent. The gentleman would also have had a cane with an elaborate and expensive head.<sup>12</sup> A lady of the house in an elite family would have owned a chatelaine; this ornamental clasp was worn at the waist during the day with useful things like keys, a watch, scissors, household notebook, seals and penknives attached to it. But the object itself was often of gold or silver and highly embellished. It worked as an ornament, a useful device and a status symbol.

There's something forlorn about pawnbrokers' shop windows, with their displays of jewelry that was once carefully chosen and personally valued and that has, of necessity rather than desire, been exchanged for cash. Small, worn on the body, handled and often valuable, jewelry connects people separated by circumstance and history. In particular, lockets, the combination of miniature portraits and jewelry that can be worn around the neck or kept hidden close to the body, resonate across time and space. When Mozart was on a long professional tour in 1789, he took with him such an object, writing to his wife, "My dearest, most beloved little wife! — Remember that each night before going to bed I talk to your portrait for a good half an hour and do so again when I wake up."<sup>13</sup> Locketts sometimes contained the hair of a loved one,

Unidentified maker  
*Chatelaine*, early nineteenth century  
 53.5 x 35 x 2 cm  
 Cut steel  
 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London / V & A Images



Bryce Duffy  
*Nelly*, 2004  
 © Bryce Duffy/CORBIS OUTLINE



whether living or dead, thus enshrining a bodily trace in the manner of a relic.

Although the fashion for lockets declined at the end of the nineteenth century, the importance of jewelry as bearer of family memories did not. Among items collected in the Jewish Museum Berlin are many small-scale personal possessions, witnessing not only to the convenience of jewelry as portable wealth in times of trouble but also to the value placed on jewelry as freighted with memory. Jacob Simon and his family, emigrating from Bingen on the Rhine to Chile just before the outbreak of World War II, took the jewelry that had belonged to his mother, who had died in 1928 or 1930. Now back in Germany and displayed in a case under the title *Objects of Memory*, the jewelry serves as a correlative for the unspeakable losses suffered by refugees.

Many jewelry designs imitate natural forms such as flowers and foliage or small creatures. These visual references, devised through craft skills in materials that endure, bring together notions of timelessness, freedom and personal identity in an object that draws the eye and demands both scrutiny and touch. They cannot answer Bianca Castafiore's question "Is it I?" but they can offer the illusion of a beauty that's not subject to the destruction of time. As jeweler Humphrey Butler declared in an advertisement, "Jewellery! Because Great Sex Doesn't Last Forever!"<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

1. Hergé published the original *Les Bijoux de la Castafiore* as a strip between 1961 and 1962, and in book form in 1963. [www.tintinologist.org/guides/books/21castafiore.html](http://www.tintinologist.org/guides/books/21castafiore.html).
2. Avril Groom, "Watches and Jewellery," *Financial Times*, November 12, 2011.
3. Althorp Papers, British Library Add MS. 75402 quoted in Marcia Pointon, "Material Manoeuvres: Sarah Churchill and the Power of Artefacts," *Art History* 32, no. 3 (June 2009): 495.
4. DeeDee Cunningham, *The Diamond Compendium* (London: NGA Press, 2011), 648–650.
5. Acquired November 2010. [www.graffdiamonds.com/\\_html/index.php?sectionid=2&pgid=590](http://www.graffdiamonds.com/_html/index.php?sectionid=2&pgid=590).
6. This tradition has been challenged by designers employing inexpensive materials such as plastics in the twentieth and twenty first centuries.
7. Queen Marie Antoinette, for one, disregarded this distinction and appropriated items from the Crown Jewels for her personal use.
8. The names of the lenders are cited in the photo captions. "Bling around the Collar" and "Dripping with Ice," *People*, March 15, 2004, 57–58.
9. Mrs. Pendarves (later Mary Delany) to Mrs. Anne Granville, March 4, 1728/29, in *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs. Delany*, 3 vols., ed. Lady Llanover (London: R. Bentley, 1861–2), 191. For this and other examples, see Marcia Pointon, *Brilliant Effects: A Cultural History of Gem Stones and Jewellery* (New Haven, CT / London: Yale University Press, 2009), 24–5.
10. Georg Simmel, "Exkurs über den Schmuck," in *Soziologie: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* (Writings of Sociology), in *Georg Simmel: Gesamtausgabe*, ed. O. Rammstedt, Band xi (Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1992), 412–21, quoted in Pointon, *Brilliant Effects*, 4.
11. Miranda Bryant, "More Londoners Are Faking It to Keep Hold of Their Jewellery," *Evening Standard*, October 24, 2011.
12. The Bond Street jeweler, Asprey, still sells canes with fancy heads as part of its range of gifts.
13. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart to his wife, April 16, 1789, in *Mozart: A Life in Letters*, eds. Cliff Eisen and Stewart Spencer (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 2006), 166.
14. *Vanity Fair*, January 2008, 63.

## Further Reading

- Balfour, Ian. *Famous Diamonds*. 3rd edition. London: Christie, Manson & Woods Ltd., 1997.
- Culme, John, and Nicholas Rayner. *The Jewels of the Duchess of Windsor*. London: Thames & Hudson in association with Sotheby's, 1987.
- Epstein, Edward Jay. *The Diamond Invention*. London: Hutchinson, 1982.
- Fales, Martha Gandy. *Jewelry in America, 1600–1900*. Woodbridge, UK: Antique Collectors' Club, 1995.
- Howarth, Stephen. *The Koh-i-Noor Diamond: The History and the Legend*. London: Quartet Books, 1980.
- Papi, Stefano. *The Jewels of the Romans: Family and Court*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2010.
- Pointon, Marcia. *Brilliant Effects: A Cultural History of Gem Stones and Jewellery*. New Haven, CT / London: Yale University Press, 2009.
- Scarisbrick, Diana. *Jewellery in Britain, 1066–1837: A Documentary, Social, Literary and Artistic Survey*. Norwich, UK: Michael Russell, 1994.
- Taylor, Elizabeth. *My Love Affair with Jewellery*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002.
- Tolliver, Gabriel A., and Reggie Ossé. *Bling: The Hip-hop Jewellery Handbook*. London: Bloomsbury, 2006.
- Yogev, Gedalia. *Diamonds and Coral: Anglo-Dutch Jews and Eighteenth-Century Trade*. Teaneck, NJ: Holmes & Meier, 1978.

# The Accessorized Ape.

Elizabeth Fischer

In the 1961 film *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, Holly Golightly introduces her neighbor Paul Varjak, a penniless writer, to Tiffany's. Paul looks for a present for Holly, and the salesman suggests a relatively affordable sterling silver telephone dialer: "Strictly as a novelty, you understand, for the lady and gentleman who has everything." It's highly plausible that in 1961 Tiffany's would sell not only jewelry but also small items closely related to the human body. However, to catch the eye of those who already have all the high-end jewelry they want and the means to buy it, the telephone dialer must be endowed with preciousness. This is achieved not because it's made of silver, but through its nature as something absolutely state of the art and modern. It bestows on the user the status of someone who can afford the most up-to-the-minute object.

The silver telephone dialer answers all the requirements of jewelry: it's small, precious, an article of value, a status symbol, an object "worn by people as decorative and symbolic additions to their outward appearance."<sup>1</sup> The telephone dialer is an ornament for the household or office. It's as closely linked to the user's body as jewelry is, for it extends the finger, replicating its function. Finally, it's an object perfectly in tune with its times, a "novelty," like any fashionable item. Does the similarity between jewelry and the dialer place them in the same category? Does a telephone dialer, which is an accessory, become a piece of jewelry when it's made of

silver? Does a piece of jewelry become an accessory when it's not made of precious stones and metals?

Commonly, jewelry isn't considered functional, whereas accessories always have utility. However, they're similar in many ways: both are in close—even intimate—connection with the body; both act as a primary means to express at once individual and social identity; both become intensely personal items; today, both are considered desirable, even "must-haves"; both have become contemporary conversation pieces. Jewelry and accessories have developed into highly functional items in terms of society and consumption, identity and emotions. This similarity is a twentieth-century development in the relationship of jewelry and accessories to dress and the body.

