Get Your Hands Dirty: A Manifesto
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Abstract

Modern jewellery making techniques can be very seductive, not least the ease with which an artist can design a piece on a computer and forego the time-consuming, and often frustrating, process of manufacture. But, the question needs to be asked: is something being lost by the artist who absents themselves from that part of the process? In this essay, I argue that such artists are subjected to a truncated creative process. Their design doesn’t come up against the limits of the material, and that of their own abilities. They aren’t forced to modify or refine their design in the face of such obstacles. By contrast, the artist with a handmade approach, such as Peter Bauhuis or Karl Fritsch, continues to have input by physically participating in the manufacture of the piece. The hurdles they must overcome in realizing their idea stimulate and extend the creative process, and the result can be a superior piece. But it doesn’t always turn out that way. The nature of the process is such that the artist can hit a brick wall and have nothing to show for their efforts other than wasted time and material. But it’s worth the risk. The increasing homogenization of culture has lead to a reaction of individuality, and a return to some old ways: the artisanal approach. Adorning one’s body with jewellery is part of a person’s attempt to define and express that individuality, and nothing can express that uniqueness like a custom, one-off piece. A handmade piece. This isn’t a new idea, of course, and it finds expression in ancient aesthetics, such as the raw beauty of wabi-sabi, right up to the work of more contemporary practitioners, whose work is discussed here.
## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Modern Jeweller</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Handmade Approach</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raw Beauty</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Introduction**

*Dressing up, disguising oneself, is a way to fight the biggest trauma of all: being born*—Salvador Dalí

The great technological advances of the past century have led to some astounding innovations in the field of jewellery design. We have electro-forming, casting, computer-designed jewellery, and even 3-D printers. Utilising many of these techniques requires new skills of the modern jeweller. But others free up the artist, and can do the heavy lifting, allowing them to focus their time, resources, and creative energy on other areas.

This, of course, is a great contrast to the traditional approach of making everything by hand. While I am not advocating that all jewellery should be made by hand, or that all computer-designed jewellery isn’t art, I think it’s an open question whether something is being lost to the jeweller who *only* designs pieces by computer, hands over the design to someone else to manufacture, and never really gets their hands dirty.

In this essay, I will argue that the artistic process of a computer-designed piece could be viewed as a truncated one. The artist who designs a piece and doesn’t participate in its manufacture has no interplay with the material, no dialogue with their own limitations, doesn’t undergo “the journey of construction,” which can lead to new ideas, and, ultimately, a radically different piece. The artist who absents themselves from the manufacture of their work is losing something. In short, the computer designing jewellery maker stops contributing to the artistic process the moment they hand over the design, but the hands-on jeweller designer benefits from an extended creative process, one which continues right through the manufacture of the piece until the very end.

Finally, I content that there is nothing new in this approach, which finds its ultimate expression in the raw beauty of the ancient Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi—the very
antithesis of the “finish fetish” of some artists who rely exclusively on computer-aided design.

The Modern Jeweller

_I always feel like the art's there and I just see it, so it's not really a lot of work_—Damien Hirst

The modern jeweller has the ability to combine materials and forms in ways that were out of reach to their forebears. Striking pieces made from silicon, resin, recycled material. A lot of work today is designed on computer. The jeweller then hands over the design to someone else for manufacture. This can allow them to either construct many copies of the same piece for a low price, or to create intricate one-off pieces that would be physically impossible to create by hand alone. Finally, and this is perhaps the greatest _perceived_ benefit to many jewellery artists, the finished piece will be an exact actualization of their design.

This approach reaches its apogee in the “gilded edge art” of people like Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, Anselm Reyle, and Urs Fischer. The term is a play on “The Gilded Age,” a phrase coined by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner both to mock the ostentatious wealth and spending of the new American upper classes during the 1870s and 1880s—itself a pun on “golden age”—and to underline the superficiality of material wealth in general (Twain & Warner 1873). The term “gilded edge art” is a direct reference to the kind of hyper-finished, super shiny work artists like Koons and Hirst, and their adherents, can produce. As James Kalm (2010) says:

_A lot of these pieces are labour-intensive, requiring industrial workshops filled with teams of specialists fabricating, casting, plating, and polishing._

_Some use rich materials like gold plate, stainless steel, and space-age_
lacquers. The fingerprints of the artist are buffed away, and the resultant objects bear a strong resemblance to ultra-high-end luxury goods.

Not only is the artist absenting themselves from the manufacture of the piece, but all trace of anyone’s involvement is removed. This kind of “finish fetish” makes the work stand out, but can also make it look alien in its surroundings (or any surroundings). The work will often make extensive use of precious metals and stones, with Damien Hirst’s *For The Love of God* a classic example—a platinum skull encrusted with over eight thousand flawless diamonds (and costing over fourteen million British Pounds to produce).

