BEYOND THE SKIN

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Abstract

This paper presents an investigation in stages of transformation between body and ornament to show upon their fluid relationship and their role for the creation of human identity. I see the act of adorning the body as an act of desire, in which we take part to become something more elevated than our original state of being. I use my background as a jeweller and the body as the territory for investigating these acts of transformation. Through material explorations I examine how we mirror ourselves in the things we make and how we reinvent our bodies through making. I compare the role of the maker with the scientist and discuss the increased interest in the body and its relation to a more and more virtual reality. I make links between ancient body modifications and human enhancement within new technology and throughout the paper I discuss my work in relation to other artists work and theorists relating to visual practices.
Introduction

In this paper I will contextualize and discuss my work as an artist and jeweller. I will construct the paper out from the four main elements my work consists of; the needles, the mirror, the skin and the imprint. In each section I will weave my methods, qualities of materiality and contextualization together to convey the role of each element in my research. In the section the needles I will discuss that alteration of the body has increased in our society, address cultural practices of piercing and describe my thinking around how this relates to my making. In the mirror I will talk about the mirror as an opening out from an analysis of other artists work and relate this to my ornaments. I will reflect upon how the ornament is a reflection of the body through historical context and my process. In the skin I will examine the skin as something that defines the body and how this can be used to create illusions of alternative bodies. In the imprint I will address humanity’s desire by comparing the cabinet of curiosities with a laboratory and relate this to my silicone imprint and its role with and without the artefacts. In the discussion I aim to make links between what is addressed in the previous chapters and discuss this in relation to jewellery and the role the maker plays in shaping the human identity. Visuals are crucial for me in my practice, therefore I will use images throughout the paper to articulate and illustrate my written text. My sources for contextualisation are mainly makers or theorists relating to visual practices.

How can stages of transformation between body and ornament offer new perspectives on the creation of identity?
I have a fascination for our embodied existence and its relation to our identity as humans. I think about it as if there is a glitch in the link between body and mind, like a gap between our physical abilities and our dreams and fantasies of what we could have been; as if we see ourselves as a loss of potential. With old and new techniques we modify the original condition of our bodies in order to enhance or alter ourselves into a desired state of being. In my work I’m interested in the stages of transformation created in this process of becoming, I use the body and ornament as tools for investigating these transformations. I have a fascination for the unreachable and desirable, this has been shaped through my background as a jeweller. Through my making I explore this in material form where the ability to transform materials are crucial. They say that the devil is in the details and for me this is true, both as a metaphor and in actuality. A small detail like a piece of jewellery can mirror its wearer and its surrounding, giving physical form to forces such as desire. I have a fascination for the body, its shapes and movements. In my work the body plays an important role, whether it’s the visitor’s own bodily experience, the body lending its shape to my ornaments or interacting with them. I wish to create an illusion, where the crafted material and the body interact with each other. I identify with artists and designers working with the body or ornamentation in a wider sense, for example the treatment of materials and their relation to the body in Fashion designer Iris van Herpen’s work or the way the body is altered in the works of designer Ana Rajcevic.
In this body of work I had a longing to work interdisciplinary and let different elements together tell a story, I have for long felt an urge to explore the body and its adornment in a more open way to continue what I started to explore in my bachelor work Intangible Embrace. In the summer of 2017 just before starting my exam year I attended a summer course called Future Bodies with artist Bart Hess. This turned out to be a turning point for me; during the weeklong workshop I realised that I could transfer my skills as a jeweller and use them as an approach that I could apply to different fields of making. I made a silicone textile and a filmed material where I played with notions of jewellery, the body in movement and light. In my exam project this has continued to develop in a material exploration where the making, material, thoughts and ideas inform one another and exist in a symbiotic relationship.
Anthropologist Ted Polhemus writes in his book *Hot bodies cool styles, new techniques in self adornment* about how self adornment in general and piercing in particular is an act of transformation. He describes how piercing has been used in past and in present cultures spread around the world as a rite of passage to mark a transformation from one stage to another. The short moment of pain leaves a lifelong mark on the body like a memory of the transformation taken place. Modern Primitives is a subcultural movement invented by performance artist Fakir Musafar. The concept practises traditional tribal techniques and rituals involving the body, such as piercing in a post-colonial western society. The Modern Primitives movement and the punk movement have made a great impact on the widespread interest in ancient body modifications during the past decades. Poet and writer David Levi Strauss writes in the book *Modern Primitives* about the movements importance; he analyses the value of the practice by first defining the origin of the words modern and primitive, modern derives from the Latin word modernus meaning, belonging to the present mode, from the 16th century modern means now. Primitive means first or belonging to the first age, period or stage. During the twenty-first century primitive has developed to be used as a term for people or practices outside the western culture and came to be seen as barbaric. Strauss explains how this view has been defined out from the western civilization being built on the Ideology of Progress, “with some declared advanced and some behind, underdeveloped. Cultural differences are re-defined as differences in stages of development.” Strauss argues that; “the increasing exploration (in one’s own body and mind) of these lost “primitive” practices and techniques looks beyond the Ideology of Progress.” Knowing that this was written in 1989 it is interesting to apply this idea of how the growing exploration in body modification will change society, on the present and yet to be developed technological possibilities in human enhancement. Will they maintain the Ideology of Progress or contribute to a more diverse view on human identity?