Almost up to World War I, only the face and hands were visible in Western dress. The rest of the body was completely covered by garments. Even heads were covered with hats and framed by collars and veils, while hands were enhanced by lace cuffs or sheathed in mitts and gloves. Save for rings on the fingers, jewelry was never directly in contact with the body. Rather, it was worn over clothing. In aristocratic dress, jewels were often sewn onto the material, integrated in the outfit's decoration. Gemstones and precious metals were the preserve of the noble, rich and powerful. Assembled as jewels, they spoke

of power, lineage, patrimony and wealth.

Starting in the nineteenth century, the trappings of the new wealthy businessmen and industrialists increasingly rivaled the prized jewels worn by the aristocracy. A growing affluent middle class aspired to new forms of jewelry. To meet demand, jewelry was produced industrially from cheaper materials. It also gradually succumbed to the vagaries of fashion and became less tied to special occasions and their required formal wear. Jewelry enhanced the cleavage and arms bared by evening gowns. It was just one ornament among many others in female dress, where woven patterns were bedecked with embroidery and lace. Jewelry imparted movement and sparkle to an otherwise stiff corseted silhouette, a function usually overlooked in histories of fashion or jewelry.<sup>2</sup>

The upheaval of World War I ushered in a new era in dress, more notably for women. Dresses shortened, while evening wear completely revealed the arms and the back. Jewels were no longer sewn onto the material, and clothing became less ornamented. The new streamlined silhouettes changed the relationship between jewelry and dress. *Vogue* stated in 1921: "Sparkling jewellery is undoubtedly an absolute necessity for modern fashion."<sup>3</sup> In 1926, Gabrielle Chanel perfected the little black dress, considered one of the starting points of modern fashion. It could be worn

Anoush Abrar and Aimée Hoving  
Fashion Series: *Mama*, 2010  
© Anoush Abrar & Aimée Hoving



from morning to evening, suited to any occasion simply by dressing it up or down with jewelry.

Although Chanel designed costume jewelry meant for pairing with unadorned outfits, she herself didn't hesitate to wear several different necklaces (or brooch and necklace) over a decorative collar or a cardigan with a striped motif. Moreover, she boldly mixed precious and costume jewelry, thus putting the focus on aesthetic function as signifier of taste rather than indicator of rank, fortune and status. Ornament and beauty weren't equated with preciousness anymore. Jewelry, especially costume jewelry, entered the category of accessories that included shoes, gloves, hats, fans, canes, parasols, etc. In this way, as chief adornment of modern dress, jewelry, far from being *accessory*, was deemed absolutely *necessary*.

Chanel freed jewelry from its centuries-old bond with a woman's dependence on a man, as either legitimate spouse or kept woman. In combining fake and real jewels, she consciously charted the way for women to appropriate jewelry as a personal and chosen expression of taste and statement of identity, just like any other accessory.<sup>4</sup> Chanel thus heralded current female consumer practices. More and more women live independent lives and careers and are affluent enough to buy pricy jewelry for themselves. Furthermore, they don't think twice about wearing it with jeans or inexpensive garments.

*A Young Lady on the High Classical School of Ornament From Punch, July 16, 1859*  
General Research Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations



The hippie revolution brought two major changes in Western dress. The body was suddenly very much revealed, and men adopted some feminine traits: colorful and patterned clothing, textile ornamentation (embroidery, frills), long hair and jewelry hitherto reserved for women, such as necklaces, bracelets and earrings. The masculine adoption of jewelry further confirmed its transfer to the field of accessories. Jewelry for men is a rich area for future market and design development, in close connection with the design of electronic devices.

Today, other parts of the body have become even more exposed: waist, midriff, lower back, buttocks, legs. It isn't just a question of more skin exposure. Synthetic fabrics and jerseys—elastic, thin, sometimes more or less transparent, clinging and mercilessly figure-hugging—delineate every limb and muscle, especially because clothing is rarely lined and underwear is minimal. The body now isn't so much clothed as adorned, adorned with accessories and...adorned in visibility. This has ushered in new types of ornaments, applied directly to the skin. Tattooing and piercing have existed since antiquity, but for centuries were used as discriminating signs, for specific groups at the margins of society. They became particularly visible with the punk movement, as signs of rebellion against the establishment, before being taken up by the mainstream. The fashion industry used this type of

skin decoration to create shock waves on the catwalk and in advertisements. With its adoption as an ornament by younger generations, piercing no longer has rebellious connotations. It's used to highlight specific parts of the body and add a kinetic dimension.<sup>5</sup> The studs and other items used for piercing exactly fit the definition of jewelry, though they're not yet considered as such.

In the 1990s, jewelry was used in spectacular ways to highlight fashion in catwalk shows. Fashion designers relied on hair and makeup artists, stylists, accessory and jewelry designers, and music and set designers to augment the visual impact of their shows. "The emergence of jewellery in this period was different because it pinpointed a relationship with the body rather than the space surrounding it. Indeed, often the style of the jewellery came to summarize the style of the designer in a kind of pictorial shorthand."<sup>6</sup> In shows and advertisements, jewelry has become a way of expanding the brand's message. For the past 30 years, accessories have brought in the most income for high and low brands. In the hierarchical relationship between clothing, considered essential, and accessories, considered secondary, sales have tipped in favor of accessories. Jewelry is now in the fore, indispensable in the performance of fashion on the catwalk and in the street.<sup>7</sup>

**Cecil Beaton**  
*Coco Chanel in London, ca. 1938*  
© Condé Nast Archive / Corbis



Today, both young men and women have wholly adopted this culture of the accessory, wearing caps, earrings, chains, bracelets, sporting bags and indispensable electronic devices. These last have become vital to the "supermodern" human being—always on the move, always connected, living with an overabundance of space, information and individualization, as defined by the anthropologist Marc Augé.<sup>8</sup>

Younger generations have embraced the mobile phone as an extension of their identity. It's kept permanently close at hand, if not in hand. They go to extreme lengths to personalize it with jingles, pictures and applications. It's the depository of their social selves, harboring all their contacts and exchange of messages.<sup>9</sup> As electronic devices become more sophisticated, they also become the repository of knowledge, obtainable in seconds flat with the swipe of a finger.

The "ornaments" custom made for these technological tools prove how precious they are to their users: patterned covers, trinkets to dangle from them, incrustations of Swarovski crystals, if not real diamonds. Some items become one with the person. (Watches are almost never taken off, even in the pool or the shower.) The mobile phone is kept by the bedside, and in the pocket or bag all day. It's the last thing to go on the dresser before bed, and the first item to be donned or consulted. The day's outfit is now paired with

fine white cables that link earpieces to portable electronic appliances. These cables are the ubiquitous twenty-first-century necklace, taking no account of gender, class or age.

We use a piece of electronic equipment to get in touch with the wide, wide world of our friends and acquaintances, to hear our favorite tunes and use selected applications, to receive information, to consult and share the documents stored in our personal cloud, another invisible (or rather, immaterial) extension of the self. However, to access this permanent connection, there's always the need for a real tool, a vehicle, which remains undisputedly material. So, too, has jewelry always been about human relationships and communicating social position and identity. It remains precious both materially and emotionally, small in size, and close to the body. Accessories, including jewelry as it has evolved in the twentieth century, have taken over the function jewelry used to have. Jewelry still has that purpose; however, it has also become an expression of personal identity, taste and beliefs.

Jewelry designers are now free to explore much wider avenues than preciousness and social rituals. Using the body as a catalyst rather than a location, they question our relationship to materials, to objects and to the body. Naomi Filmer's *Breathing Volume* sculptures focus on the

mouth, chin and neck, describing the association between a volume of space and the body, the space through which a person passes and the space that passes through a person as the breath goes in and out.<sup>10</sup> As a jewelry designer, Filmer focuses her main area of exploration on the body in its relationship to materials and objects, as a conversation between flesh, body and object, which encompasses sensations, aesthetic definitions, attitudes, postures and points of communication. Standing at the nexus of art, fashion and design, her work highlights the intrinsic preciousness of the contemporary body. More straightforwardly, Philipp Eberle's *Wind of Chains* headphone set highlights issues of communication, posture and aesthetics surrounding the ubiquitous earpiece cables.

