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Social participation in contemporary art jewellery

An investigation of contemporary art jewellery’s ability to discuss complex questions within western society.

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Abstract

On the base of cultural norms, it seems that it is commonly accepted that one animal is considered ‘friend’, while the other ‘food’. Even though people's opinion may differ in regards to the world's largest animal rights organization PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animal) (Kulkarni, 2009), the organization asks a relevant question: “If your cat tasted like chicken would you eat her?”

As I work within the contemporary art jewellery field, it is through the body, jewellery, and the conscious act of wearing it, that I would like to encourage consumers to reflect on their personal meat consumption and to connect the packaged meat to the animal it comes from: what is it that we are eating? Where does it come from? Through this essay and my work/practice, I aim to critically reflect on the different existing values between animals in our society and to inspire more conscious and well informed decisions concerning meat.

This essay is a research project prior to my practical exam work at the Jewellery + Corpus Master program at Konstfack and will serve as a basis for my artistic exam work. Against this background, I look at relevant literature and case studies representative of the field of contemporary art jewellery, in order to research/address the following question in this essay:

- Is it possible to discuss complex questions within society though the media of contemporary art jewellery?

Within the field, opinions differ between art historians as well as makers; it seems that the framework of contemporary art jewellery provides the medium, on one side, with great potential to speak of issues within society, although, on the other side, the same frame work commonly hinders the medium’s ability to reach out to the general public, in order to generate a wider discussion.
Introduction

I am not a vegetarian but I have a personal interest in the subject of meat consumption from a consumer point of view, as I want to make ethical and informed choices when it comes to my consumption of meat. It is stated that the average Swede spends about 13% of his/her earnings on food and as meat is a significant part of the food consumption in our time, there is a towering demand for meat. Safron Foer states that the Swedes are eating 50% more meat than only 15 years ago (Safron Foer, 2009). Jordbruksverket, the department of agriculture, backs these statistics and adds that the total consumption of meat was an all-time high in 2011, as the average Swede consumed about 87 kg per person (Lööv, H., et al. 2013).

A massive meat industry is the result of the food culture of our time and for a long time, the meat-packing industry has given consumers the luxury and comfort of not having to slaughter or disable the animals being eaten, to the extent that we no longer connect the “warm-blooded mammals” to the “refrigerated, plastic wrapped chops and patties” (Belasco, 2008 p.4) and a large gap has been formed between consumers and the meat industry, according to Annika Bergman, president of the Swedish pig entrepreneurship. (Van vård I svensk djurindustri?, 2009, 3/3) In line with Belasco and Bergman, Håkan Jönsson, an ethnologist, chef and author, states that many of the problems concerning food today are about the fact that we have so little knowledge of where it comes from and how it is produced (Filosofiska Rummet, 2009).

It is an industrial production with severe consequences for both animals (Djurens rätt 2009, 2012) and the environment and it is therefore germane to talk of this complex subject to encourage informed choices out from humane, environmental, and ethical perspectives. There exists a political discussion in Sweden as well as within the European Union and although Livsmedelsverket, the National Food Agency is recommending Swedes to consume less meat for health and environmental reasons (Livsmedelsverket, 2013) there are currently no specific legislations ensuring further animal protection (Djurens rätt, 2009).

“ ‘Forget the pig as an animal ‘ a modern livestock journal advises.” (Belasco, 2008 p. 4)
In my artistic work at Ädellab Konstfack, I have previously worked with the subject of food, especially focused on the connection between animal slaughter and meat consumption, and for my exam project, I am interested in investigating if I can discuss the complex issue of meat-production through the media of contemporary art jewellery. This essay is a research project prior to my practical exam work and against this background the following question will be researched in this essay:

- *Is it possible to discuss complex questions within society through the medium of contemporary art jewellery?*

Starting from the research question formulated in this essay, I will study literature representative of the field of contemporary art jewellery as well as look at case studies relevant to my project and practice.

There are subcategories within contemporary art jewellery such as: Awareness jewellery, Discussion jewellery, Conversation jewellery, and Political jewellery (den Besten, 2012). I see them as different terms for the same type of jewellery: which deals with social participation and aims to bring awareness to or start a discussion of themes or topics relevant within society. These subcategories are most relevant to my exam project and master thesis and I am therefore directing my attention towards the above written categories.