3 ibid
When I pierce the silicone with needles of stainless steel I’m relating to the tradition of piercing, when I pierce the needles through the silicone, new surfaces are created. When the needles push the silicone into new shapes it is transforming the material just like the piercing transforms the human body beyond its natural form. In the moment the hard and pointy metal hits the surface of the soft silicone skin an alteration takes place, where two materials together create a new material. While piercing is one of the oldest forms of self-adornment it has together with other forms of self adornment increased in the contemporary society. Also modifications of the body intended to be invisible, yet transformative has increased, such as plastic surgery.\(^4\) Chris Shilling professor in Sociology explains in his book *The Body A very short introduction* how the academic interest in the body have increased in the western society from the eighties and nineties onwards. In the interdisciplinary area of research called ‘body studies’ different approaches to our embodied existence are examined from the perspective that the body itself plays an important role in shaping our identities, both as individuals and as a society. Shilling means that the growing interest in the body from this time forward is related to a number of changes in the western society. One factor brought up is the growing visibility of the body in the media. This has made the body a display where the shaping of identity through appearance takes place. Another factor Shilling is lifting is the technological development, which has amplified our interest in the body and changed our possibility to alter and control our bodies, both in physical appearance and in function. This has also blurred the lines between body and technology, and increased the uncertainty about what is a ‘natural’ body.\(^5\)

With my work I want to tell a story about stages of transformation and becoming through an embodied understanding. I use the needle and the piercing technique for its transformative quality, I consider the act of piercing as a link between the body and the foreign, between the inside and outside. It’s a foreign object added like ornamentation to the flesh and creates a shift in the perception of what is natural and what is artificial. I’m interested in the shift that is occurring between elements, were the boundaries for our identity as humans blur and a transformation takes place. What makes us human? What can we become?

The mirror shapes

Curator and writer Lyle Rexer writes in his text *The multiplication of being, or a reflective abyss?* about the mirror out from artworks where the mirror has been essential. In his analysis of the mirror Rexer states that the mirror has two poles; “the multiplication of being through a plentitude of representations: or the negation of that power through the creation of an impossible void in the space of representation, a reflective abyss.” 

Two of the artworks he uses to paint the picture of the mirror are the fifteenth century painting of the Arnolfini marriage by Jan van Eyck and the series Grey mirrors by Gerhard Richter. He describes how the convex mirror in van Eyck’s painting is reflecting its surrounding beyond what’s visible for what the eye can see and how it “acts as a sort of hole sucking the entire visual world into itself, transforming it into a representation.” Rexer describes how the reflective grey surfaces in Richters Grey Mirrors create an empty landscape for us to interpret with our gaze and how its surface “swallows it up and gives back an indistinct image of ourselves – grey.”

Ornamentation is a “decorative element added to something to enhance its appearance.” This suggests that ornamentation is a mechanism operating purely on the surface of things, but I see the ornament as the mirrors described in Rexer’s text or as the masks described by Polhemus; “Masks are one of humankinds most magical, extraordinary inventions – transformation machines that mirror the quality of human consciousness that permits not only the realization ‘I am’ but also the realization that I could be other than what I am.”