Aside from this “arms race” that a “finish fetish” can inspire, the computer packages for designing jewellery are getting more advanced and we are reaching the point where someone can come up with a reasonable design with minimal training. This begs an obvious question. As the software becomes easier to use, and the hardware develops with things like 3-D printers, are we helping to create a world that won’t need expert jewellers anymore?

I think this is an open question. It doesn’t take too much imagination to envision a future where all jewellery is made in kiosks by anyone just pressing a few buttons, or just by selecting a few options on a website. Is this the future we want? A future without jewellery artists?

**The Handmade Approach**

*The crafting of art is intensive (thus expensive) of labour, material and, most essentially, time*

—Margaret Weiss

There is, of course, another way to make jewellery, one that has been with us for thousands of years, across all cultures. Using only their hands and simple tools, jewellers have been able to
create beautiful, intricate pieces that continue to be admired today in galleries all across the world.

The process is usually slower. And through the physical act of manufacture, the design can often change. All handmade jewellery is a collaboration between the artist and the material. Helmuth Von Moltke’s famous maxim was “no battle plan survives contact with the enemy”, and this is true for handmade jewellery too. No design survives contact with the handmade approach to manufacture.

The material itself has limitations, as does the artist. But this collaboration, this wilful accident, this dialogue between the artist and the material, and the interaction and interplay between the original vision and the realities of manufacture by hand is where art is born.

With a computer designed piece, the artist has no input once they hand over the design. However, with a handmade piece, it’s very different. British designer and woodworker David Pye would classify these two contrasting approaches as the “workmanship of certainty” and the “workmanship of risk”. He defined the latter as “workmanship using any kind of technique or apparatus in which the quality of the result is not predetermined, but depends on the judgment, dexterity, and care which the maker exercises as he works ... The quality of the result is continually at risk during the process of making.” (Fariello & Owen, 2005, p. 205).

I can’t speak for all jewellery artists, but for me at least, the process of manufacture is where the real magic happens. The initial idea changes as soon as I start working physically with the material. This physical contact leads to further ideas, modifications, refinements, and sometimes wholesale changes.

This isn’t because I start with a half-baked concept and dive into making something. I will already have explored innumerable possibilities with the design before settling on what I
want to do. But despite all of this exhaustive preparation, the actual act of working on the piece will cause my viewpoint to shift.

This approach can lead to several possible outcomes. Sometimes you hit a dead-end, or you are unable to realize your initial vision. Sometimes the finished piece doesn’t work, and is only good for scrap. But sometimes, it all comes together and you create something that could only have been possible by the artist physically engaging with the process of manufacture.

The process itself is quite intuitive, once you open your mind to ending up with a finished piece that is different from the initial design. I work mainly with metal, which can be a challenging material. I cut, fold, and solder; the whole process is quite simple, based on the use of only a few tools. The foundation of the piece comes first: the basic structure. Once the hands, the head, the heart, and the guts are involved this way of working offers endless possibilities. Through playful juxtaposition and exploration of further alternatives, I uncover the final execution.

Getting an idea is easy. The sweat is in the execution. That part is quite demanding, but I believe it is the part that truly makes us artists. If I was to just hand over a design for manufacture, my creative process would end before it had truly begun. But by personally conducting the manufacture, by getting my hands dirty, the artistic process continues through manufacture, and the vision of the piece changes on first contact with the material. As Pye has outlined, that process of change continues as I struggle against the limitations of the material, and the limitations of my ability (Fariello & Owen, 2005, p. 205). But this forces another creative step, one that would be missing if I never manufactured the pieces myself.

I mainly use the method of fabrication when I work with metal (which is my primary source). To me, it brings to the process a certain honesty and sincerity. Creating the object from scratch and being part of every step along the way, means to give time, patience and
dedication to the piece. It forces me to be more deeply involved with the object and makes it, therefore, more precious.

It can be a frustrating way to work and it leads to a lot of dead ends. Often, you will hit a brick wall. Sometimes the piece is salvageable or parts can be saved for another construction. But often all the artist has to show for their efforts is wasted time and material. But it’s worth the risk. And, as Samuel Beckett (1983) famously said, “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

One key way in which the handmade approach differs from the computer designed and outside manufactured approach, and especially from the “gilded edge art” style, is through choice of materials. Contemporary artists adopting the handmade approach often eschew the most precious metals like platinum and gold, and avoid the rarer stones like diamonds, and instead find beauty in materials that are often overlooked, such as wood scraps, string, food packaging, and all the other recyclable detritus that most people throw away.