The modern avatar of the silver telephone dialer, as extension of the finger, is the stylus used instead of thumb and finger on the portable screen. We're still material girls and boys, and accessories are our best friends, however much part of our world now revolves in a virtual and immaterial dimension. New needs can be answered by the qualities of jewelry, while a wide range of objects, from accessories to prosthetics, benefit from the design, development and manufacture of jewelry. "Eyeglasses have been transformed from medical necessity to fashion accessory. This revolution

has come about through embracing the design culture of the fashion industry."<sup>11</sup> In the same way, design sensibilities might be applied to hearing and communication aids, even to inner prostheses like the pacemaker. In making these objects appealing, design helps foster a positive relationship with disabilities and their outward signs and effects. A hearing aid doesn't actually have to *look* like a hearing aid. Its design can refer to other items for the ear: earrings, earphones, Jawbone Bluetooth headsets that fit in or around the ear or the tasseled earplugs worn by Holly Golightly when her neighbor knocks at the door. In this way, jewelry and its makers offer new insights on the relationship of objects with the body, challenging traditional boundaries.

The bodies of today engage us in our social life, are the standard bearers of our identity and are still the main seat of emotions, sensations and actions. The bionic bodies so often imagined for the future should retain the same capacities, augmented by extensions made of materials. In this sense, the body is absolutely precious, as highlighted in Filmer's works. Without the body, adornment and accessories are meaningless. As long as objects are meaningful vectors in our relationships with others and our environment, and the more materials are intricately incorporated into the body and the person, the realm of jewelry will have a part to play in society and in individuals' lives.

**Naomi Filmer**  
*BREATHING VOLUME: absorb*, 2009  
35 x 30 x 40 cm  
Resins and polymers; hand fabricated  
Photo by Jeremy Forster  
Han Heffken Foundation



**Naomi Filmer**  
*Orchid Neck-Piece for Anne-Valerie Hash*, 2008  
23 x 20 x 20 cm  
Silver plate on copper electroforming over synthetics  
Photo by Jeremy Forster  
Anne-Valerie Hash Archive



**Philipp Eberle**  
*Wind of Chains*, 2010  
20 x 45 cm  
Headphones, jewelry components  
Photo by Sabine Hartel  
Courtesy of the artist



---

## Notes

1. Marjan Unger, "Freedom Has Its Limitations. Jewellery Today, Seen from a Dutch Perspective" (lecture, Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, during SCHMUCK 2012). <http://die-neue-sammlung.de/archive/event/2012/marjan-unger-freedom-has-its-limitations-jewelry-now/?L=1>.
2. Elizabeth Fischer, "Jewellery and Fashion in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Fashion History Reader: Global Perspectives*, eds. Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil (London / New York: Routledge, 2010), 311–313.
3. Jean Castarède, *Histoire du luxe en France: Des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Éditions Eyrolles, 2007), 309–310.
4. For more on the subject of Chanel's influence on the norms of femininity, see Martha Banta, "Coco, Zelda, Sara, Daisy, and Nicole: Accessories for New Ways of Being a Woman," in *Accessorizing the Body, Habits of Being I*, eds. Christina Giorcelli and Paula Rabinowitz (Minneapolis / London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 82–107.
5. Karmen MacKendrick, "Technoflesh or, 'Didn't That Hurt?'" *Fashion Theory* 2, no. 1 (March 1998): 3–24.
6. Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity, and Deathliness*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT / London: Yale University Press, 2007), 231–233. Maia Adams, *Fashion Jewellery: Catwalk and Couture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2012) offers an overview of an entire generation of contemporary jewelry designers creating fashion jewelry.
7. Suzy Menkes, "Baubles, Bangles and Bags: Who Cares about the Clothes?" *International Herald Tribune*, October 6, 2002.
8. See Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), 35–36; Andrew Bolton, *The Supermodern Wardrobe* (London: V&A, 2002), 7.
9. Corinne Martin, "Le telephone portable, un objet incorporé?" in *Objet, Bijou et Corps, In-corporer*, eds. Monique Manoha and Alexandre Klein (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), 85–96, texts from the fourth Biennale du Bijou Contemporain de Nîmes held in the fall of 2005.
10. Interview with Naomi Filmer, <http://arttube.boijmans.nl/en/video/AoF-NF-en>. The sculptures were shown in the exhibition *The Art of Fashion, Installing Allusions* at the Museum Boijmans van Beunigen, *The Art of Fashion, Installing Allusions* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans van Beunigen, 2009), an exhibition catalog.
11. Graham Pullin, *Design Meets Disability* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 16–23, 38.

---

## Further Reading

Brand, Jan, and José Teunissen, eds. *Fashion & Accessories*. Arnhem, The Netherlands: ArtEZ Press, 2007.

Cappellieri, Alba, ed. *Jewelery Now: Art, Fashion, Design*. Milan: Electa, 2011.

Farren, Anne, and Andrew Hutchinson. "Cyborgs, New Technology, and the Body: The Changing Nature of Garments." *Fashion Theory* 8, no. 4, (2004): 461–476.

Finessi, Beppe, ed. *Ultrabody*. Mantua, Italy: Corraini, 2012.

Museum Bellerive, Zurich, and MUDAC, Lausanne. *Body Extensions*. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2004.

Neri, Leyla Belkaïd, ed. *Access to Accessory*. Geneva: Haute école d'arts appliqués HES Geneva, 2005.

Pieter T'Jonck, ed. *SuperBodies*. Exhibition catalog for the third edition of the Triennial for Contemporary Art, Fashion, and Design in Hasselt, Belgium, 2012.

Pullin, Graham. *Design Meets Disability*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.

Serres, Michel. *Petite Poucette*. Paris: Le Pommier, 2012

Tisseron, Serge. *Petites mythologies d'aujourd'hui*. Paris: Aubier, 2000.

Vincent, Susan J. *The Anatomy of Fashion: Dressing the Body from the Renaissance to Today*. Oxford, UK: Berg, 2009.

Warnier, Jean-Pierre. *Construire la culture matérielle: L'homme qui pensait avec ses doigts*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999.

---

# Body Modification from Punks to Body Hackers: Piercings and Tattoos in Postmodern Societies.

---

## Philippe Liotard

---

**Police in Indonesia's most conservative province raided a punk-rock concert and detained 65 fans, shaving their heads, forcing them to bathe, and stripping away body piercings, dog-collar necklaces and chains because of the perceived threat to Islamic values.<sup>1</sup>**

This news item demonstrates that, in some places in 2011, you still couldn't make changes to your body without consequences. What's interesting about this case is the violence of the authorities against people who just have a different look. This violence can be understood as an answer for insulting—via the body—the symbolic (and thus political) order. Forty years earlier, in Great Britain, punks barged with a bang into the lives of a very reserved British society. They spit on English conventions by donning a revolting yet carefully studied appearance. Their opposition to mainstream society was a kind of ethic. And even if the rebellion began with music, the do-it-yourself philosophy of the punks involved the body very early on. The punk movement of the mid-'70s created a new way of wearing jewelry and tattoos and is the starting point for many transformations in contemporary appearance.

This movement is often caricatured, but we can analyze its effects on contemporary style. For punks, the body was a tool as powerful as music. They made the raised middle

finger and the stuck-out tongue commonplace. They had Mohawked, spiked and colored hair. They wore tattoos on visible and previously unused parts of the body—neck, head, hands—focusing on aggressive patterns such as rats, spiders and spiderwebs, skulls, daggers, crosses, and skeletons and bones. While these icons had existed as tattoos before, they hadn't been as visible. These “ornaments” announced the punks' rejection of social order and normalized bodies.

This new style, identified by Dick Hebdige, a sociologist who studied subcultures, in 1979, became a way to fight the adult world without uttering a word.<sup>2</sup> Punks invented a strong “fuck you” style. The significant strength of their new look came from a kind of everyday-life obscenity.

What's also of interest in the punk movement is the fact that men's bodies, as well as women's, hijacked the ordinary uses of clothes and jewels. Chains, safety pins, dog collars and leashes became elements of punk ornamentation, along with fishnet stockings, miniskirts worn with Doc Martens, and studded perfecto jackets. Punks gleefully paraded in torn, stained and gaudy clothes, marrying colors against all the canons of good taste. Men and women shared the same accessories: ears or cheeks drilled with safety pins, exaggerated makeup, rings placed in the ear and nose and linked by a chain.

