

**NARRATIVE STRUCTURES  
IN BODY RELATED CRAFTS  
OBJECTS**

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Abstract

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BODY-RELATED CRAFT

OBJECTS

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In a largely under-theorised subject area as the crafts, this practice-based research contributes to the knowledge and understanding of the body related crafts object at PhD level. It conceptualises the narrative methodology necessary to make the creative work and theoretically examines its intention. Because the theoretical work on narrative structures has been largely done outside the crafts/art context, the research adopts and adapts existing procedures and concepts from hermeneutic philosophy and literary theory to expand on the understanding of the body related crafts object in this new context. The research project investigates narrative structures in body related crafts objects to further the understanding of these objects and to make a contribution to the theory of studio crafts practice. The dialogical and dynamic relationship between the surveying of relevant literature and the creative development of the practical work enabled the development of the narrative context of the work itself and the advancement of a studio methodology that emphasizes reflexivity and is conscious of its own need for understanding.

Drawing on historical and autobiographical material, fiction and fairy tales, a series of body-related crafts objects have been produced that tell hybrid, fantastical stories. These objects are enigmatic, yet suggestive of the wounds of history and of the trauma and healing processes that are part of our relationships with others. The work is understood as a mnemonic device created to evoke the complexities and webs of relationships, which exist between the various levels of interpretative investments that would otherwise be un-containable.

The exploration of the notion of metaphor within a semantic context is here adapted to facilitate new understanding of the metaphorical qualities found in creative and narrative craft objects. Metaphoricity can be regarded as a way of cross-mapping the conceptual system of one area of experience and terminology with another, suggesting a coherent system created for understanding knowledge in terms of critical reflection, and being conducive to new creative articulation and representation. In the work theory emerges as a dynamic encounter, a continuous re-figuration within a tradition of commentary and interpretation.

Researched ideas, practical work and developing studio methodology have been explored further and tested in exhibitions, written publications, conference contributions, teaching projects and artists residencies. A large body of practical work has been generated over the period of the research. Some of the objects are pieces of jewellery, using precious metals and other more idiosyncratic materials. Other objects, even though still wearable, extend the boundaries of the traditional piece of jewellery towards what has become a fine art practice, which uses a multi-media approach together with traditional handcraft goldsmithing skills. Assemblage, installation, video and relational interactive projects have been developed to investigate narrative structures invested in those objects.

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## *Introduction*

### **Beyond Adornment**

‘How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?’<sup>1</sup>

The aim of my research is to further the understanding of the hand-made object and to make a contribution to the theory of crafts. I have used contemporary hermeneutic philosophy and literary theory with the aim of finding tools to enable me to investigate narrative structures embedded in body related crafts objects. These theoretical concerns in turn informed the formation of a studio methodology conscious of its own need for understanding and which is exemplified in my creative work, making jewellery objects that extend the boundaries of the traditional wearable and decorative object, its status and meaning. Through this involvement and directly informed by this research my studio practice, which was rooted in the traditions of goldsmithing skills, bench work and the small-scale wearability of precious metal pieces, evolved into a fine-art practice with an interest in multi-media applications and a socially motivated arts practice. Practiced handcraft skills and material exploration together with these newly developed strategies enabled innovation on the level of discourse and directly in the practical work itself. Through my own making practice, observation of colleagues’ studio praxis and my students learning behaviours I recognised that even though there exists a variety of research methodologies, mainly from humanities and social sciences, that can be adopted and adapted to the research needs within a creative subject, appropriate research methodologies that address the studio work of practitioners were largely underdeveloped. There

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<sup>1</sup> Forster, E.M. (1927: 101) *Aspects of the Novel*, USA: Harcourt Inc.

exists a fundamental difference between the semantics of making and artistic production on the one hand and critical discourse on the other. Both are developed within their own subject-related histories and disseminated accordingly. Relatively little critical discourse has been published from within the crafts themselves, a concern that has been addressed over the last few years by crafts and theory related conferences.<sup>2</sup> The dissemination of current studio crafts practice depends on the dialogical relationship to other cultural framing devices and the analytical methodologies adapted from other disciplines. Contemporary crafts practice in that sense is still in the process of learning to speak. In terms of the studio practice itself research methodologies adopted from language-based disciplines are often perceived as alien and inappropriate. Studio practices that are concerned with hand skills and materials are ‘slow-art’ and largely intuitive.<sup>3</sup> It takes time and practice to enable the recognition of patterns, apart from stylistic appearance, in the work itself and the working practice, before further intellectualising methodologies can be formulated and successfully applied. My earlier work, even though narrative, used literal and symbolic representation that

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<sup>2</sup> *The Context of Critical Studies in the Crafts*, Loughborough College of Art and Design, 1995; *Obscure Objects of Desire*, University of East Anglia, 1997; *Ideas in the Making: Practice in Theory*, University of East Anglia, 1998; *The Body Politic*, University of Northumbria, 1999; *Craft in the Twenty-first Century*, Edinburgh College of Art, 2002; *Challenging Crafts*, The Robert Gordon University, 2004. Most interesting is the recently established website [craftculture.org](http://craftculture.org), created by Dr. Kevin Murray from Craft Victoria, Melbourne, which will take the dissemination of crafts to another level in terms of internationalisation and intellectualisation of crafts practices. Especially the web-chapter CLOG addresses cross-disciplinary enquiry and theoretical concerns adapted from other theoretical disciplines in an innovative and inspiring way.

Most notable and relevant publications have been: Greenhalgh, P. (ed.) (2002) *The Persistence of Craft*, London: A & C Black; Harrod, T. (ed.) (1997) *Obscure Objects of Desire - Reviewing the Crafts of the Twentieth Century*, University of East Anglia, London: Crafts Council; Jönsson, Love (ed.) (2005) *Six Views on a Practice in Change*, Stockholm: IASPIS, Craft in Dialogue; Johnson, P. (ed.) (1998) *Ideas in the Making: Practice in Theory*, London: Crafts Council; Stair, J. (ed.) (2000) *The Body Politic: The Role of the Body and Contemporary Craft*, London: Crafts Council;

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘slow-art’ I heard for the first time used by the ceramicist David Jones at the Challenging Crafts conference in Aberdeen, 2004

One of the most enjoyable and lucid exploration of pattern recognition in creative work I found in *Theory of Fun*, a web-site by the computer-games designer R. Koster, available at [www.theoryoffun.com/theoryoffun.pdf](http://www.theoryoffun.com/theoryoffun.pdf)

often lacked criticality, ambiguity and referential complexity. Such as *Row of Desire*, that has been made using a variety of hand skills and a literal use of symbols representing 'hope' and 'transformation'.



© Jivan Astfalck *Row of Desire*, sterling silver and rope.

In other words research methodologies need to be developed for practitioners that do not corrupt or interfere with the intuitive processes, but enhance and facilitate the studio work. My approach to the dialogical and dynamic relationship between the surveying of relevant literature and the creative development of my practical work enabled me to formulate such a methodology. It made it possible to elaborate on the narrative context of the work itself and to use this emerging strategy to motivate new work. Narrative structures embedded in body-related crafts objects make it possible to integrate historical and fictional narratives, as

well as informing the creative process and facilitating representation. My research suggests that the object can be used to open up access to a reality in the mode of narrative identity and that its poetic discourse faces reality by putting into play fiction, which is conducive to understanding, explanation, or discovery. The objects act as a mnemonic device created to grasp these complexities and webs of relationships, which would otherwise be un-containable and which exist between the various levels of interpretative investments. Like for example *I-con*, which are necklaces that suggest gold blocks but are made from recycled paper mush with a very thin 'skin' of gold leaf. The title reflects the ambiguity with which the symbols are viewed, playing with the shift from 'icon' to 'I con', referencing critical reflection on material value and status of objects.



© Jivan Astfalck *I-con*, paper, gold-leaf

The work generated all through my research project remained conscious of its roots in the history of making fine jewellery, goldsmithing techniques and attention to the qualities and particular restraints in the engagement with precious metals and in that sense describes a unique position. Extended crafts practices,

such as mine bring to fine art discourse a distinct sensibility of the relationship between making activity, application of skill and the transformation of materials to conceptual considerations and contemporary criticality. In my case the focus is extended by an interest in the relationship between object and body, might that be the physical, cultural or absent body, and most interestingly the body represented in layered narratives invested in the objects I make. Self-reflective hybrid crafts practices such as mine are informed by current visual culture and emerging artistic strategies and enquiries. My work references work generated by other artists that use similar artistic strategies and are interested in the reconfiguration of traditional skills, enquiry of the status of materials, signification of the body and narrative investments. For example Mona Hatoum's *Hair Necklace* (1995)<sup>4</sup> that negotiates the boundaries of body and object, using her own hair as material, is an inspiring piece that extends her work, which is concerned with power structures inflicted on the body, its subsequent psychological conditioning and representation of mortality and beauty. Another important reference piece is Louise Bourgeois's *Spider Woman* (2004)<sup>5</sup>, a humble white handkerchief, slightly stained with a delicate red drypoint drawing that shows a spider with a human face where the body of the animal would have been. A work so quiet in itself, but screaming with meaning. Both works, Hatoum's and Bourgeois's, achieve their aesthetic identity by using unassuming materials, traditional making skill and layered narrative investments; both works can be brought back to the body when worn. Cornelia Parker's *Wedding Ring Drawing* (1996)<sup>6</sup> uses the malleability of gold to draw two wedding rings out to such fine wire that the length describes the circumference of a living room. Here the

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<sup>4</sup> Broadhead, C. (2005: 25) 'Apart / Apart' in *New Directions in Jewellery*, Grant, C. (ed.), London: Black Dog Publishing

<sup>5</sup> Cardinal, R., Elkins, J., Gonzalez, A. and Thompson, J. *Inner Worlds Outside* (2006: 111), Fundacion "la Caixa"; Irish Museum of Modern Art; Whitechapel Gallery, London

<sup>6</sup> Broadhead, C. (2005: 32) 'Apart / Apart' in *New Directions in Jewellery*, Grant, C. (ed.), London: Black Dog Publishing

wearable object is divorced from the body and transformed into a gold line, a drawing Parker calls it. The now absent body is only implied as inhabiting the sanctity and safety of the circumscribed living room or seen from another angle imprisoned by its caging aspect, both reflections on the notion of marriage. Other artists relevant to the context of this research include Annette Messenger and her inclusive and non-hierarchical use of materials, the mixing of high and popular art forms, her use of irony that subverts the original meanings of her sources and underlines her mixing of personal story, history and literature.<sup>7</sup> By mixing her sources she challenges traditional definitions and allows creative imagination to cross boundaries. Her work often appears decoratively beautiful, if not pretty, but reveals a disturbing undertone when explored and read more deeply. Kiki Smith favours a more figurative approach, known primarily as a sculptress and a printmaker, her work encompasses a wide variety of media and techniques, including wearable pieces that investigate the feminine.<sup>8</sup> Often her work re-interprets and re-contextualises stories from literature, history and religion to find representation for gendered vulnerability, the 'girl-child' or in contrast exploring the representation of maturing femininity. Earlier work concentrated on the frail, but never-the-less enduring physical self suspended between becoming and death. In comparison, Helen Chadwick's pre-occupation with enfleshment, traces of the body as they become socialised by power structures, generated work that negotiated the boundaries between the abject and utterly beautiful, fluidity of gender roles and transmutation of materials. Chadwick created work that much more deliberately confront the viewer and challenges preconceptions in a more direct visual way than Smith, whose work communicates a more seductive and sublimated, sometimes almost whimsical, aesthetic approach.

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<sup>7</sup> [www.moma.org/exhibitions/1995/messenger/artist.html](http://www.moma.org/exhibitions/1995/messenger/artist.html);  
[www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist\\_work\\_md\\_201\\_1.html](http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_work_md_201_1.html);  
[www.jca-online.com/messenger.html](http://www.jca-online.com/messenger.html)

<sup>8</sup> [www.moma.org/exhibitions/2003/kikismith/index.html](http://www.moma.org/exhibitions/2003/kikismith/index.html);  
[www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist\\_work\\_md\\_146D\\_1.html](http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_work_md_146D_1.html)

My work is informed by my understanding of these already mapped out artistic territories and strategies, but set out to develop a studio practice that is conscious of it's own active re-evaluation of narrative investments, autobiographical or literary, and where ambiguity and cross-referencing could be embedded deeper into the work itself. The evolving studio methodology facilitated the emergence of my unique artistic position and aesthetic pre-occupation that takes the jewel, the crafted, body-related and decorative object as a starting point and searches for a theorising language that is empathetic to the particularities of the practical work.

To achieve layered meaning in the work, metaphorical reference is used and the theory of narrative identity offers a framework within which a hermeneutic reading of the object becomes possible, in as much as it conceptualises the transition from the structure of the work to the world of the work. The exploration of the notion of metaphor within a semantic context is here adapted to facilitate new understanding of the metaphorical qualities found in creative and narrative craft objects. Metaphoricity can be regarded as a way of cross-mapping the conceptual system of one area of experience and terminology with another, suggesting a coherent system created for understanding knowledge in terms of critical reflection, and being conducive to new creative articulation and representation. In the work theory emerges as a dynamic encounter, a continuous re-figuration within a tradition of commentary and interpretation. Theoretical sources have been read to find appropriate resonances that lend language to the creative process experienced in the studio practice, while making sure that the making of the practical work remains the primary source of information. While being aware of the constituting arguments and theoretical approaches expressed by the selected writers, ideas and passages of text have been singled out as relevant to the studio practice and brought into relationship to each other. A historically linear theoretical approach was abandoned in favour of a framing

selection process that is experience as being empathetic to the visual and artistic material and reflective of the shifting parameters within the work itself. Similar to the layered references and interpretative investments that motivate the practical work theoretical sources describe a journey that informed the research project. Using the analogy of the arabesque ornament that infringes borderlines and merges the one with the other, previously distinct theoretical material and ideas from different contexts have been brought into rapprochement to enable intellectual reflection and progressive development of new work.

To exemplify this approach a group of four chapters have been written, which identify and conceptualise theoretical key points in terms of the creative content. A large body of practical work has been generated over the period of the research. Some of the objects are pieces of jewellery, using precious metals and other more idiosyncratic materials. Other objects, even though still wearable, extend the boundaries of the traditional piece of jewellery towards what has become a fine art practice, which uses a multi-media approach together with traditional handcraft goldsmithing skills. Assemblage, installation, video and interactive projects have been developed to investigate narrative structures invested in such work.

The reception of the work is gauged by output measures that refer to the exposure of the work through invited exhibition participations, mostly thesis based and curated, and their published catalogues, funded commissions of new work, invited essays for publications, public lectures, conference and seminar contributions in the UK and abroad.<sup>9</sup> These activities indicate that the work and theoretical dissemination has reached an audience and actively contribute to the discourse and development of the subject area, as much as being a reflection on

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<sup>9</sup> A detailed list of activities has been included in the bibliography.

the perceived value of the work itself. Furthermore these activities expose the work to peer-scrutiny, which provides most effective information facilitating my self-evaluation process. Other methods of measuring audience reception are generated by projects and work exhibited in museums and publicly funded exhibition venues that collate audience responses and in some cases provide detailed feed-back and evaluation reports.<sup>10</sup> The gauging of the reception of work is thus embedded in the research activity itself and is part of reflective studio methodology.

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<sup>10</sup> As in the case of *Lifelines* and *The Meeting of Hands and Hearts*

## Chapter 1

### Methodology I

#### Narrabesques

##### 1.1 Metaphor and practice

Paul Ricoeur's in-depth exploration of the notion of metaphor within a semantic context is here adapted to facilitate new understanding of the metaphorical qualities found in creative and narrative craft objects. Ricoeur investigates that which in language allows, perhaps compels, the disclosure of new meaning. This underlying dynamism conforms with Ricoeur's idea of forward-directed confidence in the human capacity for creativity; it allows him to focus specifically on metaphor as a point of emergence of meaning and so engage in a tacit celebration of the human power to create and order new worlds.<sup>11</sup>

Ricoeur considers any 'shift from literal to figurative sense' a metaphor. To do so he requires that 'the notion of change of meaning be not restricted to names, or even to words, but extended to all signs'. Lexical value, as it refers to things, is a literal meaning, thus metaphorical meaning is not lexical, it is a value created

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<sup>11</sup> Ricoeur, Paul (1994) Study 6, 7 and 8, in *The Rule of Metaphor*, London: Routledge

The original text was titled *La Methaphore Vive*, living methaphore or metaphore alive. The very confusing and potentially misleading translation of the title into *The Rule of Methaphore* does not refer to Ricoeur's intentions. In his own words 'I tried to show how language could extend itself to its very limits forever discovering new resonances within itself. The term *vive (living)* is all important, for it was my purpose to demonstrate that here is not just an epistemological and political imagination, but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, a *linguistic* imagination which generates and regenerates meaning through the living power of methaphoricity.' Quoted from Ricoeur, P. (1991: 463) *The Creativity of Language*, in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, Valdes, M. J. (ed.), Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf

by context, it occurs through discourse and in discourse. Furthermore ‘the difference between trivial metaphor and poetic metaphor is not that one can be paraphrased and the other not, but that the paraphrase of the latter is without end. It is endless precisely because it can always spring back to life’.<sup>12</sup>

Ricoeur’s theoretical position offered a new way for me to looking at my work, which at the beginning of this research was concerned with material, the traditions of jewellery design and body ornamentation, and subjective narratives. The dialogical and dynamic relationship between the surveying of relevant literature and the creative development of my practical work enabled me to reflect on the narrative context of the work itself and to develop a studio methodology, which is conscious of its own need for understanding. In my work, theory thus became reformulated as a dynamic encounter, a continuous re-figuration within a tradition of commentary and interpretation.

A large number of my jewellery pieces, especially those made in the earlier part of the research, exemplify my intention to create narrative jewellery pieces, which informed by my readings on metaphor, aim to do in material what Ricoeur explores in written text. In the following a few pieces have been chosen to highlight important correlation points between my studio practice and the theoretical exploration. In a key passage, which links Ricoeur’s linguistic exploration to my studio practice, he goes on to say that poetic language fuses meaning and the senses. In doing so poetic language produces an object in on itself, in contrast to ordinary language and its referential character. The sign here is looked at, not through. He states that ‘instead of being a medium or

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<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur, Paul (1994: 188) Study 6, The Iconic Moment of Metaphor, in *The Rule of Metaphor*, London: Routledge

route crossed on the way to reality, language itself becomes ‘stuff’, like the sculptor’s marble’.<sup>13</sup>

In the piece *When I Was 19* for example, I used a collection of worn, cheap and accessible pieces of jewellery, which I had worn myself when I was nineteen. These pieces had been carefully and lovingly kept in a ‘private’ treasure box, remnants of a mythologized past, and which appear sentimental and dishevelled when looked at now. These found or rather re-found objects are my material, the re-invention of their meaning part of my investigation. The pieces gained a different identity by being transposed through a simple embossing and casting procedure. The reading of the original jewellery pieces as reference was disrupted in favour of a new aesthetic appearance. It offered the possibility of new levels of critical evaluation and sensual experience, while keeping a link to the autobiographical origin and subjective meaning.



© Jivan Astfalck *When I was 19*, set of eight brooches: sterling silver.

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<sup>13</sup> Ricoeur, Paul (1994: 209) Study 6/Icon and Image, in *The Rule of Metaphor*, London: Routledge

For Ricoeur 'this closure of poetic language allows it to articulate a fictional experience', a concern which will be explored further in chapter 2.<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur 'reserves the possibility that metaphor is not limited to suspending natural reality, but that in opening meaning up on the imaginary side it also opens it towards a dimension of reality that does not coincide with what ordinary language envisages under the name of natural reality' and by doing so 'links the introduction of imagery to the 're-introduction of private mental experience'.<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur regards his 'notion of imagery tied by meaning' to be in accord with Kant's idea of schema, a method for constructing images.<sup>16</sup>

Yet for one who participates in the symbolic signification there are not really two significations, one literal and the other symbolic, but rather one single movement, which transfers him/her from one level to the other. The re-description mediated by the use of metaphor is guided by the interplay between difference and resemblance. It is from this tensive apprehension that a new vision of reality springs forth, which ordinary vision resists because it is attached to the ordinary use of words and signs. The eclipse of the objective, manipulable world thus makes way for the revelation of a new dimension of reality and truth. The preconception of similarity or resemblance is a process of reconciliation that abolishes logical distance between remote semantic fields. In turn, this semantic

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<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur, P. (1994: 209) *The Rule of Metaphor*, London: Routledge. Ricoeur compares this feeling, which is given form by inward looking language, with what is called mood by Frye. Frye's critical method consisted of what he called 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal'. 'Centripetal', when criticism moves inward towards the structure of the work and is focusing on the aesthetic function of literature; 'centrifugal' when it moves outward towards society, a culturally determined framework of reading and the social function of literature. Frye, N. (1971: 25) *The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur, P. (1994: 211) *The Rule of Metaphor*, London: Routledge

<sup>16</sup> Ricoeur, P. (1994: 211) *The Rule of Metaphor*, London: Routledge.

