

**CONTEMPORARY AVANT-GARDE
JEWELLERY IN SOUTH AFRICA.**

by

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

ABSTRACT

CONTEMPORARY AVANT-GARDE JEWELLERY IN SOUTH AFRICA

This study considers the dynamics and nature of neo-avant-garde jewellery with specific reference to contemporary South African (neo-avant-garde) jewellery.

In Chapter One defensible working descriptions of the terms “avant-garde” and “neo-avant-garde” are established in order to establish some manageable conclusions regarding their application to jewellery design. These descriptions are derived from a consideration of the concepts in contemporary aesthetic discourse.

Chapter Two considers the role, justifications and implications of adornment with a view to isolating the development, influences and nature of neo-avant-garde jewellery. A distinction is drawn between the aesthetics, ontology and art-relevant status of such jewellery and commercial or mainstream jewellery.

Chapter Three analyses specific examples of contemporary South African avant-garde jewellery in the light of the above-mentioned distinctions. Works are considered in relation to the transgression of material, the transgression of taste, the transgression of integrity of form and the integration of narrative and parochial content and attempts to demonstrate that an appropriate critical posture in regard to such jewellery is art, rather than craft-relevant.

In Chapter Four general influences regarding themes and concepts apparent in the author’s body of practical work are discussed. An annotated catalogue supplements the general discussion.

UITTREKSEL

CONTEMPORARY AVANT-GARDE JEWELLERY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Hierdie studie ondersoek die dinamika en karaktereienskappe van neo-avant-garde juweliersware, met spesifieke verwysing na kontemporêre Suid-Afrikaanse neo-avant-garde juweliersware.

In Hoofstuk Een word die terme “avant-garde” en “neo-avant-garde” beskryf. Die doel hiervan is om uiteindelik die omvattende gebruike en definisies van hierdie terme (met betrekking op kontemporêre estetika) vas te lê.

Hoofstuk Twee gee ‘n oorsig aangaande die redes vir- en implikasies van fisieke versiering. Die ontwikkeling, invloed en aard van neo-avant-garde juweliersware word bespreek en gekontrasteer met komersiële juweliersware.

In lig van die bogenoemde onderskeidings verwys Hoofstuk Drie na spesifieke Suid-Afrikaanse voorbeelde van neo-avant-garde juweliersware. Hierdie voorbeelde word oorweeg in terme van hul oorskryding van tradisionele grense aangaande materiaalgebruik, smaak, integriteit van vorm en die integrasie van relaas. Die studie poog om die relevansie van neo-avant-garde juweliersware as kuns eerder as kunsvlyt te demonstreer.

In Hoofstuk Vier word die outeur se praktiese werke bespreek deur middel van ‘n geannoteerde katalogus. Die katalogus word voorafgegaan deur ‘n bespreking van invloed, temas en konsepte van die deurlopende ooreenkomste in die outeur se werke verduidelik.

DEDICATION

To Dirk and my family whose love, encouragement and support have made all things possible, and to my sister Anneli who died on 12 December 1999.

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INTRODUCTION

The radical reaction of art to the traditions and conventions of society can be traced throughout modernism and is known as the avant-garde; literally translated as the advanced group. The phenomenon of the avant-garde evolved slowly throughout modernism, and has reached its climax in the post-modernist culture, challenging society's conventions, expectations and pre-conceptions.

The avant-garde can be seen as a typical phenomenon of modern culture and has had a great influence on all modern art forms, including traditionally 'low art' forms such as craft and jewellery design. It is the contention of this study that certain kinds of contemporary jewellery - which for clarity will be referred to as neo-avant-garde jewellery - can best be described, analysed and critically assessed in terms identical to those appropriately applied to contemporary, post-modern, neo-avant-garde sculpture.

In order to argue this hypothesis, the study isolates a range of typical examples of such jewellery and considers them as sculpture. It is assumed that artefacts which function exclusively as functional adornment would not tolerate such a critical approach but that the jewellery in question does indeed stand up to such an analysis.

It has become increasingly the case that the more progressive jewellery of the recent past has developed in directions that transcend mere ornamentation and utility. Recent studies by Strauss (1996), Maritz (1997) and Terreblanche (1997) have thrown light on the existence of a describable sub-culture of jewellers in South Africa (as one small example of this trend) whose work is characterised by elements and concerns that reach significant levels of engagement with the viewer and that can

comfortably be described in terms appropriate only for the analysis of sculpture. This thesis attempts to apply such terms to a selection of contemporary, South African jewellery and to subsequently suggest an appropriate strategy for the analysis of this jewellery. This, in turn, should establish a defensible critical framework and, by implication, an ontologically discreet status for such jewellery.

The thesis consists of four chapters. The first considers the notion, history and implications of the avant-garde as a distinguishing feature of some contemporary art phenomena, including certain jewellery pieces, with specific reference to the contemporary post-modern avant-garde. The second chapter surveys some tendencies in international art and jewellery with a view to establishing some defensible distinguishing features of post-modernist avant-gardeist jewellery design. Chapter three subjects significant examples of South African avant-garde jewellery to critical analysis with a view to establishing in formal, iconographical and iconological approaches, a content that is consistent with critical discourse appropriate to post-modernist sculpture. Finally, chapter four consists of a consideration of the researcher's own practical exhibition material in the light of the thesis. This chapter contains an annotated catalogue of the exhibition.

The study intends to show that certain kinds of jewellery can appropriately, that is, in a revelatory and analytical way, be subjected to critical discourse normally confined to sculpture. This should provide a means for comprehending and evaluating a development in contemporary jewellery that has hitherto been seen by the non-professional as arcane, recondite and elitist. It is not intended to prove that jewellery of a certain kind is necessarily sculpture or visa-versa, nor is it the intention of the researcher to do more than demonstrate the aptness. It is beyond the scope of this thesis, for example, to engage in the polemic surrounding the definitions of art as such or to argue for qualitative distinctions between one art form

and another. Nor does it attempt to justify the methodological or hermeneutical strategies that are suggested for the analysis of sculpture. Such strategies are assumed by the researcher to be in common use and, for the purpose of the thesis, unproblematical.

CHAPTER 1

THE AVANT-GARDE AND THE NEO-AVANT-GARDE

In order to demonstrate that certain strategies are appropriate to the critical dialogue surrounding contemporary jewellery, it is necessary to establish the critical polarity between what might be called the artistic “mainstream” and its opposite, the “avant-garde”. Since a significant vein of contemporary, post-modernist jewellery falls within the experimental, innovative description of avant-gardeism, it is necessary, for the sake of clarity and consistency, to establish a defensible working description of “avant-garde” and its uses in contemporary aesthetic discourse. This chapter consists of a historical and critical analysis of the term “avant-garde” and attempts to reach some manageable conclusions regarding its use.

The nineteenth century saw the beginning of the modern age. This shift was brought about by a momentous economic and technological revolution in society. Social turmoil raised doubts concerning the legitimacy of autonomous art forms. The conjunction of these historical factors at the time ultimately mobilised the avant-garde¹. The emergence of the avant-garde resulted in a notion from which art could develop and critically analyse itself in regard to the institution² of art. Art was freed from the institutional restraints that bound it to certain traditionally acceptable norms. The avant-garde addressed these sociological and ideological elements within the art institution.

There are numerous significant interpretations of what constitutes the so-called art institution and one such a definition is suggested by Bürger (Murphy 1994: 10): “[The institution] is a set of social conditions, which

determines the particular function of art in a given historical period. Although alternative conceptions of art may exist, the institution of art at any given time is predisposed towards the dominance of one conception of art in particular.”

The art institution determines and regulates what can be considered as art and what cannot. It restricts art in terms of such concerns as style and concept, and reflects an apprehension of art that is held by the broader society – i.e. the mainstream. Mainstream art is that which is not avant-garde. It is the norm, accepted by the art institution. The term, ‘institution of art³’, will for all practical purposes describe both the social attitude towards art and the limitations that are imposed on it.

In order to understand the dynamics of the notion of the avant-garde it is necessary to view it in contrast to this presupposed mainstream art. Kirby (Kostelanetz 1978: 57) defines the difference between mainstream and avant-garde art thus:

We can distinguish between traditional aesthetics and what could be called a historical or situational aesthetics, suggested by the avant-garde. Traditional aesthetics asks a particular hermetic attitude or state of mind that concentrates on the sensory perception of the work “for its own sake” and is different from what is used in ordinary life. Historical aesthetics make use of no specific attitude or set, and art is viewed just as anything else in life. In this way, everything is pertinent in any way to the work of art and the perception of it becomes part of the aesthetic experience. This experience can be seen as including factors that are considered non-aesthetic by traditional theory.

The avant-garde’s tendency to challenge and redirect mainstream art enhances its importance to aesthetics (Murphy 1999: 7). The historical avant-garde is a social sub-system of art that enters a new stage of development. The avant-garde criticises art as an institution and subsequently enters the arena of self-criticism. It therefore becomes evident that the emergence of the avant-garde signifies a similar form of critique in which art is turned against itself as an institutional formation.

Avant-garde art is thus freed from the restraints of the institution. It is always striving to change art, looking for something new.

The formulation of art in society tends to be the concern of the avant-garde. Its critical response is aimed at those factors constituting the conditions and limitations of these formulations. The undermining of these institutionally imposed rules and expectations becomes the avant-garde artist's prerogative. Avant-garde art subsequently reflects a constant awareness of the social and institutional constraints that influence and limit the effect, form and content of the work.

These constraining, dominant forces, through which art is mediated, are overthrown when the avant-garde artists acknowledge, and/or expose these traditional rules and expectations. The social or anti-social character of the avant-garde's cultural and artistic manifestations is expressed through various art forms, sustaining its ideology as a social phenomenon. This ideology becomes an argument for self-assertion or self-dependence in avant-garde art. Artists aim to break down the traditional ideology of art, whilst reflecting on the social demarcation of culture. The validity of the interdependence of art and society and the use of art as an instrument for social action and reform is a point that Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant (Poggioli 1968: 9) stresses:

Art, the expression of society, manifests, in the highest soaring, the most advanced social tendencies: it is the forerunner and the revealer. Therefore, to know whether art worthily fulfills its proper mission as initiator, whether the artist is truly of the avant-garde, one must know where humanity is going ... to lay bare with a brutal brush all the brutalities, all the filth, which are at the base of our society.

The concept of the avant-garde is therefore bound to ideas of progress within modernist society and the avant-garde image tends to remain subject to the ideals of political and social radicalism in modernism⁴. Massimo Bontempelli (Poggioli 1968: 14) defined the avant-garde as: " ...

an exclusive modern discovery, born only when art began to contemplate itself from a historical point of view.”

These ideas of progress disrupt the equilibrium of our understanding of the world. Peckham (1965) argues that art corrupts the tendency to order and thus promotes innovation and growth. As our acceptance of the new grows, this force is balanced, and becomes incorporated into the mainstream, only for the whole process to be repeated in further corruptions of the newly established “order”. The mainstream follows the avant-garde historically and, without the avant-garde as a catalyst for change, would lapse into stasis.

T S Eliot (Lodge 1972) argues that avant-gardeist innovation is based in the traditional, changes it, and becomes a part of that changed tradition. This process is rhetorical; novelty emerges as soon as its predecessor ceases to be seen as such. When art is subsumed into the establishment, it ceases to be avant-garde. Avant-garde’s tendency to respond to traditions and innovations that have become mainstream or cliché has subsequently channeled much of its energy into addressing these inherited stereotypes by distancing itself from previous ‘fashions’ in art. The “new” rises up against the “old” avant-garde, only to be replaced eventually by a new avant -garde or fashion⁵.

There is a direct relation between the avant-garde and the notion of fashion; they both pass through phases of novelty and strangeness. There is always an element of surprise - even scandal - when a new art form is introduced, threatening the established order by replacing the old, which has become conventional. Fashion reflects a continual process of changing standards. It gives birth to and utilizes novelty. Art too, submits a new, challenging or extreme form as soon as its predecessor becomes part of the mainstream and accepted by the general public.

According to Poggioli (1968: 8), the chief characteristic of the avant-garde is its non-commercial nature. By becoming exclusively commercially orientated, an artwork may often be disqualified as avant-garde⁶ because the work's context and concept becomes unimportant. Mass appeal and financial gain become the primary reasons for its production. "... An avant-garde artist is by definition, one that is so far ahead of his time that his work is not accepted by society" (Kostelanetz 1978: 36). Avant-garde artworks therefore generally lack popularity and mainstream approval. Although the increase in educated members of the artworld has dramatically augmented the acceptance and audience of avant-garde art, the dominant part of our contemporary society still rejects and ignores avant-garde art as incomprehensible. This is because "public taste hangs on social realism in drama, representation in painting and sculpture, and the diatonic scale of music" (Kostelanetz 1978:36).

The avant-garde artist's historical opposition to mass-culture is what provokes social rejection and isolation. "In society, in an epoch or culture like ours, the artist finds himself on strike against society" (Poggioli 1968: 107). The existence of the avant-garde is never the less intensely driven by its response to bourgeois, capitalistic, and technological society. This tendency to face and address the values of modern culture develops a theory regarding the content of the work, which would ultimately support the artwork.

Part of the dynamics of significant avant-garde art is the artwork's reflexive capability at that particular point in history. However, this can only be achieved if an artwork is underlined by an aesthetically supportive theory. Art cannot exist without dialogue, theory, or response from the viewer. An example of the ontologically generative role of theory is in what Danto (1964) calls the "transfiguration of the commonplace". Art cannot be paraphrased; one has to take the visual language and interpret, explain or express it in verbal language. Art theory is essential to the existence of art

because it contributes historical significance which would have been neglected by visual perception alone. "Avant-garde artworks are conceived as a theoretical reflection on the nature of signs and codes, they are thought to function culturally and politically rather than as reflections upon either the nature of artistic media or the cognitive or perceptual experience of the spectator" (Carrol 1995: 1).

According to Carrol (1995) the avant-garde artwork should enhance a theoretical contribution on the nature of the medium, the cognitive or perceptual processes and experiences, or the operation of the codes and signs in contemporary life. The critic has to explain the artwork by highlighting the theoretical insights that the work projects. The artwork becomes a theoretical vehicle and can subsequently be understood by the viewer only once its theory has been isolated and contemplated.