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7 ibid
8 ibid
I see the act of adorning the body as an act of desire, in which we take part to become something more elevated than our original state of being, to transform. I’m interested in how a surface can create an opening to transport you beneath and beyond, rather than being a border defining where one thing ends and another begins. Like the needle being a link between inside and outside, I see the mirror surface as an opening with its multiple reflections. With its mirroring convex shape the ornaments are liquifying the reflection of both wearer and observer, capturing a moment of movement as they wrap around or fall from the body like mercury. The photographer Andre Kertesz creates similar alterations of the body but in a larger scale, in his series Distortions from 1933 he is changing the body through optical illusions. In the meeting point between the convex mirrors and the body it becomes unclear which one of the two is the original. The way Kertesz is using the body, as a sculptural form is something I also find in the work of photographer Ren Hang. In his photographs the human body is displaced and often becomes an ornament itself. The mirroring relationship between ornament and body in Hangs work is similar to the way the human shape was read into the baroque pearl. In baroque jewellery it was often combined with more defined shapes of the human body creating a hybrid. With its irregular shape it came to be a mirroring of the human body, like a fusion of the familiar and the unknown. When I developed the convex mirror shapes I realised through the process of making how we are mirroring ourselves in the objects we make and how fluid the relationship between ornament and body is. I started out this project with a collection of images of traditional jewellery; I altered the jewels on a light table by drawing lines between the different elements, abstracting and dissolving them. As this layer on layer process developed I realised they had turned into something resembling muscles and bodies, the two elements had become one liquid unit.
Image 12. Unknown artist, Konstfack library archive, unknown year

Image 13. Sofia Eriksson, drawing out from jewellery above, 2017

Image 15. Sofia Eriksson, earring Beyond the skin, hollow stainless steel, 15 x 4 cm, 2018
Writer and professor Steven Connor describes the skin as inseparable from the body in his text *A skin that walks*. He talks about the skin as one with the body and if removed from its body the skin loses its shape and the body loses its border. The skin has according to Connor never been more in focus than now, nor has the obsession to modify and control its appearance.11

The silicone skin is a material I create by casting thin sheets of silicone on a perfectly polished mannequin body. When producing the skins it feels like I’m literally making a new body. I’m using the curvaceous shapes of the mannequin as an abstraction to create movement and volume to the skins, rather than to make a direct representation of the body. I’m trying to create a material with connotations both of the body, especially the skin, and something artificial and constructed. I use the technique of a tailor, fitting clean-cut pieces together to construct volumes that gives shape to the human body, at the same time I’m doing the reversed, when using the volume in the peeled off skins like a draping technique to let the “human body” give shape to the tailored garment.

The shift between the body and the constructed is something that is present in the works of fashion designer Rei Kawakubo. In the catalogue for the Rei Kawakubo/Commes des garçons exhibition Art of the in-between at MOMA curator Andrew Bolton describes her work as built up around different kinds of dualistic relationships; one of these dualisms is the object-subject relation. Bolton takes the collection body meets dress-dress meets body as an example; Kawakubo alters the body through asymmetrical padded shapes, creating swollen volumes on the body. She creates an illusion of a deformed and abnormal body, where the border between body and dress but also the divide between object and subject becomes blurred.  

I see the skin as a membrane between the inside and the outside, in contrast to the needle and the mirror surfaces that creates openings, the skin defines where the body ends and something else begins. With the semi-transparency that partly hides and partly reveals the body behind it, I want to play with this border and make it fluid. By working with layers of semi transparent silicone, draped on the body, its borders dissolves and new silhouettes are created. Just like the skin, which is a growing material and has the ability to rebuild itself, I imagine the pieces I’m making as artificial skins in a process of growing, transforming into a new kind of body in different stages of becoming.

The artist Bart Hess uses the body as a reference point and material in his work. Interviewed in the catalogue for his retrospective exhibition *Future Bodies* he describes how he uses the body based on a collective understanding for the embodied. We all have a body and therefore we can relate to and understand material sensations. Hess states that as humans we all have the ability to imagine how we can become someone else or something else.\(^\text{13}\)

The imagination of transforming into another physical shape and the collective understanding for the embodied that Hess talks about are central for me, I use this as a tool in the silicone skins when they take multiple guises in their representation of themselves. When worn I see them as a second skin in the way they relate to the body, where the body gives shape and movement to the material. When separated from the body their form is shifting and they become an installation of sculptures, hanging like empty skins. The absent body makes them skins yet to be worn or left behind like the shed skin of a snake.

The Imprint

The imprint has similar qualities as the silicone skins in its ability to take different forms, when the ornaments are removed from their imprints the physical presence of a body is manifested by its absence. The imprint of them becomes like a memory of their existence similar to the traces of former life in a fossil.