Kant's notion of 'Schema' is reference of a non-empirical concept to an empirical sense impression. It is produced by the imagination.

Sellars, W. (1978) *The Role of the Imagination in Kant's Theory of Experience*, in Chrucky, A (ed. hypertext), available at [www.ditext.com/sellars/ikte.html](http://www.ditext.com/sellars/ikte.html)

clash creates the spark of meaning in the metaphor. Every metaphor, by bringing together distant semantic fields, defies prior categorisation, even though it is necessary that the previous incompatibility is still perceivable through the new compatibility, which creates a new sort of tension. Imagination, according to Ricoeur 'in its semantic sense - is nothing but this "competence" which consists of producing the genre through the difference, again not beyond the difference, as in the concept, but in spite of the difference.' At first sight this might be regarded as an self-referential retreat from reality, but what is denied is the standard vision of reality as described by ordinary language and what is created is the condition for the emergence of new dimensions of experience and reality and the possibility that old and empty worlds can be made new. This notion leads to the suggestion that the use of metaphor in the process of constructing subjective meaning can be regarded as a total re-evaluation and that the metaphorical quality in the created object or its discourse can be used as a device to achieve the shaping of new meaning and a re-description of reality.





© Jivan Astfalck, *Vanitas - A Mediation of Beauty and Decay*  
neckpiece: silver electroformed plastics, silk and organic materials, raffia<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Vanitas* was exhibited in *Dust to Dust*, University Gallery, University of Essex, with catalogue, 2004.

*vanitas* • n. a still-life painting of a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch genre containing symbols of death or change as a reminder of their inevitability.

*vanity* • n. (pl.-ies) excessive pride in or admiration of one's own appearance or achievements

*vain* • adj. 1. having or showing an excessive high opinion of one's appearance or abilities. 2. useless, as in having no meaning or likelihood of fulfilment.

In *Vanitas* I aimed to achieve a piece that through a variety of chemical processes allows for the organic material trapped under the metal skin to reaffirm itself, almost violently, on the surface again. That meant that the carefully established methodology and tradition of successful electroforming technology needed to be subverted and unpredictable processes invited. The organic materials used in this work would have to be absolutely sealed before a perfect electroformed metal skin can be achieved without the danger of entrapped chemicals and uncontrollable chemical processes. To do that on a real rose in flower, for example, would be almost impossible. The form is much too complex for complete lacquer spraying and the rose petals themselves would collapse in the process of coating and stabilising, let alone being suspended in the electroforming bath. For that reason only dried plant parts, which retained their shape could be used, in addition silk and plastic parts were used were needed. The aim to achieve a matt-white silver skin necessitated yet another chemical process, which at the time the work was made in 2004, was technically unconventional and challenging<sup>18</sup>. As a result the necklace is not stable in its appearance but shows continuous changes in surface colouration and flaying separations of the material layers. At some of the parts the electroforming process was stopped from taking hold, creating the interesting, in terms of my intentions, result of showing the original organic material breaking through the metal surface.

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<sup>18</sup> The work was achieved with the assistance of Les Curtis, Electroforming-Lab master at the School of Jewellery, UCE

## 1.2 Assemblage and dialogism

In *Rapunzel's Wedding Present*, a more complex piece that consists of an assembled group of objects, the additional narrative layer of a fairy tale, indicated by the title, has been brought to the reading of the work. The part-objects consist of *Flowermuscle* brooches, which are the imprints of my kisses cast in sterling silver; *Sweets* a necklace made from heart-shaped chrysopras set in sterling silver, pearls and rope; a photograph of Paedestre Manor, a reclaimed estate on Muhu Island, off the coast from Estonia; and my hair, which was cut 1990 after my own wedding.<sup>19</sup> All parts of the work are settled into the assemblage and are exhibited together with a quote by Julia Kristeva: 'No matter how far back my love memories go, I find it difficult to talk about them. They relate to exaltation beyond eroticism that is as much inordinate happiness as it is pure suffering; both turn words into passion. The language of love is impossible, inadequate, immediately allusive when one would like it to be most straightforward; it is a flight of metaphors - it is literature'<sup>20</sup>.

This quotation mirrors Ricoeur's idea of the use of imagery in metaphor to reintroduce private mental experience, but Kristeva is using a much more evocative language more directly conducive to the aesthetic sensibility I aim to create in my work. It bridges more intimately my reading of the *Rapunzel* fairy tale, autobiographical content and the practical making of the work, without creating such a transparency of meaning that would render the metaphorical quality of the work empty.

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<sup>19</sup> The work has been exhibited at the exhibition and symposium event 'Nocturnus', which took place at Paedestre Manor on Muhu Island, Estonia in 2001. The published book of this event contains my essay *Skin-Carnival*.

<sup>20</sup> Kristeva, J. (1987: 1) *Tales of Love*, New York: Columbia University Press



© Jivan Astfalck, *Rapunzel's Wedding Present*, assemblage: sterling silver, chrysopras, pearls, rope; paper, velvet and hair.

The strategy of assembling a set of objects into one context, one work, and to use title and textual support from relevant writers to achieve a layered narrative has become a valuable part of my studio methodology. It rests on the understanding that the reading of the individual part-pieces of the assemblage bounce off each other in dialogue and that they open up to the wearer or viewer and invite their own contributions to be added to the existing layers of reference.

Dialogism, according to Bakhtin, is characteristic of a world where at any given time, in any given place, there will be social, historical, psychological and other conditions.<sup>21</sup> The construction of meaning will be determined by those conditions. It follows that meaning would be different under any other conditions. Bakhtin conceptualised this phenomenon acknowledging the existence of a constant interaction between competing meanings, all of which are capable of conditioning the other. This dialogical imperative, regulated by the pre-existence of language, relative to all of us, insures that there can be no actual monologue. It also follows, that to seek to achieve a unitary language or an objective point of view, would be relative to the experience of the overpowering force of dialogism. Dialogue not only takes place externally, but also internally, between an earlier and a later self, the jeweller and the writer, oneself and the world.

Another example is *Dear Jean...*, which consists of two brooches. The first brooch is a resin-layered manipulated image of a print found on a flea market in the south of France. The image is silver-backed outlining the figure so that when looked at from a certain angle the image of Jean d'Arc appears dark with a lighter halo around the figure. The second brooch is a Polaroid image of fire, which I lit in my kitchen sink, not a normal housewife's task. The image is resin-layered in a silver setting.

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<sup>21</sup> Bakhtin, M. (1990: 428) *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin Texas: University of Texas Press



© Jivan Astfalck, *Dear Jean...*, two brooches: sterling silver, paper, resin

The background of how I made my aesthetic decisions, how I re-interpreted and questioned the story of yet another female heroine is usually hidden from the viewer in a traditional exhibition display. A descriptive, explaining text would destroy the metaphorical quality in the work and render it empty. Instead I use the dialogical device and import a quote, in the case of *Dear Jean...* it is by Germaine Greer: 'Love, love, love – all the wretched cunt of it, masking egoism, lust, masochism, fantasy under a mythology of sentimental postures'<sup>22</sup>. The quotation brings another layer of ambivalence to the work and expands on the clichéd telling of the story. Together with the vainglorious posture of the actress playing Jean d'Arc and the fire, framed and objectified, it refers to a story of repressed female passion, power and gender identity.

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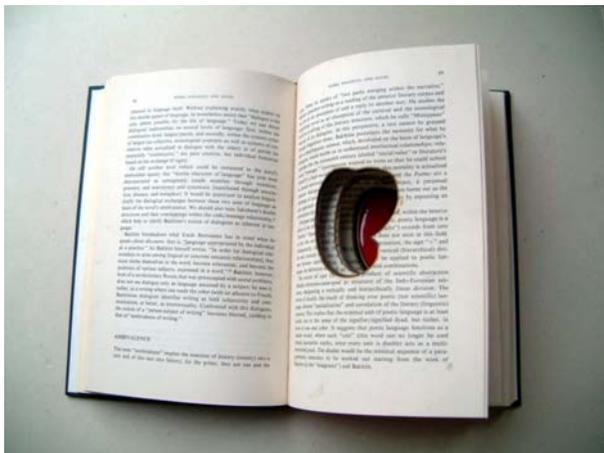
<sup>22</sup> Greer, G. (1970) *The Female Eunuch*, London: MacGibbon and Kee

In this group of works individual part-pieces are relatively easy to read, their meaning is often more directly figurative and the title offers a pathway to interpretation. The compositions, however, remained fragmented, and sometimes seemed to be precariously on the brink of disintegration, often only held together by being put into a specially designed cardboard box, a display case or some other framing device. Individual part-pieces of the assemblages moved around in a variety of contexts and stories, before they settled into their final constellation. Some parts, like the *Flowermuscle* brooches, mentioned earlier, are used in a variety of other assemblages as well. These pieces evolved and became ‘shortcuts’ of meaning, symbols within an individualised context of signification. Part-pieces of a large group of work, generated during the research remained to be autarchic, in a sense that they can be removed from their framing assemblage and worn as independent pieces of jewellery.

In another group of works the fragmented nature of the assembled work was overcome by literally merging the object with the contextualising framing device. In *Desire in Language*, for example, a silver setting was made for a (possibly Chinese) piece of coral, which carries a carved image of a mermaid – half fish, half woman. The setting was heated and used to burn the same shape of paper out of the pages in Julia Kristeva’s book *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, the burning starting at the chapter ‘Ambivalence’, and offered the best view of the coral piece at the chapter ‘The Subversive Novel’.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The book is a hardbound copy of Kristeva, J. (1980) *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, New York: Columbia University Press



© Jivan Astfalck, *Desire in Language*, assemblage: sterling silver, coral, paper

The assumption that there exists supremacy of the metaphorical and poetic function over referential function does not obliterate an interest in the reference, but it transcends the definable borders; it assumes that subjectivity is linked up with the profound objectivity of being.<sup>24</sup> Only the dialectic between sense and reference says something about the relation between language and the ontological condition of being in the world. Language is not a world of its own, it is not even a world, but because we are in the world, because we are affected by situations, and because we orientate ourselves comprehensively in those situations, we have something to say, we have experience to bring to language<sup>25</sup>.

My making of narrative jewellery such as this has, while conducting this research, found an international audience and is documented in a range of publications and exhibition catalogues.<sup>26</sup> Most significantly though was that conducting the research opened up new and unexpected pathways for my studio practice and transformed my thinking. My approach to the making of wearable pieces, material-based application of skills, and my understanding of the status of jewellery objects could be expanded into a multi-media, installation based, and later on into a relational artistic practice.

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<sup>24</sup> Ricoeur, P. (1994: 224) *The Rule of Metaphor*, London: Routledge

<sup>25</sup> "Today we are confronted by a multiplicity of possibilities, so large as to make it almost impossible to survey, that is set in a territory where the needle of a compass points in all possible directions at the same time. We can, like Jivan Astfalck in her lecture in Stockholm, choose more or less unreservedly to embrace the idea of the artist or craftsperson as a travelling narrator in ontology and the craft product as a narrative statement on several different levels of significance, some of them contradictory", quoted from Sandqvist, T. *The Impossible Fridge-Thoughts on Beauty, Crafts, and Art*, Stockholm: IASPIS/CiD

<sup>26</sup> A list of publications and exhibitions is included as additional bibliography. The appendix contains two essays, which have been published in 2005.

### 1.3 Understanding

The shift in my studio methodology was helped by an evolving and positive attitude towards the interactive dynamics between making and critical reflection. Earlier on in the research the difference between the semantics of making and that of critical discourse was problematised and reflected<sup>27</sup>. Yet again Ricoeur's writings offered valuable help, in as much as I came to understand theory and critical discourse as metaphor itself, bridging the chasm perceived earlier between the two distinctly different attitudes of engagement.<sup>28</sup> If metaphor is not understood as the transfer of meaning, but the restructuring of meaning and furthermore not perceived as expressing a similar idea, but as a way of viewing a network of ideas in terms of another network, metaphoricity can be regarded as a way of cross-mapping the conceptual system of one area of experience and terminology with another, suggesting a coherent system created for understanding knowledge in terms of creative production and critical reflection.<sup>29</sup>

Further helpful insight I gained from aspects of modern hermeneutics concerned with the situatedness of the one, who does the interpretation, the reading, the making of an object. According to Heidegger understanding and interpretation

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<sup>27</sup> Astfalck, J. (2000) Betwixt, in *Making and Unmaking*, ed. Putnam, T, Facey, R. & Swales, V. (eds.), University of Portsmouth & Design History Society

<sup>28</sup> Another valuable text was provided by Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (2003) *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. The text did not extend Ricoeur's ideas and in-depth analysis, but questioned the understanding of metaphor and other tropes as the exclusive domain of the poetic. The authors demonstrated that metaphors in fact permeate both ordinary and scientific language and state that 'metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we think and act is fundamentally metaphorical'.

<sup>29</sup> McMahan, D.L. (2002), *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahayana Buddhism*, New York: RoutledgeCurzon. In this text McMahan explores the complex functions of visual metaphor in Indian Mahayana Buddhism. Even though the subject of the book might be regarded as dispensable to my research, the text was most valuable as a case study in methodology, as McMahan explores visual metaphors that construct a discourse that serves as a model for knowledge and understanding.

are processes which we perform all the time in our dealings with the world in which we live.<sup>30</sup> This is so fundamental that, in terms of perception, he denies that there can be such a thing as ‘pure seeing’.<sup>31</sup> Heidegger states that all perception is already interpretative, that it shares with other forms of understanding the basic structure of ‘understanding something as something else’. This movement of ‘understanding as’ precedes and underlies the act of interpretation and occurs already in the context of our intentions, our interests and pre-conceptions. In Heidegger’s view we are, from the beginning, embedded in our world to such an extent that we are always already related to the objects of our understanding. We already have some idea about what they are like, what they used to be and often what their possibilities might be, like for instance seeing a hammer immediately as something to build with or mend a chair with (which for a jewellery would more appropriately read as using the hammer to planish or forge metal with).<sup>32</sup> We therefore handle or read these objects in a particular way, which is already informed by previous experience and by pre-formed ideas (*Vorbabe, Vorsicht, Vorgriff: intention, foresight, preconception*). This intentionality of our relatedness to the object Heidegger posits as pre-structure of all understanding (*Vor-Struktur des Verstehens*).<sup>33</sup> It follows that our understanding of something is thus *ein Entwerfen*, a ‘design’, and a projection on our part without denying in the process other possibilities, which might be inherent in the object as well. The particular nature of a crafts practice is often misunderstood as being reactionary welded to a past because of the traditions of making, previously learned use of tools and facilitation of skills. Heidegger’s exploration enabled me to understand making as a dialectical process in which both the understanding subject and the understood object are designed and projected; according to Heidegger, they are

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<sup>30</sup> Heidegger, Martin (1927: 148) *Sein und Zeit*, Tuebingen: Niemeyer, 1993

<sup>31</sup> Heidegger, Martin (1927: 149) *Sein und Zeit*, Tuebingen: Niemeyer, 1993

<sup>32</sup> Heidegger, Martin (1927: 84) *Sein und Zeit*, Tuebingen: Niemeyer, 1993

<sup>33</sup> Heidegger, Martin (1927: 150f) *Sein und Zeit*, Tuebingen: Niemeyer, 1993

developed into one single potentiality. Meaning then 'is the directness of the design, a directness which is structured by intention, foresight and preconception and which gives rise to the understanding of something as something' (my translation).<sup>34</sup>

However, this pre-structure of understanding implicates the subject in the process of understanding to an extent that there appears to be a serious problem regarding its validity. If what is understood is already understood in some way and there is no direct access to the thing itself, then the reading subject appears to be trapped in a vicious circle. Heidegger disagrees, he states that to bemoan this circularity and to attempt to get out of it is to 'fundamentally misunderstand understanding'. For him it is not the important issue to get out of the circle, but to get into it in the right way.<sup>35</sup> A hidden positive possibility of primary insight can be achieved if the interpretation has understood that its involvement in the object is not determined by quick ideas and popular notions, but that to secure a theme can be achieved through the elaboration of the things themselves.

In *White Lies* a variety of terms, used to describe or name female stereotypes, mostly ambivalent but never-the-less heroic, have been embroidered with white silk onto white paper squares. The strangeness of the words is heightened and subverted at the same time by the simple, non-precious and perishable material. The use of modest domestic crafts techniques undermine the pomposity of the terms, and the association of innocence with the colour white renders itself useless through the title. Technique and material add another level of

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<sup>34</sup>Heidegger, Martin (1927: 151) *Sein und Zeit*, Tuebingen: Niemeyer, 1993

For clarity's sake it has to be stated that for Heidegger understanding is not of the meaning of something, but of something; meaning does not reside in the thing, but 'belongs' to *Dassein* 'Only Being can ... be meaningful or meaningless'.

<sup>35</sup> Heidegger, Martin (1927: 153) *Sein und Zeit*, Tuebingen: Niemeyer, 1993

interpretative meaning to the work, since it subverts value hierarchies and at the same time undermines critically the heroic status of such names, describing aspects of femininity. The brooches can be worn like those through-away office badges, well known from conferences, meetings and other work situations. The badges are supposed to help the potentially alienating social situation by disclosing the name of the wearer, suggesting approachability of even 'a friend'.



© Jivan Astfalck, White Lies, 12 brooches: paper, silk, white metal

At first, according to Gadamer (following on from Heidegger's writings), the recognition of experiencing the otherness of the object is needed, which on the part of the interpreter constitutes the call for understanding.<sup>36</sup> The otherness of the object makes the claim to be understood which can only be met if the difference or distance between the object and the interpreter is preserved. The

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<sup>36</sup> Gadamer, H.G. (1960: 183) *Wahrheit und Methode, Hermeneutik I*, Tübingen: Niemeyer

distance between the object and me describes at the same time my connectedness with them. This thought is central to Gadamer's conception of hermeneutics. It is across this distance that the dialectic of familiarity and otherness unfolds which is thought of as eventually yielding understanding.



© Jivan Astfalck, *Love Hurts*, three brooches: sterling silver and 18 ct gold

The brooches that represent figures have been developed from the drawing by Aubrey Beardsley (1895) for the frontispiece of *A Full and True Account of the Wonderful Mission of Earl Lavender*.