This form of criticism demands a theory from the artwork or from the content in which the artwork emerges. It presupposes that the artist has to be a theorist in order to create successful avant-garde artworks. The work could however be interpreted as a theory and/or a theoretical contribution through its critique, concern, or contemplation of traditions and conventions – be it conceptually or contextually. Arthur Danto (1964) advocates such a theory-based, relativist perception. He argues that the receiver has to have insight into the historical positioning of an object when viewing art. The understanding of an artwork subsequently relies upon the viewer's knowledge of and insight into art theory. Art can change in time, creating a gap between art and life thus only an individual, appropriately informed about art, can bridge and understand this gap.

The traditional, essentialist aesthetic theory, on the other hand, expects art to function as an entity outside of any given time frame. Art would have little meaning unless it had some aesthetic quality that transcended time. However, context contributes a significant component of meaning in art so

art has to be viewed and evaluated within the context and realm in which it was created, together with the society, its values, and the expectations of art at that specific time.

The viewer can interpret the sensory aspects of an artwork in many ways, but the work has to be placed within a cultural-historical context in order to evaluate and comprehend it successfully. In so doing, the viewer is stimulated to search for meaning or coherence in the artwork. The work might even provoke the viewer into realizing that the institution of art has preconditioned his expectations of the artwork. The contradictory tendency that avant-garde artworks embody might, however, result in a frustrated attempt at finding any rational interpretation. "The interpreter will suspend the search for meaning and concentrate on the constitution of the work and the principles of construction underlying it ..." (Murphy 1999: 25). When an artwork's historical position is taken into account, it becomes evident that aesthetics are culturally modifiable and not universal.

These dialectics of art constitute its value in both modern and post-modern times. Modernism and post-modernism are both eras of technological, existential, and conceptual transition, and these transitions are clearly reflected in avant-garde art. Kuspit (1993) makes a clear distinction between the avant-garde, which functioned in the era of Modernism, and the avant-garde as we see it today in a post-modernist context. He calls the latter the "neo-avant-garde⁷."

Innovation and "the shock of the new," (Hughes 1980) fascinated the modernist avant-garde. The modernist avant-garde changed the perceptions of all other art, but was a kind of domesticated creativity binding artists in terms of styles and mannerisms. Modernist avant-garde movements can be perceived as violations of visual and optical theory through style and form.

The post-modern avant-garde differs from its modernist predecessor in that it tends to assimilate and rehabilitate content rooted in modernism within a social framework. It creates a contextual violation by drawing on modernist references without any restrictions and limitations regarding style, medium, format, concept, or content. Jean-François L'Gatard (Zarbrugg 1988:66) suggests that the innovation and acceleration of post-modern avant-garde practices are often blurred because they transcend the taxonomy of prior theoretical discourse.

The status of modernism is thus challenged in the present by post-modernism. The modernist concepts find refinement, elaboration, and fulfillment through the conceptual shift of the post-modern avant-garde. Post-modern avant-garde tends to be concerned with topics of repetition and return and is obsessed with the problems posed by temporality, textuality, and conventionality. Foster (1994: 30) supposes that old art models return independently in post-modernism: "I believe the historical and neo avant-garde are constituted in a similar way as a continual process of pretension and retention, a complex relay of a reconstructed past and an anticipated future - in short, in a deferred action that throws over any simple scheme of before and after, cause and effect, origin and repetition".

Contemporary avant-garde artworks draw on different aspects of precedents set in the past. The post-modern or neo-avant-garde artwork tends to somewhat overcome its predecessors' passion to shock by being more reflective of history, traditions, society, and customs. Post-modern artworks no longer have necessarily to be created in terms of shock value; the works can merely comment. The works of Koons and Hirst, however, are notable examples of post-modern artworks that transcend taste with significant shock value. The effect of the shock value rests in the depiction of subject matter and not, as is the case in modernism, in terms of style and mannerisms.

Post-modern or neo-avant-garde tends to produce works of the “idea,” which probe the limitations, assumptions, and conditions of institutional art. It not only questions the institution but also contravenes its rules and traditions. By rejecting the bourgeois society’s aesthetic theories, the “rules” of art are redefined. The unproblematic acceptance of the status of art becomes the central principle through which the post-modern avant-garde transgresses concepts and theories.

An example of this transgressive phenomenon would be kitsch⁸. Although kitsch is a very complex and problematic term it has become a popular theme within contemporary post-modern avant-garde art⁹ as a critique of mass culture. It raises questions regarding the issue of good and bad taste. The co-option of images traditionally considered kitsch can be justified within the discourse of post-modernism¹⁰ as the transgression of accepted taste. The post-modern avant-garde is not restricted by creation in any specific way. It focuses on the significance of history, and in this case more specifically pastiche or humor, and the influence it has on the future as a point of departure.

It becomes evident in light of these considerations that even though avant-garde artworks (modern and post-modern) might differ from each other, aesthetically and/or contextually, they often contest or refer to the bourgeois principles of autonomous art and artists. By defining or identifying the institution of art, be it directly or indirectly, the avant-garde questions the institution’s formal conventions and aesthetic assumptions in an attempt to transform traditional ideologies. It can therefore be said that changed attitudes towards the world¹¹ go hand in hand with radical changes in art.

One of the most important factors in sustaining the notion of the avant-garde is its directional nature. In order for the avant-garde to succeed, it has to function in a manner that redirects the assumptions of traditional

social or cultural norms. This break from the familiar, the past and traditions, is characteristic of the avant-garde's effect on the status quo – its reaction to the mainstream.

In chapter two, consideration is given to jewellery artefacts that do not normally qualify as art (whether mainstream or not) and the parallels that exist between the critical reception of these and more conventional, “high” art objects and phenomena.

NOTES

¹ The avant-garde should be regarded as a reaction to the social traditions applied to creating in terms of style, format, material, concept, etc.

² In order to investigate the notion of the avant-garde, a mainstream or institutional art should be presupposed. The term "institution of art" refers to unwritten rules and stipulations which are assumed to constitute art with mass-appeal. This topic will be elaborated later on in the chapter.

The avant-garde artist aims to change and escape from the limitations and aesthetic regulations imposed on him/ her by society. These aesthetic limitations and regulations could be traditionally acceptable materials (such as oil paint), scale and format of the artwork, subject matter, concept, style, or even the traditional understanding of what defines an artist and art.

³ This presumption of mainstream or institutional art should not be confused with George Dickie's (1983) understanding of the institution of art as a universal term amalgamating the art world as a whole.

⁴ The political transgression of the modernist avant-garde signifies a distinct approach in which artists addressed, or rebelled against, political and social issues. Many of these political motivations were aimed at changing society and its rules.

⁵ The term "fashion" refers to the notion of fashion. Although clothing styles constitute a significant aspect of the nature of fashion, the broader sense of the word relates directly to the notion or behaviour of the avant-garde.

⁶ This, however, does not refer to the financial value of avant-garde artworks; it merely refers to works not backed by a credible aesthetic theory, i.e. created exclusively for the purpose of financial gain and mass appeal.

⁷ The term neo-avant-garde (Kuspit 1993) will be adopted as a convenient term for referring to post-modern avant-garde art.

⁸ (Oxford Art Dictionary 1988 Sv "kitsch"):

A German term, "vulgar trash," which became fashionable in the early twentieth century. Its application ranged from commercial atrocities such as touristic souvenirs to any pretended art, which is considered lacking in honesty and vigour. A museum of such

products was organized in Stuttgart. Although the battle against kitsch was healthy in its origin, in Germany it frequently led to an unbalanced fear of all obvious beauty or sentiment.

(*Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms*. 1984. Sv "kitsch"):

[German Trash] Mass-produced art and artefacts unsuccessfully aping the aesthetic standards of the elite culture.

⁹ This theme is often employed by avant-garde jewellers (as will be illustrated in chapter 3) to comment on both society and kitsch tendencies present in numerous examples of commercial jewellery.

¹⁰ The works of Jeff Koons are examples of how the traditional, modernist assumption of good and bad taste is provocatively challenged within the Post-modernist avant-garde framework.

¹¹ Art therefore cannot be separated from society, philosophy or science.

CHAPTER 2

NEO-AVANT-GARDE JEWELLERY.

This chapter addresses the nature of neo-avant-garde¹ jewellery as an international phenomenon in regard to the reason for its existence, its development and influences, its characteristics in contrast to commercial or mainstream jewellery, and examples of its provocative nature. By surveying these tendencies in international avant-garde jewellery, some defensible distinguishing features will be established.

Jewellery and adornment have consistently played a significant role in the development of all societies and cultures. This social role of jewellery has had a significant impact on the way in which neo-avant-garde jewellers apply and appropriate concepts of tradition and convention in their work. They tend to respond to the traditional function of jewellery by creating transgressive non-functional conceptual artworks. In order to fully understand the dynamics of the neo-avant-garde jeweller's response to the traditional functions of jewellery and adornment, an insight into the reasons and development of jewellery and adornment is essential.

In *The Psychology of Clothing*, J.C. Flügel (Poggioli 1968: 10) wrote about man's reasons for adornment:

To the primitive mind the cause of all evils, whose source is not immediately obvious, is to be found, not in the physical properties and interactions of things but rather in the influence of magical or spiritual agencies. To such a mind the whole universe is continuously permeated by these influences, and the disasters that befall human beings - such as accidents, disease, and death (for death is not attributed to "natural causes") - are supposed to be due to either hostile magic set into operation by other men, or to the working of ghosts or other discarnate psychical forces. The only protection possible against these multitudinous and disastrous

influences, is the use of counter magic...For this purpose various objects, supposed to possess magical properties, were hung or otherwise attached to the body and some authorities are inclined to believe that this magical purpose of articles carried on the person preceded even ornamental purpose, and therefore constituted the real motive for the first beginnings of clothing. Such a view is of course to be widely held among anthropologists, that in general the earliest forms of art served utilitarian (i.e. Magical) rather than purely aesthetic ends. If this is the truth with regard to clothes; it may be said that the motive of decoration in dress, in its earliest manifestations, gradually grew out of magical utilitarian motive, in which the same way that, in later forms of art, instruments and other objects, originally constructed to serve some useful purpose, became decorative and eventually in certain cases, persisted as decorations.

People define themselves both individually and collectively. However, the human body, as an organism, is individualized and placed within a social realm once it has been transformed into a coded language covered by recognizable signs such as dress and adornment. These signs are identified and understood within the social group that they represent and the society within which they function. Meanings emerge from these symbolic interactions, and a classifying system arises.



Fig 1. Zulu woman².

Identity, together with social position in society, can be shown on the body through decorative embellishment, using jewellery, paint, scarring, or even by altering the body's³ physical shape. Social and cultural identity is therefore expressed through visual communication. One can presume that identity is bound geographically and historically. Identity not only declares who or what one is but *how* one is. Decoration is what makes an individual socially, ideologically and culturally recognizable.

These cultural, ideological and social codes have a direct impact on an individual's taste. According to Bourdieu (Gretton 1985), the determination of taste depends firstly, on the individual and secondly, on the social group in which the individual functions. When Tom Gretton (Gretton 1985: 63) reviewed Pierre Bourdieu's book, *The Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, he wrote: "People situate themselves in social structures, not by their objective relation to the means of production, nor by overt references to any accepted status, hierarchy, or matrix, but by the things that they choose to do, say or buy and by the way in which they perform these actions."

Distinctions within various social groups are determined by a variety of beliefs, the group's practices, and their artefacts. These elements allow for the creation and perpetuation of an ordered, stable, hierarchical society. Bourdieu (Gretton 1985) writes that the institution arbitrarily and historically determines taste in (specifically) Western society. It reproduces a social system which is concerned with material possessions. The institution, created by the dominant class, interprets meanings within social groups as legitimate rules by which the norm within the group is then measured. Taste is therefore the way in which individuals make material and behavioural choices. Although the significance of taste differs within various social and cultural groups, it plays a crucial role in the maintenance of social systems. The transgressive role of novelty and the development of the selection of image as process is a dynamic one. Neo-

avant-garde jewellers tend to select elements from these systems and traditions and these subsequently form the basis for their contextual or conceptual reaction to the institution.

The conformative nature of the human race - the need to blend in with a crowd, and the dramatic subconscious impact of mass media – has created a psychological restriction in people against acquiring and attaching things to their person that might catapult them out of the social group to whom they belong to or draw unwanted attention to themselves. This tendency, in conjunction with often non-functional pieces, may be a contributing factor for some of the general public's dismissal of new and radical ideas in adornment (such as neo-avant-garde jewellery). The paradoxical nature of adornment and its conformative implications can be explained through the application of make-up. The everyday application of make-up has traditionally been confined to women and has been accepted as, and expected to be, part of the western female's dress code. By ignoring these expectations (by not wearing make-up) or by not conforming to the acceptable normative boundaries of make-up application (through excessive or unconventional application), women isolate themselves from the norm and subsequently become part of another group (the "non-conformists").

Historically, the possession of fine jewellery has been an indication of economic status and therefore the prerogative of the rich. Protected by sumptuary⁴ laws, jewellery could traditionally be acquired only by the aristocracy because of the skilled workmanship and costly materials used. The growth of the middle class during the twentieth century and the means for mass-production, however, meant that luxury items such as jewellery increased dramatically.

The twentieth century not only changed attitudes towards jewellery in terms of design and manufacture but also its function. Jewellery often moves off the body to become an autonomous artefact or object⁵.

In Britain (around 1861) the industrial revolution gave rise to the Arts and Crafts movement, which in turn had a very significant impact on the development of jewellery. This movement fostered an aesthetic that was essentially anti-mechanical. Arts and Crafts practitioners held the view that the industrial revolution would kill all possibilities of individual expression. Their aim was to unite artists and craftsman against industrialization. This ultimately encouraged self-expression and well-crafted objects.

In successfully transmitting ideas and concepts, the Arts and Crafts movement established a notion of quality, the fundamentals of which required purity and simplicity, together with respect for the limitations of the materials that were being used. This movement was traditional and progressive at the same time, it asserted itself against the prevailing traditions of fine arts and attempted to regenerate society and morality by combining the spheres of art and craft.