**Peggy Photo (née Morrison)**  
Ron Athey, 1982  
Courtesy of the artist



In this way, punks produced significant differences from other youth styles, mixing colors and altering the meaning of looks. They opened many possibilities in the underground contemporary construction of appearances. With their altered rebel bodies, punks quickly gave birth to a charged self-image. Their very own promoters conspired with the media they despised and turned them into symbols of decadence, then exported their body aesthetics across the world.

During that time, genital and breast piercings became popular in BDSM (bondage/discipline/sadism/masochism) and gay cultures. Genitals and nipples offered a new space for intimate ornamentations, under the influence of Gauntlet, the first piercing shop, opened in 1975 by Jim Ward in Los Angeles. During the '80s these practices remained discreet. However, they were about to burst out and join the fashion world in the '90s, in particular with the public use of piercings by the fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier.

In the same period, some of this transgressive use of body modification took an aesthetic turn. On the West Coast of the United States, some tattoo artists introduced Pacific stylings in their inking of skin. Tattoos weren't just a way of showing an antisocial character, but a method of defending an aesthetic vision inspired by a “tribal” style. Two complementary uses of tattoos coexisted. The first

one displayed a nonconformist and antisocial posture exaggerated in punk style; the second explored aesthetic perspectives that aimed at the embellishment of the body. These two purposes for the same practice must be kept in mind in order to understand how body modifications reveal the tensions between the normalization and the transgression of the appearance.

Initially marginal practices stemming from the underground and subcultures, the practices of piercing and tattooing came out of the closet, becoming popularized and gathering wider and wider social groups. Within less than 20 years (from the early '80s to the end of the '90s), they became commonplace adornments involved in identity and gender constructions through that double movement of transgression and normalization.

Punks initiated an aesthetic based on the deconstruction of white American gender norms. Before the '80s, being tattooed or pierced (except for the ears of women) was a kind of claimed marginality. But gradually, we can observe a valued use of tattoo and piercing that tends to be part of femininity and masculinity codes. For example, in the mid-1990s, American heterosexual pornography erased pubic hair on women and chest hair on men and showed tattoos and piercings, even on intimate parts. A new way of marking the

**Denis Rideau**  
Portrait of Gwendoline  
Courtesy of the artist



body became visible. Pornography made body hair unwanted and tattoos desirable: tattoos on the pubic area and tramp stamps (tattoos directly above the buttocks) were seen as feminine, and big tribal tattoos on the shoulder and chest were a sign of manhood and virility.

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, female porn stars with piercings of the nipple, clitoral hood, and labia began to appear. A new category of porn actress emerged, the so-called Suicide Girls, heavily pierced and tattooed models who established a new fantasy niche. (Previously, actresses wore just one or two tattoos or piercings, whereas Suicide Girls sported many.) As far as male models were concerned, nipple or genital piercings (for example, Prince Albert rings on the glans) were exposed only in homosexual pornography. But generally, mainstream pornography offered visibility to transgressive and intimate ornamentation practices, strengthening gender stereotypes. Women can be genitally pierced as long as the jewel remains discreet. If not, they cross the line into BDSM style. In men, the groin and torso are shaved, but genital piercings aren't acceptable.

These observations might seem surprising. Nonetheless, pornography prefigures the common uses of piercings and tattoos of today's teenagers. The body-artist/performer Ron Athey says it was hardly conceivable for him, during

**Manoly Magdala**  
Self-Portrait, 2009  
Chamom piercings by Tribal Act (Paris),  
transdermal implants by Lukas Zpira, shirt by Holy Mane  
Photo by artist



the '80s, to imagine that a navel piercing might someday become a stylish accessory for respectable girls, or that a nipple piercing could be fashionable.<sup>3</sup> Now, piercing and tattoos are the tools of an ordinary look. They're used both for matching the standards of appearance and for producing a "unique" appearance.

The democratization of the Internet brought with it a continuous flow of images. Common tattoos and piercings are shown on teenagers' blogs. It proves that they've become more socially acceptable for young people, certainly because of the increasing number of celebrities who publicly sport their tattoos or piercings. This self-presentation in the media conforms rather scrupulously to gender roles. Women's piercings are often worn around the lips, in the tongue or on the wing of the nose. For men it's on the eyebrow and in the cartilage of the ear. Some mixed practices exist, such as the labret or the ears. However, even if some parts can be pierced by either girls or boys, a distinction remains with regard to color, size, material or the motif or design of the jewel worn. For teenagers, wearing piercings is significant if it fits within the gender codes.

After leaving the subcultures and reaching mainstream groups, piercings and tattoos tended to reinforce gender norms. Their popularization can be seen as a way to

underline hegemonic masculinity or stereotypic femininity.<sup>4</sup> If we look at the more common tattoos, we can identify gendered patterns or gendered areas of placement on the body. This is the same with the jewelry. In the '80s, punks used everyday objects (nails, safety pins) to create new "jewels." "Modern primitives" (popularized by the special 1989 issue of *RE/Search*<sup>5</sup>), straight-edge punks and posthuman mutants have all experimented with many materials—wood, surgical steel, titanium. What followed is a wide range of new, specialized jewelry for the nostril, navel, breast and so on.

Some people, however, get involved in experimental and innovative practices that continue to blur respectable appearances and disturb the codes of the look. The democratization of practices of body ornamentation (which are made "in the flesh") doesn't necessarily mean that gender standards are called into question. Nevertheless, avant-garde experimentations in body modifications create new applications for tattoos and piercings that blur some of the gender borders. Large tattoos on the arm, back or leg are traditionally worn by men and are viewed as an affirmation of masculinity. However, all through the '90s, women began to wear full sleeves—tattoos on the entire arm—and even on the whole back without being seen as bad girls. The aesthetic turn addresses the body of women as well as the body

Claire Artemyz  
*LUKAS—Head with Implanted Spikes*, 2010  
Courtesy of the artist



of men. Wearing large jewelry on stretched pierced lobes bypasses the usual categorization between the appearance of men and women. Beyond a certain diameter, jewelry simply breaks the standards of Occidental suitability.

Another practice that appeared in the mid-1990s consisted of inserting a foreign object under the skin.<sup>6</sup> The object itself isn't meant to be seen; rather, its form creates a kind of sculpture. Subdermic and transdermic implants are one of the most recent inventions of the "do it yourself" body. These evolutions of appearances paint a broad stroke of possibilities, spreading from the most common of tattoos and piercings to the most unlikely "bodmods."<sup>7</sup> As far as jewelry is concerned, almost everything can be used almost anywhere, from the tongue to the navel. The multiplicity of uses, the mix of different practices (tattoo, piercing, scarification, implants) expands, day after day, the boundaries of the imagination.

A couple of limits still remain: the ability of the body to accept foreign bodies or unusual treatments, and the normative force of society. But new materials and new techniques spur the imagination to invent new ways of changing appearance again and again. Nonetheless, cutting-edge body modifications are generally male practices. Among them, heavy transdermal implants or metal prosthetic teeth cause their owners to look straight out of a post-apocalyptic

Lukas Zpira  
Untitled, 2008  
Courtesy of Lukas Zpira / [www.blowyourmind-production.com](http://www.blowyourmind-production.com)



movie. The *Mad Max* style has crossed the boundary of fiction to reach into real life, mixing flesh and steel. Postmodern punks wear metallic Mohawks or subdermic implants.

In 2001 I wrote that "creating a hybrid ideal of the body is a game for the privileged."<sup>8</sup> Now, the DIY body spreads from the homeless to the trendy middle class. The metallic-spike-Mohawked, postmodern punk goes on shaking up conventions by creating a revolting yet artfully crafted appearance. It's not a revolution, but certainly an evolution, a sort of mutation made possible by a kind of self-correction of the body seen as a draft.

