

After Wearing:
A History of
Gestures, Actions,
and Jewelry

Curated by
Damian Skinner and
Monica Gaspar

September 25
–
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- MG On 20 August 2012, your email arrived with the proposal to curate an exhibition together. It has been a long and exciting journey to relocate typical discussions about contemporary jewelry within a context of participation and use through the format of an exhibition. When you approached me in 2012, I had just finished curating the show *Metadomestic* at Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) in Middlesbrough, United Kingdom. In that exhibition and catalog, I explored the idea of “the applied” in relationship to contemporary art and design. I found that phrase interesting because it suggests an action or performance (to “apply” something somewhere) as much as a reaction (it has been “applied”). “The applied” suggests an unstable condition, since it requires both an agent (someone to do the applying) and a goal external to itself (something to be applied to). I thought the term was pragmatic as well as utopian in nature, and it provided me with a frame to present current conceptual developments in the applied arts as intrinsically relational: “Applied” art as a social art in action.
- DS At that time, I had finished editing the book *Contemporary Jewelry in Perspective* (Lark Books, 2013), which involved a considerable effort to survey the field on a global scale and gather authors to deliver both historical and critical texts. Some chapters pointed at the missing narratives around the wearer, and also indirectly to the need for research about the recent past—especially about those jewelers whose work has become increasingly participatory, requiring action from, or interaction with, the audience in order to exist. It seemed to me that we were both very much thinking about the perspective of the wearer/owner/user, and that a collaboration would be beneficial. My initial thoughts were circulating around a show that would have two layers: an art historical investigation of the “relational turn” in contemporary jewelry and its precedents; and a curatorial investigation of how to stage an exhibition of jewelry practices that require audience participation in some sense, and don’t necessarily exist as objects. I thought that perhaps our project should be called “Contemporary Jewelry: A User’s Guide.” In my research for our

initial texts, it became clear to me that the nature and meaning of participation and relationality depends very much on what perspective you occupy—whether you are looking from the maker’s position, or from the wearer/owner/user’s position. I wondered if making our project about the user would allow us to think across a number of different problems in contemporary jewelry discussions that hadn’t been tackled yet. What would a history of contemporary jewelry from the point of view of the user look like?

- MG I remember this initial phase. Our main research topics were “assemble,” “perform,” and “participate,” which were very much focused on the aspects of making.
- DS Indeed, we did quite intensive research on makers that have introduced issues of customization in their work, from Anni Albers’ modular jewelry in the 1940s to Ted Noten’s *Chew Your Own Brooch* in the 1990s. But then we started to see a difference between this kind of approach to jewelry and projects that invited a different (perhaps a deeper?) involvement from the wearer/owner/user. Quite often, these involved social media to collect and record the wearer’s experience, and “making” wasn’t always important.
- MG These projects seemed to belong to the kind of post-studio practices that had emerged since the 1970s. At some point, we realized that if we wanted to follow those developments, our curatorial perspective would need to become “post-studio” as well. I sent you an email with a radical proposal: let’s dump the jewelry! That became a critical moment. We wanted to focus on the kind of gestures, actions, and meanings these objects make possible, but paradoxically, because of their presence—which invites aesthetic judgment—these other aspects kept receding into the shadows once again. By banishing the objects from our exhibition, there was a chance to activate the audience’s social imagination—the images and references and experiences that people carry in their heads about the idea of jewelry—which is so much broader than the artistic jewels of contemporary jewelry.
- DS We went crazy thinking about loaded categories or genres: heirlooms, political

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badges, luxury accessories, candy chains for children, jewelry lost on the subway... It gave us license to take seriously an idea that hovered around our discussions, that maybe jewelry in the world—the kind of jewelry that most contemporary jewelry is deliberately rejecting or critiquing—is actually more relational, more active, holding more potential. It is pretty hard to imagine anything more potent than a wedding ring, and that made us realize that sometimes artistic intentions can be a barrier to relational potential, rather than a guarantee of it.

MG It has been exciting to try out the theoretical frame provided by “relational aesthetics” in the context of contemporary jewelry, to finally recognize that jewelry is actually a category of objects that has always been relational in nature. This fundamental characteristic has been often neglected by artistic responses around jewelry, which have primarily focused on what jewelry is and not so much on what jewelry does.

DS We are replacing the dominant model of the critique of preciousness. This installs the maker and aesthetic criteria as the key criteria for the value (economic as well as cultural) of a piece of jewelry. For this exhibition, we have developed a model that prioritizes the way objects and practices function—the gestures and agents that are involved in the relational aspects of a piece of jewelry. In part, I wanted to follow the “non-human turn” in social science to explore what happens when the object itself is understood to have agency and be a social actor.