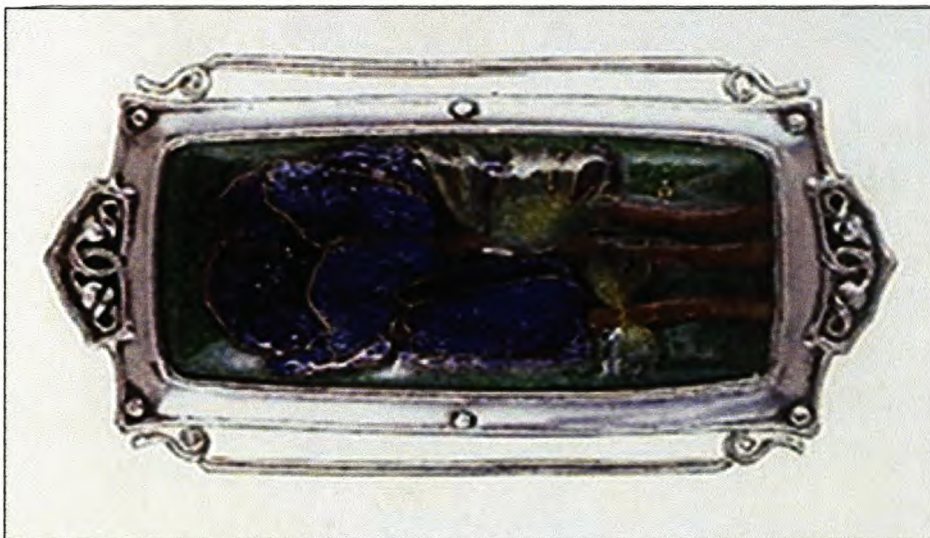


Fig 2. Nelson Dawson (+/-1900). Arts and Crafts buckle.

Silver and enamel

The Arts and Crafts movement failed both to change the path of commercial opportunists and to unite art and craft completely, but it was successful in its articulation of the importance of design and in the fostering of an awareness of the importance of the aesthetic value of things. These (mostly) hand-made objects formed the antithesis of mass-produced objects and developed an aesthetic that valued hand made articles for their uniqueness and idiosyncrasy.

In 1912 Roger Fry founded the Omega workshop. This was seen as the last outpost of the Arts and Crafts movement. The main objective of the workshop was to promote Post-Impressionism in England. The Omega workshop can be seen as an extension of the Arts and Crafts movement, aimed at prolonging its objectives. Like the Arts and Crafts movement, Omega artists revolted against mass production. Although their art was bland, it was very accessible and their productions – of painted furniture, fabrics, rugs, pottery etc. – were accepted by the cognoscenti in the spirit of a social and cultural service.

The establishment of the Bauhaus was a revolutionary step towards uniting artists, craftsmen, and industrialists. It was seen as the art school of the future, reforming art education in order to create a new kind of society⁶. The Bauhaus was to have a long and significant influence on design and the school formed the basis for numerous institutions concerned with educating artists in the field of applied arts. By combining the skills of artists and craftsmen to form a unified art world, it tried to elevate the somewhat low and negative status attached to craft to that of fine arts.

Modernist movements, such as the Arts and Crafts movement, the Omega workshop, and the Bauhaus, laid the foundations for the development of neo-avant-garde jewellery by challenging the nature of art, art and craft, and high and low art. The making of functional objects has traditionally

been considered a process of manual labour rather than an intellectual discipline. Although jewellery played a dominant role in decoration and adornment during the Dark Ages, no clear distinction was ever made between art and craft. The negative “craft” status - that is still implicit in the perception of jewellery today - was imposed during the Renaissance. Larsen claims that this was due to the fact that artists were encouraged to proclaim themselves as intellectuals, philosophers and gentlemen (Grant 1994: 6). In his autobiography, Benvenuto Cellini, the acclaimed goldsmith of the Renaissance, lamented the inferior status of the craftsmen *vis-à-vis* the newly elevated position of painting and sculpture (Grant 1994: 6). The status of fine art was elevated to that of the elite, associated only with the rich and established. Although some of the recognized masters of the Renaissance did not restrict themselves to working in any single medium, jewellery and other related disciplines (considered to be craft) never received the same acknowledgment as painting or sculpture. This heralded the break between fine art and craft, and the inception of the concept of “high” and “low” art. There has subsequently been a tendency amongst art historians⁷ to refer to disciplines such as jewellery as the “minor arts.”

This notion of a hierarchy of codes – into “high” and “low” art – is rooted in the implicit claim of fine art as superior to other art and craft forms and has been in dispute amongst aestheticians for decades. The use of “low” art techniques and subjects in post-modern art challenges the traditionally elevated position of fine art as an activity in which certain concerns are taboo and others *de rigueur*. Connected to this demarcation of the concerns of art is the subsequent demystification of the artist as “hero” or “creative genius.”

Although philosophers such as Collingwood (1938) have argued for a philosophical distinction between art and craft, the vague boundaries of late modernism and post-modernism cause some confusion regarding the

matter of what constitutes each. While Metcalf makes a distinction between art and craft⁸ he concedes the point that art is distinguished from other forms by virtue of the complexity of the theories associated with it. According to Metcalf (1993: 40-47), these terms spring from very different sets of values and historical consciousness. He notes that what characterized Western art is its limitless character. In order to understand an object as an artwork, the artwork has to be backed by a convincing argument or theory. Seen in this light any artefact can therefore be a candidate for art. Craft, on the other hand, is set in limitations arising from its history, it is defined by its medium and its lack of philosophical substance, so while, philosophically, anything can be art, not everything can be craft.



(above) Fig 3. Salvador Dalí, *The Eye of Time* (+/- 1950). Watch. Enamel, platinum, ruby, diamond.



(right) Fig 4. George Braque (1940). Brooch. Gold, emerald.

The fact that jewellery designers have been sensitive to the traditionally inferior status that jewellery has experienced has spurred some of these designers into co-opting into jewellery precisely those formats and iconographical elements that have distinguished the fine arts. This tendency has its presidents in jewellery pieces by modernist artists, such as Dalí, Braque and Picasso⁹. Modernist jewellery tends to resemble or

project certain stylistic and formal elements of the relevant Modernist movements it does not however challenge social and aesthetic traditions.



(above) Fig 5. Artist Unknown (1890). Art Nouveau Necklace. Plique a jour enamel, pearls, diamonds, gold, coral.

(above left) Fig 6. Georges Fouquet (1925). Art Deco Brooch. Gold, coral, onyx, diamonds

(left) Fig 7. Artist Unknown (+/-1949).

Bag Clip. Steel, enamel (Co-option of a popular image¹⁰)

According to Metcalf (1993: Feb), when these elements of stylistic adoption are applied to craft they become a superficial miming of the character of modernism. The elements become less persuasive in relation

to their position in fine art. Craft, more specifically jewellery, tends to contextualise fine art notions in terms of style rather than idea¹¹. These craft objects show a tendency to imitate or resemble the formal elements of the relevant fine art movements by creating visual resemblances¹², an occurrence that is in fact an appropriation of styles (with relevance to the appropriate periods). The jewellery piece aspires to be something - an art object – merely because it has adopted certain stylistic characteristics¹³. This contradictory contextualisation tends to be a post-modern phenomenon as it has unlimited access to the assimilation and rehabilitation of content rooted within certain social and historical frameworks. Neo-avant-garde art can therefore freely appropriate and contextualise styles, images and concepts. However this argument can not be applied to modernist jewellery because modernism dealt with aesthetic models that prohibit pastiche.

Since the eclipse of modernism, prejudices regarding materials and techniques have been overcome. Artists who are not constrained by convention continue to stretch the boundaries of painting, sculpture, jewellery, performance art and fashion design to the point that the boundaries between these disciplines have become not only vague, but irrelevant.

The traditional function of jewellery has been challenged by the notion of neo-avant-garde jewellery. This relatively new application of jewellery as a platform for art has achieved full recognition in the contemporary post-modernist era. Neo-avant-garde jewellery, like other post-modernist avant-garde art, is not only concerned with style and form but also with concept. The idiosyncratic nature of neo-avant-garde jewellery rehabilitates and re-contextualises selected aspects of mainstream jewellery through a critical response to traditional conceptions. Avant-garde jewellery serves as a theoretical vehicle by addressing, or commenting on, conventional ways of thinking, society and social issues, culture and traditions, and ultimately

the art institution. Avant-garde jewellery rejects the preconceptions that inhibit change, be it through personal expression or conceptual exploration.

The word "jewellery" has certain associated prejudices and conceptions. Commercial jewellery¹⁴ has, through exposure by mass media and popular customs, shaped our understanding and preconceptions of what should be considered jewellery. Jewellery has often been associated with social conformity, with specific items, such as rings, being used for specific events. The result of these social conventions is stereotypical conformity. Wedding rings, for example, are traditionally made of polished gold bands set with diamonds. The function of this kind of jewellery is to attach a social tradition or connotation to the jewellery piece. In the case of marriage it becomes a token of spiritual and bodily love and reflects the wearer's status. The effect of the connotative symbolism of the pieces makes it almost impossible for the ordinary public to conceive of neo-avant-garde jewellery as an entity separate from that of commercial jewellery. This further alienates the public's acceptance of such jewellery as art.



Fig 8. Detail of an advertisement by commercial jewellery designer Jenna Clifford.

Commercial (or mainstream) jewellery can be described as jewellery that functions solely as a vehicle for the codes and symbols of decoration and social rituals. It imposes an appropriate model of adornment based on the idea of the fashionable wearer - the clothes make the man (or woman). In order to critically analyse neo-avant-garde jewellery and to establish a formal content consistent with the critical discourse appropriate to neo-avant-garde sculpture, neo-avant-garde jewellery has to be divorced from the conventions of the stereotypical commercial jewellery to which it is bound.

Commercial jewellery is not only mass-market-orientated but also designed with financial profit as the objective. This does not suggest that avant-garde artists are not financially rewarded for their work¹⁵, it merely suggests that the central objective of commercial jewellery is profit for the manufacturer and social gesticulation. Since commercial jewellery tends to be purely decorative or representative of certain social customs, it has little or no supportive theory and is thus incapable of generating the necessary aesthetic discourse. The conventionally-based agenda of commercial jewellery has no philosophical relevance, "It does not tell a story; it *is* the story" (Jones 1995: 37). The economic success of commercial jewellery is based on a belief system of rarified commodities and cliché's such as sexuality, status, and social position: it is the embodiment of trends and social expectations. The object's value is measured by the financial value of the material used. These shallow, commercial, aesthetic, and intellectual values desired of jewellery by mass-culture, ensure a social paradigm against which neo-avant-garde jewellery can react and from which appropriations can be made.

Avant-garde jewellery can be seen as a visual discussion that provokes the viewer's thoughts and sentiments. It is an idea made tangible, addressing the conceptual and contextual aspects of art. In order for the work to have significant meaning, it has to be supported by a significant

theory. The work must therefore be conceptually based instead of being merely decorative so as to be understood as art. Neo-avant-garde jewellery tends to come to terms with the ambiguity of modern life by integrating contradictions into a unity. The provocative nature of this art form addresses traditions by focusing on issues such as production techniques, wearability, tactility, taste and kitsch.

The use of unconventional non-precious materials (such as found objects, plastics, latex, perspex) is often a hallmark of neo-avant-garde jewellery. The use of traditional precious metals (for the purpose of establishing a specific financial value) is rejected or questioned, and the focus shifts from the artefacts' normative value (the value of the materials) to that of the artworks' artistic significance.



Fig 9. Myra Mimlitsch-Gray, *Timepiece* (1988).
Brooch. 14ct gold, lens, diamonds



Fig 10. Van LeBus, *Super Hero* (1990).
Neckpiece. Found objects.

This shift in the value of the artefact can best be illustrated by Van LeBus's *Super Hero* (Fig 10). Van LeBus disregards the use of traditional materials in jewellery by creating a neckpiece from near-worthless found objects.

The objects are however recognisable and the neckpiece tends to provoke a reaction from its viewers by drawing on their own frames of reference, with each object bearing its own associations for the viewer. The piece becomes the mediator between the designer's intention and the message for the viewer.

It is also possible to exploit traditional precious materials in a way that exposes the negative properties of the material. Mimplitsch-Gray (Fig 9) utilises the diamond, traditionally acquired for its commercial value, in such a way that its physical properties become the source of destruction. The diamond scratches the abrasive surface of the lens whenever the kinetic arm (in which the diamond is set) moves. This destructive process, together with the clock like shape of the piece and its title, draws attention to the notion of time and focuses on the practical, industrial aspect of the diamond as a glass cutting material. The artist here demands a repositioning from the viewer.



Fig 11. Friedrich Becker (1980). Ring.
Stainless steel and diamonds



Fig 12. Friedrich Becker (1980). Bracelets.
Stainless steel and diamonds

Becker (Fig 11 and 12) not only utilises unconventional material (stainless steel) for the setting of diamonds, but does so in a somewhat absurd

manner. He creates functional designs that are of a very high quality. The matt finish, elegant design and combination with diamonds camouflages the stainless steel which appears to be precious and could easily be mistaken for white gold. The hard outer stainless steel surface of the ring protects the diamonds that are set on its inside. It appears as though the precious content of the ring is being hidden from the outside world and all unwanted attention. The “secret” of the ring’s content and value is however contradicted by the fact that all of the ring’s information (the total weight of the diamonds = 2.46ct, the type of stainless steel, the date and the stamp of the maker) is recorded on the side of the ring shank. It appears that the ring and bracelets have been manufactured inside out, concealing traditionally-shown elements (such as the diamonds) and displaying traditionally hidden elements (such as the stamped information). This creates a provocative tension between the piece, its wearer and the observer.



(above) Fig 13. Martha Steward, *Feminine Appetite* (1995).

Charm Bracelet. Chocolate, silver, mixed media

(left) Fig 14. Christina Schon. Ear Jewellery. Silver, leek

Fig 13 and 14 imitate the appearance and formats of conventional commercial jewellery. The works are, however, not manufactured from traditional materials, a combination of edible substances (chocolate and

leek) and precious metal (silver) make up their formation. The perishable materials determine the work's lifespan and restrict its functionality and durability and thus challenge the viewers' perceptions of acceptable jewellery materials, media and durability.