The fossil and the ornament have other touching points of interest, both being artefacts of great value; one made by humans and the other made by nature. As described in the text Digging the thames with Mark Dion the cabinets of curiosity where emerging in the 14th century and developed during the centuries to follow. The tradition of collecting, arranging and displaying rare artefacts in curiosity cabinets was an expression for a “growing desire among the peoples of Europe to place mankind accurately within the grand scheme of nature and the divine.”14 The most valuable objects were “rare items that crossed or blurred the lines between animal, vegetable and mineral” 15 like a fossil or a coral. The belief at the time was that the objects were linked to each other; the links could be either visible or hidden similarities within the objects. The belief was that if you managed to decode and identify these links you “would be brought to an understanding of how the world functioned, and what humanity’s place in it was.”16

15 ibid
16 ibid
Placed in its imprints my ornament becomes elevated objects of desire and curiosity just like the fossils in the curiosity cabinet or the jewellery in the glass vitrin. They are there for you to interpret with your gaze and to mirror yourself within the shapes of their bodies or the surface of their skin. Humanity’s desire to capture the unknown and posses objects and physical qualities that has the ability to enhance ourselves, are present in the cabinet of curiosities; so are the darker nature of this desire. In my imprint the clinical qualities of the silicone and the cold surgical light that illuminates it from underneath relate to the environment of a laboratory. In many ways the laboratory is another form of a curiosity cabinet in which we collect, create, arrange and display our curiosities and desires. Like the glass plate is a growing place for the bacteria in a laboratory, so is this surface a growing place for the ornaments; removed from their natural habitat.

As a maker I become the scientist in the laboratory, giving shape and bending reality. When making the imprint I let the mirror shape bodies sink down in layers of silicone, as the silicone wraps around them their imprints are created. When the empty imprints are illuminated from underneath an optical illusion make them look three-dimensional, like a virtual reality clone of its original, creating uncertainty if they are imprints or volumes emerging from the surface.
Discussion

In the reality of the present, an increasing visibility of, and interest in the body in a more and more virtual world, is shining new light on the body’s role for what it means to be human. Connor describes our relation to our bodies; “we invent with our bodies, and by doing so reinvent our bodies.” One of the ways we reinvent our bodies is through self-adornment with, amongst other ornaments; jewellery. This is of course not something new; as writer Aja Raden explains in the book Stoned jewelry obsession and how desire shapes the world the oldest piece of jewellery that has been found is eighty-two thousand years old. The technological developments have changed the possibilities from ancient body modification techniques to new possibilities to alter and control our bodies through surgery, technology and genetic manipulation. As the piercing is a rite of passage marking the transition from one stage to another, so can the practices in body enhancement be seen. Are these acts of altering the body a new kind of jewellery? Throughout this research I have found different ways in which we mirror ourselves in the things we make, one of these things is jewellery; in them we see something rare and distant, an elevated object that we by possessing can, in a way become. I find jewellery and ornamentation relevant to use as tools to examine and comment on how new ways of the altering of the body can change the rules for our identity as humans. Jewellery is an object that exists in correlation with the body; it is defined through the body, by being worn or relating to the idea of being worn. This, in turn gives jewellery the possibility to define and redefine the body. As both Shilling and Polhemus have identified; the act of adorning the body is significant for what makes us human. The longing for the real, for physical sensations defining the body, like the pain from a piercing and the very opposite; a freedom beyond the boundaries for the physical, has always been present and expressed through different artistic practices but the conditions and possibilities for in what ways we can enhance ourselves has changed and will continue to develop.

Jonathan Openshaw, author of the book Postdigital artisans craftsmanship with a new aesthetic in fashion art design and architecture, argues that living in a contemporary society where the digital has become part of our everyday life has created a new aesthetic called postdigital art. The aesthetics and thematics in postdigital art are shaped by and stand in relation to the new circumstances given by the digital and by new technology. In my work I can relate to this, both in my areas of interest and in my aesthetics. I have chosen to work with the materials silicone and stainless steel which suggests something anti-human. These are also materials that we are familiar with in relation to practices that alters the body, like plastic surgery and robotics, but also technological devises where an erasing of the body in physical form takes place; like a phone or a computer. When choosing materials I started with an awareness that I wanted a material that felt as foreign to the body as possible in order to create a tension between ornament and body. By using these anti human materials to create shapes with connotations of the human body I try to use materiality to offer new perspectives on human identity and our longing for a preferred state of existence.