MG Your motivation somehow echoed my investigations into the practice of wearing as an identifiable cultural technique. This puts jewelry back into the social world to show how it operates and what its potential is. From that point onwards, we started to list the actions, objects, and contexts that responded to the questions: “What can I do to a piece of jewelry?” (Wear it, gift it, lose it, endow it with meaning and emotions, etc.) and “What can a piece of jewelry do to me?” (Embellish me, demonstrate my wealth and power, shape my interactions with others, modify my body language, make me part of a group, etc.). This list grew into a poetical catalog of over 200 actions and gestures

around jewelry. It was great when designer Martí Guixé accepted the invitation to collaborate with us and transform our list into a mind map, populated by interactions and actions, meanings and emotions, and commitments and side effects around different jewelry experiences.

DS Guixé’s drawings visualized what we called the “scale of relationality.” It was our own version of the Mohs scale of mineral hardness, a way for us to look at a piece of jewelry and measure its relational potential! While it started as a joke, it actually became very useful and central to our sense of what we were doing. Once this conceptual frame was secured as a pivotal element of the show, we came back to the practices of the artists that had triggered these thoughts with their work. It was soon clear that we should have existing work and documentation of trajectories along with site-specific projects. The selection of works features contemporary practices in and around jewelry, ranging from speculative design and conceptual craft to photography, video, performance, and participatory projects.

MG Throughout this project, we have glimpsed a fragmentary and mostly unwritten history of jewelry that is not about material research, but engaged in aspects of wearing and use. That’s why our title mentions history, as a nod to this genealogy; and it is also why our show includes old and new projects. While we can’t survey these instances of different ways of thinking about what jewelry is and what it does, we can remind ourselves and our visitors that contemporary jewelers have, really since the beginning of a practice called “contemporary jewelry,” been aware of jewelry’s relational potential.

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The works in the first section of this exhibition demonstrate that jewelry is a powerful phenomenon in social life. Viewers are introduced to a series of artworks (moving image and photographs) that in different ways circle around what we are calling the “gestures of jewelry”—the movements, poses, attitudes, and behaviors that seem to be in some way characteristic of jewelry. Often these gestures are learned behaviors, mediated by the representation of jewelry in photography, film, television, and art, which is why so many of these works use found images to construct their archives or catalogs of gestures. It is also notable, and important to our argument, that these artists and makers—a number of them are jewelers who have established practices in the contemporary jewelry field—focus on fine or conventional jewelry, rather than contemporary jewelry. In part, this is an issue of scale and economics; there is so much more money associated with conventional jewelry, resulting in a scene with a much greater visual culture of mediation and representation than the experimental one of contemporary jewelry.

In the second section of the exhibition, viewers are introduced to the “Scale of Relationality,” which through graphic illustrations articulates multilayered sets of jewelry actions within the frame of everyday experiences. The scale is broken into four different sections, with the possibilities arranged as narratives that involve transformation from one state to another: WEARING (about choosing when to wear: from never to always); ATTACHMENT (about wanting: from acquisition to disposal); OWNERSHIP (about connecting: from me/individual to us/the collective); and MAKING (about participation: from receiving to customization to co-production).

In the third section of the exhibition, visitors are introduced to various projects that exploit the relational and participatory potential of jewelry. These projects focus on the user/wearer rather than the maker, and introduce the possibility that jewelry need not be an object, but rather an opportunity for interaction—where the jewel as an outcome of craft skills and processes encounters new contexts and audiences (Gabriel Craig); where jewels of different kinds are valued in new ways as profound agents of meaning and identity (Mah Rana); where the jewel dematerializes altogether, leaving only ways of looking or behaving as a cultural producer (Schmuck2 and Yuka Oyama); or where the

jewel is made by (or profoundly affected by) the wearer, a souvenir of moving through a specific landscape in a certain way (Roseanne Bartley, and Lauren Kalman and Kipp Bradford). As well as encountering past manifestations of these projects through various kinds of documentation, viewers are invited to take part in relational works and experience directly these important shifts in thinking within the contemporary jewelry field.

Mónica Gaspar is a design historian and a researcher at the Institute of Theory at the Zurich University of Arts. In 2001 she curated the first public collection of contemporary jewelry in Spain (Design Museum, Barcelona) and since then she has been actively involved in curating, writing and lecturing about contemporary jewelry. In 2010 she curated the groundbreaking exhibition *Schmuck* in Munich.

Damian Skinner is an art historian and curator of Applied Art and Design at the Auckland War Memorial Museum Tamaki Paenga Hira, and an enthusiastic user of contemporary jewelry. He is the editor of *Contemporary Jewelry in Perspective* (Lark Books, 2013) and the co-author of *Place and Adornment: A History of Contemporary Jewellery in Australia and New Zealand* (Bateman, 2014).