The combination of material, imagery and the title in Fig 13 stimulates the audience to question their perceptions and expectations of the charm bracelet and the feminine appetite (as the title states). The stereotypical feminine appetite (physical and psychological) is arbitrarily depicted in the form of a charm bracelet. The chocolate represents the physical female appetite that could be easily satisfied. The charms (hairdryer, cream tubes etc.) represent the paraphernalia used to satisfy the psychological feminine appetite (beauty, vanity, the need to be accepted, etc.). The fact that the charms can be removed or added onto the bracelet with little effort trivializes the issue of the feminine appetite even further.

Both jewellery and sculpture, through their three-dimensional qualities, are greatly influenced by tactile interaction. These objects create a 'touching' space through visual interaction and the engagement of the flesh and ultimately have a dramatic psychological and physiological effect on humans. The significant contextual importance of these forms is obvious and forms another platform for avant-garde transgression.



Fig 15. Laurie Hall (1988). *E.A.T.@ McDonalds*. Pin (shoulder position). Silver, Plexiglas, copper, brass.



Fig 16. Christina Smith (1989). *Just a minute Maud*. Brooch. Silver and acrylic.

“...The implications of tactility could only have been lost to the human awareness in a ... culture which is now dissolving under the impact of the nature electronic circuitry. The tactile sense is distributed throughout the body, but of receptivity depends on environmental stimuli” (Ramlijak 1997:38). When viewing, touching or wearing jewellery, the body becomes the source of the sensory experience. Different jewellery formats have different impacts on both the wearer and the viewer; each format demanding its own degree of interaction, participation, and awareness. The brooch is perhaps the most pure, self-containing format for jewellery as its function depends less on the wearer. It is pinned on as an attachment or addition and the interaction between the brooch and the wearer is therefore limited. Fig 15 and 16 illustrate how the brooch can act as an intimate, self-contained form depicting a narrative or personal message from the artist.



Fig 17. Joan A Parcher (1990). Graphite Pendulum-Pendant. Soft graphite, silver and stainless steel.



Fig 17a. Joan A Parcher (1990). Graphite Pendulum-Pendant. Soft graphite, silver and stainless steel.

Rings, bracelets, and neckpieces mostly demand, or assume, direct physical contact with the wearer. These formats engage the wearer's

body by enclosing certain areas (i.e., the arm, neck, finger etc.). Parcher's elegant Graphite Pendulum-Pendants (Fig17 and 17a) act like a pencil when worn or moved against a surface, marking its subject. These marks physically illustrate the consequences of the wearers' movements to both the wearer and the viewer. The penetration of body parts through an object creates an intimate, physical relationship with the wearer.



Fig 18. Jean-Paul Callau, *Traveling Rings*. Rings.

Brass, fabric and paint.

The implications of tactility (in relation to jewellery) on the human psyche are not only relevant to commercial and functional avant-garde jewellery, but also non-functional jewellery. When a non-wearable object suggests the possibility of wearability, the viewer's visual senses correspond to the object in relation to the tactile demands set by the traditional format. For example, when the dimensions and weight of a sculptural object, fitted

with a brooch pin, exceed the physical possibility of being worn. The designer/ artist is clearly performing outside the normal utilitarian constraints of jewellery design and the result is that the receiver has no analytical recourses (outside that of fine art) that will enable a validation of the object. The fact that it has the minimal mechanics, such as a brooch pin, lends to it the status of a brooch. The non-functionality suggests dialogue that has no place in functionality.

Avant-garde jewellery can be attached to the body or it can merely occupy a space close to the wearer/ viewer. It can suggest function without actually being functional. By disabling the functionality of certain pieces, the artist questions the status of functionality and legitimacy of commercial jewellery. Callau's *Travelling Rings* (Fig18) with their artistic wearability and practicality, are examples of such an interrogation of functionality.

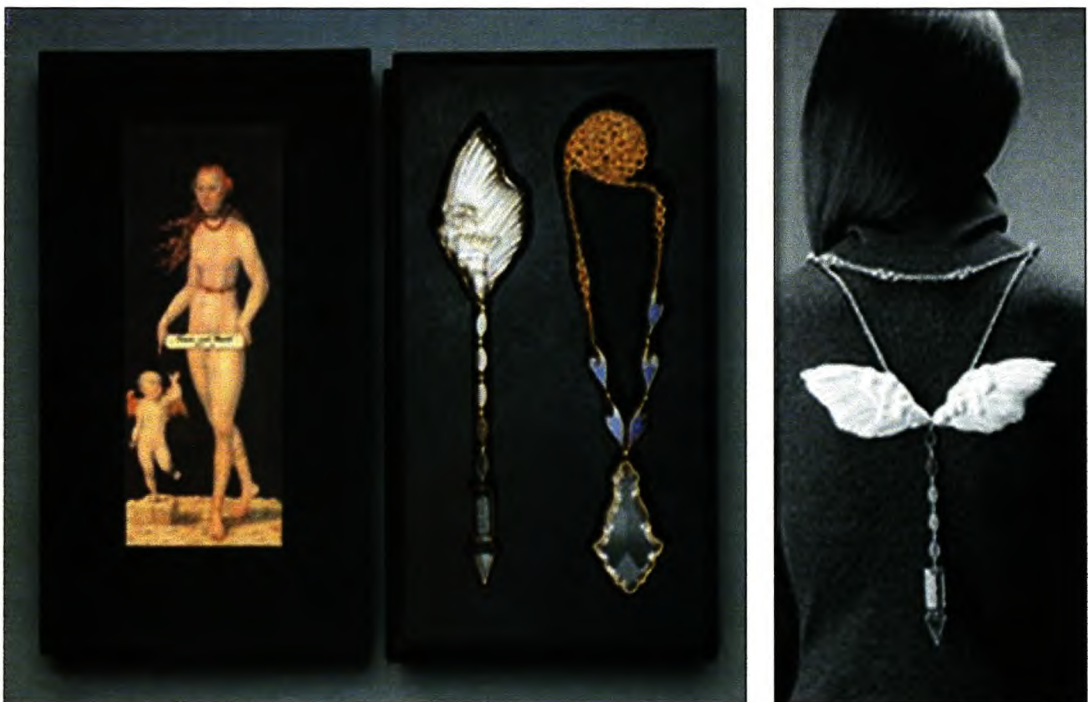


Fig 19. Sandra Sherman, *Venus and Cupid* (1991-94). Alternative Title: *Mothers and Sons*. Necklace and box. Silver, 24ct gold, clad bronze, pearls, glass, watch hands, glass chandelier pendant.

Artworks tend to address more than one concept, often resulting in work that examines society on an intellectual level. Sherman's *Venus and Cupid* (Fig 19) is a conceptual piece that lures the viewer into a fantasy world, challenging the audience on a contextual and conceptual level. A Baroque chandelier crystal depicts Venus, while Cupid is depicted by a phallic shaped glass crystal, attached to wings by means of 5 glass segments containing watch hands (representing the arrows of Cupid). Sherman's use of symbolic elements, fine detail and subtle references expresses her own experiences. The world that she creates for her viewer becomes a metaphorical model of our own world. The title of the necklace and the fact that it has to be worn on respectively the front and back at the same time captures the wearer (physically and contextually) between male and female. Sherman not only questions the dynamics of male and female but also the tendency of classifying things as either A or B, black or white, without any in-between category. Even though the format of the work falls within the parameters of traditional jewellery, the audience is bombarded by the unconventional material choices, references and metaphors.

These are but some of the ways in which avant-garde jewellery addresses conformational social, cultural or philosophical issues. Contemporary or neo-avant-garde jewellery disregards the pure aesthetic concerns of beauty, and places more emphasis on content, concept, originality and self-expression. Subject-matter is therefore often derived from formalist principles, social critique, the limitations of adornment and emotional expression.

Neo-avant-garde jewellery cannot be separated from other contemporary avant-garde art forms because it transacts with traditions, conformities and conventions on a similar philosophical, contextual and conceptual basis. It is therefore logical to apply the criteria and critical language that is appropriate to non-functional autonomous art forms, to these objects.

Notes

¹ The term neo-avant-garde (Kuspit 1993) will be (as previously stated) adopted as a convenient term for referring to post-modern avant-garde art.

² Traditional earplug becomes part of the ear.

³ The African use of adornment is not just decorative, but also a visible sign of status. The jewellery of certain cultures sometimes becomes part of the body. An example of this phenomenon is the traditional earplugs or ear-discs used by Zulu woman.

⁴ Laws were imposed during the Middle Ages protecting and restricting the bearing and ownership of fine jewellery to all but the ruling. (Black 1974: 128)

⁵ Fig 18 is such an example and will be discussed at a later stage.

⁶ The Department of Fine Arts at the University of Stellenbosch was based on some Bauhaus principles. See Maritz (1997).

⁷ An example would be Huyghe (1968:78).

⁸ Collingwood defines and argues for the philosophical distinction between art and craft (Collingwood 1938: 15 - 17).

⁹ Some other examples are Man Ray, Miró, Mary Quant, Mondrian, Sam Kramer, Alexander Calder, Margeret de Patta, Giacometti, David Watkins, etc.

¹⁰ Here is an example of a popular image, which was considered low art, used prior to the Pop Art movement. It is interesting to note that Gablik S (1969) draws the historical line of Pop art at 1962.

¹¹ An example of this would be the introduction of Mondrian-like earrings during the Pop era. The jewellery pieces in question merely adopt a pattern but not the theory.

¹² Jewellery has echoed the trends in fine art throughout the ages. (See Appendix A for an example.)

¹³ Fig. 5, 6 and 7 are examples of the stylistic resemblances of jewellery to art in the relevant periods.

¹⁴ Designer jewellery is generally associated with local goldsmiths such as Jenna Clifford, Charles Greig etc. (See Appendix B.)

¹⁵ Although there is a sector of the marketplace devoted to the support of neo-avant-garde jewellery, as with avant-garde art, the market is very small in comparison to that of commercial jewellery.

CHAPTER 3

CONTEMPORARY AVANT-GARDE JEWELLERY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Neo-avant-garde jewellery design has, like painting and sculpture, become interdisciplinary. Questions regarding the nature of jewellery as art form have challenged assumptions that determine the social function of jewellery. By challenging traditional conceptions and conventions, the neo-avant-garde artist continues to change many conventional and conservative ideologies. The theoretical approach to neo-avant-garde jewellery has redefined and shifted the function of jewellery from an economic showcase to that of fine art. Forces – such as the art institution – that aim to control and mediate art, are scrutinized and rejected by the neo-avant-garde artists in all fields of art and design. This approach draws on a wide diversity of contemporary thinking in the fields of fine art, theory and literature as well as the principles of function and design. Concepts typical of post-modernist art, such as parody, are explored and even narrative can be used as both stimulus and theme in this approach to jewellery design.

In contrast to commercial South African jewellery, which is aimed at a popular market, the area of neo-avant-garde jewellery is restricted to a small number of practitioners¹. These contemporary South African avant-garde artists, like their European and American counterparts, wish to move away from conservative canons of beauty, tradition and sentiment. This is apparent in their focus on concept and context.

It has previously been argued that the neo-avant-garde jewellery object can be understood only within the context of fine art and sculpture. In this

Chapter local South African neo-avant-garde jewellery is discussed, amongst other considerations, in relation to the transgression of material, the transgression of taste, the transgression of integrity and of form and the integration of narrative and parochial content.



Fig 20. Errico Cassar (1992). Brooch. Enamel, 22ct gold, silver, garnets

There are numerous ways in which artists can intervene in the stereotypical perceptions of jewellery. The adamant presence of precious decoration and excess is often parodied by the exaggerated extreme use of precious materials and traditional techniques.

Cassar (Fig 20) covers a silver foil base with transparent emerald green enamel. This enamel centrepiece is set by a highly decorative construction. The rich, enamelled colour set within the golden geometric construction, encourages the viewer to appreciate the delicate and precious nature of the piece and makes reference to the traditional (often centred) setting of emeralds and other gemstones. The transparent enamel allows for a glance at the surface texture, which it covers. This creates an effect similar to that of looking through a stained glass window. Two garnets are placed directly opposite each other. However, they are not identical and consequently disturb the geometric balance of the work. The exploration of material and form challenges social ideas regarding the

traditional value of jewellery. Cassar therefore undermines mainstream culture through the exaggeration of forms and the unusual inclusion of precious materials.

The use of colour and traditional techniques in conjunction with post-modern concepts is not foreign to neo-avant-garde jewellery. Figures 20-24 illustrate the exploitation of colour through the age-old technique of enamelling. Enamelling often simulates the process of stone enhancement and reproduction.

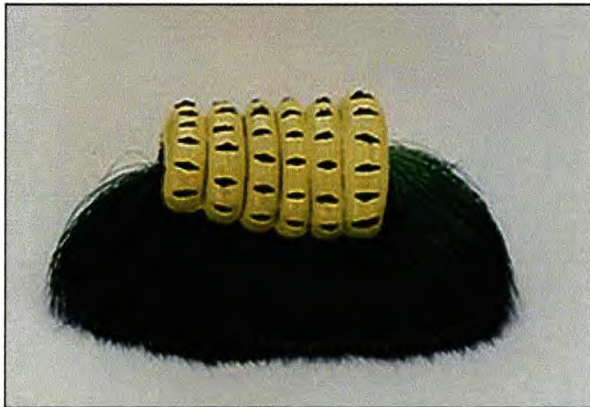


Fig 21. Beulah Grobbelaar (1994). Brooch. Silver, enamel, copper, fabric, animal hair



Fig 22. Beulah Grobbelaar (1994). Brooch. Silver, enamel, binding wire

The use of transparent enamel in Grobbelaar's brooch (Fig 22) has a similar effect to that achieved by Cassar (Fig 20). A contrast is however created between the hair-like binding wire mesh and the solid enamelled organic shape. Grobbelaar creates a solid dimension through her use of non-transparent enamels in Figure 21. The cold, smooth surface of the yellow enamel contrasts with the luxurious sensual mink, which it embraces. In both Figures 21 and 22 the textures create a visual tension and the tactile quality occurs that stimulates the viewer both physically and visually.