More common metals, such as copper, are regularly employed—whose very abundance leads some artists to ignore it. But in jewellery, as with any art, it’s often the juxtaposition or contrast that can make a piece truly striking—taking something that’s commonplace, such as food packaging or copper, and turning it into something altogether different, so the viewer experiences it in a radically different context. Artists that typify this approach include Fabrizio Tridenti, Karen Pontoppidan, Karl Fritsch, Anna-Maria Zanella, and Peter Bauhuis (Hufnagl 2008).

It might be instructive to examine the case of Peter Bauhuis in more detail. Bauhuis is known for lost-wax casting—a standard process in conventional jewellery making. However, his preoccupation with the process itself, and experimentation with breaking the rules has lead to innovative work. According to his artist statement (Klimt02, 2012), “[Bauhuis]
understands and exploits the essential nature of the casting process using what industry would call ‘a mistake’ to achieve a delicate organic surface.”

Needless to say, if Bauhuis had absented himself from the process of manufacture, he neither would have had ‘mistakes’ to experiment with, nor would he have achieved the innovative effects he is praised for. His artistic process continues through the period of manufacture, something which is quite obviously to his benefit. A lengthy quote, which is worth reproducing in full, should serve to illustrate this further (Gaspar, 2004):

Bauhuis is capable of reducing jewellery to a few millimetres, to show that its magnetism remains intact. Yet his work also includes much larger formats, such as his series of full-sized vessels and bowls. These receptacles are full of themselves, or in other words, they contain pure potential: their functionality is not practical but poetic. The artist and goldsmith explores different alloys to achieve desired effects: a colour, a certain material strength, a texture. His execution is precise, and he always indicates the composition of the metals he has used. Paradoxically, scientific rigour is “betrayed” by spontaneous impulse, which brings the elements of accident and chance into play. When Bauhuis carried out a performance that entailed melting a chocolate rabbit with the heat from a photocopier, which in turn documented the successive states of transformation, copy by copy, he was already demonstrating his interest in “fusion” processes.

To illustrate further that the approach of Bauhuis in embracing the artistic possibilities with personally handling the process of manufacture, exploring his “mistakes” to innovative effect, and transforming material so that the viewer sees it in a different context, I would like to examine the case of Karl Fritsch.
The work of Munich-based Fritsch has been described as “artistic invention,” largely because of his tendency to take existing pieces as his starting point, “removing or replacing the stones, recasting the settings, oxidizing the metal” resulting in what can be characterized as radical renovations of traditional jewellery (Klimt02, 2012). In his own words, he described his work as follows (Lim 2006, pg. 15):

That longing for renewal, coupled with the search for uniqueness is a cardinal rule of contemporary art. I think it is one of my own commandments: to make jewellery that does not look like someone else’s while going as close as is bearable to other things that have already been made—making the familiar look new again.

While Fritsch and Bauhuis differ slightly in their approach—Fritsch reconfiguring existing pieces and Bauhuis more likely to start from scratch—both explore the artistic possibilities inherent in embracing the process of manufacture rather than outsourcing it.

There is one final attraction to the handmade approach which echoes the concerns of Fritsch in the above quote. With the advancement of technology and the rapid industrialization of still developing nations such as China, goods can be manufactured—on a huge scale—cheaper than ever. Endless multiples of identical products swamp the globe. But, as Hung & Magliaro (2007) point out, the price has been a loss of individuality, of the characteristics which help define people—at least on a surface level. Body adornments, such as jewellery, can be a reaction against this monotony. As Janice Jeffries of the UK Craft Council says, “To craft is to care ... working on a personal scale–acting locally in reaction anonymous, globalized, industrial production.” (Hung & Magliaro, 2007, p 12). By making everything by hand, you are guaranteeing to the wearer that the piece they decorate themselves with is unique, as even an attempted replication of the design and process will turn out something quite different.
Margells (1991) explains that we all choose the items we decorate our body with carefully, whether that’s a hair style or colour, our clothes and the way we wear them, or the jewellery we select. All our indicators of an image we wish to project. This combination, in some indefinable way, says, “this is me”. And we all want to be unique. Wearing handmade jewellery can be viewed as an act of rebellion; saying “no” to the homogenisation of culture, embracing instead the artisanal approach to life.

If an impetus is needed, we don’t need a new aesthetic. All we need to is look towards the past, and the ancient Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi.

**Raw Beauty**

*Nature does nothing in vain, and more is in vain, when less will serve; for Nature is pleased with simplicity, and affects not the pomp of superfluous causes*—Isaac Newton

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the hyper-finished, luxury nature of “gilded edge art” from people like Hirst and Koons—the pinnacle of computer-aided design—is the ancient Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi.