The distance, rather than constituting an obstacle, is that which opens up the possibility for understanding through mediation, which Gadamer believes becomes possible on the basis of a shared, historical ground. He states that historical understanding itself is not to be viewed as an act of subjectivity, but a

move into the process of mediating between past and present.<sup>37</sup> For this understanding to come about, the interpreter's historical, cultural and idiosyncratic background has to be brought to consciousness, his/her pre-conceptions, prejudices and biases need to be known in order to be in a position to enter into dialogue with the otherness of the object. I remain critical of the premises in Gadamer's thinking that there exists a shared historical ground. I favour a cross-mapping methodology, which allows for the integration of historical and autobiographical narratives, operating not in a continuum of one history alone, but of many. This seems to be more appropriate in view of theory that refuses notions of tradition and foundation<sup>38</sup>, the recognition of the fragmentation of a unifying body of knowledge<sup>39</sup>, and is more useful in terms of a studio practice, which is as hybrid as mine. I do, however, concur with Gadamer, when he continues that if one's own position remains un-reflected, one runs the risk that the subject and the object collude, that they become absorbed into one another; otherness disappears, and with it the possibility for understanding. It followed that the dialogical and dynamic relationship between the surveying of relevant literature and the creative development of my practical work not only enabled me to elaborate on the narrative context of the work itself, but also required a methodology of making which is conscious of its own need for understanding. The fact remains that one's own situation is of course that which one finds oneself in the middle of; it is therefore not possible to confront it and to know it as an object. Every situation involves the taking up of an standpoint which is limited in terms of what one is able to see, limited in that it does not allow access, at the same time, to all that which also exists as possibility in excess of one's own perception. The field of vision opened up by one's standpoint

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<sup>37</sup> Gadamer, H.G. (1960: 173f and 233ff) *Wahrheit und Methode, Hermeneutik I*, Tübingen: Niemeyer

<sup>38</sup> For example: Baudrillard, Jean (1988) "The System of Objects" in Poster, Mark (ed.) *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, Oxford: Polity Press, 1992

<sup>39</sup> A very accessible account of this concern can be found in Steiner, Georg (1971) *Bluebeard's Castle*, London: Faber & Faber

Gadamer terms *horizon*.<sup>40</sup> In order to understand something, which is outside one's horizon, and only things outside one's horizon require understanding, one has to gain some awareness of the limitations one's own horizon imposes. To repeat, understanding is both constituted and limited by the situatedness of the subject. The position and statement of others (and this includes cultural objects) are met with the expectation that they are both coherent and have a claim to truth. Gadamer sees the hermeneutic task in the development of the tension between one's own horizon and that of the other, keeping in mind that any horizon, past or present, is never static and never insulated from what surrounds it, and that therefore the notion of distinct horizons is ultimately more apparent than real. In the moment of understanding a fusion of horizons is taking place, where what was developed as separate and other is revealed as belonging to one another 'Understanding is always the process of fusion of such horizons which seem to exist for themselves'. It is my contention that 'understanding explained as a fusion of horizons' implies progressive development. Instead of the evolutionary process of traditionally taught design development, which progresses gradually and is conducive to stylistic harmonisation, motivation for the development of new work might be regarded as a result of new understanding. This realisation not only impacted on my studio practice and the development of new work, but also on my teaching practice. My strategy of placing work in assemblages, 'field' installations, in dialogue with video or still image, and other staged environments helped to create this 'new' format, which allows me to elaborate visually on the thought processes that contributed to the making of the work. Hidden layers of meaning can be played with, as the objects assume new identities while dialogically interacting with their environment. New readings can be achieved through this process and static interpretations can be made porous.

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<sup>40</sup> Gadamer, H.G. (1960: 307-312) *Wahrheit und Methode, Hermeneutik 1*, Tübingen: Niemeyer



© Jivan Astfalck, *Love Zoo - Transitional Objects 1-30*

In *Love Zoo - Transitional Objects 1-30*<sup>41</sup> I explore this dynamic by placing ‘made-again’ (handmade copies) and ready-mades of traditional, often clichéd jewellery of dubious value onto early 1960s *Steiff* animals. The jewellery has been made and chosen specifically to suit the character of the soft toy animals, which have been collected over three years and had at least two previous owners. These animals have been chosen because they are exquisitely made - beautifully crafted and because they have ‘collectors value’ in their own right. They are emotionally charged and refer to the autobiographical aspect of the work, the fact that I loved such animals when I was a child and always dreamed about being able to have a large collection of them. Their cute pre-Disney nostalgic quality replaces the traditional display prop and re-configures the objects, offering reflection on the sentimental, emotional investment jewellery and transitional love objects share. Funny, yet suggestive of more serious issues like the myth of childhood and the pains of growing up, these objects are sites of memory and fiction, history and thought, visible traces providing connections with the invisible and imagined in a complex web of relationships<sup>42</sup>. The work means to reach beyond adornment, addressing the way in which we deal with the humble and naive, such as these

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<sup>41</sup> *Love Zoo* has been exhibited at *Hnos* (solo), Gothenburg, Sweden, 2006; *Raum fuer Schmuck* (solo), Cologne, Germany, 2005, and will be exhibited at *Beatrice Lang Galerie* (group), Bern, Switzerland, 2007.

<sup>42</sup> “To take a stuffed animal (which could itself be taken as an emblem of the transitional object per se), to adorn it with jewels (of dubious value) and to title the resultant work, “*Siggi (Siegmund) – transitional object no. 1*” is a series of acts that together perform a *gesture*. This particular gesture is one that, significantly, must be understood within the context of a developing tradition of narrative jewellery. As a strand of jewellery making practice, narrative jewellery takes as one of its starting points the relationship between jewellery objects and meaning. A work of jewellery is not only a valuable object in terms of its craft, beauty and materially quantifiable worth (all of which might be translated as ‘proper’ values - proper in the sense of belonging to the object itself, i.e., objectively as its own properties). Within narrative jewellery the jewellery object is acknowledged, and, in fact, embraced, as an object of non-proper values - of values, which find their source in emotional and psychological investments. And with these kinds of investments, value and meaning become slippery and unquantifiable. This is not to say, however, that value and meaning of this kind is not *real*. Its reality is of a different order, the locus of which is to be found elsewhere, in that zone between the human psyche and the object. To quote Hans Bellmer: “an object that is identical with itself is without reality”. In other words, the object whose qualities belong to it ‘properly’, objectively, even measurably, is not guaranteed the kind of reality that is *reality for a subject*. As a jewellery artist Jivan Astfalck’s commitment to the territory of ‘reality’ that Bellmer has in mind has been longstanding.” Quoted from the essay by Bernice Donszelmann in Jivan Astfalck (2005), *Love Zoo*, Centre for Design Innovation, UCE Birmingham, UK

found ready-made animals, previously rejected and rescued from attics and other 'dark' places. They offer a site where I can rethink our ideas of tradition in jewellery and the status of objects in a way that allows me to perceive the old and tired clichés in a new way, full of possibilities. I have chosen pieces of jewellery, which are usually excluded from the context of jewellery design taught at art colleges, and do not merit the interest of the jewellery historian. Never the less these pieces are hugely popular and are being enthusiastically worn by a wide non-specialist audience. I suggest that the use of metaphor in the process of constructing subjective meaning in works can be regarded as a re-evaluation of other levels of consensus meaning. The metaphorical quality in the object itself or in relation to their staged environment can be used as a device to achieve the shaping of new meaning and a re-description of reality. According to Ricoeur fictions are not only complex ideas whose components are derived from simple images or previous experience, which are then combined in new and unexpected ways.<sup>43</sup> They derive from a complete shift in the referential status that takes place in the transition of the image as replica to the image as fiction. The new combination might have no reference to the previous original from which the image could be copied. This denial of the primacy of the original opens new possibilities of referring to reality, it allows for intervention and discovery. Similar to the operation of metaphor in language, where the metaphorical quality allows the image to give body, shape, contour to meaning. The preconception of this similarity or resemblance is a process of reconciliation that abolishes logical distance between remote semantic fields. In turn, this semantic clash creates the spark of meaning in the metaphor. Every metaphor, by bringing together distant semantic fields, defies prior categorisation, even though it is necessary that the previous incompatibility is still perceivable through the new compatibility, which creates a new sort of tension and provide us with the means to speak of the

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<sup>43</sup> Ricoeur, P. (1994) study 7, in *The Rule of Metaphor*, London: Routledge

object. In Gadamer's words, a new horizon is gained in which new things can come to consciousness, and the new knowledge thus acquired changes both the object and the knowing subject. It follows that the person who understands something about the otherness of his object becomes changed through the process of understanding. Hermeneutics, according to Gadamer, is structurally dialogical and offers a theory by which the idea of a transition from one mode of discourse, semantics or understanding between distinct realms of application, into the other is superseded by a dialogical model, whose dynamic itself constitutes a third and new mode. The questioning of a made object can be thought of as having the same question and answer structure as the dialogue between people, it is a questioning in relation to the object, which is itself understood as the answer to a question. The maker, reader or viewer, depending on the level of engagement, ends up questioning him/herself and emerges from the dialogue as another, being changed as a result of the interpretation.<sup>44</sup> We are thus not asked to enter into dialogue with the author's subjectivity, but with the answers the made object provides to the question it is concerned with. The object gains meaning in the process of interpretation. Any interpretation will only ever show one aspect amongst many possible ones and only in the multiplicity of such voices does the object continue to exist as an object of understanding. A new meaning of the object that was not accessible from any previous perspective asserts its claim to truth. A new true understanding can be said to be added to the totality of the object's true meanings. However, the totality of these meanings remains, in principle as well as in practice, inexhaustible. Rather than aiming at a metaphysical notion of ultimate knowledge of self and the world, Gadamer's philosophy promotes continuous disposition of openness to new experience and new understanding. His dialectic is and remains open-ended and embraces continuous change, giving up the idea of an end-state of complete understanding.

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<sup>44</sup> Gadamer, H.G. (1960: 340ff) *Wahrheit und Methode, Hermeneutik I*, Tübingen: Niemeyer

## Chapter 2

### Methodology II

#### Poema – Work and Fiction

This chapter will not create a dialogue between the theoretical text and the images of my practical work. Instead the first two parts I will explore the theoretical ideas about fiction, imagination and delight that informed my practical work when it extended itself beyond the object itself. As a result of my research I realised exhibition opportunities were I was able to engage with much more complex narrative constructions and expanded my practice into an installation context. The later two parts of this chapter *Tacita Dentata* and *On Memory and Loss* engage with the practical work.

#### 2.1 Narrative identity and fiction

The made object can be used to open up access to a reality in the mode of narrative identity and its poetic discourse faces reality by putting into play fiction, which is conducive to understanding, explanation, or discovery. In the theoretical concept of narrative identity developed by Ricoeur I found a structure, which helped me to conceptualise the integration of historical and fictional narratives with the aim to discover new articulation and representation<sup>45</sup>. Ricoeur explains that narrative identity exists in addition to personal identity and refers to the changes that affect a subject capable of designating itself by signifying the world.

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<sup>45</sup> Ricoeur, P. (1992: 113-115) *Oneself as Another*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press;

He points out that ‘neither the definition of the person from the perspective of identifying reference nor that of the agent in the framework of the semantics of action, considered nonetheless an enrichment of the first approach, has taken into account the fact that the person of whom we are speaking and the agent on whom the action depends have a history, are their own history.’ Personal identity usually has to be articulated within a temporal dimension of human existence and is narrated as a contribution to the constitution of the self. Ricoeur’s search is for a structure of experience capable of integrating the two great classes of narrative, that of history and that of fiction. He relates the notion of narrative identity to a person or community and asks ‘do we not consider human lives to be more readable when they have been interpreted in terms of the stories that people tell about themselves ... self-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation’. Based on the understanding that non-linguistic artistic production, such as mine, is narrative, and signifies the world, I used Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity to be played out in the development of my studio work. I continued to understand my concrete handmade crafts-objects as signs that no longer fulfil exclusively didactic, prescriptive or instructive functions, but convey a meaning. In order to construct meaning metaphorical reference is used and in addition the notion of narrative identity offered a framework within which a hermeneutic reading of the work became possible to me, in as much as it enabled me to conceptualised the transition from the structure of the work to the world of the work.<sup>46</sup>

In the wider context of hermeneutics Gadamer’s exploration of aesthetic experience asserts that aesthetic experience is constituted within the hermeneutic continuity of human existence and can therefore only be appropriately discussed

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<sup>46</sup> Ricoeur, P. (1994: 220) *The Rule of Metaphor*, London: Routledge

in this wider framework.<sup>47</sup> In another text he elaborates that ‘art is rather to be characterised as intuition, indeed, as a world-view, *Weltanschauung* – literally, an intuition of the world. This does not simply mean that art justifies its own claim to truth over and against scientific knowledge, insofar as the free play of imagination tends towards “knowledge in general”. It also means that the “inner intuition” in play here brings the world – and not just the objects in it – to intuition.<sup>48</sup> He stipulates that hermeneutics are to be understood in a comprehensive way, including all of art and its discourse. Like every other piece of text artistic work needs to be understood within such a context<sup>49</sup> Ricoeur concurs when he is saying ‘to imagination is attributed the faculty of moving easily from one experience to another if their difference is slight or gradual, and thus of transforming diversity into identity.’<sup>50</sup> With regards to the meaning of creativity in language he points out that ‘there can be no praxis, which is not already symbolically structured in some way. Human action is always figured in signs, interpreted in terms of cultural traditions and norms. Our narrative fictions are then added to this primary interpretation of figuration of human action; so that narrative is a redefining of what is already defined, a reinterpretation of what is already interpreted. The referent of narration, namely human action, is never raw or immediate reality but an action, which has been symbolised and resymbolised over and over again. Thus narration serves to displace anterior symbolisation onto a new plane, integrating or exploring them as

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<sup>47</sup> Gadamer, H.G. (1960: 169-171) Aesthetische und hermeneutische Folgerungen: Rekonstruktion und Integration als hermeneutische Aufgaben, in *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen: Niemeyer

<sup>48</sup> Gadamer, H.G. (1986: 164) Appendix: Intuition and vividness, in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and other Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

<sup>49</sup> Gadamer, H.G. (1960: 169) Aesthetische und hermeneutische Folgerungen: Rekonstruktion und Integration als hermeneutische Aufgaben, in *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen: Niemeyer

<sup>50</sup> Ricoeur, P. (1992: 127) Personal Identity and Narrative Identity, in *Oneself as Another*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

the case may be.<sup>51</sup> Bakhtin's *Dialogical Imagination* explores the idea that poetic complicity situates itself between discourse and the world. He argues that in the case of the poetic image in language, the dynamic of the image takes place between the world in all its aspects and the object in all its complexity. The resulting internal layering of language he regards as a prerequisite for the novel, which 'orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions.'<sup>52</sup> It is those links and inter-relationships that lead to the novel's dialogisation. Bakhtin argues against the idea of a random organisation of the novel in contrast to poetry, where the content seems to be more obviously related to the poem's formal structure. In contra-distinction to poetry he defines the novel as a 'multiplicity of styles'.<sup>53</sup> That implies that when I make narrative work, using language or any other material, I am faced with a multiplicity of possible pathways that have been already established by social practice and cultural production. Along with all the internal contradictions of the work itself, I am faced with the multitude of interpretations already laid out by social conventions and their resulting confusion of meanings. The meaning of the object is always interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it.

Stating in his preface to 'The Art of the Novel' that the world of theories is not his world, Kundera approaches the polyphonous nature of fiction as a practitioner.<sup>54</sup> He explains that 'in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tereza is

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<sup>51</sup> Ricoeur, P. (1991: 469) The Creativity of Language, in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, Valdes, M. J. (ed.), Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf

<sup>52</sup> Bakhtin, M. (1981: 263) Discourse in the Novel, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin: University of Texas Press

<sup>53</sup> Bakhtin, M. (1981: 669) Discourse in the Novel, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin: University of Texas Press

<sup>54</sup> Kundera, M. (1986) *The Art of the Novel*, New York: Grove Press

staring at herself in the mirror. She wonders what would happen if her nose were to grow a millimetre longer each day. How much time would it take for her face to become unrecognisable? And if her face no longer looked like Tereza, would Tereza still be Tereza? Where does the self begin and end: You see: Not wonder at the immeasurable infinity of the soul; rather, wonder at the uncertain nature of the self and its identity.<sup>55</sup> Rather than relating to abstract thought Kundera expresses his interest in the action, in the situation itself. He asserts the fundamental difference between philosophical and creative writing by stating that within the realm of the novel 'reflection changes its essence, it becomes part of the realm of play and of hypothesis'.<sup>56</sup> Kundera's exploration seems to be critical to facilitate the understanding that artistic work, informed by abstract ideas, are not in themselves the illustrations of those ideas. 'Imagination' he says, 'which, freed from the control of reason and from concern for verisimilitude, ventures into landscapes inaccessible to rational thought. The dream is only the model for the sort of imagination that I consider the greatest discovery of modern art.'<sup>57</sup> Rather than creating a fusion of dream and reality, he uses what he calls 'polyphonic confrontation', novelistic counterpoint to unite philosophy, narrative and dream within the ordered unity of his stories.<sup>58</sup> For Ricoeur fictions are not only complex ideas whose components are derived from simple images or previous experience, which are then combined in new and unexpected ways. They derive from a complete shift in the referential status that takes place in the transition of images as replica to images as fiction. The new combination might

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<sup>55</sup> Kundera, M. (1986: 28) *The Art of the Novel*, New York: Grove Press

<sup>56</sup> Kundera, M. (1986: 80) *The Art of the Novel*, New York: Grove Press

<sup>57</sup> Kundera, M. (1986: 83) *The Art of the Novel*, New York: Grove Press

<sup>58</sup> Hans Stofer referring to some of my work commented that the 'pieces are about the dormant element of objects and materials. It is the things we do not see, the unknown, the seemingly dead, and what emerges after this slumber that is the key to the work. When we sleep, our metabolism slows down, allowing us to rest and to dream. With our eyes shut we are in darkness but we are not dead. Once we open our eyes we are, in a sense, re-born.' He perceived the intended relationship of the work to 'dream-like' processes, but missed to what degree their narrative content is crafted. Stofer, H. (2006) *Wire Jewellery*, London: A&C Black

have no reference to the original from which the image could be copied. This denial of the primacy of the original opens new possibilities of referring to reality, it allows for intervention and discovery.<sup>59</sup> Similar to the operation of metaphor in language, where the metaphorical quality allows the image to give body, shape, contour to meaning and furthermore, actually participates in the invention of meaning.<sup>60</sup> This by no means is an arbitrary doing, but entails that 'all narrative, however, even Joyce's, is a certain call to order. Joyce does not invite us to embrace chaos but an infinitely more complex order. Narrative carries us beyond the oppressive order of our existence to a more liberating and refined order. The question of narrativity, no matter how modernist or avant-garde, cannot be separated from the problem of order.'<sup>61</sup>

I came to understand the dialectic between composition, material exploration and other aesthetic decisions in the making of the practical work and reference to be in relation to the ontological condition of being in the world. The narrative object is not a world of its own, but, as Ricoeur explains, because we are in the world, because we are affected by situations and because we orientate ourselves comprehensively in those situations, we have something to say, we have experience to bring to the meaning of the work.<sup>62</sup> 'In fact, one can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship, whether it is not his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful and

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<sup>59</sup> Ricoeur, P.(1991: 118) The Function of Fiction in shaping Reality, in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, M.J. Valdes (ed.), Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991

<sup>60</sup> Ricoeur, P.(1991: 123) Metaphor and Image, in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, M.J. Valdes (ed.), Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991

<sup>61</sup> The word 'order' if read in relation to power or control would jar with what Ricoeur claims to aim at, I understand the word as in 'ordered' with a clearer reference to composition or creative construction. Ricoeur, P. (1991: 468) The Creativity of Language, in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, Valdes, M. J. (ed.), Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf

<sup>62</sup> Ricoeur, P.(1991: 5) Introduction, in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, M.J. Valdes (ed.), Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991

unique way' says Benjamin<sup>63</sup>, while exploring the relationship between storytelling and craft. In a passage, referring to Valery, he says

‘with these words, soul, eye and hand are brought into connection Interacting with one another, they determine a practice. We are no longer familiar with this practice. The role of the hand in production has become more modest, and the place it filled in storytelling lies waste. (After all, storytelling, in its sensory aspect, is by no means a job for the voice alone. Rather, in genuine storytelling the hand plays a part which supports what is expressed in a hundred ways its gestures trained by work.) That old co-ordination of the soul, the eye, and the hand which emerges in Valery’s words is that of the artisan which we encounter wherever the art of storytelling is at home.’

He goes on to say that the craftsman/woman’s relationship to storytelling can be understood as ‘a kind of procedure which may perhaps most adequately be exemplified by the proverb, if one thinks of it as an ideogram of a story. A proverb, one might say, is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a happening like ivy around a wall.’<sup>64</sup>

What is important is that what is communicated is not the experience of the storyteller as experienced, but its meaning.<sup>65</sup> The lived experience continues to remain private, but its sense, its meaning, becomes public through the work. Thus my private feelings remain part of my psychological world, but the narrative structures embedded in the work relate some sense of the lived experience. Furthermore, and relating back to Kundera’s thoughts, what the object now

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<sup>63</sup> Benjamin, W. (1992: 107) *The Storyteller*, in *Illuminations*, London: Fontana Press

<sup>64</sup> For a more extended exploration of Benjamin’s use of the notion of craft : Leslie, E. (1997: 21-31), *Walter Benjamin: Traces of Craft*, in *Obscure Objects of Desire - Reviewing the Crafts of the Twentieth Century*, Harrod, T. (ed.) London: Crafts Council

<sup>65</sup> Ricoeur, P.(1991: 4) Introduction, in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, M.J. Valdes (ed.), Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991

means matters more than what I meant when I made it. This apparent autonomy does not mean that my intentions have been completely lost, but it means that they cannot stand outside the object, which is a human construct created by me for my audience about something, my intentions thus have become a part of the object.