Both Lloyd and Warne (Fig 23 and 24) use enamel as a tool to visually and literally illustrate their concept. Warne ironically creates a precious

object - through the application of a precious jewellery technique – by recontextualising imagery that belongs to disposable cardboard boxes. The intermingling of text, image and colour assists and guides the viewer into forming an understanding of the work's intention or social comment. The realistic depictions stimulate a continuous intellectual approach activating nostalgic mementoes relating to the artists' experience and the viewer's frame of reference. Their well-considered objectives and execution thereof sentimentalise the issues. Both of these works have evocative titles that direct the viewer's thoughts in specific directions.



Fig 23. Jacqueline Lloyd, *Walking in the shadow of (1) faith, suffering and redemption* (1999). Ring.
Copper, enamel



Fig 24. Pam Warne, *Rattex* (1999). Neckpiece.
Copper, enamel



(above) Fig 26. Carine Terreblanche, *Regte Egte* (1999). Neckpiece. Gold plated silver, gold leaf
(left) Fig 25. Nina Odendaal, *Tomato Heart* (1998). Brooch. Silver, tomato tin

The traditional enamelling technique is considered by many to be superior to other “non-precious” methods of colouring precious metals (i.e. painting, chemical colouring etc.), not only in terms of technical and physical attributes but also in terms of durability and quality. Even this can be undermined and the qualitative, “precious” status of the piece brought into question. The works of Odendaal and Terreblanche (Fig 25 and 26) utilise “less precious” colouring methods to simulate and ultimately undermine the preciousness of the enamelling process. The title *Tomato Heart* (Fig 25) literally refers to the material used (the tomato tin that forms part of the collage of the hart’s inserted leaves) and conceptually to the sentimental (“squishy” and “soppy”) nature of love – symbolised by the heart shape. Odendaal recycles the packaging of tomato paste – an ordinary consumer product.

The unsubtle, somewhat banal application of colour in Fig 26 immediately draws the viewer’s attention to the “fake” nature of the colour. Even though the colours resemble red enamel and gold, a distinct and deliberate fake or “plastic-like” quality is evident. Terreblanche utilises non-durable colouring techniques – gold plating and paint – to pseudo-imitate the “real thing” (i.e. gold and enamel). The intended preciousness is however superficial and any scratch on the surface would reveal the true nature of the material. The slogan *Regte Egte*² attempts to convince or persuade the viewer of the materials’ authenticity (real gold and real enamel), when it is in fact obvious that the materials are imitations of the real thing. This fascination with the ontological questioning of reality, imitation and the art object as a separate, “non-imitative” reality (Danto 1964: 574) is typical of late Modernist questioning of the role of art as a mirror to nature.

Combinations of precious and non-precious materials often create cheaper alternatives to traditional precious jewellery, making the jewellery financially more accessible to a greater audience. The artists’ choice of

material and subject matter might more often than not alienate the work from this susceptible audience.



(above) Fig 28: Errico Cassar (1999). Brooch
Silver, gold leaf, paper

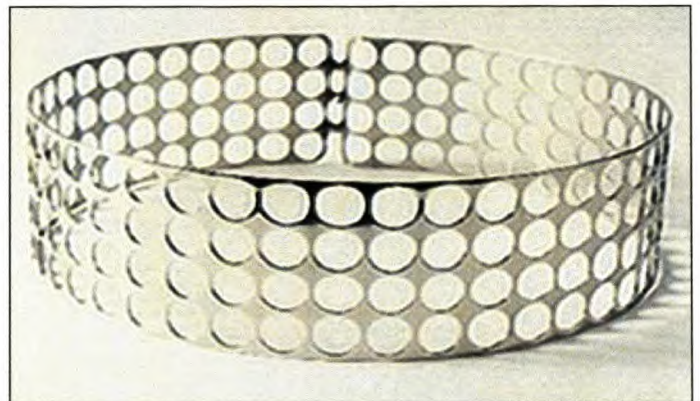
(left) Fig 27: Marchant van Tonder (1999). Pendant. Gold,
rhodochrosite, Pratley putty

At first glance the work depicted in Fig 27 and 28, seems to fall within the unchallenged, conservative, traditional and formal parameters of jewellery. On closer inspection it becomes clear that the work has exaggerated selected elements acquired from traditional jewellery. The rhodochrosite crystal in Van Tonder's pendant (Fig 27) is attached to the gold link by means of Pratley putty. Due to the gold-painted colour of the Pratley putty, the setting appears at first glance to be a gold nugget and thus blends in with the rest of the piece. The use of Pratley putty, and the viewers intended recognition of the material, however, undermines the traditional techniques of stone setting. The combination of precious materials (i.e. gold and gemstones) with an everyday utility product (i.e. Pratley putty) transcends traditional expectations of the preciousness of jewellery.

Cassar (Fig 28) creates a precious-looking brooch by using colours resembling precious materials (i.e. gold leaf on paper). The hepatic quality of the paper is utilised to change the shape of the work through physical

movement. This establishes and challenges the relationship between the viewer and/ or wearer and the piece. The geometric balance of the piece is physically and visually disturbed whenever the piece is moved or worn; the paper “worm” flops over and constantly reminds the wearer of the effects of his actions and movements. Cassar imposes an emphasis on the receiver as critical participant in the function of this work. The non-precious paper, as well as Van Tonder’s use of putty, thus masquerade as things they are not; they imitate the preciousness of gold but are intended to be revealed as deceptions. This more complex exploration of the phenomenon of imitation falls within the parameters of post-modern art.

Neo-avant-garde artists are not bound by prescriptive uses of material and tend to produce works that are characterised by concept and innovation. No material is considered necessarily superior to another; the material choice being influenced by the design and concept rather than the opulent use of precious gems and metals. This transgression of materials is generally achieved by either taking materials out of their traditional roles and recontextualising them, or by over-emphasising the preciousness of the object and/ or its manufacturing process (Fig 29 – 33).



(above) Fig 29. Chantal Mayer, *High lustre, low art* (1999). Neckpiece. Stainless Steel

(left) Fig 30. Carine Terreblanche (1997). Brooch. Latex, fabric, silver

Mayer (Fig 29) challenges conformist views regarding material use, jewellery aesthetics, theme and concept. The mechanical means by which this piece was manufactured is obvious and is further emphasised by the use of an industrial material, namely stainless steel. The work appears mass-produced and is therefore cold and impersonal. Although the work could be mass-produced with ease, it is significant that only one of these units exists – the artist making a whimsical statement regarding uniqueness (with implications for high and low art).

Terreblanche (Fig 30) exploits the diamond shape as a sentimental symbol - the diamond symbolising ever lasting love and durability. She addresses this sentimental relationship and the connotations associated with diamonds such as “diamonds are forever” and “diamonds are a girls’ best friend”. Terreblanche undermines the mainstream understanding and sentimental associations of the physical properties of diamonds through the juxtapositioning of the diamond symbol and the use of latex, with its perishable qualities. The glitter, together with the latex, refers to the superficial glorification and commercial value attached to the idea of ever lasting love and the depiction thereof. The latex diamond, therefore, represents the transient nature of our material and emotional world.



Fig 31. Heike Flink (1999). 2 Rings. Silver, silicone, pearl



(above) Fig 32. Heike Flink (1999). 2 Ring. Steel, bronze, brass, gold leaf, 22ct gold, ceramic
 (left) Fig 33. Heike Flink (1999). Ring. Steel, 18ct gold, concrete

Materials foreign to those of traditional precious jewellery often transcend ideas of conventional and institutional expectations regarding the durability of jewellery. The natural patterns, lines, shapes, textures and layers enforced by the specific use of earthy colour gives Flink's work (Fig 32 and 33) a primitive quality. It seems as though the works have been excavated from an ancient burial site. The crude beauty of the urban environmental elements, such as steel, ceramic and concrete, is transformed into elegance, creating significant objects or jewellery pieces.

The delicate use of silicone in Fig 31 contrasts with Flink's use of durable, industrial materials in Fig 32 and 33. Although silicone can be considered an industrial material, the application and colour of the silicone in combination with the silver creates a candyfloss-like tactile quality. The pearl appears to have been casually "plonked" into the silicone – like one would fill a hole, in a utility area, with silicone. The combinations of these diverse materials form a continuous theme of material transgression throughout Flink's work.

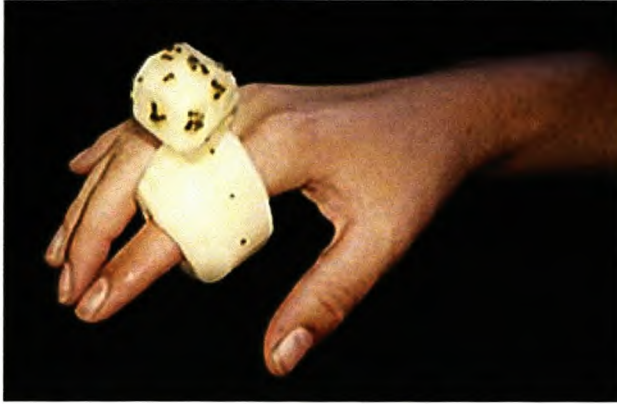


Fig 34. Marie van Niekerk (1998). Ring. Apple



Fig 35. Marie van Niekerk (1998). Earrings.
Mushrooms, pumpkin seeds, grapefruit



Fig 36. Saar Maritz (1997). Ring. Wood,
aluminium leaf, varnish, non-precious beads



Fig 37. Saar Maritz (1997). Ring.
Wood, aluminium leaf, varnish, pearls

Temporality, perishability, the restrictions on durability and functionality are some of the issues that Van Niekerk (Fig 34 and 35) and Maritz (Fig 36 and 37) address. The idea of perishable or disposable jewellery (Fig 34 and 35) is in itself rather ironic, because of the traditional financial and sentimental value attached to jewellery and the fact that one does not generally acquire jewellery in order to throw it away or to recycle it.

Colour plays a very important role in Maritz's work (Fig 36 and 37). The viewer is subtly drawn to notice the surface effects, textures and colours which are evident in the materials that she uses. The monochromatic colours (gold and silver), non-precious materials, textures and voluptuous curves invite the viewer to make a closer examination. The varnish-covered aluminium leaf resembles the use of transparent enamel, but on closer inspection the fragile surface of the aluminium leaf becomes evident.

Although these works are far removed from the parameters of precious jewellery they appear to be very precious and delicate, conveying a message of delicate material use. The durability of the work is here irrelevant to these artists and although the works hold the possibility of being wearable, the materials do not allow for it. The fragile nature of the materials inhibits and affects the durability and functionality of the pieces. The limited lifespan of the works is paradoxically – juxta - posed against the idea of the ever-lasting jewel.



(above) Fig 38. Anton Heunis (1998). Brooches. Bronze

(left) Fig 39. Beulah Grobbelaar (1996). Brooch. Silver, enamel, copper, topaz, tourmaline

The assimilation and rehabilitation of content rooted in historical and social frameworks is often a popular theme in neo-avant-garde jewellery. Artists tend to build on the past by contextually re-examining certain subjects connected to our historical and natural experiences (Fig 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, and 44). The reproduction of segments of stylised Renaissance-like figures, such as the David statue, forms the central theme in this series of brooches (Fig 38). Heunis utilises common images that are familiar to most and that evoke nostalgic memories in the viewer. He recontextualises these mostly decorative kitsch objects into functional jewellery that can be worn on the chest - almost as a proclamation of the emotional attachment between the object and the wearer. This preserves and memorialises the image.

Fig 39 seems to be an appropriation of Salvador Dali's brooch *Ruby Lips*³. Grobbelaar combines traditional enamelling and precious stone setting techniques, normally associated with superior craftsmanship, with a crude and banal copper wire depiction of a tongue. It seems as though this image is mocking the viewer and perception of "broochness" by sticking out its tongue.



(above) Fig 40. Anton Heunis (1998). 3 Brooches. Silver, vinyl

Heunis (Fig 40) realistically depicts male figures in a brooch format. He challenges the viewers' association with the human figure and its actions. Where enamel might have been the traditional choice for colour and detail portrayal, Heunis utilises vinyl cut-outs. The cut-outs are set in silver frames, which appear almost halo-like and illuminate the figures' contours. Vinyl is traditionally used as a surface-covering material, but in this case it is used as a centrepiece to define the features of the figures. The cut-outs refer the viewer to the childhood practice of paper-figure cut-outs. The figures are not, however, repetitious images, as they would be in a child's cut-outs. Instead they read as a narrative (from left to right); of a man taking off his jacket. These brooches rehabilitate and recontextualise the found object and the use of non-precious materials.

The solitaire ring can perhaps be considered as one of the most popular and familiar commercial jewellery formats. Fig 41 – 44 address the sentimental connotations attached to the solitaire ring. These rehabilitated productions imitate this type of mainstream jewellery.



Fig 41. Tamu Raysman (1998). Ring.
Gold plated silver, synthetic sapphire



Fig 42. Chantal Mayer (1992). Solitaire Ring.
Silver, plastic



Fig 43. Abigail Scorer, *Cow* (1998). Ring.
Plastic, fabric



Fig 44. Kim Goosen, *Finger Ring*
(1998). Ring. Latex, silver

Fig 41 and 42 mirror the characteristics apparent in the commercial solitaire ring. The artists emphasise and exaggerate elements considered to be of great value in the traditional solitaire ring, such as the size of the ring and the gemstone. These rings not only imitate traditional mainstream jewellery, but also refer to the conformist nature of society. The oversized designs emphasize and recontextualise concerns regarding sexuality, status, social position, social expectations, the perceived value of the materials used and, ultimately, the traditional function of jewellery.

Scorer (Fig 43) challenges the viewer's understanding of both the solitaire ring and "cow-ness." This work deliberately avoids the (expected) use of traditional material. The artist constructs a ring band from cow-print fabric and utilises a plastic toy-cow udder where traditionally the gemstone would have been placed. The toy-cow udder and the fashionable cow print satirises, and becomes a metaphor for, social expectations placed

on individuals and the impact of social status that the artist sees as ridiculous.

Goosen's ironic use of image in *Finger Ring* (Fig 44) confronts the viewer in a humorous way. The viewer is conceptually challenged by the latex finger that has unceremoniously been attached to the top of the ring (which might traditionally have been decorated with a solitaire gemstone). The work's format engages the viewer's understanding of, and sentimental associations with, jewellery, or more specifically the solitaire ring and mass-culture (i.e. wedding and engagement rings). The viewer is forced to consider and evaluate Goosen's choice of material and might find it either repulsive or beautiful. The latex could be seen as a metaphor for the pliable nature of relationships and the work questions the financial and emotional preciousness attached to jewellery.