But beyond the look, "body hacking"<sup>9</sup> continues down another road. It tries to cross the border from metallic and silicone implants to multiapplication technological implants, going from flesh/object to biology/technology hybridizations. As the body-hacktivist Lukas Zpira says, "Things of virtual nature are replaced by more palpable objects, familiar and recognizable. We are no longer in the imaginary world but rather one of desire."<sup>10</sup>

Yann Levy  
*Studio Portrait of Jean-Luc Verna*  
Courtesy of the artist



---

## Notes

1. "Police shave the heads of punks in Aceh, Indonesia, and force them to bathe," *The Telegraph*, December 14, 2011.
2. For more about the punk movement, see Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen & Co, 1979).
3. Ron Athey, "L'encre et le métal," *Quasimodo (Modifications corporelles)*, no. 7 (2003): 113–120.
4. As defined by R. W. Connell in *Which way is up? Essays on sex, class and culture*. (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1983).
5. V. Vale & A. Juno, eds., *RE/Search: Modern Primitives* (San Francisco: RE/Search, 1989).
6. Invented by Steve Haworth in Phoenix, Arizona.
7. Mike Featherstone, ed., *Body Modification*. London: SAGE Publications, 2000.
8. Philippe Liotard, "The body jigsaw," *Unesco the Courier*, July-August 2001, 22–24.
9. This expression has been created by Lukas Zpira to explain his approach to body modification.
10. Laurent Courau, "You Can't Say You Didn't Know—ITW by Laurent Courau," September 7, 2010, online interview. <http://laspirale.org/texte.php?id=307> (English version: <http://lukaszpira.wordpress.com/interviews>).

---

## Further Reading

- Featherstone, Mike, ed. *Body Modification*. London: SAGE Publications, 2000.
- Holland, Samantha. *Alternative Femininities: Body, Age and Identity*. Oxford, UK: Berg, 2004.
- La Spirale: An Ezine For the Digital Mutants. *Theme: Tatouage*. <http://www.laspirale.org/theme.php?id=41>.
- Muggleton, David, and Rupert Weinzierl, eds. *The Post-Subcultures Reader*. Oxford, UK: Berg, 2004.
- Pitts, Victoria. *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003.

---

# A Touchy Affair: On Contemporary and Commercial Jewelry.

---

**Suzanne Ramlijak**

---

The relationship between art and commerce is a tricky one. While both spheres have their distinct means and ends, they're also interlinked in many ways. The aim of art has been variously defined to encompass everything from overcoming personality (T. S. Eliot) to breaking the frozen sea within (Kafka).<sup>1</sup> The goal of business is invariably tied to monetary gain. Nonetheless, these two endeavors often converge in pursuit of their objectives. Ultimately, no creative practice can survive without capital, and every business needs structure and vision to thrive.

A similar interaction exists between the artistic and the commercial realms of jewelry. The dense terrain of contemporary jewelry harbors several coexisting subcultures, each with its own producers, consumers, networks and values. In zoological terms, one could say that all jewelry is of the same species, within which are numerous breeds marked by pronounced formal and behavioral traits. There is no fixed terminology for these jewelry subsets, but the two sectors considered here are widely known as contemporary jewelry and commercial jewelry. A comparison of these strains serves to highlight similarities and differences in their material, style, content and function.

It's useful to first establish the common denominators in all jewelry practice. On the most basic level, every jeweler—whether an academically trained studio artist or a manufacturer of mass-produced lines—is involved in creating ornament for

the body. The human form is the jeweler's domain, whether explicitly or implicitly. Each jewelry type, excepting the pin, is directly affixed to the skin, rubbing on flesh and circling an appendage. As such, jewelry's contours and scale must defer to our anatomy. In addition to size, jewelry has to contend with weight and the pull of gravity on the object and the wearer. While most jewelry accommodates the body's limits, certain works place demands on the human frame and impinge on physical comfort. This factor of "wearer friendliness" proves to be a key distinction between much contemporary jewelry and commercial work.

Jewelry makers also share a heritage of craftsmanship and technical knowledge that provides mutual ground for the profession. As producers, they're involved with the acquisition of tools and materials to realize their creations. Although the current palette of jewelry materials is vast, across the board there's growing concern for sustainability, ethical sourcing and environmental soundness. Within the art jeweler community, the strongest voice for such accountability is Ethical Metalsmiths, launched by studio artists to educate about mining issues and encourage advocacy.<sup>2</sup> In the corporate arena, the cause is championed by the "No Dirty Gold" campaign that supports the rights of communities affected by mining operations. Major jewelry retailers like

Cartier, Fortunoff, Tiffany & Co. and Zales have adopted the initiative's Golden Rules, which include supply-chain transparency, choosing responsibly sourced materials and reducing environmental impact.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of motives or aesthetic disputes, jewelers big and small are rallying around such ethical causes.

The rift between hand-wrought and machine-made factions—once a defining factor between art and industry—is also gradually closing, with new technologies entering the jeweler's studio and CAD/CAM becoming standard in academic curricula. Many leading studio jewelers are enlisting computer technology to propagate their ideas in a more accessible manner. Ted Noten's vending machine installation, *Be nice to a girl—buy her a ring!*, borrows this handy format for dispensing products to offer an affordable line of rapid-prototyped rings.<sup>4</sup> Like other populist jewelry productions, Noten's ornamental snack machine fulfills a tenet of his jewelry manifesto, *In Celebration of the Street*, which declares, "Jewellery must be owned by the public if it wants to touch the public."<sup>5</sup>

Just as jewelry artists are making forays into the wider marketplace, so too are we witnessing large-scale manufacturers touting the artisanal status of their mass-produced items. These mergers of art and commerce are joined by new hybrids of production and consumption. A

growing desire for customization has generated a trend known as *prosumerism*—a cross between producer and consumer behaviors. For art jewelers this tendency finds expression in interactive kits or projects, which give buyers leeway to make choices and individualize their products. Such jewelers as Arthur Hash, Benjamin Lignel and Thomas Mann are helping put creative power in the hands of people, involving them in making, not just wearing, jewelry. Customization is also taking hold in the commercial jewelry industry. Stuller, a leading manufacturer and supplier in the field, offers retailers CounterSketch Studio software, which promises to allow "anyone in your store to express their creativity and take custom design jobs from start to finish, while your customers participate in a personalized jewelry-buying experience."<sup>6</sup>

Along with sustainability, computer technology and customization, art and commercial jewelry often share stylistic similarities and overlapping trends. Fashion jewelry, by its very nature, involves the renewal of past styles to maintain an ever-changing supply of goods. Such fashion merchandising relies on the public's historical amnesia to ensure that borrowed modes will seem fresh. Jewelry artists also draw upon the past, enlisting forms and motifs from history, but they move at a meandering pace and aren't compelled to spur and fulfill appetites for the latest look. Even today, when contemporary

jewelry is undergoing an ornamental revival, this engagement with history entails deconstruction or abstraction of stylistic conventions and a critical attitude toward social norms.

The divergent stances between art and commercial jewelry can be most clearly seen with regard to its luxury status and the value of precious materials. While all jewelry falls into the market category of hedonic versus utilitarian consumption, its cultural value and social function exceeds its materials and price tag. The commercial industry's fixation on intrinsic worth and monetary value does not define the art jeweler's practice, which often tests conventional definitions of value. Whereas commercial jewelry is made *for* money, much contemporary jewelry is instead made *about* money and mainstream values. Indeed, a number of jewelers, foremost Kathy Buszkiewicz, have focused their jewelry on the relative nature of all values, and how we come to accept prescribed valuations.

In our pluralist era without clear hierarchies, there's no dominant or driving sector of cultural influence. High art, fashion, street life and pop culture all draw energy and inspiration from each other. The circuitous life cycle of hip-hop jewelry demonstrates such multidirectional flow of effect and appropriation. This ostentatious genre of body ornament was spawned by young musicians, who usurped generic conservative jewelry—gold chains, small diamonds, charms

**Atelier Ted Noten**  
*Be Nice to a Girl—Buy Her a Ring!*, 2008  
 Dimensions vary  
 Vending machine, 3-D printed rings in glass-filled nylon  
 Atelier Ted Noten / Red Light Design / Droog Design / Amsterdam,  
 The Netherlands  
 Photos by Atelier Ted Noten / www.tednoten.com



**Kathy Buszkiewicz**  
*Vanitati Sacrificium: Eternity, Fancy and Macho*, 2001  
*Eternity*, 0.6 x 2.5 x 2.5 cm; *Fancy*, 2.5 x 2.5 x 2.5 cm; *Macho*, 2.9 x  
 2.5 x 2.5 cm  
 18-karat gold, U.S. currency, cubic zirconia  
 Photo by artist  
 Private collection



and pendants—and turbocharged its scale and iconography. Pumped up and pimped out, bling-bling jewelry came to communicate machismo, danger and the newly minted buying power of successful hip-hop artists. As hip-hop music gathered market force, a neutered bling style was sold to the masses as a flashy shell of its former acerbic self. After going through this cycle, these blinged-out baubles landed back in the high-end inventory of fine jewelry stores from whence they hailed.