## 2.2 Delight

Drawing on historical and autobiographical material, fiction and fairy tales, I make body-related crafts objects that tell hybrid, fantastical stories. These objects are intended to be enigmatic, yet suggestive of the wounds of history and of the trauma and healing processes that are part of our relationships with others. I develop my work like mnemonic devices created to evoke the complexities and webs of relationships, which exist between the various levels of interpretative investments that would otherwise be un-containable. Funny, yet suggestive of more serious issues like the myth of childhood, the pains of growing up, and the grander myths of gender and belonging, these objects are sites of memory and fiction, history and thought, visible traces providing connections with the invisible and imagined in a complex web of relationships. My pieces mean to reach beyond adornment and always relate to the conflicted complexities of being in the world. Despite the often melancholic and painful narrative themes that are imbedded in my work I take great delight in making them, I aim to invoke this sense of delight in my audience too, and I want the work to be beautiful and seductive. This double-layered intent of meaning and ambiguity of emotional investment was elusive for the most part of my research. It was only in the later part of the research that I was able to become conscious of this ambiguity and set out to bring it into focus.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> 'Delight' is not a notion, which can be commonly found in the indexes of contemporary philosophical thought; neither *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* nor *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* list 'delight' as a

Re-reading Kant on the beautiful and the sublime I adapted some of his ideas into the framework of my research. He states that

‘the beautiful and the sublime agree on the point of pleasing on their own account. Further they agree in not presupposing either a judgement of sense or one logically determinant, but one of reflection. Hence it follows that the delight does not depend upon a sensation, as with the agreeable, nor upon a definite concept, as does the delight in the good, although it has, for all that, an indeterminate reference to concepts. Consequently the delight is connected with the mere presentation or faculty of presentation, and is thus taken to express the accord, in a given intuition, of the faculty of presentation, or the imagination, with the faculty of concepts that belongs to understanding or reason, in the sense of the former assisting the latter.’<sup>67</sup>

He goes on to say ‘hence both kinds of judgements are singular, and yet such as profess to be universally valid in respect of every subject, despite the fact that their claims are directed merely to the feeling of pleasure and not to any knowledge of the object.’ Kant argues that delight taken in the beautiful relates to the representation of quality, delight in the sublime in that of quantity. Understanding that his reflections relate to the aesthetic appreciation of natural phenomena, it seems useful to remain critical of his dichotomy. Ambiguity is delightful, exactly because it has a fluidity that plays between the layers of beauty, sublime, seriousness and amusement. I have however, adopted his statement that ‘for the beautiful is directly attended with a feeling of the furtherance of life, and is thus compatible with charms and a playful imagination. On the other hand, the feeling of the sublime is a pleasure that only arises indirectly, being brought about

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notion worthy of including; neither Gadamer nor Ricoeur seemed to have been interested either, which is particularly surprising as Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, which informed so much of their work, is a rich source of reflection on the notion of delight.

<sup>67</sup> Kant, I. (2004: 23) Book II. Analytic of the Sublime, Section I. Analytic of Aesthetic Judgement, in *The Critique of Judgement*, [eBooks@Adelaide](mailto:eBooks@Adelaide), available from: <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/k/kant/immanuel/k16j/index.html>

by the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful, and so it is an emotion that seems to be no sport, but dead earnest in the affairs of the imagination.<sup>68</sup>

I think of my pieces as having a skin of beauty and delight, exemplifying advanced skill and knowledge of materials, underneath which other issues might lie that horrify or puzzle me. Previous to this research my work had been exhibited in traditional glass case displays. This format proved itself inadequate to accommodate work with more complex narrative content and ambiguous emotional investment. I needed to engage with different presentation formats that allowed for a better cross-referenced presentation or staging of the dialogical relationships between layers of investment and content. I started to experiment with installation concepts, which at first proved very difficult, because the objects I make are small scale and the idea ‘installing’ them in a space seemed inappropriate. The result was that my practice opened up to a more multi-media approach. Photography, video and interactive work generated in social contexts became rich, inspiring and engaging extensions of my practice. ‘Objects framed and presented in installation or photographic/video contexts enable new possibilities of visual perception and subsequently interpretation and understanding. The often rather more ‘introverted’ objects acquired heightened theatricality and performativity. It is a powerful strategy giving more artistic control over the interpretative reading of the work. Hidden layers of meaning can be played with, as the objects assume new identities while dialogically interacting with their environment. What is denied is a standard version of what is commonly thought of as jewellery; what is created is the condition for the

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<sup>68</sup> Kant, I. (2004: 23) Book II. Analytic of the Sublime, Section I. Analytic of Aesthetic Judgement, in *The Critique of Judgement*, [eBooks@Adelaide](http://eText.library.adelaide.edu.au/k/kant/immanuel/k16j/index.html), available from: <http://eText.library.adelaide.edu.au/k/kant/immanuel/k16j/index.html>

emergence of new dimensions of experience and reality, and the possibility that old and empty worlds, old and tired formulae, can be made new.<sup>69</sup>

### 2.3 **Tacita Dentata** - material exploration and fiction

Michel Serres argues that there should be no separate cultural formations between science and poetry, since *myth is the origin of scientific advances*.<sup>70</sup> His writings negotiate the recognition that our complex culture demands new approaches, which not only bridge separate fields of study, but also bridge the semantic gaps and holes obvious within their own separate discourses. He writes

‘the baker involutes time, circumstance, and fluctuations in the circumvolutions of the dough. She stretches the dough and folds it back, either cuts it or doesn’t cut it to fold it back, but she does not write. History writes on the tablet; the historian thinks it blank because he sees it is grey - he knows nothing of the time of the dough and the fantastic, secret spells scrawled on it. His own very simple tracks, the little circling flights of human letters, point out the brief laws and the clear sequences of analysis and synthesis. Yes, one can say that, one could also say other things, and still other things. Nets with large loops can also catch fish. No writing will ever catch up the present, patent and latent, complexities, black and white like Vesta’s jars’.

Emotional identification and intuitive making processes are to some extent indifferent to the barrier between reality and make-belief. If we want to speak about the work as an aesthetic object, we have to shift to the level of knowledge that concerns contingent truths. Michel Serres’s reminds us that the value of

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<sup>69</sup> Jivan Astfalck (2005) *Jewellery as a Fine Art Practice*, in *New Directions in Jewellery*, Grant, C. (ed.), London: Black Dog Publishing. The full version of the essay can be found in the appendix 1.

<sup>70</sup> Serres, M. (1991) *The Book of Foundations*, Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press

active imagination lies in its broadening of our understanding beyond what we encounter in our own lives and studios.



Working at the bench in my studio I do not speak for long periods of time, I look out into the garden - dreaming. I think of a nymph ... no one has ever seen. Plutarch called her 'Tacita'<sup>71</sup> - the silent one, the poor mute. Like other inspirational spirits of nature, nymphs did not allow human beings to watch and observe them uninvited. Humans caught in the act of spying on nymphs usually found themselves in a very dangerous and potentially deadly situation - madness was not an uncommon punishment. To open the mouth of such a being to force her to speak, would not only demand superior powers but also would be an act of 'unspeakable' violation and intrusion – surely such an act would be repaid by angry teeth. The narrative trope of the nymph links to the idea of another unfathomable and threatening dark space, filled with imagined teeth, that of *Vagina Dentata*, female libidinous genitalia, where the unsuspecting hero might lose his phallic dominance and patriarchal discourse usually comes to an end.

A much better way to awaken the dichotomous nymph and to return her to consciousness and language would be to kiss her awake, a successful strategy

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<sup>71</sup> Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases: 'tacit' - unsaid, unspoken, unpronounced, unexpressed, unvoiced, unmentioned, unarticulated, untold of, unsung; undivulged, unproclaimed, unprofessed, undeclared; unwritten, unpublished; understood, implied, inferred, implicit, between the lines; allusive.

employed by many fairy-tale princes, as in the story of the apple-poisoned Snow-white. It was Snow-white's venomously jealous step-mother, who, after several failed attempts at murder, found Snow-white in her hide-away, deep, deep down in fairy-land, living with her seven dwarfs. Masked by kindness and by innocence she succeeded to seduce Snow-white to eat the apple, red like blood and poisoned. Snow-white fell as dead, breathing still and beautiful as ever, but no sign of life could be detected and no sound came from her lips. Heartbroken dwarfs put her into a casket made of glass, until one day her adoring prince found her, kissed her awake again and returned her to life. Another, culturally more contested, story of a forbidden apple eaten against god's will, is the story of Eve. By eating the forbidden apple she earned us consciousness and lost us paradise - all because of one apple and a snake.

I am a Snow-white and an Eve myself, my gender, mind and self forever caught up in the history of reason and of fiction, I have lived the story's line and suffered its confusion. I bought four of the reddest apples I have ever seen at Marks & Spencer. From one of the apples I took, with great care, twenty-three bites. After drilling a hole into all of the pieces, I dipped them repeatedly in polyester resin. It took four coats until the apple pieces were sealed airtight and, after curing of the resin, I made a necklace from the apple-beads. I used paper-rope to string the beads and 18 ct gold to hold the beads in place, all beautiful materials in their own right, only I have changed their hierarchy in terms of value and of meaning. Apple, like other organic matter contains water and sugar, and even though it is sealed off from the air, life continues to take place. The essential feature, namely the apple-matter in the resin shells, was gradually disintegrating. Now after some time, only transparent blobs of resin and a little bit of apple-skin are left over. I cast my kisses in sterling silver and made a brooch to wear with the necklace. The remaining three red apples I pretended to eat; but then spat out the pieces repeatedly, which was filmed by my husband-prince. The film material was

looped to run for three hours and was shown alongside the other work. The necklace and brooch was exhibited in a glass case situated in a field of 100 red apples, which over a period of four weeks deteriorated into piles of mush, whereas the deterioration of the apple matter in the resin beads could not be detected - it seemed as if ageing did not take place. Two features of the work cannot be documented here, but have been very important to the reception of the work. The work was exhibited in the Atrium Gallery of the School of Jewellery (UCE Birmingham) and one was 'hit' by both sound and smell when entering the building. The sound coming from the video, the biting into the apple, suggested violence and it took some time for the viewer to figure out the source of that sound. At the same time the delightfully sweet and seductive smell of the rotting apples pervaded the building, which surprisingly only in the very last few days of the exhibition developed a sickening note (the caretaker who demanded much earlier that the work should be removed finally succeeded at this stage). *Tacita Dentata* was the first work I exhibited at the School of Jewellery after I first became lecturer at UCE. Never before had such work been exhibited at the School, the fact that an installation format, video and multi-media approach was used led to heated debates and arguments. The emphasis of the work on narrative and interpretative meaning instead of skill-based handling of precious metal was a challenge to some members of the staff group and other trade related visitors from the Jewellery Quarter. I became known as the 'apple-lady' in the Jewellery Quarter. Ken Quickenden, who at that time researched and developed *The Virtual Gallery of Contemporary Jewellery*, instigated a new category on the cd-rom to accommodate the work; the chapter was titled 'New Sites for Jewellery'.<sup>72</sup> As a result the culture at the School of Jewellery has changed and subsequently concept based work relating to the subject matter of jewellery design has been positively engaged with. In particular the MA Jewellery, Silversmithing and

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<sup>72</sup> Quickenden, K. (ed.) (2000), *The Virtual Gallery of Contemporary Jewellery*, CD-Rom, UCE/BIAD Birmingham, UK

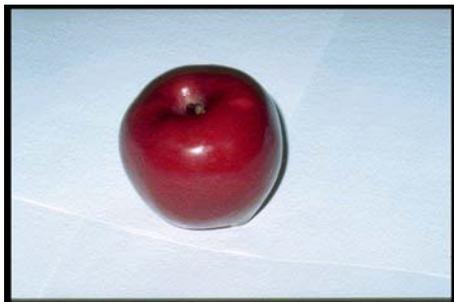
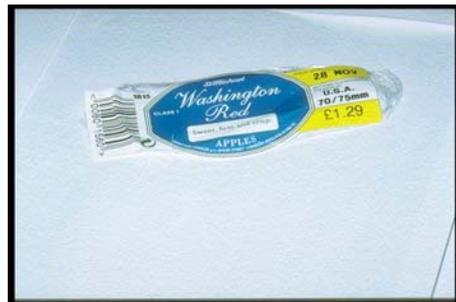
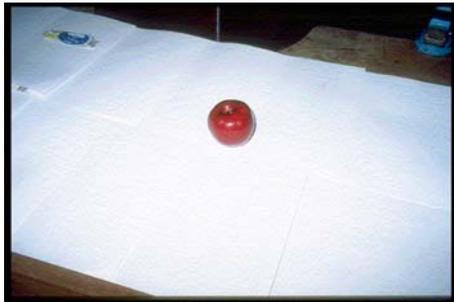
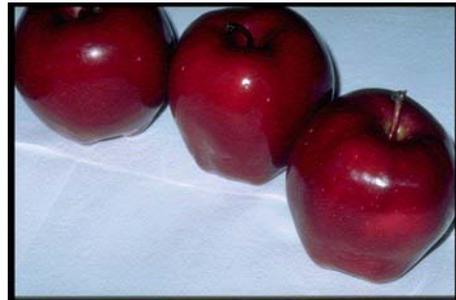
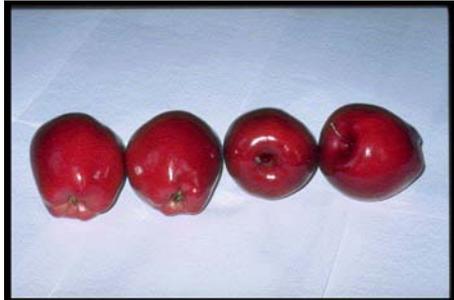
Related Products has become known as a course where concept based work with an narrative enquiry is encouraged to be researched and developed.

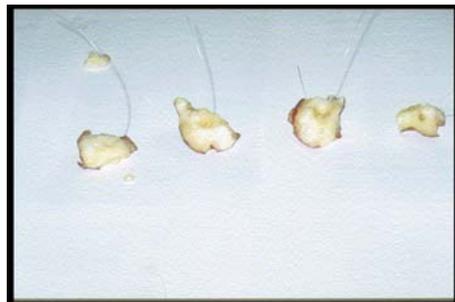
Using ideas from already existing stories, which through the process of making became 'my' story, motivated the work itself. After deciding on the materials and processes symbolic of the narrative dynamics, the making of the necklace happened in a consistent way. The essential features on which the work depended was the course of its inner logic and by following it negotiated an unknown space where world and I are anything but usual. To interpret the material character of the work with the aid of the usual concepts to do with jewellery design fails, not only because these concepts do not take hold of the thing-related features, but ultimately that when we force the created work into a pre-conceived framework we obstruct our own access to the unique being of the work. Something has been made and hands have been moving, fingers and lips interacted with material - apple, gold, paper, resin and silver; so much we know and appreciate as necessary truth, but neither properties of materials, nor of tools, not even of the emerging object are necessarily part of its meaning. The exploration of the idea of making as being essentially poetic opens a different, if somewhat complicated, possibility to utilise poetic self-reflectivity and fiction to generate creative work.<sup>73</sup> In addition, if we read the object as we would read a poem, conscious of its structure but at the same time allowing for our own projections and fictional investments, the hidden might unfold and imagination can be shared.

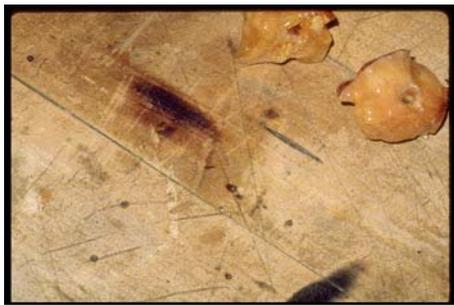
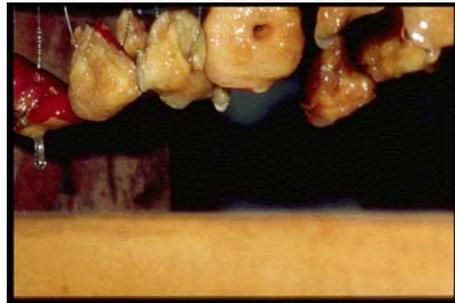
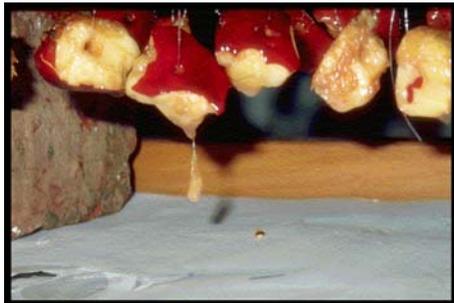
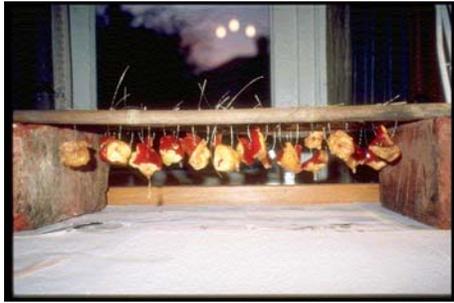
... at the end of the story Snow-white does return to consciousness and language, kissed awake with a jolt. She leaves behind an empty shell of glass and a little piece of apple – only that nobody knows for sure where she has been.

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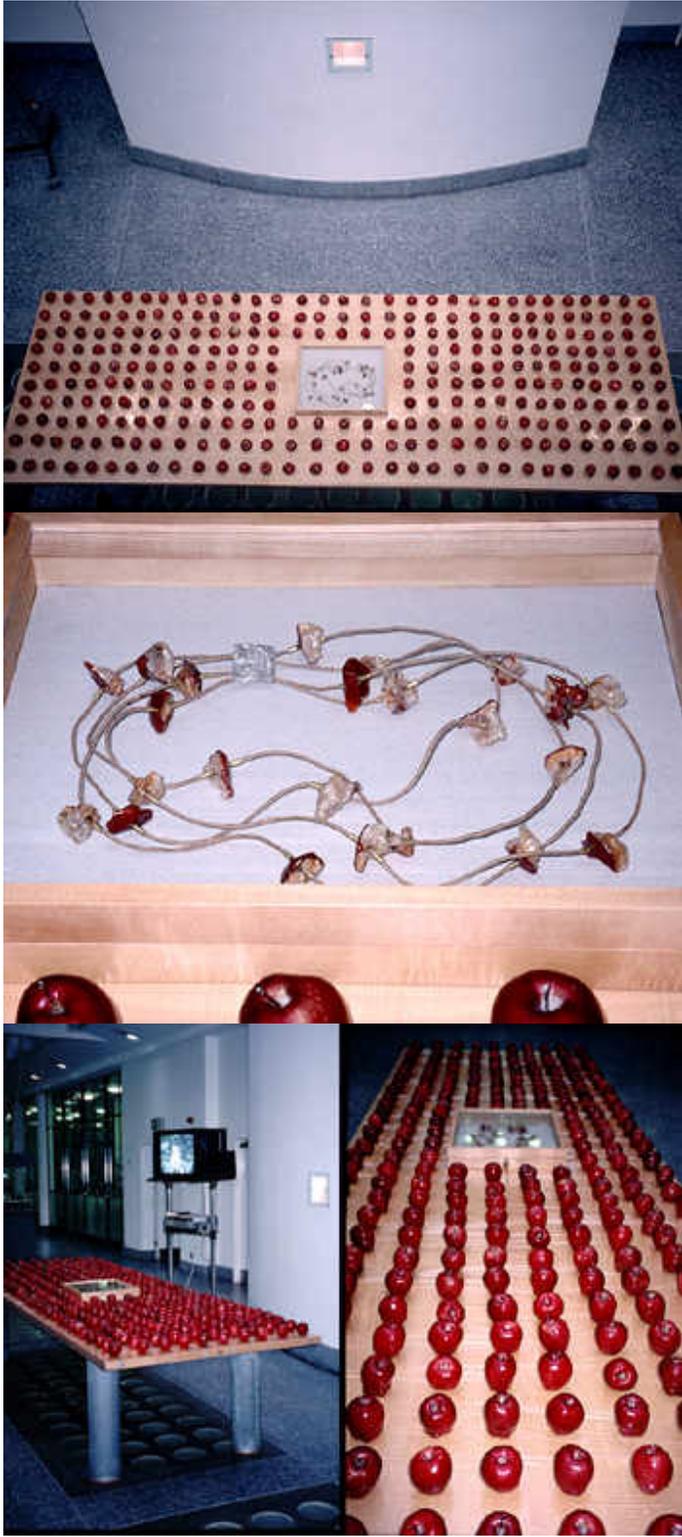
<sup>73</sup> Jivan Astfalck "Poiema - Work and Fiction" in Pamela Johnson (ed.) *Ideas in the Making: Practice in Theory*, Crafts Council Publication, London 1998











## 2.4 **On Memory and Loss** - crafts objects, cultural serendipity and fiction

My installation *On Memory and Loss* was commissioned new work for the project 'Acknowledged Sources'. The project was originated by David Kay, then at Southern Arts, and involved the collaboration of eight crafts makers from different disciplines and three museums (Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth; Hastings Museum & Art Gallery, Hastings; The Castle Museum, Nottingham). The museums have collections from diverse cultural sources and were open to engage with contemporary crafts practitioners to interpret these collections, formulate new responses and interact with the role of the museum itself. The aim of the project was to further understanding of the diverse cultural influences that have contributed to the development of contemporary crafts in Britain and to highlight some of that influence and the implications for artistic identity that arise from it. All makers shared an interest in the notions of historical memory in art, the status of objects in collections, framing ideologies of artefacts, aesthetic appreciation of crafts work from another cultural context than one's own, politics of access and power, the reinvention of identity through acquisition from others, appropriation and notions of authenticity. The participating makers have been asked to relate or create their own story in dialogue to one of the collection. The resulting installations were expected to include new work and where appropriate, objects and artefacts from cultures other than the makers own that represented an important influence on their work. I was able to re-visit a life-long fascination with American Indian culture by choosing to collaborate with the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery and gaining access to their collection of American Indian artefacts. *On Memory and Loss* was my first public commission of that scale and marked an important pivotal point in my work, an opportunity to apply research concerns to practice, and subsequently reaching a much wider and different audience than previously.