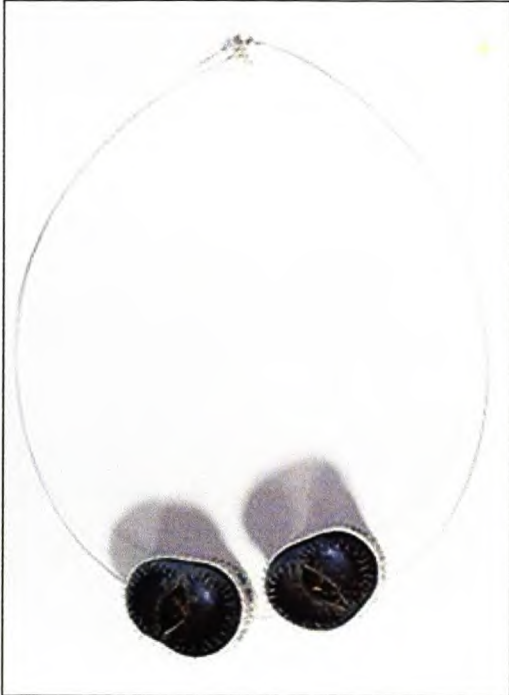


(above) Fig 45. Lizel Cloete, *Wings* (1998). Pendant.
Silver, feathers

(left) Fig 46. Estelle du Plessis (1995). Brooch.
Silver, gold plate, enamel, feathers

The personal interpretation of subject matter and imagery and the creation of aesthetically pleasing objects for the sake of their beauty, are issues not foreign to fine art. Du Plessis's brooch (Fig 46) depicts an

angel in a very charming and decorative manner. Her holy and pure association with, or understanding of, angels is successfully transferred and represented by the somewhat abstract precious object.



(left) Fig 47: Abigail Scorer (1998). Pendant.
Beads, photographic image, silver
(above) Fig 47. Detail

Cloete (Fig 45) combines actual feathers with realistically manufactured silver wings that can open and close, just like a birds wings. Caught between the two wings is an insertion in the shape of a wing that has been pierced with images resembling the continents. This work refers to the globalisation of the world and the work subsequently refers to the ease and speed of travelling, and the means by which one can obtain information.

Scorer (Fig 47) employs the beading technique in a way that transcends the use of craft considered techniques. She strings the beads in combination with the photographic cacti image in such a way that it appears to imitate the physical properties of the cacti. This pendant can therefore be seen as Scorer's interpretation and representation of a natural organism.

The indulgent application of mainstream aesthetic is a post-modern approach that functions as a transgressive contradiction to the hegemony of popular culture, society and traditions. Vernon Theiss stated (Lewis 97: 17):

The complexity of communication derives from the intertwined layers of our psyche, acting as both protection and barrier.... The language at times becomes a visual parative of words and metaphorical images. The words and imagery illuminate not only the decorative surfaces, reliquary feelings, but suggest to animate one's own personal perspective. The passion of this language symbolises a microcosm where one identifies themselves and show issues of the complex environment.

The dynamics of kitsch, in terms of notion, style and ideology, is a popular theme in South African neo-avant-garde jewellery. The works are often embedded in rich historical references, concepts and ideologies. The artists tend to use humorous imagery to refer to social clichés. The works are a highly critical form of wearable art which asserts itself against traditional status and prestige associated with commercial jewellery by satirising certain icons of society.



Fig 48. Heike Flink, *Red Cross Series* (1999). 3 Rings.

Feel Me: Silver, cold enamel, felt feathers

Squeeze Me: Silver, cold enamel, glass, silicone

Touch Me: Silver, cold enamel, glass reflectors

By employing the combined complexities of language, text and imagery the artist exploits the multiplicity and contingency of meaning. Flink (Fig 48) intentionally confuses and problematises the viewers' response to the work. She does this through the juxtaposing of incompatible materials and visual and textual puns.

In the *Red Cross Series* (Fig 48), Flink creates an ironic tension between the healing and caring emotions associated with the title and the materials used in the individual pieces (i.e. glass silicon, plastic). The subtitles of the pieces – such as *Squeeze Me* – ironically contradict the physical properties of the work – i.e. silver, enamel, glass and silicone. The work bears transgressive, contextual and tactile implications.



Fig 49 Carine Terreblanche, *Die Kappie* (1999).
Brooch. Silver, photographic image

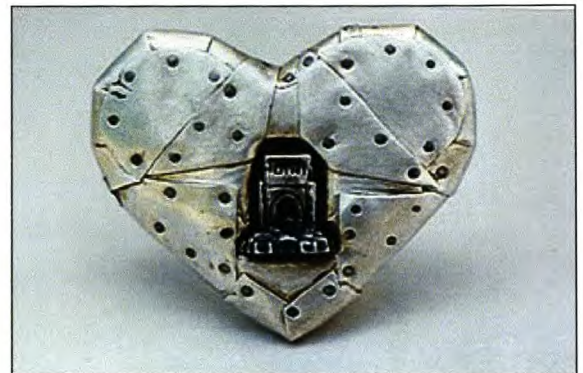


Fig 50. Carine Terreblanche (1995) Brooch. Wood,
silver, nails

Terreblanche (Fig 39 – 51) and Cloete (Fig 52) critically challenge their audience on a cultural level. They respond to elements in their surroundings through appropriation and recontextualisation of cultural symbols and their associations.

Terreblanche's body of work (Fig 49 –51) has a strong reference to her own experience as an Afrikaner. She tends to simultaneously emphasise and satirise the fall of Afrikaner icons, heroes and emblems, and

paradoxically questions the sentimental value attached to jewellery and the legitimacy of Afrikaner nationalism (Fig 49, 50).

The *Voortrekker* bonnet (Fig 49) refers to rigid Afrikaner nationalist sentiment, generally associated with apartheid. Juxtaposed against this image is the satirical insertion of a photographic image of a black male. By placing the *Voortrekker* monument (Fig 50) - another symbol of Afrikaner nationalism - within the metal heart; symbolising love – Terreblanche questions the legitimacy of the love for Afrikaner culture. The silver plates are held in place by steel nails, this emphasises the role that icons such as the *Voortrekker* monument have played in keeping the Afrikaner identity intact.



Fig 51. Carine Terreblanche, *Vandag my Plig*² (1997). Brooch.

Silver, brass, enamel, enamel paint, resin

The works, *Vandag my Plig* (Fig 51) and *South African Medal* (Fig 52) comment on official adornment as status symbol. Terreblanche (Fig 51) uses a primary school motto in conjunction with gemstone simulations (enlarged paper images of gemstones set in resin), to make up a medal.

In Cloete's image (Fig 52), a photographic depiction of an Afrikaner President (P W Botha – an obvious apartheid icon) and a protea flower (South Africa's national flower) are set within a traditional medal format. This channels the viewers' reading and interpretation of the work in a very specific and clearly ironical direction.



Fig 52. Lizel Cloete, *South African Medal* (1998). Pendant. Silver, fabric, photographic image



Fig 52. Detail

Both of these medals form part of the identification ritual in military practice. This type of ritualist adornment draws on the cult of popular and official jewellery and is a practice that falls well within the parameters of traditional male adornment⁴. The medal becomes a metaphor portraying status and social position. The artists question and undermine the idea of authority and the identity of the Afrikaner male.

Content of specific social interest, apparent in many neo-avant-garde jewellery pieces, is often combined with wit, humour and irony. Mayer (Fig 53 – 56) utilises the over-indulgence of text and images in order to consider certain social class and consumer demands.



(above) Fig 53. Chantal Mayer, *Breakfast menu: first come first served* (1994). Neckpiece. Bronze, silver, brass, non- and semi-precious stones
 (left) Fig 54. Chantal Mayer, *Smell the Rose* (1994). Ring. Silver, photographic image, gold plated steel



Fig 55. Chantal Mayer, *Well it must be OK it's a Fabergé* (1994). Ring. Gold, silver plated bronze, synthetic and semi-precious stones

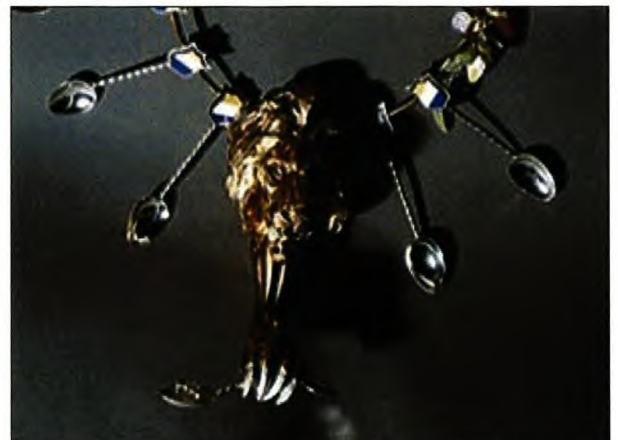


Fig 56. Chantal Mayer, *This is South Africa* (1994). Neckpiece. Silver and enamel spoons, semi-precious stones, glue "stops", copper

The works of Mayer (Fig 53 - 56) draw on symbols and concepts that have become cliché through over-exposure in the media. The titles of the works guide the viewer along the path of associations, referring to these exhausted clichés. The focus of Mayer's comment tends to be aimed at the social values added to wealth and, ultimately, material or jewellery possession. The thematic body of work reveals humorous imagery which is both ironic and very critical of society. The content of the works tends to focus the viewer's attention on the ignorance of the consumer and the kitsch values that are attached to, and desired of, objects and items reflecting status.

Fig 55 is an example of how Mayer transcends the values that society attaches to items reflecting status. The famous Fabergé eggs are known for their unique features, quality and workmanship. Because expensive objects often look the part, consumers have the preconception that they are good quality and value for money⁵. Mayer satirises this by creating a ring from a non-precious material and plating it in order to look expensive. Everything about the ring is however fake and Mayer has deliberately manufactured it in a sub-standard manner – the “egg” is merely tied onto the ring by means of a rope. But because it is a “Fabergé” it must be OK!



(above) Fig 57. Juliette McDonald, *Zoo Cookie* (1994). Brooch. Silver, Enamel
 (left) Fig 58. Juliette McDonald, *Zoo Cookie* (1994). Ring. Silver, Enamel

The foreign market's infatuation with Africa and its inhabitants has turned South Africa into a favourable tourist destination. The tourist industry has created many commercial opportunities for businesses in all sectors of the market. The commercial jewellery market has, besides catering for the local mass-culture, been flooded with jewellery resembling African-ness⁶. These "African" jewellery pieces are often kitsch gold representations of wildlife or "traditional" beadwork (blue and red) combined with precious metal. These pieces have become attractive souvenirs for tourists and are simultaneously targets for a post-modernist deconstruction.

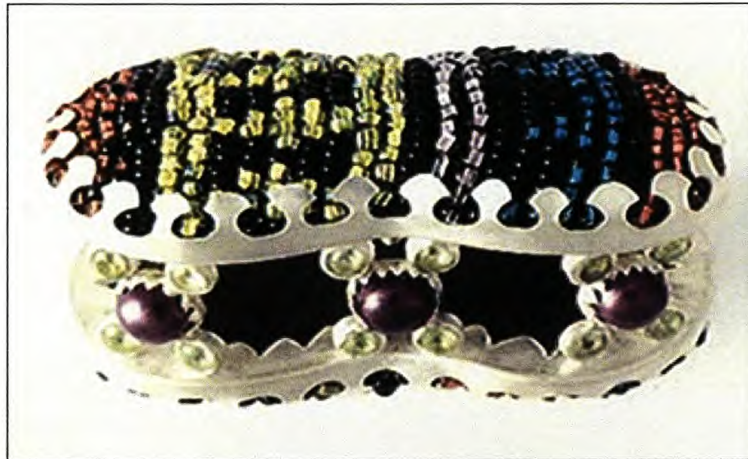


Fig 59. Françoise van Rooyen (1999). Brooch. Beads, silver, peridot

The *Zoo Cookies* (Fig 57 and 58) are humorous depictions of the commercial nature of jewellery aimed at the tourist market. MacDonald reproduces consumer goods (the actual zoo cookies) in precious metals, thus commenting on the impact of these objects on the jewellery industry. The sculptured animal images refer directly to the kitsch representations of wildlife in commercial jewellery. In this recontextualisation of commercial consumer products, MacDonald transgresses "good" taste by integrating parochial content and context.

Van Rooyen (Fig 59) uses the very popular "African" technique of beadwork. The brooch presents the beaded centrepiece as one would traditionally set a gemstone. Although the format of the brooch is not

ethnic in style, the co-option of African patterning and appropriation of African colour creates a definite African reference. Again it is the recontextualising of the image that lends the piece its irony.

Much of the work discussed fulfils both the function of jewellery and object. However the translation of a work, proclaimed to be a functional object (i.e. a pendant), to merely a decorative object of contemplation, is an inherent contradiction. The impediment and complication of utility not only challenges the traditional understanding of jewellery and objects, but also suggests debates regarding functionality and tactility. Heunes' *Pendants* (Fig 60 – 62) fall within this realm: they proclaim to be something (pendants) which they are not. This pretentious phenomenon is typical of post-modernist art. The physical size, weight and material transcend all possibilities of functionality. Heunis considers the parameters of jewellery in relation to the body, namely, the manner in which jewellery is worn and the consideration of the impact of non-wearable jewellery, by questioning issues of scale and wearability.