Wabi-sabi is a difficult concept to grasp, and to explain succinctly. The words “wabi” and “sabi” don’t translate easily. “Wabi” originally meant the loneliness of living in nature. More recently, it is used to describe a rustic simplicity or quietness that can emanate from an object—whether natural or man-made. “Sabi” is the beauty or serenity that comes with age, when the life of the object is visible in its wear and tear. Together, “wabi-sabi” can be understood as raw beauty or flawed beauty.

A classic example is the Japanese tea ceremony. Often the items used are quite simple, imperfect, asymmetrical, or even chipped (sometimes deliberately), and yet the objects—especially when considered together—are beautiful. Rather than it being a case of
appreciating an object despite its flaws, wabi-sabi embraces those flaws and elevates them to an aesthetic. Those who embrace wabi-sabi can find beauty in the simplest objects, or even in breakage and decay (Koren, 1994).

In one sense it’s the antithesis of the conventional approach which seeks to master the object, to impose the artist’s vision from above, to attempt to realize an idea by bending the metal to your will. That approach leaves little room for accident, non-precision, and intuitive action. Wabi-sabi teaches you to embrace what you fear.

Every craftsman knows their limits: the imperfections stare back from the finished piece. In one sense, all things are incomplete, in a never-ending state of becoming or dissolving. Often we designate stages as “finished” or “complete”. The notion of completion has no basis in wabi-sabi.

Rather than polishing a piece until it shines, wabi-sabi teaches you that all objects will decay and tarnish, metal will rust, silver will lose its sheen. Objects record their natural decay from sun, rain, wind, heat, and cold, through staining, warping, shrinking, cracking, and shrivelling. In addition, the history of their use and abuse is recorded in nicks, chips, bruises, scars, dents, and peeling.

Modernism and wabi-sabi share some similarities: both apply to all kinds of manmade objects, spaces, and designs, and they can both be considered as reactions against the dominant aesthetics and sensibilities of their times (Koren, 1994). Neither is keen on any decoration that is not integral to the structure, and both are, at root, abstract, non-representational ideals of beauty. While they both have surface characteristics, where modernist pieces are polished and smooth, wabi-sabi objects are earthy and imperfect.

But the differences go beyond surface concerns. Wabi-sabi objects can appear coarse and unrefined, and, on first glance, their craftsmanship may be near-impossible to discern. Indeed, they are supposed to appear coarse and unrefined. Instead of fighting nature’s decay,
wabi-sabi embraces it and elevates it to an art-form of unconventional, modest, humble, imperfect, tragic, raw beauty.

Again, there is a link here with the work of artists such as Bauhuis. Aside from the art of embracing “mistakes” which tallies perfectly with the philosophy of wabi-sabi, critics have noted other similarities in his work with the ancient Japanese aesthetic (Gaspar, 2004):

> At the bottom of the vessels, the melted metal produces random stains that have an unusual pictorial nature, reminiscent of Japanese ink paintings. This oxidation and the rough textures on the inner and outer surfaces, as well as the subtle calligraphy-like cracks in the walls of the pieces, have something Asian about them. It is as if they shared the wabi-sabi aesthetic of traditional Japanese arts, in which imperfection and asymmetry are appreciated.

Everything falls apart. Everything fades into non-existence eventually. Or, as a scientist would put it, all systems tend towards entropy. That’s not just a fact of life; it’s a fundamental characteristic of the basic building blocks of all matter in the universe. Through the prism of wabi-sabi, I’m trying to capture the moment of decay—freeze-framing the metal just at the point where the rust is beautiful rather than repulsive. I take the clean, pure silver, and I age it, oxidize it, rust it, and beat it to within an inch of its life. Each chip or crack is another invented story, an imagined history, a past-life for the object that never was.
Conclusion

Too often jewellery artists focus on the negative aspects of working with hands, but they forget what they lose when they switch to the machine. As Japanese craft theorist Soetsu Yanagi said, “No machine can compare with a man’s hands. Machinery gives speed, power, complete uniformity and precision, but it cannot give creativity, adaptability, freedom, heterogeneity. These the machine is incapable of.” (Farriello & Owen, 2005, p. 199). Creativity, adaptability, freedom, and heterogeneity are not just the very essence of individuality; they are the very essence of art.

In the 21st century, the human race is always striving to do things at the speed of light: supersonic aeroplanes; high-speed internet; bullet trains. But sometimes when you slow down, you realize that the journey can be more valuable than reaching the destination. If you slow down and enjoy the journey of making something with your own two hands, if you explore your own limitations and respect them, you might find you can push past them.
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