*On Memory and Loss* was about the childhood fantasy of a little girl who wants to be an American Indian, a mythological figure, ambiguous in gender and ideally a chief. I was particularly interested in the hidden undercurrent of subjective narratives that are brought to the appreciation of objects and our romantic investment in cultures other than our own. *On Memory and Loss* was not strictly speaking about American Indian culture in a historical, anthropological or socio-political sense, but rather was partly my response to the highly idiosyncratic collection of artefacts at the Hastings Museum and partly a self-reflective and fictionalised representation of my own childhood memories. I used a multi-media format to create a narrative space, in which the individual pieces of work, those which I had made and those which have been from the Museum's archive, interacted dialogically. I worked from the premises that Museums are shrines for the worship of objects, where we not only ritualistically engage in subjective art appreciation but also re-invest our ideas of cultural value, identity and the world around us. All museums, in my view, package objects in narratives, mostly stories of a historical past, to ideally enable understanding and further knowledge of a kind.

Parallel to my involvement with the Hastings Museum I took the opportunity to return to the American Indian collection in Berlin for some more research. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century this collection was recognised as one of the most substantial collection of American Indian culture outside North America. After the fall of the Third Reich and the division of Berlin, one half of the collection was 'abducted' by the Russian forces to what was then Stalingrad. In 1973 it was given to the GDR government and was housed in Leipzig. After the fall of the Berlin Wall both halves of the collection were brought back together again and now constitute one department at the Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz. Having left Berlin in 1985 I have not had the opportunity to see the collection as a whole before. Research and making of *On*

*Memory and Loss* finally necessitated a visit to this collection, whose scientific and historical approach stood in stark contrast to the Hastings collection. It offered a point of reference for me, which helped to clarify my own responses. Most significant for my interest was that the Berlin collection could only be entered by going through a room that addressed fictionalisation of American Indian culture. The room contained American Indian representation in film and literature, childhood games and toys, and examples of hobby club and conservationist activities. This strategy offered the viewer a tool for reflection before they viewed the historical collection, but also highlighted the fact that there exist two kinds of American Indian, one imaginary and the other real. This could not be more true than in the case of the American Indian collection at the Hastings museum, officially the collection appears to be motivated by historical concerns, but I detected much more personal agendas. I became deeply involved with what I considered to be a collection of fiction. The paintings, which frame the collection in the display, tell the story of the noble savage in a most sentimental and uncritically way; Grey Owl repeats his mythologized illusions a hundred times a day on video loops; the objects are crammed into their glass cases and the architecture of the display invokes an instant sense of claustrophobia. The potential of enabling empathetic understanding for a culture so very different to any European culture was rigorously undermined and all sense of the dauntingly spectacular nature of the American landscape removed. With time and more information though, I came to understand that the Hastings collection could be seen as a prime example for passionate investment of a group of individuals, whose obsessions and life stories are enshrined in the collection and have made it the way it is. I came to realise that these people had wanted to be American Indians too<sup>74</sup>...

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<sup>74</sup> Randal and Beatrice Callender were missionaries based at Makkovik, Labrador in Canada from 1919 to 1921. During their time in Labrador they collected many Inuit items reminiscent of Grey Owl on his

As I researched the archives and history of the collection I was struck by the fact that it was called 'Native Americans'; the notion of 'native' became my starting point from which I generated my enquiries and structured my artistic response. I found two photographs in the archives, which showed an 'English' girl dressed up in full American Indian costume, standing in the back garden of a typical red-brick terraced house. A native in her environment, no doubt, dressed up as a native of another kind. As girl-hood was part of my interest, flowers, dolls and

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winter trails, including snowshoes and goggles and seal and buckskin clothing. The Callender Collection was acquired by the Taylors in the late 1960s from their son, Alan, who lived in St. Leonards.

Archibald Belaney a.k.a. Grey Owl was born 1888, in Hastings. He was raised in Hastings by two aunts. Emotionally damaged by his father's rejection and stifled by the rigid upbringing by his aunts, Archie collected unusual animals and played "Red Indian" with his few friends. He immigrated to Canada in 1906. He wanted to live in the wilderness, near the Indians. He lived in Toronto, then in northern Ontario, where he learned to trap, canoe and survive in the wilderness. He returned to England as Grey Owl, an invented fictional personality, claiming that he followed the ways of the Ojibway. Grey Owl lectured, wrote numerous books and articles to publicise his views. Only after his death in 1938 it was realised that Grey Owl was not an Indian. The consequences of this revelation were dramatic. Publication of the Grey Owl books ceased immediately, and in some cases they were withdrawn from publication. This in turn had an effect on the conservation causes with which Belaney had been associated, affecting donations to conservationist causes badly. He did, however, leave a legacy of awareness of the wilderness that ranks him as one of the pioneers of the modern conservation movement.

Edward 'Ted' Blackmore was born, lived and worked in Eastbourne. As a young boy, Ted would roam the Downs, feathers in his hair and pitch his home-made wigwam and practise tricks learned from E.T. Seton's 'The Book of Woodcraft and Indian Lore'. Later in life, Blackmore became friends with the Mohawk Indian, Chief Os-ke-non-ton. The Blackmore collection was donated in 1983. It incorporates items from the Clare Sheridan Collection.

Born into a wealthy, and cultured family, Clare Sheridan was brought up at Brede Place in East Sussex and later, in the 1950s lived for a while in Hastings, as a well known writer and sculptor. After the sudden death of her son in 1937 she went on a pilgrimage to Montana and Canada, to find spiritual refreshment, and stayed with the Blackfoot Indians. During Sheridan's time on the Blood Reserve she was adopted into the Blackfoot tribe and was given many items that are now on display at Hastings Museum and Art Gallery. The Sheridan Collection was passed to Ted Blackmore in the 1960s, and this was in turn acquired by Hastings Museum in 1982.

Dr Colin Taylor lived and worked in Hastings, and provided invaluable support to Hastings Museum in developing its Native American holdings, including in 1982 the donation of the Plains Indian collection of Edward Blackmore. Taylor was an admirer of the conservationist Grey Owl. He was a consultant for Richard Attenborough's film 'Grey Owl' and was an inspiring founder and secretary of the Grey Owl Society. In addition to collecting, Taylor was a researcher and writer. He lectured widely in the United States and Europe. Just before he died in 2004, over 120 items from the Taylor collection were transferred to Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.

Information sourced from:

[www.hmag.org.uk/nativeAmericans](http://www.hmag.org.uk/nativeAmericans); [www.collectionscanada.ca/2/6/h6-230-e.html](http://www.collectionscanada.ca/2/6/h6-230-e.html);

[www.virtualsk.com/current\\_issues/grey\\_owl\\_bio.html](http://www.virtualsk.com/current_issues/grey_owl_bio.html)

jewellery came to represent the stereotypical and gendered. For that reason I choose six wildflowers, native to the British countryside, to visually and narratively frame and re-represent those archive photographs.



© Jivan Astfalck, *Natives*, ink-jet colour prints

In our contemporary culture we might regard any attempt to re-connect with a personal or cultural point of origin as nostalgic; we find ourselves much more in a world of shifting, flexible frameworks in which our origins, bonds, traditions, our sentiments and dreams, exist alongside other stories, other fragments of memory and traces of time. I am interested in the idea of a voyager, a person on a journey wandering or more likely meandering through the world of appearances and the abandonment of a carefully constructed cultural identity becomes identity itself.

The ambiguous nature of the notion of the author, the narrative incompleteness of life, the entanglement of life histories in a dialectic of remembrance and anticipation it all adds to the way in which we apply fiction to life. Because of the elusive character of ‘real life’ we use the help of fiction, a narrative invention and construction, to deal with imaginary and real events and to organise our experience of it. With respect for the particularity of the Hastings collection I denied myself the temptation to engage with the making of yet another set of simulated American Indian artefacts using contemporary aesthetics and materials... but opted to attempt the visual representation of the passionate investment, which I detected as an undercurrent to the collection.

On the wall next to *Natives*, I suspended two five-meter long necklaces. The first necklace consisted of small-scale silver representations of the wildflowers used in *Natives*. In the Hastings display the silver flowers were used with their stalks to achieve the length; later the stalks were removed for a much denser *DaisyChain*.<sup>75</sup>



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<sup>75</sup> The very laborious work was achieved with the assistance of Sabine Spangemacher, who at that time served a placement in my studio, funded by the DAAD.



© Jivan Astfalck, *DaisyChain*, sterling silver

The second necklace aimed to subvert the apparent sweetness of the first necklace, indicating the all-consuming uncritical and devouring nature of romantic assimilation. I collected the vertebra bones of three chickens, which we had eaten (with great pleasure) ourselves. The bones were cooked for a period of over six hours to remove all fat and then bleached to achieve an almost paper-like consistency. The bone sections and artificial pears have been strung loosely onto 0.5 mm fine-gold wire. The ambivalence between beauty and death represented in the necklace refers to one of the oldest pre-occupations in body decoration, where materials from plant or animal sources are thought of as having magical properties, which can be assimilated by wearing or eating into one's own body. For *On Memory and Loss* I choose a chicken not an eagle, an important animal spirit in most Native American tribal mythology. Apart from the fact that it would have been impossible to come by an eagle to eat, the chicken offered an

amusing twist to the pomposity of appropriated cultural meaning and offered a linguistic link to the term ‘chick’, an endearing synonym for girl or doll<sup>76</sup>.



© Jivan Astfalck *ChickBones*, necklace: fine-gold, pearls, chicken bones

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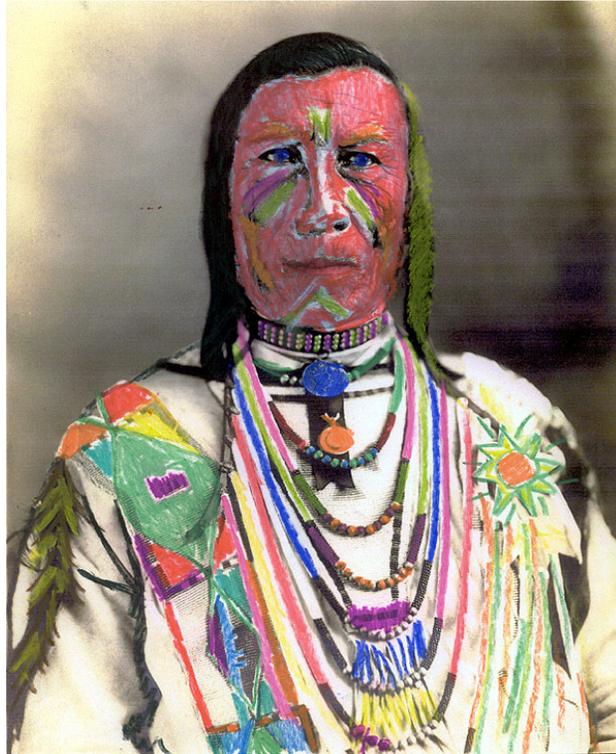
<sup>76</sup> ChickBones was later exhibited on its own and was chosen for publication in *Jewellery-Unlimited*, Association for Contemporary Jewellery, 2004 and *Wire Jewellery*, Stofer, H. (ed.), London: A&C Black, 2006

The eagle made another appearance in the next work *Chief Os-ke-non-ton*, a video. From the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, which has an extensive anthropological sound archive, I brought back the recording of the 'Eagle Song' of the Hopi Indians of Arizona, recorded by Otto Abraham in Berlin, on 15 December 1906 and I used the recording as the background music to the video. Chief Os-ke-non-ton was a Mohak Indian, befriended by Ted Blackmore. He played the role of the Medicine Man in *Hiawatha*, which was performed every year from 1925-1939 at the Royal Albert Hall in London. It was 'Ted' Blackmore and Chief Os-ke-non-ton who made the flaring warbonnet that Grey Owl wore on his British lecture tours. In 1932 Chief Os-ke-non-ton came to Eastbourne to proclaim Ted Blackmore, a brother of the Bear Clan of Mohawks, a rare honour, and presented him with a Mohawk necklace of bear's teeth, the badge of the clan, which is now on display at Hastings Museum. I found a very impressive portrait photograph of Chief Os-ke-non-ton in the Hastings museum archive, copied and digitally enhanced the image to use in the video.



The camera is locked full frame onto the sepia photograph. After a few seconds my hands are moving into the frame holding pastel crayons in gaudy child-like colours. Slowly the hands are colouring-in the photograph, much like a paint by numbers game. At first the body ornaments and costume are coloured, then the process gets more transgressive. The hair is turned blond, warts and scars are retouched, the eyes coloured blue and finally the skin is painted white. The camera rests on the uncanny face, ghost and clown-like at the same time, before another layer of bright red was put on top of the white skin...





© Jivan Astfalck *Chief Os-ke-non-ton*, still image from video

I could not bear the nastiness implied by such seemingly naïve re-decoration of an identity other than the mythologized stereotype. But there is no ‘happy end’ and I resolved the dilemma by making the hands bring in another transparent sheet of paper to hide the image. When in the next scene the paper is taken away again the original portrait is revealed and the whole process started again from the beginning, much like the continuous loop of cross-cultural reading, appropriation and assimilation<sup>77</sup>. The visual appearance of the final shot in *Chief Os-ke-non-ton*, opened up a range of reference points to figurative abstraction used in American Indian artifacts, especially those of the Hopi Kachina dolls, a much happier reference. I engaged in a debate with the curator of collections (a

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<sup>77</sup> I was aware that as a white European it would have been easy to get the work wrong. I felt reassured when at the opening of the exhibition my non-white friends, who have come to the UK for different reasons, could relate to this work. One of my friends burst into tears, saying that I managed to capture a dynamic she would not have been able to express in words.

different person than the one who curated Acknowledged Sources), who was of the opinion that the three Kachinas owned by the Hastings Museum are sacred artifacts and therefore should not be shown in public, the reason given why they had not been exhibited for many years and I was able to re-discover them in the archive. After I convinced the curator that Kachinas represent spirits - yes, but are also dolls made by fathers for their daughters I was allowed to show them alongside my work<sup>78</sup>. Surprisingly and by fortuitous coincidence all three of the Kachinas in Hastings show white paint on their faces too, which is not at all the norm.



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<sup>78</sup> The Hopi Kachina carver and jeweller Ramson Lomatewama wrote in an article for Native Peoples magazine Fall 1992 'It's breathtaking when the Kachinas come to the plaza to dance and sing their songs ... they bring Kachina dolls for the children. These are usually tied to long stems of deep green cattail, still moist from the distant waters. It's truly a wondrous sight, especially when the Kachinas give them out after the dance. You can feel the excitement radiating from the children, and you can see the anticipation in their eyes. I remember those feelings when I was that age. Hopeful that I too would be befriended by a Kachina, who might've brought something for me. When I stand on the rooftop above the plaza watching the girls admiring their dolls - and the boys, too - it reminds me of a pond that's full of life down there, with all the cattail around the edge of the plaza, reaching up, swaying in the light breeze. There is happiness all around.'

The other important visual reference from the final shot in *Chief Os-ke-non-ton*, I worked with, was to the pre-occupation of early Modernist artists with non-European cultures and the important influence that had on their then developing aesthetics<sup>79</sup>. To my great delight, a photograph of Max Ernst together with his rather extensive collection of Kachina dolls was printed onto the museums leaflet of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. Ernst was deeply interested in the world views and artistic production of tribal cultures, particularly Native American. After his emigration in 1941 to New York Ernst started to collect Kachinas, a passion he shared with Duchamp and Breton. Maybe he wanted to be an American Indian too...



Max Ernst with his Kachina collection, New York, 1942, Photo: J.Th.Soby

Ernst has been known, like so many other Germans, to have had his first fascinating encounter with the Native American cultures through reading the

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<sup>79</sup> Harrison, C., Frascina, F. And Perry, G (1993) *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, in association with The Open University

imaginary stories of Winnetou, Old Shatterhand and Nscho-tschi written by Karl May. Karl May published 'Winnetou I' (the first of a sequel of three) in 1892 to great commercial success<sup>80</sup>. May visited North America only once in 1892, well after the writings of his Winnetou books and did not visit the areas described in the books. His lack of direct experience was substituted by imaginative fictional accounts mixed with actual maps, travel accounts and some anthropological studies. His 'good guy' in the Winnetou books is a German (Old Shatterhand) who, in accordance with romantic ideals of the noble savage, helps his 'Red Indian' friends against, mainly white, aggression. For that he is adopted into the tribe and becomes Winnetou's blood brother<sup>81</sup>. Cross-cultural bonding works extremely well in the story till Old Shatterhand falls in love with Winnetou's sister Nscho-tschi. She was the only important female protagonist, but dully slain in a massacre and removed from the story to my great annoyance as a girl. It resulted in my belief that there was not much scope in being a girl and wanting to be an American Indian at the same time. Girls of my generation, growing up in the early sixties in Germany, could freely engage in boy's games and often refused the toy paraphernalia originally designed for them, but wearing the boy's kit instead. Luckily my father, who was a super-8 film enthusiast, in 1966, documented this. On a summer holiday in Demark he filmed us (me and my two brothers) playing Indians in the fields, me being the gang leader and wearing the best gear. I had this film sequence translated into video format and looped for continuous

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<sup>80</sup> Anecdotal evidence has it that Karl May is the best-selling German writer of all times. His books have been translated into thirty languages, there exists a very successful yearly festival the Karl-May-Festspiele and many films have been made. The early films, predating the Italian 'Spaghetti Western', from the early sixties have only recently been re-published on DVD. May had many famous admirers, including Adolf Hitler, Albert Einstein, Herman Hesse, Heinrich Mann and Karl Liebknecht, but remained almost unknown in the English-speaking world.