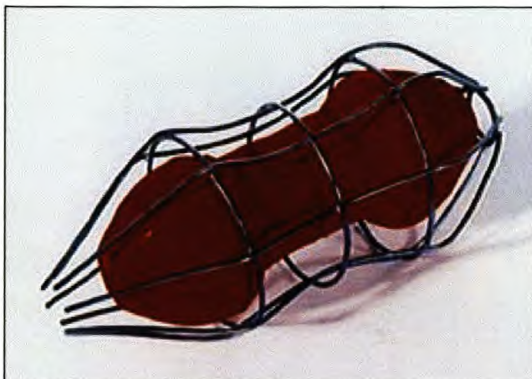
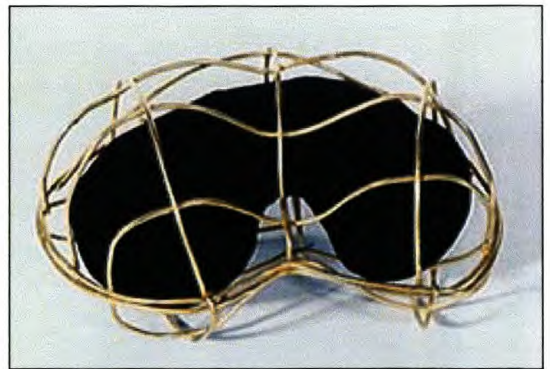
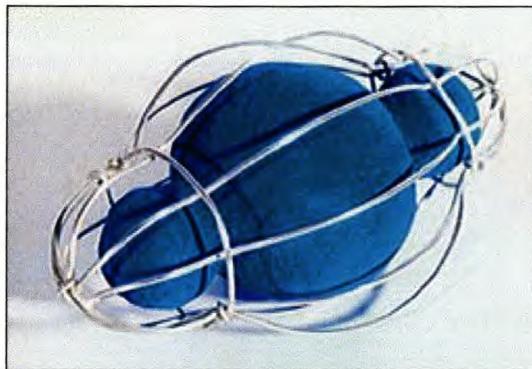


Fig 60, 61, 62. Anton Heunis, *Pendants* (1998). Objects.
Silver, concrete, pigment powder.

The social role that the South African neo-avant-garde plays as an art form by disregarding the institutionally-enforced perceptions relating to the nature of jewellery is clear. The diversity of the approaches and strategies of the works discussed is evident in their interpretation of traditional ideals, conceptions, and social comment. The objectives of the works are soundly supported by the artists' choice of methods and supportive theories. Their concepts and executions sensuously engage the viewer through a variety of expressions. It is these elements (methods and theories) that destabilize the authority of institutionally imposed rules, conditions and expectations. The openness to the dynamics of the art world makes this kind of contemporary jewellery a candidate for the status of art. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a critical approach outside of art relevant dialogue, that could perform an appropriate exegesis of such works.

"If an object is the bearer of new creativity, a new language, of technical and material innovation and moreover serves to satisfy a practical need, I do not see what prohibits its consideration as an example of fine art... What counts is to provoke doubt, to create insecurity about established values" (Grant 1994: 12).

NOTES

¹ This new generation of South African artist tends to live and work in the Western Cape. This is due to the fact that the University of Stellenbosch is the only academic institution in South Africa that offers jewellery design at fine art level.

² The translation for “regte egte” is “real”.

³ See Appendix C for the Dali image.

⁴ The practice of body embellishment through jewellery has traditionally been confined (in western society) to women.

⁵ Consumers often measure quality in terms of price.

⁶ See Appendix D for examples of such commercial jewellery.

CHAPTER 4

DESIRABLE OBJECTS

Desirable Objects is the title for the body of work produced by the author as partial fulfillment of the degree MA in Fine Art. An annotated catalogue¹ of these works will follow the general discussion of the themes and points of departure apparent in the works. The distinct characteristics, influences, concepts and parameters will form the central theme of this chapter. The author, however, does not expect or attempt to force the receiver into traveling through all her journey of associations. The fact that this text might guide the spectator to an understanding of the intentions and concepts of specific pieces does not necessarily mean that the viewer will conclude the same references or associations. The receiver should form his or her own opinions.

The prominence of lace in clothing fashions has been evident since the 16th century. Handmade antique lace has been a greatly treasured possession, and was, prior to the 20th century, often inherited or acquired as an investment. The popularity and use of lace has however, as that of accessories, fluctuated with the demands of fashion.

Contemporary Western fashion tends to bind the use of accessories and lace to women's dress. The artist aims to address this traditional tendency of role descriptions within society. She simulates the traditional textile technique of lace making (a craft traditionally practiced by women) and appropriates traditional patterns of the predominantly metal body of work. The artworks imitate lace and thus suggest the adoption of its function.

By referring specifically to items traditionally assigned for consumption by women, such as lace, hairpins, crowns, bodices, etc, the artist aims to address

the often-ambiguous boundaries regarding female gender and identity. These female accessories and the title, *Desirable Objects*, encourage the viewer to explore associations with the female image, together with issues such as ownership, chastity, sexuality, desire, pleasure and beauty.

The adornment theme is linked to the psychological involvement of adornment choices. The objects refer to the time-honoured use of detail and accessories as a phenomenon directly related to social culture². The works confront the social tendency to adopt accessories as details accompanying fashion. The “added on” nature and social status of accessories is challenged by the exaggerated use of precious materials and the intensive, laborious techniques applied in creating the works.

The traditional function of lace is to be attached to clothing or worn in some way or another. The lace is therefore in close contact with the body. This function is juxtaposed against the impractical delicacy of the works. These metal lace fabrications might never physically be worn, but the tactile implications and qualities are nevertheless very important to the way in which these objects communicate and function in relation to the viewer and/ or wearer.

“Regression to touch is perhaps the only way of waking the body to the fact that it is not a machine... it is the best means of feeling real and alive to counteract a sense of unreality and indifference” (Ramljak 1997: 40). The comprehension of an objects’ tactile qualities, such as weight and textures, can only be fully understood once the visual experience has been supplemented by touch. The implications that physical contact might have on these delicate objects - that they might break, bend or tear - force the viewer into experiencing the frustration of mere visual satisfaction instead of the sensual understanding that is fulfilled through touch.

The exaggerated application of precious metal and the co-option of delicate fabric qualities, rarefies the object and emphasises its preciousness. The fragile nature of the works subsequently challenges and contradicts the traditional expectations, i.e. durability and functionality, of precious jewellery. The artist is thus not loyal to making either functional jewellery or accessories. The concept of the work is placed above traditional sentiments of functionality. The works must be experienced as aesthetic entities and are therefore not restricted or compromised by the dynamics of function.

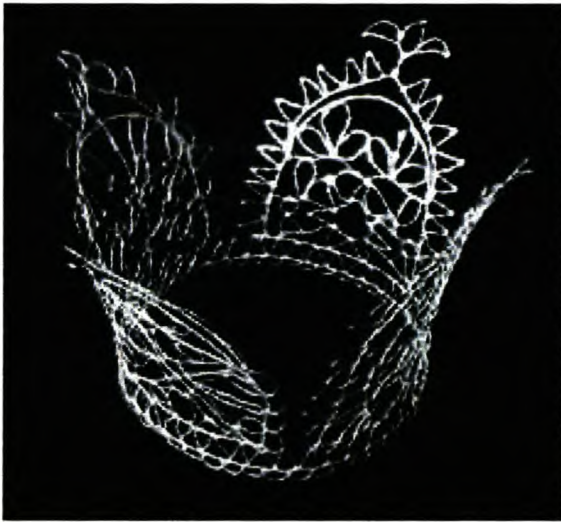


Fig 63: Kim Boezaart (2000). Crown. Silver.
Size: 10cm X 11cm.



Fig 64. Kim Boezaart (2000). Bracelet.
Platinum. Size: 3.5cmX 7cm.

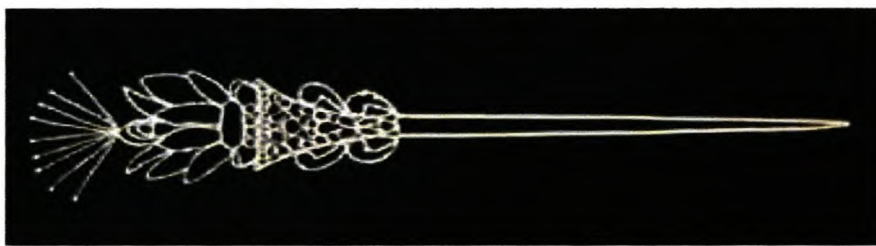


Fig 65: Kim Boezaart (2000). Hair Pin. Silver. Size: 27cm X 6cm.

The transgression of the traditional expectations of precious objects and jewellery is a central theme in the artist's work. Fig 63, 64, 65, 66 and 67

specifically address and accentuate the contradictory relationship between the precious object and its expected function.

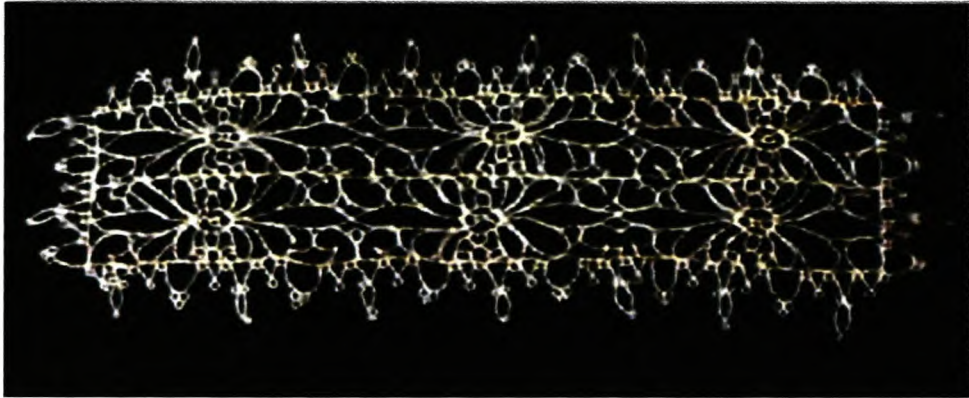


Fig 66. Kim Boezaart (2000). Lace. Silver, 18ct gold solder. Size: 13cm X 34cm.

Fig 66 is an appropriation of 17th century lace patterns, joined in a way that forms an entirely “new” design. The work presents itself as lace, which tends to have the potential for functional application, yet its fragile rigid format has stripped it of any possible utility. The relevance of this metal reproduction’s existence in relation to issues of functionality is thus brought to light. The work is an “imitation” that transcends function. It is merely decorative, a pretty and precious object.



Fig 67. Kim Boezaart, *No Pain, No Gain* (2000). Collar.

Silver, granulation. Size: 15cm X 22cm

In Fig 67 the artist transcends function and traditional social expectations of adornment in a similar manner to Fig 63, 64, 65 and 66. The work’s title, *No Pain,*

No Gain, directs the viewer to another social concern, namely the lengths to which people (especially women) would go to be socially accepted. The laborious manufacturing process and the tedious granulation technique becomes a metaphor for this social acceptance, and the stiff uncomfortable collar draws the audiences' attention to the often-unnatural perception and projection of identity and status.



Fig 68. *VERGIS MIN NIT #1*. Brooch. 18 ct Gold. Size: 10cm X 6.5cm.



Fig 69. *VERGIS MIN NIT #4*. Brooch. Silver. Size: 8.5cm X 6cm.

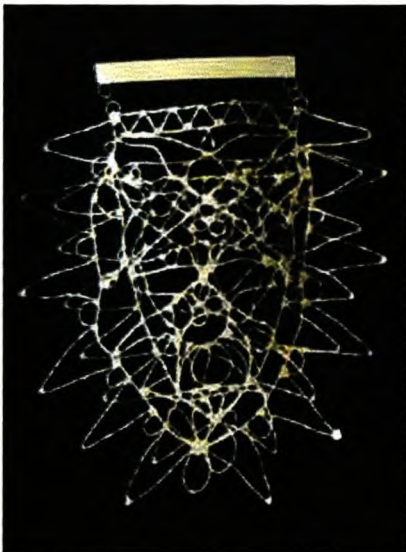


Fig 70. *VERGIS MIN NIT #2*. Brooch. 18 ct Gold. Size: 9cm X 8.5cm.



Fig 71. *VERGIS MIN NIT #5*. Brooch. Silver, paper. Size: 8.5cm X 6cm.

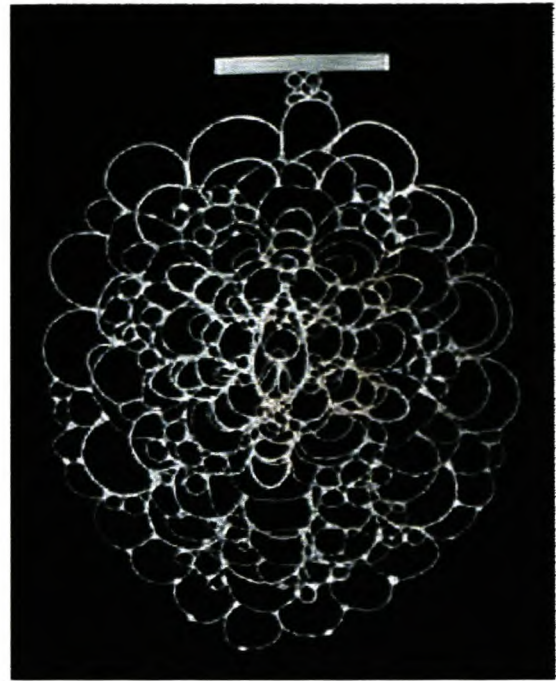
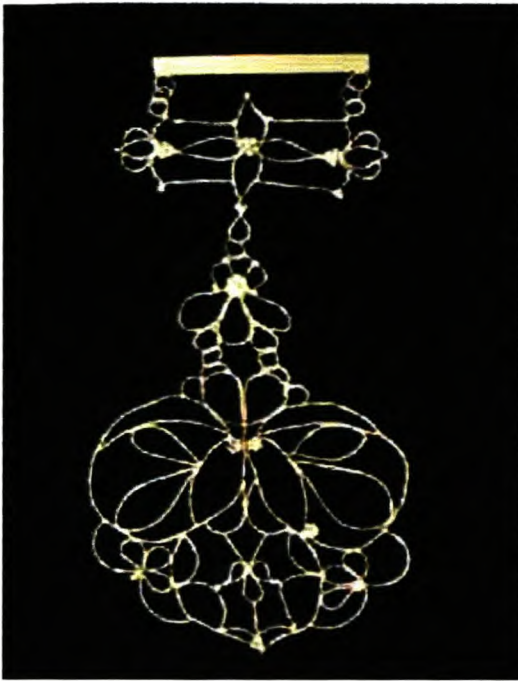


Fig 72. *VERGIS MIN NIT* #3. Brooch. 18 ct Gold. Size: 10cm X4.5cm.