In order to be able to make a qualitative research study, I refer mainly to two books that have been highly influential during my studies at Ädellab and are representative of the theoretical debate on the field of contemporary art jewellery. The books, which will constitute the primary literature for this research are: *On Jewellery* (2012), written by art historian and author Lisebeth den Besten and *Contemporary jewelry in perspective* (2013), edited by art historian and author Damian Skinner. The authors represent two different positions within the field and the selection of this literature for my essay, is based on the authors’ vast engagement in and knowledge of the field of contemporary art jewellery (Art Jewelry Forum, 2013)(Klimt02, 2005).

In addition, it is of importance to clarify that the selected books will be studied and interpreted according to my aim to investigate if and how contemporary art jewellery can make significant comments on events, themes or topics within society; the content produced in this essay, will therefore be presented from this particular perspective, which affects the structure, analysis and discussions of the content. (Hartman, 2003)

It is of importance to clarify that, in the essay, the quotes followed by the sign * were translated from Swedish to English.
In the following chapter I will present a discussion concerning my research question based on the chosen literature and relevant examples. The discussion is structured starting from key concepts such as mobility, display and material. The second chapter of this essay investigates/analyses jewellery as a tool for discussion, and it is followed by several case studies which illustrate how contemporary jewellery has been used with the aim to highlight or generate a discussion within society.

**Mobility**

Contemporary jewellery has a fundamental connection to the body which gives the medium a great potential to speak of important issues within society. As the body most often, determines the shape, weight, and size of the piece, jewellery is “mobile” unlike other forms of art (den Besten, 2012) and contemporary jewellery is therefore not necessarily “dependent on fixed structures such as walls on plinths” (Skinner, 2013). According to Liesbeth den Besten, the body offers jewellery unique ways of display as the person wearing the piece displays it as a living being. The body is therefore a vehicle for contemporary jewellery to move in the public space (Skinner, 2013) where it encourages social comments, through its generally daring esthetics and statements (den Besten, 2012). Moving around in social contexts, jewellery operates between the personal and public space, it has a unique ability to interact with the viewer (den Besten, 2012). Damian Skinner additionally states that because of its mobility jewellery has an “immense capacity to interact and seduce” (Skinner, 2013 p.57).

In line with both den Besten and Skinner, jewellery artist Dana Hakim emphasizes the core qualities of jewellery stating that:

> “Jewelry is an intimate art medium within the private and the public space which offers a personal relationship and an encounter between the wearer, the viewer audience and the actual jewelry. It is an invitation to start a conversation and it can make a meeting possible. The body is a portable show case and the wearer chooses what and how to exhibit on him/her. Jewelry expresses the wearer character and sense of humor, it acts as an extension to the wearer personality, indicating his/her group of belonging, it is asking questions or claiming its opinion about the reality in which we live in, about our society, our surrounding and ourselves. By wearing jewelries we attain communication.” (Hakim, 2009)

Jewellery has a fundamental power to connect people to specific causes; because of its public character, the medium can be used to bring like-minded people together: a way of voicing an opinion. An example of this is the Aids ribbon in 1991 as it “pinned to clothing quickly became synonymous with the call to recognize the impact of the disease.” (den Besten, 2012 p.242). A development of this ribbon later came in the form of mass-produced jewellery labelled awareness
bracelets which contributed to the success of global justice campaigns such as Kony 2012 and Make Poverty History (2005): colored bracelets made of silicone served the same function of uniting people for a specific cause as badges or pins did in the past, becoming meaningful as political statements because they are worn on the body (Skinner, 2013). So as the body moves in the street, jewellery moves in the public space.

Skinner makes a distinction, however, between jewellery moving in the street and contemporary jewellery as he states that the latter only “does circulate in the street to a limited degree when it’s discretely displayed in gallery windows or worn by members of the contemporary jewellery scene.” (Skinner, 2013 p. 57). Does this mean that the unique quality of mobility is dependent on the display of contemporary art jewellery?

**Display**

Galleries and museums most commonly serve as places for the display of contemporary jewellery. This alienates contemporary jewellery from the masses, as it is natural only for a small group of people to move within the gallery scene. This group is mentioned as “members of the contemporary jewellery scene” (Skinner, 2013 p. 57) and repeatedly referred to as a “small clique” as well as an “inner circle of jewellery aficionados”. (den Besten, 2012 p.29-30)

Liesbeth den Besten states that these venues of display generate a separation between contemporary jewellery, the body, the viewer and the wearer. She adds that the fixed possibilities of display in galleries can additionally be a problem for artists who are forced to modify their work or the display of the work to fit the restrictions of the galleries. Another aspect of the gallery context is that the venue “stimulates buying instead of reflection and the object is treated like a commodity, an object of desire.” (den Besten, 2012)