<sup>81</sup> An important ritual copied by countless children to turn their favourite friends into brothers and sisters. My own experience was pretty painful and consisted of cutting across our hands with a knife and then mixing the blood. At the age of seven this was done with utmost sincerity and resulted in a life-long bond.

showing. The video, titled *Kinder* was shown inside the lower compartment of a display cabinet, with the door slightly ajar<sup>82</sup>

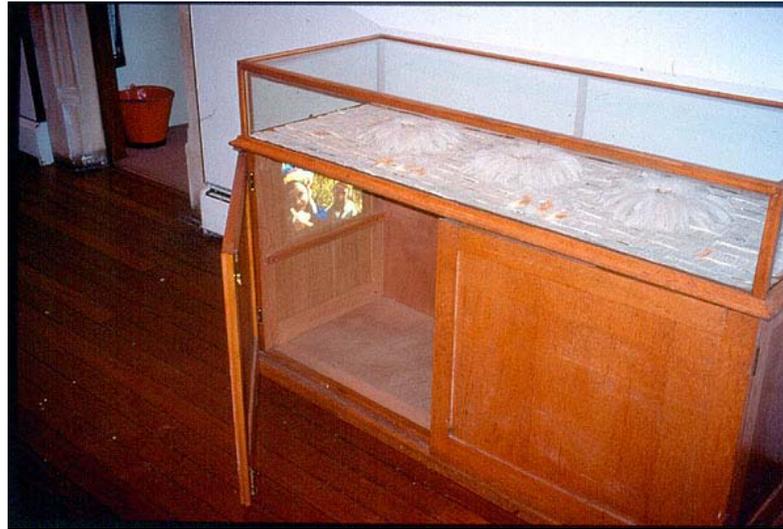


Unlike need or demand, which can be partially satisfied by a particular object, the only object of desire is an originally lost object. The memory of a lost childhood, the mythologizing of its happiness and carefree absence of cynicism, for example,

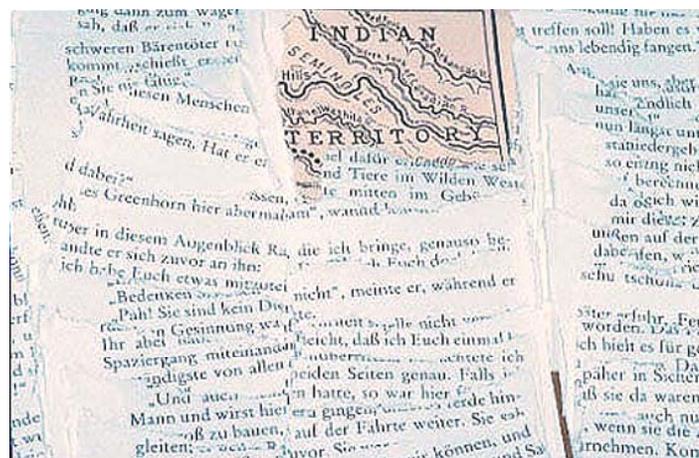
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<sup>82</sup> The work had the greatest success with visiting children, who thought that this was cinema for little people. On a few occasions the museums guards had to removed children, who had climbed into the compartment for better viewing.

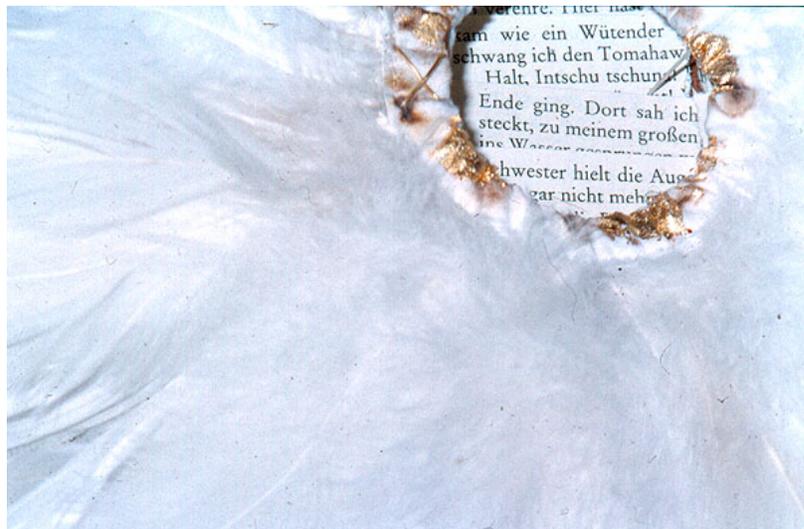
is a particular powerful fictional trope in this context and comparable with the longing for another culture.



In the top part of the display case, under the glass, I layered out 3x3cm square ripped pieces of a whole book of Winnetou I in German. I carefully rearranged the ripped text, looking out for new connections and textual revelations, mindful that for my English audience the text would be only perceivable as a background pattern.



I made three white feather bracelets *Lightness of Being*, specifically for girls to be worn, and laid them out on top of the textual ground. And so the exhibition ended where it all began...



© Jivan Astfalck, **Lightness of Being**, three bracelets: feathers, fine gold, fabric;  
torn and reconstructed text from the book 'Winnetou' I by Karl May

## Chapter 3

### Learning, Teaching and Communities

#### Applied Narratives

I regard metaphoricity and fictional investment as a way of cross-mapping the conceptual system of one area of experience and terminology with another, suggesting a coherent system created for understanding knowledge in terms of critical reflection and conducive to new creative articulation and representation. I became interested if this dynamic only functions within my own self-referencing studio methodology or if it can be adapted to facilitate knowledge acquisition and self-reflective learning in others too. Conceptual reflections prompting this new interest had been previously considered in Ricoeur's reference to Frye's critical method, which consists of the differentiation between 'centripetal', when criticism moves inward towards the structure of the work and is focusing on the aesthetic function of literature, and 'centrifugal' when it moves outward towards society, a culturally determined framework of reading and the social function of narratives.<sup>83</sup> It is also reflected in Bakhtin's idea of dialogism<sup>84</sup>. The two projects I am going to describe in this chapter were suitable to integrate into my research because they were motivated by the dynamics described above, extended and innovated my studio practice and allowed for the idea of teaching as creative practice. The projects allowed for my continued preoccupation with placing objects in installation contexts and, even though they have been generated

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<sup>83</sup> Referred to in footnote 4 in chapter 1; Frye, N. (1971: 25) *The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

<sup>84</sup> Referred to in footnote 8 and 9 in chapter 2; Bakhtin, M. (1981: 263 and 669) *Discourse in the Novel*, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin: University of Texas Press

together with large groups of people with whom I shared the aesthetic decision making process, were consistent with my previous work.

### 3.1 **Lifelines** - myth and meaning

I had inherited a BA year 2 project when I started teaching at the School of Jewellery in Birmingham. The project addressed figuration, meaning and issues aligned with superstition, symbolism and ritual, aiming to give students an experience in this area of jewellery design history and practice. Over the three following years, I re-contextualised the project and brought it into line with contemporary concerns and debate. The objectives were to facilitate and enhance experiential learning through a practical project that viewed design development in a narrative and self-reflective context, and to introduce critical practice in a soft and unthreatening way to under-graduates. It was anticipated that at the end of this project, students should be able to better position their work with reference to diverse social, cultural and interpretative issues and appreciate the relationship between a subjective artistic position, a wider cultural context and the production of contemporary decorative objects. In addition, the project served to introduce a variety of theoretical concerns, aspects of art historical discourse and a different approach to the process of generating ideas and develop design. In 2003 I divided the projects into two parts, the later concerned with individualised studio practice, the first titled *Lifelines* to allow for collaborative and collective experience. Since, *Lifelines* has been accomplished at the School of Jewellery, University of Central England twice, in 2003 conducted by myself and in 2006 conducted by my colleague Zoe Robertson. In 2003, funded by a grant from the Erasmus programme for teaching exchange, Professor Theo Smeets, head of the jewellery department of the Fachhochschule Trier in Idar-Oberstein, Germany and I exchanged teaching positions and I conducted *Lifelines* in Germany. In 2006

I was invited to Belfast to run *Lifelines* with the BA jewellery students at the University of Ulster.<sup>85</sup>

The conception of *Lifelines* was based on the idea, formulated by Claude Levi-Strauss, that a myth can be reduced to its smallest part. Levi-Strauss's component parts called 'mythemes' often refer to one event or position within the story, the narrative core of the myth.<sup>86</sup> His methodology consists of laying out these 'mythemes' so that they can be read diachronically, like the linguistic features, as they change through time, and synchronically, like linguistic features, or events of a particular time, without reference to their historical context, simply the structure itself, which can exist in the past, present, or future. In other words the story or narrative of the myth can be seen to exist on the diachronic, a left-to-right axis, in non reversible time, and the structure of the myth can be seen to exist on the synchronic, up-and-down axis, in reversible time. This idea was spatially represented in *Lifelines* by a grid-system of vertical hanging rope lines, whereby each line represented the life of one student. A series of 10 variable, designed and highly subjective narrative objects were attached along each individual line, which more-or-less aligned horizontally with the objects of the other lines.

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<sup>85</sup> My experience at the University of Ulster was fundamentally different. Apart from the fact that the level of study skills was not sufficient enough for textual studies, the majority of students wished not to engage with the project on an autobiographical level, however enthusiastically they engaged with the making of narrative objects. With hindsight, I guess I was naïve to think that young people carrying the invisible traces of history, trauma and paranoia, would feel safe enough to expose their own personal narratives. Should I again have the opportunity to do this project in a conflicted social context, I would have to reconsider what other veiling mechanism can be integrated to provide a greater sense of anonymity for the participants.

<sup>86</sup> Levi-Strauss, C. (1994: 206-230) The Structural Study of Myth, in *Structural Anthropology 1*, London, New York, Victoria, Toronto, Auckland: Penguin Books

Levi-Strauss, C. (1994: 144) Reflections on the Work by Vladimir Propp, in *Structural Anthropology 2*, London, New York, Victoria, Toronto, Auckland: Penguin Books



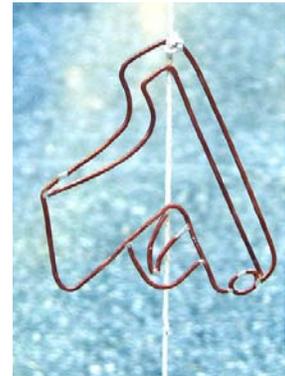
*Lifelines*, Atrium Gallery, School of Jewellery, BIAD, UCE Birmingham, 2003.

Keeping in mind Ricoeur's point (who despite being cautious towards Levi-Strauss's ideas acknowledges his contribution to identifying the existence of enduring symbolic structures in societies resistant to historical change) that one must not forget that in our society symbolic systems change and evolve over time carrying within themselves different layers of reinterpretation. He goes on to say that there exists a dynamic 'to create meaning from a common mythical heritage, to receive a tradition and re-create it poetically to signify something new'<sup>87</sup>. A 'mytheme', however is understood as an unchanging element that is shared with other related 'mythemes', which in turn are re-assembled in complicated relationships like a molecule in a compound. Levi-Strauss regarded myths as a

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<sup>87</sup> Ricoeur, P. (1991: 471) Ricoeur, P. (1991: 471) *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, Valdes, M. J. (ed.), Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf

system that codifies knowledge based on an understanding of reality, that links fundamental cosmology with everyday experience; a structured system of signifier.<sup>88</sup> He believed that the system of meaning within mythic constructions parallels closely that of a language system, but also in addition exists on the level of the story that myths tell. That story is special, because it can be translated, paraphrased, while poetry is that which cannot be translated, or paraphrased. The story can be condensed, expanded or manipulated without changing its basic structure, an idea that lends itself easily to visualisation and representation. Furthermore, using the English language, 'mythemes' can be read as 'my themes', - an amusing word game, but surprisingly also an inference towards subjective interpretation; linking post-structuralist methodology to hermeneutic possibilities. Which implied to me that once we have found the 'mythemes' or 'my themes' we can interpret them in an almost infinite number of ways. This might vary from person to person, depending on how the story is read.



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<sup>88</sup> Levy-Strauss's methodological approach to the creation of myths describes a very different perspective to the psychoanalytical Freudian perspective, which would regard the myth as being motivated by psychological dynamics.



By way of introducing the students to the project, they were given Levi-Strauss's text 'When Myth becomes History' to read and under tutorial supervision disseminated the text.<sup>89</sup> The main aim of the seminar was to enable students to appreciate the idea that that what we might consider to be a historical account could be regarded as the mythologized narration of an event, situation or occurrence; and that by the same token that what we might consider to be mythological fiction might in fact contain historical content and information. In the discussion period the students were encouraged to relate this phenomenon to their own life experience. The seminar raised the student's understanding that mythologisation is not something that only happened in the past, at places far away or in books, but that we can identify mythologisation on a daily basis in everyday life. Furthermore, the point was raised that critical awareness can offer resistance to manipulation and a better understanding of historical fictionalisation, as well as offering the possibility to use this new understanding in the creative design process and the representation of emotional investments and content.

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<sup>89</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss (1978: 35) When Myth Becomes History, in *Myth and Meaning*, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978



Levi-Strauss says

I am not far from believing that, in our own societies, history has replaced mythology and fulfils the same function, that for societies without writing and without archives, the aim of mythology is to ensure that as closely as possible - complete closeness is obviously impossible - the future will remain faithful to the present and to the past. For us, however, the future should be always different, and ever more different, from the present, some difference depending, of course, on our political preferences. But nevertheless the gap which exists in our mind to some extent between mythology and history can probably be breached by studying histories which are conceived as not at all separated from but as a continuation of mythology.<sup>90</sup>

Myths are often universal, about unexplainable occurrences, nature phenomena or deep-rooted political shifts, involving unfathomable emotions and complicated interrelationships of peoples and nations. If we think of Greek Mythology, for example, grand scenarios of life and death are being told within the framework of, maybe not lived experience, but on a human scale which makes it easier to relate to. Nature becomes a person, gods squabble like teenager, heroes are psychopaths etc. The structural scenario is played out in a multitude of narrative

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<sup>90</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss (1978: 42f.) When Myth Becomes History, in *Myth and Meaning*, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978

possibilities, which involuntarily imply contradictions. Such contradictions might consist of believing in two precisely opposite things, such as the collective and the individual, selfishness and altruism or the critical and the romantic. The students, who took part in *Lifelines*, were offered a creative and safe space in which they could explore these contradictions



Considering the idea that there is, after all, not that much new in human life, but that artistic innovation can be achieved through re-configuration and re-interpretation, the students were asked to explore their design development in terms of narrative representation, which for most of them was completely new territory. They focused on the significance of materials and form, how their material knowledge might relate to their use of private and/or collective symbolism, and the relationship between abstraction and figuration. The students were asked to identify 10 significant points, situations, stories or concerns from their own lives, points which they thought were representative and related to their sense of themselves. They were encouraged to investigate creatively how their

'my themes' might have influenced their sense of identity and their attitudes towards the collective e.g. partnerships, families, learning communities, national communities, as well as communities of thought, idea and aesthetics.



The objects have been laid out, or rather hang in space and can be interpreted in a variety of ways, depending on the level of engagement the viewer would be willing to bring to the work. From afar, the installation might be read as a rain of toys, playful, colourful, and almost innocent; but zooming into the reading of individual objects and allowing for a deeper level of sincerity, other qualities begin to be perceptible. Many of the objects here tell a story, which we the viewers can easily read and follow, other objects are much more idiosyncratic and use an almost secret visual language. However, all objects are charged with emotions and even though we might not get the meaning of each and everyone of them, we can perceive the commitment and pleasure with which they have been made. Considering that a large part of art/design/craft education in Britain is either focused on product development, which by its very nature is geared towards success in the world of trading, or individualised studio practice, the relational and social function of art is often neglected. In that respect, narrative exploration

providing the motivation for the making of artefacts, and collaborative projects, like *Lifelines*, can offer a particularly fruitful strategy to engage with and explore social and relational aspects of artistic production and enhance experiential learning.



Even though my research favours hermeneutic theory over psychoanalytical approaches, I found Tillman Habermas's writings in *Geliebte Objekte* conducive to my research interests; his approach respects the nature and validity of material exploration and application in the framework of creative production and explores these levels of engagement as enabling functions in the formation of psychological integration and learning behaviours of young adults. Habermas explains

'different to day dreaming and escape, or rather the retreat from every day life, creative activity necessitates a turning of attention and activates exploration, a deeper acknowledgment and consideration of reality, in as much as the creative act reshapes reality. In the creative activity it is not enough to surrender to the spontaneous ideas of daydreaming. More importantly the feasibility of such ideas needs to be judged from the perspective of the material, which is to be transformed, and from the critical perspective of an audience's aesthetic considerations. Such judgements in turn need to feed back into the creative process. In so far as this would allow a critical 'I' to be part of the creative process, an 'I' that plans instrumental work procedures and judges the object aesthetically. Creative production differentiates itself from daydreaming through the self-critical change of perspectives, which facilitates the shift from idiosyncratic product to a cultural object'<sup>91</sup> (my translation).

In 2006 *Lifelines* was invited to be exhibited as part of the 'Wissenschaftliches Colloquium zum 3. Idar-Obersteiner FormDiskurs 'Schmuck - Denken 2 / unterwegs zu einer Theorie des Schmucks' in Idar-Oberstein, Germany'<sup>92</sup>. The invitation provided the opportunity to exhibit *Lifelines* outside of the educational

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<sup>91</sup> Habermas, T. (1999: 402f) Kreativitaet: Formen und Schreiben, in *Geliebte Objekte. Symbole und Instrumente der Identitätsbildung*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp

<sup>92</sup> Scientific Colloquium for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Idar-Oberstein Form Discourse *Thinking Jewellery - On the Way to a Theory of Jewellery*

framework in the public realm. Due to the committed lobbying of the city's representative for cultural affairs, the main branch of the 'Sparkasse' (one of Germany's banks) invited *Lifelines* to be exhibited in their main reception area. This took *Lifelines* right into the every day life, and allowed for some previously hidden potential to emerge, in as much as it transformed the tediously boring public space of the bank into an interactive event, very much to the delight of all, the staff of the bank, visitors and us.



Before...



and after...

In the continuation of the project, when the emphasis shifted back from the collective experience to individualised studio practice, the students were able to build on their experience gained from making *Lifelines*. They used metaphoricity and fictional investment as design strategy that allowed for cross-mapping iconographical as well as autobiographical material. They were asked to identify contemporary issues to do with the complex relationship of myth and history and to proceed in the creative articulation and representation of giving shape and form to their identified themes and critical reflection. To reconfigure the creative process and to allow for narrative content to motivate the work offered a new and different learning experience of the students. The project gained continuously high ratings in the student evaluation questionnaires. Especially the perception of ‘meaning’ in the work was positively commended upon. It raised the level of motivation for some of the students, who elected to use this way of working in the later part of their BA programme.

### 3.2 The Meeting of Hands and Hearts

The project *The Meeting of Hands and Hearts* was a collaborative ‘action research project’ that had been developed in the context of the exhibition *Self*, which started touring in the UK in 2004.<sup>93</sup> The practice of ‘action research projects’ had been developed by ‘Craftspace’ to contribute to the curatorial strategies as a means to explore exhibition themes, widening access and addressing educational concerns.<sup>94</sup> The project focused on the exploration of identity, drawing upon narratives of memory, experience and sense of self, by using a variety of crafts practices as a means of engagement. The organiser of the project Andy Horn stated that ‘participatory practice enables us to initiate and explore processes of making and to articulate ideas within the making. We consider making to be a multi-dimensional and transformative process, inclusive of both materials in relation to processes and the creation of meaning. In addition to the explorative nature of our exhibition programming themes, it enables us to initiate dialogue about the contexts of social practice and of how craft is situated within the world beyond the immediate object.’<sup>95</sup> The background debates that happened between the arts professionals and prospective artists at the time of formulating the project were deeply concerned with questions of access and participation in the appreciation of artistic practice, about perceived exclusions relating to class, labour, caste, economics, social behaviour, cultural values, changing gender roles

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<sup>93</sup> For *Self*, I was also commissioned to make new work, which I will expand on in the next chapter.

<sup>94</sup> Craftspace is an agency in Birmingham that is working to increase opportunities for makers as well as access to and understanding of contemporary crafts for all ([www.craftspace-touring.co.uk](http://www.craftspace-touring.co.uk)). The following is quoted from *Are Sockets the Same in Shanghai? Case Studies of International Arts in the West Midlands*, Arts Council England (2006): ‘Jivan Astfalck, originally from Germany, now teaches at the School of Jewellery in Birmingham. Her experience is a prime example of how the project helped her develop her practice. It took her through five stages, from accepting the commission, leading a project team, the academic dissemination of the programme, international showcasing and profile raising, and the publication of a catalogue which included her work and was seen by an international audience.’