A similar recycling of street aesthetics is found in the jewelry field's engagement with graffiti art. Like hip-hop, its musical equivalent, graffiti emerged as an expressive outlet for urban youth. With rebellious origins and vandalistic intentions, it slowly infiltrated the commercial sphere, entering the vocabulary of common culture and ultimately showing in art galleries. Jewelers of all stripes were not immune to graffiti's graphic pull. *Pop Rock Daddy* by Daniel Jocz was part of his *Ruff* series inspired by Dutch seventeenth-century stiff lace collars. This neckpiece of aluminum, chrome and auto-body lacquer is layered with airbrushed imagery lifted from custom motorcycle art, pop culture and the vivid graphics of graffiti taggers. Like real graffiti, Jocz's aggressive riff on traditional ornament is brash, unsettling and threatening with its spiky chrome "thorns" aimed at the wearer's neck.

When graffiti is translated into high-end commercial jewelry, a much tamer necklace is born. Tiffany & Co. celebrates Paloma Picasso as its star designer, describing her as "universally acclaimed for her bold jewelry designs," and creating "sumptuous pieces [that] have a strong, dynamic presence."<sup>7</sup> In Picasso's own *Graffiti* jewelry collection, words like *peace*, *love* and *kiss* are rendered in cursive script and wrought in precious materials, including white gold and diamonds. In scale, tone and message, this dainty adornment couldn't be farther from the gutsy street art it feigns to convey.

A sharp analysis of these contending culture tiers is found in Clement Greenberg's seminal essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" of 1939. For Greenberg, kitsch is the "simulacra of genuine culture" that "provides vicarious experience for the insensitive with far greater immediacy."<sup>8</sup> Greenberg cited Pablo Picasso as the epitome of avant-garde art in contrast to the then-popular social realism of Ilya Repin. "Where Picasso paints cause," Greenberg wrote, "Repin paints effect." Repin "predigests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a shortcut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art."<sup>9</sup> Ironically, 70 years later the great Picasso's daughter, Paloma, personifies the very syndrome that Greenberg bemoaned: overprocessed

**Daniel Jocz**  
*Pop Rock Daddy*, 2007  
 45.7 x 30.5 x 25.4 cm  
 Aluminum, copper, auto-body lacquer, chrome  
 Photo by artist  
 Ornamantum Gallery



commercialized fare with a pretense of making a true cultural contribution.

While the interplay of kitsch and avant-garde pertains to all visual arts, jewelry is unique in the fact that it's worn on the body and circulates in the larger world. In spite of its intimacy and personal associations, jewelry remains a form of public art. As it travels on the wearer into social space, it transmits signals to strangers. As a worn experience and broadcast device, jewelry also has allegiance with performance art. The question then becomes: What happens when different types of jewelry are worn, or performed, in the communal realm?

*Daisy Chain*, a double-sided neckpiece by Keith A. Lewis, provides a model in which to consider jewelry's social dynamic, as well as the contrast between contemporary and fashion jewelry modes. One side of the necklace seems innocent, with benignly pretty flowers like those on costume jewelry, while the reverse features close-cropped photos of anuses. Depending on which side faces out, wearers can either fade into the social landscape or fiercely announce themselves to others in proximity. "Wearing the piece becomes a sort of playground dare," states Lewis. This and his other works "assert the primacy of sexual desire," according to the artist, and act as "a sexual emissary to be worn on the body and in public."<sup>10</sup> Such jewelry ends up performing the wearer's body itself, situating its desires up front and center.

**Keith A. Lewis**  
*Daisy Chain*, obverse and reverse, 2001  
 Diameter, 20 cm  
 Sterling silver, 18-karat gold, magazine photos, watch crystals  
 Photo by Doug Yaple



A prime measure of contemporary jewelry, and of all high art, is how much it asks of the viewer. Does the piece require us to work, to *appreciate* it in both senses of the word? In this regard, it's helpful to recall Marcel Duchamp's claim that it's the viewer who completes the artwork. This is in stark contrast to commercial jewelry, which conversely promises to complete the wearer, as in a recent advertisement that states: "Every woman knows that it's the fashion jewelry that completes the look, and Lord & Taylor is here to help."<sup>11</sup> Jewelry as finishing touch is diametrically opposed to jewelry as starting trigger for active appreciation.

The degree of work involved in artistic experience brings us back to Clement Greenberg's analysis of kitsch. Greenberg acknowledged that the laboring classes lack "enough leisure, energy, and comfort to train for the enjoyment of Picasso."<sup>12</sup> Rather than working for one's cultural pleasure, it's easier, and more affordable, to opt for less demanding diversions. Discomfort is an acquired taste, as is much contemporary jewelry. But feeling uncomfortable ignites self-consciousness and elicits a state of heightened alert. Once the uneasiness wanes, viewers and wearers can settle back down with a newfound awareness. And sometimes being uneasy in the world is the only way to achieve comfort within one's own skin.

---

## Notes

1. "The role of art is not to express the personality but to overcome it." —T. S. Eliot; "A book should be an ice-axe to break the frozen sea within us." —Franz Kafka
2. Founded in 2004 by artists Susan Kingsley and Christina Miller, Ethical Metalsmiths seeks to "channel information about mining issues and encourage jewelers to become informed advocates for social and environmental responsibility." (Statement of purpose from About Us section of [www.ethicalmetalsmiths.org](http://www.ethicalmetalsmiths.org).)
3. Issued by the "No Dirty Gold" campaign, and posted on [www.nodirtygold.org](http://www.nodirtygold.org). The Golden Rules are proposed as "social, human rights, and environmental criteria for more responsible mining of gold and other precious metals."
4. Ted Noten's *Be nice to a girl—buy her a ring!* was part of Red Light Design at experimentadesign, Amsterdam (September 18–November 2, 2008), a cooperative effort among Droog Design, the city of Amsterdam, and jewelry designers.
5. Ted Noten and Gert Staal, *Ted Noten: CH<sub>2</sub>=C(CH<sub>3</sub>)C(=O)OCH<sub>3</sub> enclosures and other TN's* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2006), 115.
6. Promotional copy for CounterSketch Studio 2.6, on [www.gemvision.com](http://www.gemvision.com).
7. "Tiffany designer Paloma Picasso is universally acclaimed for her bold jewelry designs. Her eye for color is brilliant and her sumptuous pieces have a strong, dynamic presence," from Paloma Picasso designer page at [www.tiffany.com](http://www.tiffany.com).
8. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 10 and 15.
9. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 15.
10. Keith Lewis, Artist Statement, "Curated Exhibition in Print—Contemporary Enamel," *Metalsmith* 23, no. 4 (August, 2003): 33.
11. From Lord & Taylor online advertisement, January 18, 2012.
12. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 18.

---

## Further Reading

Cohn, Susan, ed., and Deyan Sudjic. *Unexpected Pleasures: The Art and Design of Contemporary Jewelry*. Milan / Geneva / New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012.

Farneti Cera, Deanna. *Jewels of Fantasy: Costume Jewelry of the 20th Century*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992.

Noten, Ted, and Gert Staal, eds. *Ted Noten. CH<sub>2</sub>=C(CH<sub>3</sub>)C(=O)OCH<sub>3</sub> enclosures and other TN's*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2006.

Ramljak, Suzanne. "View: Prosumer Jewelry." *Metalsmith* 28, no. 5 (October 2008): 16–17.

Strauss, Cindi. *Ornament as Art: Avant-Garde Jewelry from the Helen Williams Drutt Collection*. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2007.

Woolton, Carol. *Fashion for Jewels: 100 Years of Styles and Icons*. London: Prestel Publishing, 2010.