While in a museum the contemporary art jewellery faces another dilemma as it is further isolated by its added significance generated by the context of the museum. The places most commonly used for displaying contemporary jewellery thus isolate it from the world, a fact that prompts several makers to look upon the venues as “traps” (den Besten, 2012, p. 47). This paints a picture of the contemporary art jewellery scene as being hidden away in drawers at galleries and museums, inhabited only by a small group of people: the makers and the collectors. Furthermore, although the mobility of jewellery provides contemporary jewellery with the potential to move in the public space and encourage social commentary, it does not, in reality, share the mobility of traditional jewellery, which seems pivotal for social engagement and discussions.
Material

A second core aspect of contemporary art jewellery, which differs from both traditional jewellery and most visual art, and that provides the medium with great potential, is a profound focus on materials.

Many materials have “a complex legacy”, which can lead to an “engagement with world politics” (Skinner, 2013 p. 75). Materials play a key role in mediating concepts within contemporary jewellery according to Kevin Murray (Murray, 2013), as well as photos, signs and motifs that “are meaningful as a part of the system of visual representation.” (Skinner, 2013 p.8) Another core aspect of contemporary art jewellery is the critique of preciousness which aids contemporary jewellery and “can propose new conclusions about the body and society.” (Skinner, 2013 p. 63) This is also in line with statements from the SUBSTANCE exhibition, held at Gustavbergs konsthall in Stockholm in the beginning of 2013 the curators stated that there is a strong tradition within contemporary art jewellery according to which the material or materials chosen by the artists are those most suitable for conveying or describing the aim or concept of the work (Gustavbergs konsthall, 2013).

There are several examples of artists within contemporary art jewellery that are currently working with jewellery with the aim to bring awareness to and raise questions concerning specific issues through the use of material. An example is provided by artist Katrin Spranger, who has worked with oil, a material loaded with history and associations, to highlight consumption and man’s use of resources. (Spranger, 2012)

According to den Besten there is a negative aspect in this focus on material as the appearance of the final piece does “not immediately appeal to people outside the inner circle. Their appearance is too unfamiliar or too pale, and their extraordinary size, unconventional materials and expression are more repulsive than attractive.” (den Besten, 2012 p.29-30). A second negative aspect of this emphasis on material meaning within the contemporary art jewellery field, could be that a language is used which is hard to read outside of the contemporary jewellery clique. As a result, parts of the story are lost to the viewer and this, according to den Besten, leads to “misunderstanding and contempt” as a gap is created between the artist’s intention in a piece and the viewer’s interpretation. (den Besten, 2012) This generates a debate concerning whether or not the entire story has to be perceived by the viewer for him/her to understand and appreciate the piece or its aim/concept.

One could argue, in line with Mieke Bal, co-founder of the Amsterdam school for cultural analysis at the university of Amsterdam, that the viewer is never fully capable of seeing or reading all the information that the artist wants to convey, because it is always a viewer’s interpretation of the work.
(den Besten, 2012). However, if the aim or intention of the piece is to talk of or bring light to a specific question or issue, is it not pivotal that this information comes across? The piece then seems “unsuccessful”, as mediating the concept is a necessity for the start of a wanted discussion and as a result the conversation might not reach out from the inner circle of contemporary jewellery. Are a material’s signs and language isolating contemporary jewellery further as they contribute to a loss of narrative and a distance between maker, viewer, and wearer? Den Besten assumes that there is a language within contemporary art jewellery that is different from that of the rest of the world and she seems to be of the opinion that an artist’s work can or should speak for itself. But can it? It might not be justifiable to generalize, as Katrin Spranger’s work has great potential to communicate a narrative concerning consumption and resources through the use of oil, a material whose associations and language go far beyond jewellery.

**Jewellery as a tool**

“What can jewellery do?” ask by American jeweler Bruce Metcalf. Metcalf seems pessimistic about contemporary art jewellery’s chances to contribute notable impact on or change within society. He in facts states that contemporary jewellery:

“seems powerless in the face of world events. In fact, all art is in much the same position. It’s doubtful that jewellery is an effective agent of change. It may, however, get out in the world and make a few people think”. (Skinner, 2013 p. 244)

Metcalf goes on to say that jewelers wanting to make political changes should be politicians instead and that the artistic freedom would be threatened if artists were to strive towards common political changes. He hopes that his work can catch the “attention” of a few people but he is not interested in communicating political views to the masses. (den Besten, 2012)

Lisebeth den Besten says similarly to Metcalf, that “Indeed, it can be argued that politics is relatively incidental to studio jewellery. At most, it becomes a gesture in irony, not intended to make any substantial change in the world.” (den Besten, 2012).