Fig 73. *VERGIS MIN NIT* #6. Brooch. Silver. Size: 14cm X 10cm.

Kim Boezaart, *Medal Series: VERGIS MIN NIT* (2000).

Alternative Title: *Forget me not. 6 Medals.*



Fig 74. Kim Boezaart, *Shield Series: Souvenir #1* (2000). Pin. Size: 5cmX 4.5cm



Fig 75. Kim Boezaart, *Shield Series: Souvenir #1* (2000). Pin. Size: 5cmX 4.5cm,



Fig 76. Kim Boezaart, *Shield Series: Souvenir #3* (2000).
Pin. Silver. Size: 5cmX 4.5cm,

Fig 68 – 78 illustrate the production concept of working within an integral series of designs. The duplication and/ or variations refer to the author's interpretation of the staple commodity, which in turn draws significance to the fact that they (Fig 68 - 77) are ironically all handmade, and therefore to some extent individual.

The Medal Series (Fig 68 – 73) and the Shield Series (Fig 74 – 76) comment on official adornment as both status and commemorative symbol. Both the titles – *VERGIS MIN NIT* and *Souvenirs* – make direct reference to the commemorative nature of official medals. The masculine image associated with official adornment is ironically contradicted by the lace representation of the medal form³ - lace does not fall within the same traditional parameters of male adornment as official adornment does.

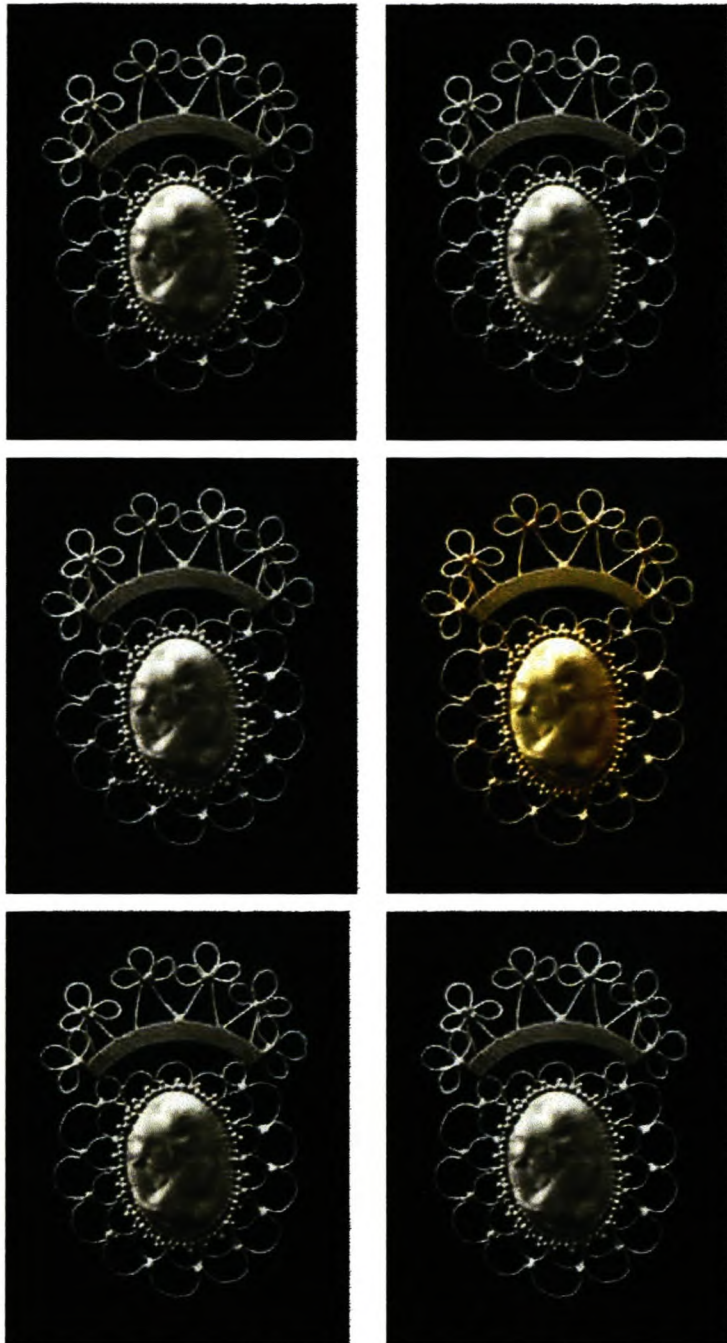


Fig 77. Kim Boezaart, Cameo Series: *PER TUE BELTA* (2000). Alternative Title: *For Your Beauty*. 6 Pins. 18ct Gold, silver, granulation. Size: 4.5cmX 3cm

The stamped cameo's (Fig 77) are mounted in a medallion format. This juxtapositioning of "male" authority within a "feminine" technique refers the viewer to the conflicts apparent in male and female identity. This tension between "male and "female" associations is further enhanced by the female silhouette

imprints. The cameos refer the viewer to the traditional seal which authenticated ownership and goods. Even though these cameos are handmade, the commercial association with the seal, mass-production and commercial appeal is addressed.



Fig 78. Kim Boezaart, *Va-da-voom!* (1999). Alternative title: *Come-fuck-me-pumps*. Pins.

Silver, fur, enamel paint, gold plated silver. Size: 2.5cm X 1cm⁴.

Va-da-voom! (Fig 78) is a co-option of the accessories of the popular Barbie icon. The author considers certain status and consumer demands through these “mass-produced” (cast) reproductions of Barbie shoes. Theoretical and

philosophical contemplations of issues such as objectness, accessibility, ownership, mass-culture, kitsch and popular images are apparent in this work.



Fig 79. Kim Boezaart, *Eat-sum-more #1* (2000). Corset.
Salt dough. Size: 48cm X 44cm



Fig 80. Kim Boezaart, *Eat-sum-more #2* (2000). Alternative title: *Chastity for the Arms*. Gloves.
Salt dough. Size: 50cm X 10cm

The female image is explored in Fig 79 and 80 through the transgressive utilization of consumable materials. The provocative sexual shape and connotations surrounding the lace corset unleashes thoughts regarding ownership, chastity and the female as decorative, “consumable” object (the latter is enforced by the title *Eat-sum-more*). The work’s perishable nature, lack of function and fragility is emphasised by the perishable material (dough) that is used.

Desirable Objects is based within the ambiguous complexities of art history, feminism, accessories, adornment and craft. It is concerned with the psychological impact of traditional ideologies on society and how this impact is affected, and changed by the environment in which it is viewed. The work tends to undermine the traditional functions and conventions regarding jewellery by referring to these conventions in terms of subject matter and text.

An intimacy between the works and the spectator is created through the format of the work and the exhibition space. The format of the work demands an individual degree of participation, awareness and interaction from the viewer - the proportion and weight of the work ultimately affects and addresses the human sensory capabilities; the small details scrutinize the eyes, and a variety of tactile experiences are derived from the various materials, shapes and textures.

NOTES

¹ This catalogue does not include the complete body of work.

² Lace is a good example of the shift in social expectations that occurs with the changes in fashion. Lace was once a dominant accessory in both men's and women's clothing, but is now considered to be feminine.

³ The medal format is constructed by lace.

⁴ The image does not include the complete work.

CONCLUSION

It is hoped that the notion, concept and meaning of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde, together with the role that it plays in contemporary avant-garde jewellery, has become clear through the discussion of theories and ideologies of the motivations apparent in some neo-avant-garde jewellery. This study has given attention to, amongst others, the issues of "what is art", "art and craft", and "high and low art". This has subsequently highlighted the radical and challenging nature of neo-avant-garde art.

A select few contemporary avant-garde artists have shifted the function of jewellery from a merely decorative, utilitarian realm to that of fine art, by addressing socially, traditional norms and conventions. The dynamics of neo-avant-garde jewellery as an international phenomenon is bound to certain defensible, distinguishing features apparent in Post-modern avant-gardeism. Creators of neo-avant-garde jewellery share the same challenges regarding traditions, convention, context and concept as artists in other areas of fine art such as painting and sculpture and should therefore be described and evaluated in terms of the critical dialogue appropriate for the contemplation of contemporary avant-garde sculpture.

Avant-garde jewellery is very much alive within the South African art world, creating a climate for new ideas. Whether this reaction is passively abstract (the works of Cassar and Maritz) or aggressively literal (Terreblanche and Mayer) does not change the importance of this art dimension. Contemporary avant-garde jewellery satisfies its audience on an intellectual, visual and physical level and the examples of contemporary South African avant-garde jewellery clearly illustrate the direction of this art form in South Africa.

This study examined the phenomenon of avant-garde jewellery in South Africa, with reference to specific works of certain artists. The study touches areas such as the co-option of South African images and icons; the way in which South Africans respond to avant-garde jewellery; user attitudes towards jewellery in South Africa; and the way in which Post-modern avant-garde jewellery developed from its Modernist predecessor. It is hoped that this will open the door to further research in this fertile and exciting area.

APPENDIX

A: These examples indicate how jewellery has traditionally followed the ideologies and subject matter of fine art styles.



Fig A: Pieces show the influence of Neo-Classicism. Artists Unknown (1805-1820). Tiara, pendant, necklace, earrings, and watch. Gold, enamel, and precious stones.



Fig B: Artist Unknown (+/- 1380). Medieval Devotional Pendant. Silver-gilt, enamel

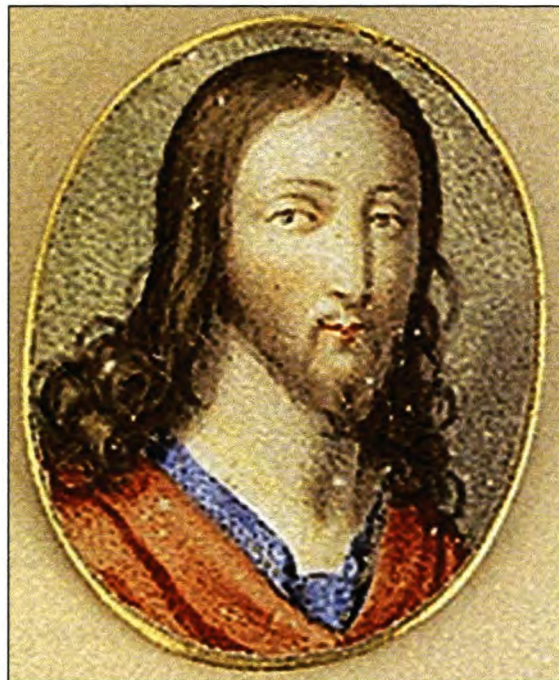


Fig C: Artist Unknown (+/- 1675). Renaissance Medallion. Gold, enamel

B: The similarities between the two designs are very obvious and show the unoriginal tendency apparent in commercial jewellery.



Fig D: Pearls and Diamond Studio (19). Ring. Gold, diamonds



Fig E: Jenna Clifford (19). Ring and pearls. Gold, diamonds, pearls

C:

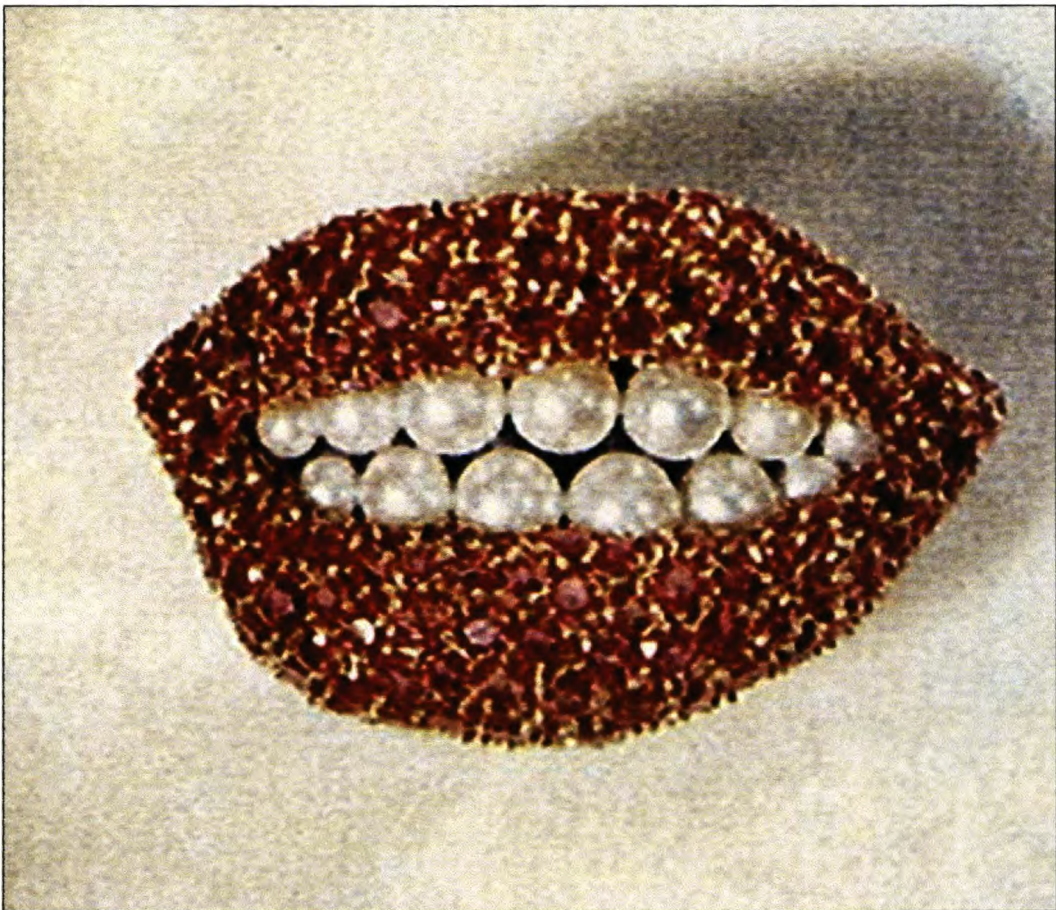


Fig F: Salvador Dali (+/- 1950). Brooch: *Ruby Lips*. Gold, rubies, pearls

D:



Fig G: Uwe Koetter Jewellers. Neckpiece, Rings
Gold, Onyx, Diamonds, Enamel.



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