---

# Now and Then: Thinking about the Contemporary in Art and Jewelry.

---

**Julie Ewington**

---

Is the *contemporary* in contemporary jewelry the same as the *contemporary* in contemporary art? This is an immensely complex question. One immediate answer is affirmative: all cultural practices are, inevitably, sustained by fundamental social matrices and issues, and the historical conditions governing the character, social location and experience of contemporary art extend to other creative fields, such as jewelry. As jeweler Lisa Walker asserted, "The strange world of contemporary jewelry would fit perfectly into contemporary art, some day they'll finally realize this."<sup>1</sup> Looking across cultural practices in any context is immensely rewarding: artistic manifestations clearly participate in energetic neighborly conversations, and not remotely enough work has been undertaken to place jewelry in its historical and cultural settings.<sup>2</sup>

Jewelry is a marvelous terrain for considerations about the contemporaneity of culture, partly because of its extraordinary longevity and enduring appeal; it may be the oldest continuous form of art making practiced in the great majority of human cultures.<sup>3</sup> Despite the enormous diversity of materials used across various societies and the development over time of new technologies, jewelry has remained remarkably constant in its forms and purposes. It is literally circumscribed by its affinity with human bodies, and, in its turn, circumscribes them; it marks us, threads our hair and pierces our bodies. The infinitely

various ways that jewelry adorns the body are open to complex significations, but, in a nutshell, jewelry marks affiliations, status and social locations; in dialogue with social groupings, it allows for the expression of personal individuality; it acts as nonverbal signs, whether in nonliterate cultures or today's mass metropolitan societies; and it serves as a form of portable and inalienable wealth. Jewelry is supplementary—that is, it eventually derives not from physical necessity but from the sheer propensity for delight. Its necessity is of a different order.

In many ways, too, because jewelry's social uses are clearly identifiable (though prone to slippage between them), it offers an exceptionally rich set of histories and practices for examining dialogue between continuity and change. It's simultaneously graspable and slippery. Importantly, contemporary jewelers are acutely aware of what art historian Terry Smith calls "the stronger sense of contemporaneity at work" today: "The coexistence of distinct temporalities, of different ways of being in relation to time, experienced in the midst of a growing sense that many kinds of time are running out, is the third, deepest sense of the contemporary: what it is to be with time, to be contemporary."<sup>4</sup>

The currently perplexing theoretical issue—whether the period of contemporary art has extended roughly since the 1960s and become irrefutably dominant since the 1990s—is particularly relevant for jewelry. In this period a remarkable group

of artist-jewelers flourished and became internationally renowned under the self-proclaimed banner of the contemporary jewelry movement.<sup>5</sup> Committed to innovation, using non-precious materials, privileging experimentation over status and monetary value, often focused on jewelry's capacity to signify and exceptionally reflexive about shared values and interests, these jewelers have dedicated themselves to the interrogative capabilities of their practice. Fundamentally cosmopolitan, their jewelry nevertheless often exemplifies the deep affiliations with local traditions, social contexts and practices that is one hallmark of contemporary art. For while (and because) many pieces pass through centuries of multiple uses and social locations, illuminating them through this endurance, jewelry can directly challenge contemporaneity by drilling into the past.

Crucially, some contemporary jewelry indexes continuity through time. In Australia, indigenous Tasmanian jeweler Lola Greeno and her peers are practitioners of an ancient form of jewelry. They continue to make exquisite shell necklaces called *maireeners*.<sup>6</sup> Worn by their ancestors for thousands of years and recorded in the earliest European images of Tasmanian people, these ur-necklaces are long, continuous strands. Greeno uses the same (now diminishing) natural resources, techniques and knowledge as her forebears. In the past two decades these beautiful contemporary necklaces have been

collected by museums, where they affirm Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, refuting previous claims of its extinction over nearly two centuries of colonization.<sup>7</sup> Once ceremonial gifts marking family and community alliances, the necklaces are now sold in museum shops and galleries and are worn by individuals aware of their cultural significance. Always acknowledging subtle variations in each maker's style, *maireeners* today are identical to those made thousands of years ago: they encapsulate the argument against a simple notion of "the contemporary" as an interpretive frame.

Another equally emphatic answer to the original question would be negative, looking to conventional demarcations between art and jewelry—jewelry as a subset of craft—and insisting on the specificity of each cultural practice (jewelry, painting and post-1980s video installation, for example). This argument appeals to the nuanced histories of each form, emphasizing the particularities of each context. But while it's extremely valuable to attend to each practice's local histories, eventually medium-based approaches become blinkered, and in some cases fatally limiting.

Take the work of Karl Fritsch, for example. He romps through the genealogies of traditional European jewelry, placing precious gems in settings that simultaneously mock various notions of value while reaffirming, by remaking, the very forms and histories

he seems to parody. Fritsch said, "What I find really fascinating, and one of the reasons why it's so interesting to make jewellery, is the moment of recognition when something that comes across cute and pretty has on second glimpse an almost obscene grotesqueness."<sup>8</sup> He makes purposeful perversions of conventional forms and materials, especially extraordinary gem-set rings. Working within a broadly accessible jewelry vernacular, Fritsch makes intelligent appraisals of established forms of beauty that have struck a chord with audiences today who are skeptical of jewelry's traditional functions of securing social status and displaying wealth. A form of internal critique, Fritsch's jewelry suggests how craft is firmly embedded within specific histories and contexts.

Taken on their own, neither of these approaches suffices. To unpack intricate relationships between such rich and freighted terms as *the contemporary*, art and jewelry require more thought. Fritsch's jewelry, as we have seen, would be unintelligible without a knowledge of European jewelry, but it derives its fullest meaning from the ways it deploys and challenges that history in the contemporary context. At any rate, the question this essay addresses provokes multiple answers, not all of them reconcilable. I will counter with others: Can contemporary art be defined? May contemporary jewelry be defined? And are these unitary practices, or are they so

**Lisa Walker**  
*Necklace*, 2010  
 50 x 35 x 2 cm  
 Plastic, spray paint, thread  
 Courtesy of the artist  
 Collection of National Gallery of Victoria, Australia (pending)



**Lola Greeno**  
*Green Maireener Necklace*, 2007  
 180 x 1.5 cm  
 Green maireener shells threaded with double-strength quilting thread  
 Queensland Art Gallery  
 Purchased 2008, Queensland Art Gallery Foundation Grant  
 Acc. 2008.087



**Karl Fritsch**  
*Rings*, 2007–2008  
 Dimensions vary  
 Silver, gold, rubies, sapphires, diamonds  
 Photos by the artist  
 Gallery Funaki



profusely diverse, so ungraspable, that arguments suggesting they be defined as contemporary exist, in actuality, precisely to make sense of multiple coexisting artistic expressions? In the current global cultural arena, whether works and enterprises are encountered actually or virtually, one recognizes an extraordinary plethora of art that is simultaneously rich, strange, evidently incommensurable and often overwhelming.<sup>9</sup>

So, what implications does the notion of the contemporary have for jewelers? Walker's recent work is emblematic of this rich immediacy, in the second of art historian Smith's senses of the contemporary. Her inspired fooling about in the here and now, collaging and assembling found elements from various sources, is, however, splendidly strategic. In fact, in cultural theorist Meaghan Morris's immortal phrase, it is "semiotically delinquent." Walker's profligate energies and enthusiasms seem diametrically opposed to Greeno's. Taking great pleasure in quotidian materials and objects, Walker too makes necklaces, though from entirely different materials. Above all, she's attuned to the nuances of her sources: Walker's work is deliberately interrogative of contemporary notions of value.<sup>10</sup>

I now want to look at temporal and historical markers in jewelry from Australia and New Zealand, reading works as contemporary interventions into jewelry's long histories that problematize both past and present. If Greeno's maireeners are

contemporary affirmations of continuity and survival, then other works actively interrogate the historical past. Jewelers today are exceptionally well informed about art and jewelry of the past. Yet while many were trained by late modernists, through the period of postmodernism, and are acutely aware of their own locations in historical time, not all jewelers riffing on historical themes are postmodernists. On the contrary, their interests and affiliations are more deliberate, more selective.