In contrast, there are several jewellery artists who believe in the capacity of contemporary art jewellery to raise political questions and I will in the following chapter present four examples of contemporary jewellery artists who use the medium as a tool for conversation concerning issues within society.
**Artist examples**
The project **ALLA** (2011) served as an act of taking a stand against xenophobia, investigating jewellery as a carrier of messages in our time as well as “creating a platform for a discussion about racism in Sweden.”* (Lungström, 2013); the project was initiated by contemporary jewellery artists Rut-Malin Barklund and Hanna Hedman, who posed a similar question to that of Metcalf: “Is it possible to question prejudice and xenophobia through jewellery?”* (Gustavbergs konsthall, 2013).

The project was a reaction to a xenophobic party being elected into parliament in the political election of 2010 (Gustavbergs konsthall, 2013). Brooches were created by 29 participating artists and thereafter worn by five of them on a trip from Kiruna in the north of Sweden to Malmö in the south, passing through Stockholm and Gothenburg, with the aim to meet and converse with the common man. (Ljungström, 2013)

Another example is provided by Australian silversmith and designer Susan Cohn. Her work *I protest: LOVE NO WAR (3)* (2004) consists of a large number of badges with the text, **LOVE NO WAR** forming a picture when assembled. In the picture there is a poster with the words NO WAR, above which there is another poster of a female suicide bomber. According to Skinner “the effect of the work as art is more to raise questions than galvanize action.” (Skinner, 2013 p. 243)

A third example is Israeli jewellery artist Dana Hakim’s and her project *I Care A Lot: Middle East Portable Discussion* (2009). She invited international to make a piece of contemporary jewellery in response to the theme of the middle east and to participate in an art exhibition with the aim to “raise the discussion about current issues in the Middle East”(Hakim, 2009). The pieces were later shown in a travelling art exhibition. (Hakim, 2009)

Auli Laitinen’s oeuvre provides the fourth and final example of a jewellery artist who uses this medium to talk of complex questions. She formulated a research project in 2012, with the aim to investigate jewellery as a conversation piece that highlights the theme of Swedish identity. In the project **I am Swedish**, she produced ten brooches bearing the words and invited ten people to wear them for a week. At the end of the time frame, the wearers reported back sharing comments they had received or conversations generated by the brooches (Laitinen, 2012). She labels the brooches as “conversation pieces” but with the aim to start a conversation about uncomfortable questions like “origin and identity” as opposed to ‘breaking the ice’, which was the original function of conversation pieces. In this way she views jewellery as a tool for discussing difficult questions and states that the “conversation with others is central”* to her projects. (Laitinen, 2012 p.3-4) She underlines the
difficulties, however, in making jewellery about uncomfortable issues and getting people to wear them (Laitinen, 2012). Unlike most traditional jewellery it requires courage for someone to wear jewellery that stands out as it naturally brings added attention to the wearer.

These examples have several things in common as the projects highlight political issues within society, mostly using the brooch to do so. In the case of ALLA, the brooch was chosen because of its historical tradition of serving the function of demonstrating opinions and uniting people (Gustavbergs konsthall, 2013); this is an example of how the history and traditions of jewellery can aid a concept or aim. In Hakim’s project, similarly to ALLA, several artists were invited to participate in the discussion of a specific topic through making: this process could engage a larger group in the discussion. Both in Laitinen’s and ALLA’s cases, the jewellery pieces were brought out in society to the common man, by wearing them traveling on a train and/or placing the work in peoples’ everyday lives, using the mobility of jewellery to reach a public. All examples were however exhibited in the places typically used for display within contemporary art jewellery, and this fact could hinder the original aim of the project as it only speaks to a small group of people. These examples communicate how a handful of jewellery artists have worked with contemporary art jewellery as a means for discussion as well as highlighting the difficulties in this task connected to the work frame of the medium. When investigating the examples and the available information connected to the projects, it was difficult to find an imprint or generated discussions and it would be necessary to further investigate the examples to be able to produce a deeper analysis.

**Outcome**

Within the field, opinions differ between art historians as well as makers; it seems that the framework go contemporary art jewellery provides the medium, on the one side, with great potential to speak of issues within society, although, on the other, the same framework commonly hinders the medium’s ability to reach out to the general public, in order to generate a wider discussion. In my master project I will investigate the possibilities of social engagement through contemporary art jewellery against the background formulated in this essay.