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Gestures



Tracey Clement
A Leading Role, 2006
Video
42 seconds
Courtesy of the artist



Jessica Craig-Martin
The General, 2014
C-print
26.75 x 35.75 inches
Courtesy of Winston
Wächter Fine Art, Seattle



Suska Mackert with
Thomas Dierks
Trailer02, 2001
Video
5 minutes 20 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

Jhana Millers and
Suska Mackert
Display, 2013-14
Photographic prints
39 3/8 x 19 5/8 inches each
Courtesy of the artist



Joanne Wardrop
*Matrimonial Rituals,
Gender Studies and False
Facial Hair*, 2013
Courtesy of the artist

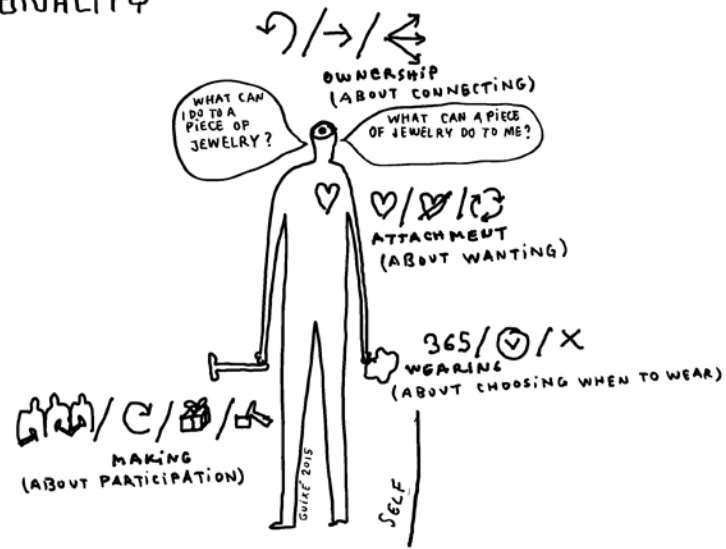


Robert Smit
Everyday Adornment, 1975
50 Polaroids
4.25 x 3.5 inches each
Courtesy of Robert and
Louise Smit



Scale of Relationality

THE SCALE OF RELATIONALITY



Martí Guixé
Detail, *Scale of Relationality*, 2015
Courtesy of the artist

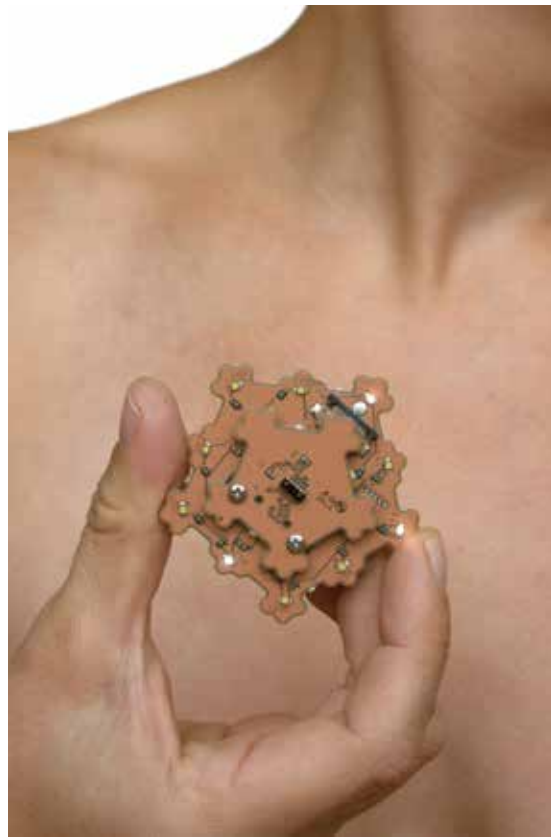
Participatory Projects

Roseanne Bartley
My Shadow Wears: Green Ticket (Barcelona), 2012
Photograph and wooden frame
Courtesy of the artist



Gabriel Craig
Pro Bono Jeweler, 2007
Courtesy of the artist





Lauren Kalman and
Kipp Bradford
Virus Simulation, 2011–2015
25 brooches, custom
designed circuit board,
electronics
2 x 2 x 0.35 inches each
Courtesy of the artist



Yuka Oyama
*Metamorphic Spirit
(dragon)*, 2010
Courtesy of the artist,
photo: Becky Yee

Mah Rana
Meanings and Attachments,
2002–present
Clockwise from top left:
Sukhjeet, 2003, Elizabeth,
2015, Salabanzi, 2004,
Aileen, 2010
Courtesy of the artist



Schmuck2
Hochsitz, 2010
Designed by Martí Guixé
and built by Makra Bau
Photo: Shintaro Imai



Roseanne Bartley
Tracey Clement
Gabriel Craig
Jessica Craig-Martin
Martí Guixé
Lauren Kalman and
Kipp Bradford
Suska Mackert
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