Blanche Tilden plays with the forms of industrial modernity in impeccable works assembled from purpose-made glass and metal components. Often these are long sinuous chains invoking the imagery of mass production: one thinks of factory production, assembly lines, bike chains, even the way these processes and objects match the exact passing of mechanical time. Yet the effect or emotional impact of these shiny, perfectly manufactured elements is far more ambiguous. While they seem removed from human intervention, each part is lovingly crafted, and something of their emotionally remote perfection speaks of nostalgia for a mechanically ordered view of the universe. With Tilden's long poetic meditation in metal and glass, which speaks to the fundamental role of machines in modernity, her chains literally articulate circularity.

Crucially, wearers of Tilden's chains comment on their emotional attachment to them.<sup>11</sup> Carrying affection and offering

protection has been one of jewelry's main functions across time and cultures, one that Greeno's maireeners and Tilden's chains share. Situating Greeno and Tilden in the same frame reveals the usefulness of the notion of "the co-temporary" as part of "the contemporary."<sup>12</sup> Greeno and Tilden exhibit in the same time and space in Australia. This points to the key problem of using the term *contemporary* as a form of periodization: these two jewelers have fundamentally different relationships not only to historical periods but, arguably, also to the broader sense of how human history is registered in time and place.

In Margaret West's recent work, simple emblematic brooches are reduced in form and means; paradoxically, as in the best modernist art, reduction makes the work richer. Intervening into slices of stone, West suggests a strictly modernist affiliation with the idea that the material should speak, embodying its own truth. Indeed, West privileges the beauty and the density of each stone—basalt, granite, often marble—its obduracy speaking to the depth of geological time, and, by implication, to the ineffable magnificence of the universe. (All this in less than 2 inches [5.1 cm] squared.)<sup>13</sup> But something in this work is far older than modernism. West inscribes into stones. This recalls ancient writing, so that many brooches are like thoughts pinned to a coat, like wearing a brief poem. She sets human time into the complex temporalities of the natural

world, dramatizing these long engagements. Now unrepentantly hybrid rather than pure in the modernist sense, West's brooches remind us that her other practice is poetry. (One recent poem is titled "The Tacit Truth of Stone."<sup>14</sup>)

Warwick Freeman has also recently played with stone, but to different ends. Take the suite of stone pendants titled *Handles* (2009). In a pronounced case of Duchampian naughtiness, a group of pendants is ranged along a shelf, like so many diminutive lingams, but the forms are borrowed from modern resin screwdriver handles and each mimics the original size of the handle. The sleek modern design of the original mass-manufactured tools is part of their appeal: they are pleasing objects. Translated into stone they're not only comically outrageous, but they also turn back time. Modern manufacture gives way to a new stone age in Freeman's hands, recalling the American painter Barnett Newman's 1952 diatribe against New York's Museum of Modern Art as a haven for Bauhaus screwdriver designers.<sup>15</sup> Freeman's handles are, eventually, a contemporary rumination on the passing of time and, inevitably, changes in making.

If the idea that all cultural practices today are necessarily contemporary—that everything made at this time, regardless of origin, social context, style and material, or even artistic intent, somehow belongs together—if this idea is, at its core,

**Blanche Tilden**  
*Robyn McKenzie Wearing Nightrider Necklace, 2002*  
 Diameter, 26 cm; height, 20 cm  
 Borosilicate glass, aluminum; frameworked, anodized  
 Photo by Marcus Scholz  
 Private collection of Robyn McKenzie



**Margaret West**  
*Petal, passing, 2009*  
 10 x 7.5 x 0.5 cm  
 Basalt, paint, silver  
 Photo by artist



both irrefutable and trivially true, then this proposition is, finally, radically problematic. It permits a far more interesting idea: that co-temporal objects pose valuable questions about how to interpret practices that appear to be irreducibly different, precisely because they keep those questions open, fluid and active. Given our unprecedented access to information about artistic practices across the globe, including jewelry, the best response to the question heading this essay might be to say, “No, not exactly, but yes, almost”—and then to keep passing the problem along a (sometimes discontinuous?) line of propositions and cases, until, much enriched, we find ourselves back at the beginning. The richness of this problem, and this metaphor, will always return me to jewelry.

**Warwick Freeman**  
*Handles*, 2008  
 80 mm tall (largest)  
 Pendants: quartz, jasper, nephrite, basalt, conglomerate, petrified wood  
 Photo by Roy Tremain



## Notes

1. See Lisa Walker, “revelations no 4,” in *Lisa Walker Wearable*, Liesbeth den Besten et al. (Munich / Wellington: Braunbooks, 2011), 62.
2. See Marcia Pointon, *Brilliant Effects: A Cultural History of Gem Stones and Jewellery* (New Haven, CT / London: Yale University Press, 2009) for an exemplary historical study.
3. Kate Ravilious, “Oldest Jewelry Found in Morocco Cave,” *National Geographic News*, June 7, 2007, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2007/06/070607-oldest-beads.html>.
4. See Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3–4, 241–71.
5. See Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2011); and Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee, eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (London: Duke University Press, 2008), especially Smith’s introduction.
6. Francis E. Parker, “An Unbroken Strand: Palawa Shell Necklaces” in *Floating Life: Contemporary Aboriginal Fibre Art* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2009), 75–76 and 144; Greg Lehman, “Lola Greeno,” in *Beyond the Pale: Contemporary Indigenous Art: 2000 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, Art Gallery of South Australia* (Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 2000), 29–32.
7. See Lyndall Ryan, *Tasmanian Aborigines: A History Since 1803* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2012) concerning the “history wars” that started at least as early as her original 1981 book on the colonization of Tasmania and its indigenous inhabitants.
8. Karl Fritsch, *Returning to the Jewel Is a Return from Exile: Robert Baines, Karl Fritsch, Gerd Rothmann* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2010), 38.
9. See Terry Smith’s discussion of Hal Foster’s original question, “Are there plausible ways to narrate the now myriad practices of contemporary art over the last 20 years?,” in *Contemporary Art: World Currents*, 252.
10. See Liesbeth den Besten et al., *Lisa Walker Wearable* (Munich / Wellington: Braunbooks Publications, 2011).
11. See Merryn Gates et al., *Blanche Tilden: True* (Nacogdoches, TX: SFA Press, 2010).
12. See Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*
13. See Margaret West’s website, [www.margaretwest.com.au](http://www.margaretwest.com.au), for texts by the artist on her work.
14. Margaret West, “The Tacit Truth of Stone,” in *Margaret West, Leaf and Stone* (Sydney: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2012), 80.
15. See Julie Ewington, *Owner’s Manual: Jewellery by Warwick Freeman* (Auckland: Starform, 1995); Damian Skinner, *Given: Jewellery by Warwick Freeman* (Auckland: Starform, 2003); Barnett Newman, “Open Letter to William A. M. Burden, President of the Museum of Modern Art” (1953) and “Remarks at the Fourth Annual Woodstock Arts Conference” (1952), in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John O’Neill (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 38, 245.

## Further Reading

- Anderson, Patricia. *Contemporary Jewellery in Australia and New Zealand*. Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998.
- Birnbaum, Daniel, et al. *Defining Contemporary Art: 25 Years in 200 Pivotal Artworks*. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2011.
- Cohn, Susan, ed., and Deyan Sudjic. *Unexpected Pleasures: The Art and Design of Contemporary Jewellery*. Milan / Geneva / New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012.
- den Besten, Liesbeth. *On Jewellery: A Compendium of International Contemporary Art Jewellery*. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2011.
- Dormer, Peter, and Ralph Turner. *The New Jewellery: Trends and Traditions*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1985.
- English, Helen W. Drutt, and Peter Dormer. *Jewelry of Our Time: Art, Ornament and Obsession*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1995.
- Ewington, Julie. “In Time.” In *The Second Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, edited by Caroline Turner and Rhana Devenport, 19–20. Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1996.
- Fabian, Johannes. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.
- Smith, Terry. *What Is Contemporary Art?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Smith, Terry, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, eds. *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. London: Duke University Press, 2008, especially Smith’s introduction.
- Turner, Ralph. *Contemporary Jewellery*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1976.
- Turner, Ralph. *Jewelry in Europe and America: New Times, New Thinking*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996.