I will continue the investigation from a practical point of view, developing a deeper awareness of how display and contexts of display affect the work and its ability to generate discussion and raise questions. An appendix will follow where I motivate the choice materials and methods in relation to my area of research.
Appendix

For my practice, the choice of jewellery as a medium is motivated by its core qualities. Being connected to the body, wearable, it gives the work an opportunity to move in the public space. I make jewellery with an intention to bring awareness to a subject, to be a part of our social engagement.

Introduction

Through using the medium of jewellery, I aim to bring awareness to and raise questions concerning our relation to meat-production, consumption and to the fact that animals are valued differently in the western society. I want to stress that I am not a vegetarian but I have an interest in the subject from a consumer point of view. In this time there is a massive gap between production and consumer and it is difficult to connect the meat we eat to the animal it originates from. Because of the consequences of the meat production industry, and from an ethical as well as environmental and health perspective, I wish for people to reflect on their own meat consumption, what it is that we are eating and the amount of meat consumed.

Structure/Method/Material

As many seem to lack an emotional connection to livestock as opposed to the domesticated cat, I will use cat as a material for this project. By questioning how eating a cat or dog is generally considered morally objectionable, while eating pig, chicken, or cow is not, I aim to explore and promote awareness and to encourage reflection on the subject of meat production and consumption.

It turned out that the unattainability of the material, namely products or materials derived from cats such as bones and fur, prompted a research which unmasked a bigger set of questions and issues as it put me in contact with institutions, ethical issues, and laws exposing thin lines and absurdities within our system. I encountered a type of attitude which is apparent in our legislations, where animals are valued differently based mostly on emotional reasoning and for my project I explore the material I have gathered in my search for a taxidermy cat. This material consists of interviews, laws, conversations, and articles where this attitude is evident. Every finished piece will ultimately be supported by and be supporting a piece of text chosen from the gathered material which will give me the opportunity to address the theme out from different angles.

A reference of mine is the PIG 05049 project from 2007, by designer Christien Meindertsma (Meindertsma, 2007). She tracked the different body parts of one slaughtered pig and researched in what products they ended up. The final outcome of her project consists of a book which presents all the products that contain parts of this one pig, and it shows how pig – its parts, products or materials
derived by this animal is in almost everything. This stirs ambivalence: on the one hand it is positive that the parts not eaten are used in, for example, children’s shoes and cigarettes, but on the other, it makes me question whether or not it is being used because it is the most useful material or if it is because of a massive surplus being a consequence of the meat production industry. To bring light to the fact that the general public has very little information or knowledge of where and how their meat is produced, and how livestock is used in our day to day products I am looking to create parallels between the cat and the pig by placing the cat in the settings of the pig, and by extension, of any other livestock animal such as cow or chicken. Additionally I am exploring how the general public considers domesticated animals to be individuals but animals bred as livestock are not considered as such. When does the individual get lost in the group? When does a group of individuals become simply a group? I am considering aspects of production, what we keep and what we throw away, what we see in the grocery stores, products so attainable that we take them for granted, without reflecting on their origin. To highlight what meat products actually are, I am taking them out of its context and giving it the space it is never given.

My work is not to be considered propaganda for vegetarianism: the pieces should not scare people away, or be aesthetically repulsive and gory, as this would hinder the communication with the viewer right away. This has influenced a more somber, white color palette to emerge. For me the color scale leaves room for contemplation and gives the shapes, reminiscent of pieces of meat, more freedom to communicate. The choice of material also reflects this ambivalence: silicone, silver, cooking string and porcelain are combined with cat or chicken bones. In some of the pieces, I keep the original shape of the bones, while in others the bones are filed and grounded into powder, then mixed and cast with porcelain, to create cat bone china. Casting is a meaningful technique for my project as it refers to the repetition of production and in this I see a link to the meat production and its consequences (animals branded as products).

Because of the complexity of my subject – meat consumption and how we assign different values to animals – there are many aspects that I aim to highlight and bring forth in my project and I have thus tried to create pieces that talk of these different aspects. Using chicken and cat bones as key materials in my work, creates a parallel between two animals that are valued very different in everyday life: I wonder if the viewer or the wearer experiences differently the pieces that are made of cat bones as opposed to those made of chicken bones. Placing objects made of cat bones on the body, and treating them as jewellery, can be both sentimental and macabre, and this challenges our habits, as it points out how it is but a collectively constructed idea that brings us to value animals differently. We consider some animals holy, while we are completely disconnected from those that
we consume as food or material source. This divergent perception is what I wish my pieces to address and challenge. By challenging these habits, I wish for people to question their own meat consumption.
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