I started this project with the question; how can stages of transformation between body and ornament offer new perspectives on the creation of identity? I have come to realise that the identity I’m aiming at with this question is not the individual identity; it’s the creation of identity as humans. Through my research in making and in my reading I have come across multiple examples on how we as humans create our identity through our bodies and ornaments, and how we have a desire to alter and control it. There is a tension and a paradox in the longing beyond the skin that intrigues me. I see conflicting elements between the real and the virtual similar to the fascination for the precarious and hybrid-like qualities in the fossil. Maybe we are getting closer to a point in our human identity where it isn’t clear anymore what is real and what is virtual. What role does materiality play in this development and what will be the role of the maker?

18 Raden, Aja, Stoned Jewelry, obsession and how desire shapes the world, HarperCollins Publishers, 2015, p.107
19 Openshaw, Jonathan, Postdigital Artisans Craftsmanship with a new aesthetic in fashion, art, design & architecture, Frame publishers 2015, p.5
In the book *Transhumanism & its critics* artist and researcher Natasha Vita-More explains that the main focus in transhumanism practise and theory is on human enhancement, this is something that have for long been in focus for artistic practices. “Historically, artists and designers have been altering the human form- perceptually, conceptually, and in actuality-from existing states to envisioned, preferred states.” 20 The dutch designer Iris Van Herpen know for her interest in new materials, combines traditional craft techniques with innovative engineering in her work. In an interview about her work with Andrew Bolton for the book *Manus x Machina* she discusses how new materials such as meta materials and nano engineering will radically change the conditions for designers and also create new behaviours. Van Herpen means that as makers we are not always aware how much of our artistic expression is controlled by materials and their characteristics. Van Herpen gives two textile materials as examples on how technological advancements can come to set new circumstances for the role of the maker, one is a textile that has the ability to bend the light so you can see through it, the other material is doing the opposite, a textile so black that it absorbs all light. A three-dimensional object covered in this textile becomes completely flat. It creates a black hole. 21 These examples on new material possibilities and the historical use of craft in general and practices related to self-adornment in specific, shows that the field of craft could be central in the discussion and practise around human enhancement and its role in shaping the human identity. 

20 Vita More, Natasha,”Bringing art/design into the Discussion of Transhumanism” Transhumanism & its critics Grassie, William, Hansell, Gregory R, Metanexus Institute, 2011, p.70
Conclusion

Just like the transhumanist looks at the development of the human body being able to take multiple forms, I see my work as moving in-between different identities. In my practice I find myself on a sliding scale where I move between different mediums using my background as a jeweller and the body as a territory for exploration. My work can be seen as jewellery in one context and as objects a part of an installation in another. The silicone skins also take multiple forms, being a garment when worn on the body and sculptures when installed as an installation. I plan to create an installation with the different parts of my work where they become one unit. I intend for the installation to create an atmosphere merging a laboratory and a cabinet of curiosities, both being contexts where we reinvent and mirror ourselves through the objects surrounding us. I want to make the audience aware of their own bodies and their gaze in relation to my installation by creating a setting making them spectators. For the installation at the spring exhibition at Konstfack I will also make a movie in collaboration with a dancer, where the silicone skins will be activated in relation to the body and movement. During my research in this project I have found new ways to use my making and material qualities to create concept and theory. I have come to a deeper understanding for how I use this as a method in my artistic practice. This research have opened up my area of exploration and in the research around the relationship between history of body modification, the cabinet of curiosities, the laboratory and human enhancement I have found an organisation called BioArt Laboratories that I would like to get in contact with in a future practice, they work interdisciplinary with artist and scientists creating new materials and projects. I am intrigued to continue my research and I have come to see a greater potential in material exploration and new ways to use craft in relation to other fields.
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4. Sofia Eriksson, Intangible Embrace, handsculpted and casted silver, paint, 20x10cm 2017
7. Sofia Eriksson, work in progress Beyond the skin, silicone, stainless steel, 2018
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22. Sofia Eriksson, work in progress, silicone imprints,20 x 40 cm, 2018
24. Sofia Eriksson, work in progress, jewellery placed in illuminated silicone imprint, stainless steel, silicone, 20 x 40 cm, 2018
25. Sofia Eriksson, Collage with image by Ren Hang, photograph, copper, 15 x 15 cm, 2017