<sup>95</sup> Astfalck, J., Horn, A. & Paxman, K. (2004) ‘Whose Jewellery is it anyway?’ in *Challenging Crafts*, Gray’s School of Art, The Robert Gordon University

and status. Questions were raised about the cultural validity of the domestic, applied crafts and art practices that exist purely as idea, all of which challenge critical discourse and question the status of the object. The idea of a participatory practice challenged perceived boundaries and territories and related crafts practice to other socially motivated practices within contemporary art, aligned with the marginal and hybrid.<sup>96</sup>

The artists chosen for participation in both the ‘action research projects’ and the exhibition engaged all in hybrid artistic practices informed by specialist craft knowledge relating to either jewellery or photography. The choice of crafts media aimed to enable the participants of the projects and visitors to the exhibitions to relate their own experience and knowledge to the reading of the work. Furthermore the artists were chosen for an emphasis, in their already established studio practice, to engage with referencing familiar or everyday experiences, either generally or for a particular cultural group. The research process investigated perceptions and experiences of jewellery art that are often formed by photography, in which jewellery is specifically framed, depicting objects of personal importance, which are significant in the construction and mediation of our lives. Jewellery has the particular capacity of signifying meaning in the context of identity and the body. The ‘action research projects’, the way Craftspace are conceptualising and developing them, are meant to generate investigations and creative processes within the lives of other people, who are not professional artists. The collaborating organisations, which host these projects have had already some, if limited, experience with art activities; some of their motivation to engage with these projects originated from their aim to develop long term strategies to work with arts organisations in Birmingham.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Astfalck, J., Horn, A. & Paxman, K. (2004) ‘Whose Jewellery is it anyway?’ in *Challenging Crafts*, Gray’s School of Art, The Robert Gordon University

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*

I was interviewed for the ‘action research project’ hosted by the ‘Community Integration Partnership’ (CIP) in partnership with the ‘Midlands Refugee Council’ (MRC). CIP is a resource centre and safe place for many women who use the advice of the Council. Those who wanted to work with us had achieved a nominal level of settlement in Birmingham, which was by no means guaranteed.<sup>98</sup> Most came from traumatic backgrounds and did not come to Birmingham because they wished to do so. Without a clear sense of home and often bereaved, they struggled (and still do) with their sense of identity and future prospects. Groups like this are often publicly vilified in the press and labelled with many stereotypes and negative imagery. Craftspace, CIP and MRC were particularly interested that I would bring experience of cultural transition, the struggle to come to terms with a new language, new sets of social conventions, manners and the necessities of making a living to the project. Aspects of my studio practice that revolve around questions of identity and meaning were already recognised. My collaborating artist was Kate Paxman, who had before worked with gender specific groups of different cultural backgrounds, using photography and installation to look within the inner spaces of people’s lives.

Similar, but different, to my experience in *On Memory and Loss*, the desire to reconnect with a personal or cultural point of origin had to be abandoned right from the beginning of the project in favour of more flexible narrative framework, which we, the artist and arts organiser, and the participants could share. We had been firmly briefed not to ask any direct and probing questions about the past of the participants and to be sensitive towards any conflicted issues. At the same

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<sup>98</sup> 'The beauty of the project has been that it has brought together women from different backgrounds and cultures. The Community Integration Partnership values a holistic approach when working with women and this activity has fed into the organisation's values and ethics and has introduced new ways of working. Specifically it has enabled us in our work in breaking down barriers, raising confidence and encouraging the integration process', quoted from public relations material, Dally Panesar, Manager, Community Integration Partnership, 2004.

time the theme of the project related to cultural transition, identity and by extension a sense of self. We were very conscious of the fact that everybody was bound to their histories and memories, as we are, and that we needed to create a space where all participants would feel safe enough to engage with their imagination and engage in creative activity. As art school educated artist we come from a privileged position; we take the playful engagement with the world of appearances for granted. We are used to create work methodologies, which not only engender the making of artefacts, but which also express highly complex relationships and reference systems, often much more eloquent than everyday language could achieve. Our project needed to be designed for people who did not necessarily share this attitude, who had a very basic idea of what art might be (if that at all mattered to them, which we doubted), who spoke a wide variety of languages, none of which we were able to understand, and who, at the beginning at least, have been much too shy to speak at all. At the same time it would have been pointless to surrender our own identities as artists, our own research interests and aesthetic ideas, in favour of providing a 'good' experience and therapeutic benefit, for which we were not qualified anyway.

The debate about what our role as artists in this context was continued all throughout the project. It demanded of us continuous questioning of ourselves, our prejudices, values, aims and objectives. To do so we divided our time; in the mornings we worked with the participants and used the remaining time in the afternoons to debate what had been happening in the process, modifying our methodologies as we went along. The organisers, CIP and an independent evaluator, who recorded the participants' personal responses to ascertain the project's benefits, supported this continuous self-reflective process. We aimed to create a project where all participants were collaborators, not consumers, and to create work, which would survive critical scrutiny in a contemporary art/crafts environment.

In the interviews leading up to the project it had become apparent that some members of the CIP and MRC expected of me the direct making of wearable decorative body adornment. I was able to convince the selection panel that my work extends the notion of the traditional piece of jewellery and that I would be interested to use the project as an opportunity to explore my research interests of narrative structures, using crafts techniques as a way to explore the cultured body and its signification.<sup>99</sup> I devised a series of work projects that used narrative strategies throughout, where the participants could engage in a reflective and creative process without disclosing personal secrets, but which did not repress the existence of those either. The story structures needed to be universal enough for all to engage, despite hugely differing backgrounds. We could also not assume any specialist skills or crafts knowledge, but thought that as we were working with a gender specific group, certain crafts activities related to the domestic environment could be taken for granted, like for example skills that relate to the preparation of food and the making and mending of clothes. I viewed CIP's and MRC's highly enthusiastic intention to create a positive and life affirming experience, in the absence of political solutions, critically. Narrative, creative and reflective engagements such as these projects cannot (and should not aim to) remedy life's wrongs or have an impact on political circumstances. What they can do, at their best, is facilitate awareness of multi-layered and concurrent emotional investments and offer ways to view reality anew through narrative reflection. My own (romanticised) wish for the project was to create a bridge between the harshness of everyday reality and utopian ideal that such a project could engender

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<sup>99</sup> As I was also selected to make new work for the exhibition, it seemed only logical to aim for a closer relationship between my activities in the collaborative project and the work I was at that stage planning to make for the exhibition.

hope for the future. But first we had to face the daunting prospect of starting the project and to introduce everybody.<sup>100</sup>

And so we began our project by shaking hands...

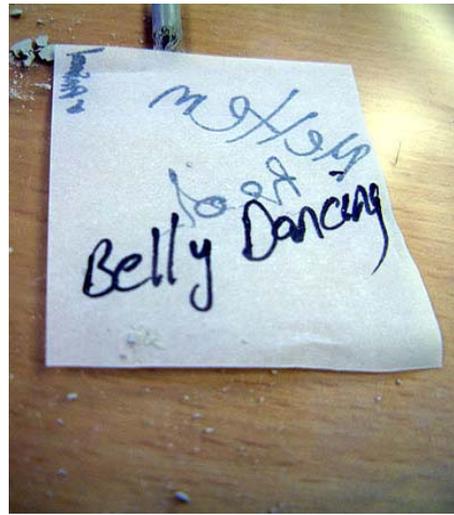


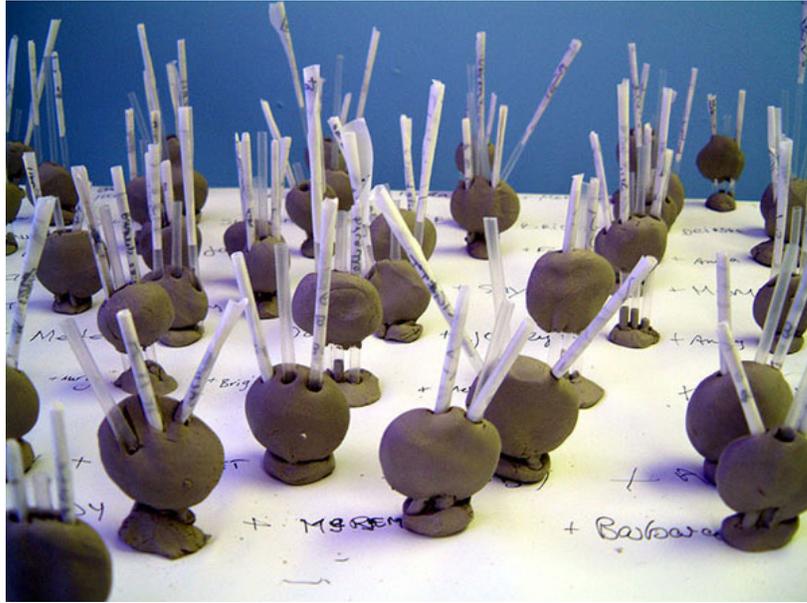
'Shaking Hands' might not be regarded as a gesture of universal cultural significance, there exist taboos that govern the relationships between women and men in some cultures and in other cultures only men might practice it between themselves. Working in a mostly female group, Andy Horn the project organiser from Craftspace and the husband of one of the women (who would not have come otherwise and later did come on her own) were the only men present, eased some of the complications we might have encountered otherwise. The meaning of the gesture, expressing the friendly but respectful meeting of the other person was significant to everybody. As we touched each other's hands in greeting we

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<sup>100</sup> All images of the project: ©Jivan Astfalck (2004) *The Meeting of Hands and Hearts*, Craftspace and CIP Birmingham

had a little lumps of clay between the so-called heart-area of the hands, making beads in the process. The clay retained traces of two sets of hand lines, unique to each individual. Two written scrolls of paper were added, containing each a little bit of information gained from each other about what the other person loved. Everybody who was at CIP that day got involved, the participants of the project, friends who happened to come along, all the treasured children, arts organisers, CIP and MRC employees.





We sealed the text pieces with pure gold...





Finally I chose a fluorescent pink, a strong colour visually emphasising the connection, nylon rope to thread together all our stories, and transformed the separate pieces, like prayer beads, into one whole necklace.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>101</sup> The necklace was included in *Ursprung* (origin), an exhibition that toured extensively in Germany 2004-2006, Forum fuer Schmuck and Design, with catalogue.



© Jivan Astfalck, *Origin*: Jivan meets Sukran, meets Falila, meets Kate, meets Meryem, meets Andy, meets Linda, meets Anita, meets Dorothy, and meets Jocelyne. Jocelyne meets Kate, meets Andy, meets Sukran, meets Marie, meets Brigitte, meets Deirdre, meets Meryem, meets Falila, meets Dorothy, and meets Yvette. Yvette meets Paramjit, meets Jocelyne, meets Brigitte, meets Falila, meets Anita, meets Meltem, and meets Barbara. Barbara meets Yvette, meets Dally, meets Deirdre, meets Shylet, meets Meryem, meets Andy, meets Jocelyne, and meets Marie. Marie meets Jivan, meets Paramjit, and meets Andy. Andy meets Jocelyne, meets Dally, and meets Anita. Anita meets Barbara, meets Yvette, meets Falila, and meets Brigitte. Brigitte meets Jivan, meets Marie, meets Dally, meets Andy, meets Anita, and meets Shylet. Shylet meets Andy, meets Jivan, and meets Deirdre. Deirdre meets Paramjit, meets Marie, meets Brigitte, meets Melten, meets Jivan, meets Anita, meets Dally, and meets Sukran. Sukran meets Meryem, meets Dally, meets Jocelyne, meets Andy, meets Meryem, meets Selmi, meets Linda, and meets Melten. Melten meets Dally, meets Linda, meets Brigitte, meets Andy, and meets Paramjit. Paramjit meets Dally, meets Kate, meets Jivan, meets Anita, and meets Linda. Linda meets Anita, meets Dally, and meets Kate. Kate meets Deirdre, meets Sukran, meets Meryem, meets Andy, meets Anita, and meets Dorothy. Dorothy meets Anita, meets Deirdre, meets Andy, meets Brigitte, meets Dally, and meets Falila. Falila meets Deirdre, meets Brigitte, meets Andy, meets Meryem, meets Barbara, meets Jocelyne, meets Anita, meets Dorothy, meets Kate, and meets Jivan.

Kate Paxman and I were delighted with the necklace, but deeply suspicious of the image of the handshake (shown earlier on). To us it looked like a 'Benetton' ad, clichéd and dubiously obvious. We had a process where we put all the images taken the previous week up on the walls and the group loved that image. They did not see what made us uncomfortable, and after discussions insisted on its positive value. They asked for copies of the image to have and subsequently we continued using the image, respecting their wish. The group perceived our activities in different ways as we did, but none of the work would exist without them. They were the perceiving, conscious, meaning-conferring others who helped, or forced, us to define our own world-picture and subsequently define our own view of our place within it. We came to understand this process not only as a psychological dynamic, but also as a social, socialising and socialised process.

In our research activities leading up to the project we had discussed stories and images of refugees, who carried objects of significance, photographs and jewellery, often sewn or placed within their clothing. This literal picture of carriage and of the body, of things worn close to the body, hidden from view, suggested the complicit power of objects to transcend and participate in the transitory nature of life. The transition in the life of the women, who come to CIP is supported with a lot of new learning, mostly citizenship and language skills, but we also watched briefing sessions where they learned about expectations of behaviour and manners. The most impressive I watched was a training session in the run up for a ministerial visit from the home office. This session was quite rigorous in the training of restrained manners, polite questioning and un-confrontational etiquette. Given that these people are at the mercy of a political decision making process they are not given access to, the responsibility for a successful meeting and, of course, the anxiety of future funding lay with CIP. My response watching this was to be reminded of school, structured and aimed at a positive outcome, but nonetheless patronising and to some extent repressive.



With this in mind I bought a set of five white shirts, which are sold at John Lewis department store. They are part of traditional English school uniforms and are sold in large sizes as well, referring to chest size rather than height or age. The girlish ‘Wendy’ collar signifies these shirts in terms of gender and difference to men’s shirts. School or office shirts of this kind remain part of a dress code in environments, where body is a learning or working body, not necessarily expected to be an expressive individualised body.

The idea related to my piece *White Lies* (chapter 1), but took on another dimension. It also related to the white skin layer in the *Chief Os-ke-non-ton* video (chapter 2), but with a more positive outlook. Remembering what they wrote onto the paper scrolls for the necklace we asked the group to develop images that represent those things. These images were embroidered on to ripped pieces of white paper, which in turn were stitched to the shirts. In this way the participant’s own unique, subjective sensitivity could reaffirm itself on the new skin-surface of the shirts. The paper embroidery went on in parallel to other, often very lively, activities at CIP and created a quiet and peaceful space of meditative making.



Andy Horn, the project organiser from Craftspace, often took part in the making sessions and it was in the embroidery sessions when issues of gender and socialised gender roles came to the forefront. Giggling and whispers tentatively introduced the issue, what is he as a man doing there, sitting with the women embroidering. All participants had experiences of working in women's groups, but all came from background where these activities would have been segregated from the activities of the men. This is just one example of wide ranging conversations that emerged in the space of shared activity, a learning of a different kind. CIP introduced us to the notion of soft outcomes, difficult to verify, but considered hugely important in the context of community related and socially motivated work.

In all of our activities the camera was always present. Right at the beginning of the project consent had been sought from the group. As mentioned before, we had used the camera to take images of the workshop activities and shared those with other CIP users by exhibiting them on the walls. These images looked very much like images one can find in family albums, snapshots that capture significant events, bonding situations, shared activities and memories. We aimed to explore the dynamic between the making of objects and the making of images, in the context of reflective practice, further. The project developed in very harmonious ways, with Kate being involved in the making and me using the camera. This, somewhat surprising, reversal of predestined roles gave me the opportunity to engage with creating images focused on people. Most images of my previous work show pieces in the absence of a person; in *The Meeting of Hands and Hearts* I came to consider the making of images as part of my creative practice motivated by my relationships and engagement with people (rather than objects). We asked permission to photograph some of the participants wearing the shirts, thinking that the shared narrative in each shirt changes in meaning when worn by different individuals. The request was greeted with hilarity and laughter, and a

joyful engagement in play and performance that would never have been possible at the beginning of the project. Wearing the shirts drew the work back to the physical being of each person and allowed yet again for the dialogue of the hand-made material object and its representation in a photographic format.



©Jivan Astfalck, *Dancing in New Shirts*, Craftspace and CIP Birmingham, 2004

From the beginning our intention was to provide a space where the participants could tell us fragments of their own stories and share moments of their own experience, open to the possibility of expression, without infringing on their difficult recent histories. This impulse came directly from our own working practice. Kate Paxman was drawn to explore the smallest (though always significant) details of our lives, whether in anecdotal memories or current conditions of all that we encounter. My work was preoccupied with the fictional quality we bring to the narration of our lives and the Bakhtinian idea that poetic complicity situates itself between discourse and the world and that in the case of the poetic image, the dynamic of the image takes place between the world in all its aspects and the object in all its complexity.<sup>102</sup> We were interested in the resulting complication that the artist then is faced with a multitude of interpretations already laid out by social conventions, a situation that results in a confusion of meanings, which surround both the object and the social situation. In response we engaged with the idea of the artist, professional or not, as a voyager, a person on a journey wandering, or more likely meandering, through the world of appearances; where the abandonment of a carefully constructed cultural identity might become identity itself and where the framing, selection and presentation of visual and artistic material reflects these shifting parameters. All through the project we had to negotiate the ambiguous nature of the notion of the author, the narrative incompleteness of life lived so far and the entanglement of life histories in a dialectic of remembrance and anticipation. And it was most interesting to find ways that allow this to manifest itself visually. We focused again on the snapshot for its particular aesthetic, its random content, lack of formality, absence of composition and the lucky coincidence of an image that captures something fleeting. Snapshots are evidence of what we visually collect, with a multitude of detail within the edges of each picture. The snapshot bears

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<sup>102</sup> Chapter 2, Bakhtin, M. (1981: 263) Discourse in the Novel, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin: University of Texas Press

testimony to a moment of lived experience and all the choices of detail that lie within it.

All participants were given disposable cameras and we asked them to take images of what they considered worth taking a photograph of. Before it was always us in charge of the camera; the handover of the camera was met with great enthusiasm. Most of the participants had come to Birmingham with no photographs of their past and the people they had left behind. The very fact that we asked them to make the image themselves gave them a very intimate significance and facilitated the participant's sense of control and self-expression. We initiated careful discussions about how each person could approach taking a set of pictures, which would narrate a description of themselves, showing people, places, things that they found important.



We then worked closely with the group to find narratives within each set of developed photographs. These narratives framed an immediate and current sense of self and the experience of life at present. Each member of the group took a candid and thoughtful approach, and the collected photographs truly reflected this. Their content told of family members, children, the housing situation as a

refugee in Britain today; the ways of looking at a place which is new and unfamiliar, going to church, preparing for family celebrations and weddings, shopping trips, and just going for a solitary walk with a snapshot camera.



We aimed to achieve qualities in the images that derived from the interweaving of digital and non-digital techniques. CIP already owned a networked set of computers. We used some of our project budget to install Photoshop Elements and to buy a scanner and printer. With support from CIP Kate taught the group how to scan, select, format and manipulate their images. Minute mistakes happened in the digital interpretation of information, these mistakes were reproduced, and further flawed interpretations took place. We enjoyed this random deterioration, pushing the legibility of an image to its limit. Furthermore, by investigating a photograph digitally it was possible to look very closely at all the incidental ephemera within each frame. When used in combination with film taken by disposable cameras, then cheaply machine-processed, digital techniques allow to recover some of the evidence lying within the frame by bringing to light areas, which otherwise might be regarded as void or are overlooked. There have been very interesting moments of crossover between hand-made and mechanical processes, when each set of photographs was closely contemplated. The

participants made small, torn paper frames through which to view their photos, a way of re-seeing and re-framing the visual information in the images. After visual editing was completed and choices had been made, the process was then repeated on the computer.

### 3.2.2 **Our Feast**

All along we had planned to lift the images out of their two dimensions into three-dimensional material, re-uniting them with crafts processes and transforming them into narrative objects. Kate and I bought a complete set of crockery for 20 people, plates, bowls, mugs and all. We were mindful of Judy Chicago's 'Dinner Party', which had become an iconic format for investigating dynamics of gender roles, femininity and the domestic; as well as the more recent dinner service by Magdalene Odundo, which focused more on double identities of cultural readings.<sup>103</sup> Previously established artist's dinner sets, we had in mind, re-appropriated aesthetics of the hand-made, the domestic and related to a non-gallery context. They did, however, remain pristine showpieces, untouchable, exclusive and unusable. We wanted to take this one step further and re-connect the static, designed and sculptural crockery pieces with lived experience. We wanted work that looked odd, confounded established aesthetic expectations and carried the chaotic traces that life always leaves behind; working again with a dynamic that allowed re-affirmation of the unnamed, humble and uncelebrated on the surface of the crockery pieces themselves.

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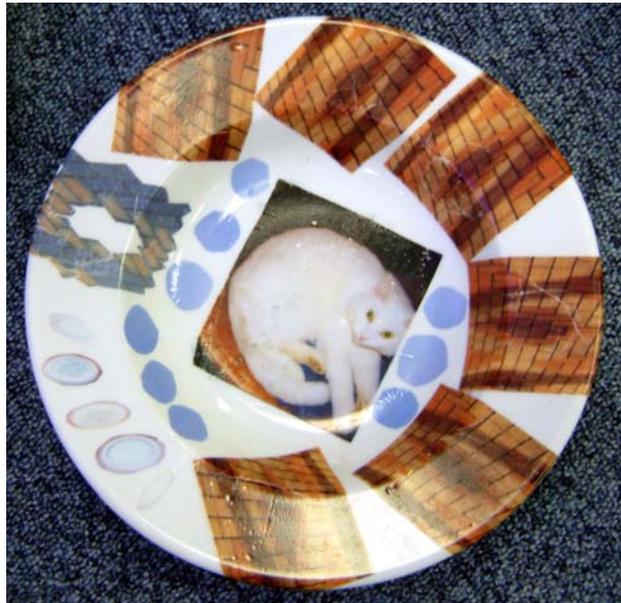
<sup>103</sup> Odundo's dinner service was exhibited at the Russell-Cotes Museum, part of *Acknowledged Sources*, at the same time as I exhibited *On Memory and Loss* at The Hastings Museum and Art Gallery. Using the format of the dinner service Odundo created an autobiographical installation, by looking back to Mombasa where she came from and gathering together the elements of her story.

We extracted the (by now computer manipulated) images that had been created and printed them onto decals, which were cut, collaged, pasted and applied to the crockery.





By using the images for aesthetic reasons the previously carefully constructed visual narratives got completely mixed up and our often very private images appeared in the collages of the others.<sup>104</sup>



Individual members of the group volunteered to prepare a meal such as they would cook at home for a special occasion; they did that with great pride, enormous care and commitment. Whereas I have to look into a cookbook, never having learned to memorise recipes, they had it all in their heads and had skills beyond expectation.

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<sup>104</sup> The image of my white cat *Apollo* was most popular, appearing in many pieces of the dinner set.

On the day of our feast we had food from ten different countries and many of the dishes inspired the telling of stories from childhood, about mothers and grandmothers. We also had tears, about one particular dish, which one of the participants had not eaten for so many years.





Life experience merged with aspects of performance, distinctions blurred between performer and audience, and the crockery pieces got thoroughly and satisfyingly wrecked in the process.



The filmmaker Joseph Potts made a video of the feast that because of his careful and sensitive editing went beyond documentation. The video was later exhibited along the other work and was presented at the Challenging Crafts conference to an international audience.<sup>105</sup> The video highlighted the performing aspects of the occasion. The crockery pieces transformed into mementos of a happening and we viewed the disrupting traces on the surface decoration as equally significant as the design process the pieces have undergone beforehand.

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<sup>105</sup> Astfalck, J., Horn, A. & Paxman, K. (2004) 'Whose Jewellery is it anyway?' in *Challenging Crafts*, Gray's School of Art, The Robert Gordon University.



As with the previous pieces we had made in this project, ‘the feast’ was the culmination of our curiosity about the interface between life experience and the making of work, a place that is un-fixed and in flow. Traditional dualities of high and low, performed and real, memory and presence got blurred, common identities of craft, design, art lost their boundaries in favour of life experience that enriched us all and enabled new understanding of our work.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> ‘Jivan, I want to write here about the profound effect the workshops – the handshake necklace and the embroidered symbols on paper – had on me, and on my understanding of the work that was beginning to generate from the weeks in Birmingham..... both the embroidery on paper where we sat and talked, and the slowing down of time whilst we sat and worked, and of the symbols pulled from lingering thoughts and memory that were discussed and shared, and the clay handshakes and introductions – ‘my name is ----’; ‘tell me something about yourself’, and the tentative drawn symbols, and those shared secrets, the rolled up fragments of gilded paper.....I found these workshops as performed as the Feast – a strong element of the performed, and the strength of the process informing the content of each piece, the process (the ‘during the workshop’ time, the ‘making’ time has become as important as the final pieces; and the traces, the connection of each hand of each maker to a completed work, a collection of many individual maker’s single touches – all of this an echo-symbol for the glimpsed traces we leave – and here is the link that has resonated with me between what you have creatively intended during the workshops, and what I hoped would be possible to concretely manifest – the indisputable image, the record, the documentation of an impulse, a decision, a choice, the mark of a distinct and unique individual.’ Quoted from an email by Kate Paxman, expressing the emotions invested in the project much better than my writing.

The closure of the project was the private view and celebration of *The Meeting of Hands and Hearts* at the Atrium Gallery, School of Jewellery in Birmingham, which was attended by all participants and collaborators.



The resulting evaluation report of the project emphasised the positive outcome of the project by canvassing the responses from all participants of the project. Subsequently CIP considered artists-run project provision as part of their remit and applied successfully for further funding. Quoting from CIP's web-site, 'art project working with professional artists to produce art for exhibition - using clay, metalwork, painting and other techniques',<sup>107</sup> had become integrated into what the centre prioritised to provide.

The documentation of the project was then exhibited alongside the curated part of the *Self* exhibition<sup>108</sup> and was featured in the accompanying catalogue. Apart from being exhibited in various venues in Birmingham the work was selected by *Aralis*, a non-government organization that promotes social inclusion and supports immigrant communities and refugees to access housing in Lyon and the Rhone-Alpes region. Having seen *Self* in Birmingham at the invitation of Birmingham City Council, they felt that the theme would be exactly right for the *Traces* Festival in Lyon in December 2005. *Traces* is an established festival organised by Aralis that highlights the lives and cultures of immigrant communities and refugees. Supported by the Arts Council of England *The Meeting of Hands and Hearts* was exhibited at *Traces* to enable the work to be seen in a new country and context. The exhibition was used to raise awareness of refugee and asylum seeker communities to the general public and to highlight the similarities and differences faced by the UK and France. The following is quoted from feedback by Laure Durrbach, Director of Communications at *Aralis* that we received after the exhibition: 'the quality of the exhibition and the atmosphere that it created as well as the interpretation within the exhibition (of the objectives,

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<sup>107</sup> Quoted from CIP's web-site <http://www.cip-uk.org.uk/page.asp?id=8>

<sup>108</sup> Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham; Bury St Edmunds Art Gallery, Suffolk; Piece Hall Art Gallery, Halifax; Ucheldre Centre, Holyhead, Anglesey; McManus Galleries, Dundee; Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham; Hove Museum and Art Gallery.

ethics, the qualities of engagement) enticed and interested all the visitors. The professional visitors, whose team of Andre Mitrovic (Head of Housing in Lyon) that you met and presented to, were very impressed by the respect, the creativity, the cultural approach of the exhibition that reflects on the many aspects of the life of the participants and the exhibition objectives (the opportunities to meet together, to develop their making skills, to learn life skills...). They are very ready and keen to develop similar methods of working. As regards general public, the visitors clearly appreciated its poetic, moving, significant qualities (they are recorded words), which are invested within, and carried through the project's ideas. They recognised the value within the project of process as opposed to an emphasis on the spectacular or the novel.<sup>2</sup>

## Chapter 4

### Body and object

#### Semaphores

#### 4.1 The body

This chapter expands on the relationship of the practical work, which I make to the notion of the body. The work generated in this research extended the traditional format of the wearable decorative object and refers dialogically to the body, either in its absence when exhibited, directly when actually worn or as a representation of a reflected enquiry about the body. One could argue that the body is always implied because of the physical nature of making. The hand-made crafts object (and those where a technological application has been used in a combination with the hand-made) carry the traces of the body's involvement, regardless on which level of cultural production they are subsequently disseminated. However, I am interested in those body-related objects that map out the demarcation lines, where body meets world; a place, or idea of a place, where narratives are invested in body-related objects with the aim to negotiate that gap, complexity, confusion or conflict.

In Nancy's essay *Corpus* I found a useful exploration of the notion of the body; a text that informed my way of thinking the body and influenced my studio practice.<sup>109</sup> Nancy says:

‘At times the body is the ‘inside’ in which the image is formed and projected (sensation, perception, memory, conscience): in this case, the ‘inside’ appears

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<sup>109</sup> Nancy, J.L. (1994) ‘Corpus’ in *Thinking Bodies*, Flower MacCannell, J. and Zakarin, L. (eds.), Stanford, California: Stanford University Press

to itself as a foreign body, as an object to be examined from the outside, as a dissected eye, or as the hallucinated body of the pineal gland. At other times, the body is the signifying 'outside' ('zero degree' of orientation and of the aim, origin, and receiver of relations, the unconscious): in this case, the 'outside' appears to itself as a thick interiority, a filled cave, a property prior to appropriation. As such, the body is the articulation, or better yet, the *organ* or *organon* of the sign: it is, for our entire tradition, that *in which* sense is given and *out of which* sense emerges. But as such, regardless of the perspective used – dualism of body and soul, monism of the flesh, symbolic deciphering of the bodies-, the body remains the organon, the instrument or the incarnation, the mechanism or the work of a *sense* that never stops rushing into it, presenting itself to itself, making itself known as such and wanting to tell itself there.' ... 'Either it is by the body and through it that signification occurs, and then signification falls within its boundaries, and is worth only what a shadow is worth in the cave, or it is from the body and on it that signification takes shape and is deposited, and signification never stops reaching toward this proper locus where it should endlessly curl up into itself.'<sup>110</sup>

Like many of the writers referred to in this research Nancy favours literature before philosophy in this regard. His reason is because rather than referring to the signifier and the signified in philosophy, in literature 'there is nothing but bodies'. Nancy specifies his terminology as the 'philosophical specification of literature', a literary, theoretical or critical understanding of a subject matter. The reading of Nancy's text is rewarding for the purpose of this research because he

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<sup>110</sup> Nancy, J.L. (1994: 19f) 'Corpus' in *Thinking Bodies*, Flower MacCannell, J. and Zakarin, L. (eds.), Stanford, California: Stanford University Press

I presume that Nancy's refers to the allegory of the cave used by Plato, book 7 of *Republic*, where he narrates waking up to the truth of reality about us.

identifies three components yielded by literature: fiction, by definition bodiless; bodies covered with signs; and the signified body:

‘One must think the thought of the body thus. A double genitive: the thought that is the body itself, and the thought we think, we seek to think, on the subject of the body. The body here – mine, yours – which attempts to think the body and where the body attempts to be thought, cannot do so rigorously. That is, it cannot give up signifying the body, assigning signs to it – except by allowing itself to be brought back to its own thinking matter, to the very place from which it thoughtlessly springs’.<sup>111</sup>

The difference in my activities to Nancy’s exploration is that thinking takes place in making, but my making signifies bodies all the same. Nancy offers an exploration that includes the body in pain, bodies of misery, hurt, tortured, deported and stretches his exploration across towards the joyful body ‘rejoicing in itself’. Reading Nancy brought back to me with a force that despite thinking through the mediated layers of culture, history and theory we are grounded in the physical - in our visceral sensations, like pain or desire, in our longings, fears, and our knowledge of the transience of bodily existence. Making narrative work that maps out the demarcation lines where body meets world happens at the node between complex referential networks, in between the physical world of making and the world of ideas, thought and language. My conceptualisation of the body exists in the many facets of the in-between, at a place where we create ourselves as individual subjects with distinct identities and where the activity of self-creation is attuned more to its ambiguities rather than its certainties, knowing quite well that the activity of self-creation is fraught with disappointment, porous and evasive.

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<sup>111</sup> Nancy, J.L. (1994: 27) ‘Corpus’ in *Thinking Bodies*, Flower MacCannell, J. and Zakarin, L. (eds.), Stanford, California: Stanford University Press

All through the research I have made work that addressed a body that negotiates the confounding complexities of history, autobiography and fiction. As mentioned in earlier chapters the research facilitated a consistent enquiry and a previously inconceivable development in my studio practice. Early on I had started experimenting with body casts to bring a more distinct trace of the body into the work itself. An early example is *Flowermuscle*, the silver casting brooches of my kisses, which are part of the assemblage *Rapunzel's Wedding Present*, referred to in chapter 1. In 2003 I was invited to attend a group artist residency in Turnov in the Czech Republic.<sup>112</sup> While working within the remit of the residency I was aware about the historical conflict between Germany and Czech Republic and the atrocities inflicted on the Czech people by the Nazis and consistently ever since under the Soviet regime. I had conversations with Czech participants of the residency, telling me of their own thoughts on the tremendous changes, which took place in the country at the time of the residency (after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989), and what they knew of earlier history, related to them by their parents and grandparents. During the residency I had started to make *Bandages for Broken Hearts*, which could only be finished a year later back in London.<sup>113</sup> In

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<sup>112</sup> Since 1984 the Museum of Bohemian Paradise in Turnov has organized contemporary jewellery symposia. Curator Dr. Miroslav Cogan invites artists from around the globe to spend two July weeks here. They visit and grow to understand Bohemian Paradise one of the most beautiful parts of Czech Republic and Turnov a historical town located 80 km north of Prague. Thanks to the hundreds of years long tradition of precious stone processing and goldsmithing the High School for Stone Cutting and Jewellery was established here in 1884 here, since 1886 there exists also a museum focused on minerals, gems and jewellery. In the beginning of the Symposium program is an exhibition of 4-5 representative pieces of each participant's own work in one of museum galleries. Later follow trips to the romantic countryside surrounding the town, to the garnet mine, agate quarry and realisation workshop. The artists are inspired to create here new jewellery from the materials of the region, including Bohemian garnets or other local precious stones and silver. Throughout the course of the symposium, each artist is scheduled to present an informal 15 -30 minute lecture with catalogues, slides, video etc of their work. It is obligatory for each artist to contribute one new work to be a part of the museum's collection. The collection of contemporary jewellery, one of few similar in the World, is presented in museum's permanent exhibition and temporary exhibitions abroad as well (Netherlands 1997, USA 1998, Poland 2000, Portugal 2004, Germany 2005, Spain 2003, 2006); Available at <http://www.muzeum-turnov.cz/index.php?id=11&jazyk=en>

<sup>113</sup> The work was exhibited at *Jewellery Unlimited*, Bristol, 2004, with catalogue. Ralph Turner criticised the work as sentimental in *Crafts Magazine* 2004, which is correct and goes to the heart of the matter, even though he did not appreciate the sentiment of my investment.

Prague I had bought old photographs showing groups of people, either in domestic celebratory groupings or more official school and office group images, all done for the presumed reason to memorise an event. By the way the people in the images dressed, the look of the scenes, I believed the images to be older than I am myself. My reaction of acute nostalgia was merged with my admiration for the resilience of the Czech people, who had lived through so much trauma. *Bandages for Broken Hearts* consists of a series of pieces, which represent hurt and healing at the same time: sticky plaster stitched with garnet beads; wound dressing, stitched with pearls and a red Bohemian glass cross; an electroformed oak-leaf and twig, bound together with 'red thread'; and a plaster cast of my own wrist, indicating myself as being part of the story, being part of that history. The cast carries the wing of a dragonfly sealed in resin, an electroformed feather and a silver circle set out with garnets; all symbols of renewal and lightness, emphasising my need for redemption and hope.



© Jivan Astfalck, *Bandages for Broken Hearts*, various materials, detail



© Jivan Astfalck, *Bandages for Broken Hearts*, various materials

The body-signifying object, or maybe I should say, the object which covers the body with signs, breaks down, by means of narrative subjectivity, the verifiable, objective interpretation of itself and the world and interacts with the body on the level of interpretation and performativity. The object can then be used as a 'semaphoric' device, an apparatus for conveying information by means of visual signs and signals. These visual signs, which like a light whose position may be changed, indicate changing positions of the dark viscous biology of our bodies, deep down and hidden by the objects on the surface of the skin. The analogical relation between what the object represents and what they are made of intensifies their sensual and psychological impact. *Bandages for Broken Hearts* succeeded in its

representation of emotional investments within a narrative framework but did not come close enough to the thoughts expressed in Nancy's essay that we do not know what happens beyond our skins. We fear the depth of unchecked physical and psychological possibilities and excess, amoral and potentially hostile. We do not know how our feelings and proprioceptions come into existence when we feel ourselves, and we fill the gap of comprehension with a mixture of preconceived knowledge and fictionalised fantasy, bridging ritualistically what is impossible to comprehend, my living body, seat of my own mortality. And by implying almost the amorality of our own bodies, we make sure the demarcation lines, where body meets world, are mapped out with signs. I continued using the casting process and in other pieces electroforming technology to simulated skin or create layers that could be wrapped around the body. *Hic Orbis Circumagitur - The Leaf is Turning* is one of those pieces. The casting material is latex, which I had not used before. Its luminosity appears skin-like and it can be coloured using inks. I took castings from plant leaves, which in the process underwent interesting wilting processes, faster than the natural wilting process, and curiously arrested halfway through decomposition.



© Jivan Astfalck, *Hic Orbis Circumagitur - The Leaf is Turning (Hosta Halcyon)*

I made a series of pieces where the latex remained on the leaf, was partly pulled away or just the latex itself. The leaves had rope attached and a small gold label that could be used to bind the piece around the body – a skin on a skin. Some leaves did not surrender their form to the process and when applied to the body curled up and around like frills on a shirt. I had dyed the latex with ink because I was trying to get a ‘plant-skin’, but it became apparent that if I would have left it skin coloured than the curling would be perceptible as if belonging to the body itself.



I became aware that I was getting involved in work that referenced practices in body art, where conceptual concerns transgress the definable object; the object literally merges with the body, defusing the fuzzy boundary between the body related but independent object and the body as object. I do not take the idea of body as object, the merging of body and sign, lightly. I am aware that most often the merging of body and sign appears and is practiced where power is imposed. One only has to remind oneself of the deadly serious signing of bodies in the Third Reich, where the marking of Jewish people literally rendered all so signed bodies invisible from social gaze. The signing and denoting of bodies does imply

power structures and hierarchies of dominance and violence. Contemporary artists who use the body as their site, Olan and Stelarc for example, are said to work to unpack these power relationships and, by literally taking apart their physical bodies, strive to deconstruct the narrative of the body in an attempt to subvert dominant ideologies and to assert their self-determined ownership of their bodies. My own work operates the other way around; I am interested in an integration of referential fragments into a coherent narrative. Aware of the romantic need to imagine ourselves and the world as integral to what we are, I am looking for the creation of a constructed narrative in the object, which interacts dialogically with the narrative of the body - this narrative might be perceived as a cultural and socialising dynamic or subjectively constructed. Subsequently my assumption is that the narrative of the object frames the core or body narrative and pivots on the body's ability not to cohere identity, but to perform identity. Jana Sterbak's piece *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* is such work. She made a dress of rough beef flesh, which she wore in her performance.<sup>114</sup> The wearing of rough flesh on the skin takes a double turn on inside/outside, vulnerability and physical existence. In addition I found it interesting that the flesh dress when removed from the body existed in its own right, aging and changing in appearance as if what was flesh would turn into wood, transforming its materiality. The piece is performative, a semiotic gesture that is a being as well as a doing. Or, more accurately, it is a doing that constitutes a being, an activity that creates what it describes. Performatives are intelligible only within a matrix that is simultaneously social and semiotic and depend on a densely woven web of social relations that renders it intelligible, believable, and acceptable. A shift can also parody the dominant conventions, revealing that they are, in fact, conventions; a dynamic I was interested in all along. The semiotic gesture might not only refer to a symbolic system, but also describe a non-rational influence of

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<sup>114</sup> Jana Sterbak 'Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic', Performance, 1991, in *Parkett* no.35, Zurich: Parkett-Verlag

the self, an irruption that can be channelled into the symbolic order by the artist. Referring back to Ricoeur's idea (chapter 1 and 2) that fictions are not only complex ideas, whose components are derived from simple images or previous experience, that are subsequently combined in new and unexpected ways, but derive from a complete shift in the referential status which takes place in the transition of the image as replica to the image as fiction. The new combination might have no reference to the previous original from which the image could be copied. This denial of the primacy of the original opens new possibilities of referring to reality, it allows for intervention and discovery. It is alike to the operation of metaphor in language, where the metaphorical quality allows the image to give body, shape, contour to meaning and more so, actually participates in the invention of meaning. 'To see the similar' Ricoeur says, 'we said with Aristotle, is to memorise well. Why would not this proximity of meaning be at the same time a proximity between things themselves? Is it not from the proximity that a new way of seeing springs forth?'<sup>115</sup> The preconception of this similarity or resemblance is a process of reconciliation that abolishes logical distance between remote semantic fields. In turn, this semantic clash creates the spark of meaning in the metaphor. Every metaphor, by bringing together distant semantic fields, defies prior categorisation, even though it is necessary that the previous incompatibility is still perceivable through the new compatibility, which creates a new sort of tension and provides us with the means to speak of the body in terms of the object. I came to understand the notion of the body as inter-corporal in much the same way as artistic work is inter-textual. Like artistic work, the body cannot be conceived outside the web of inter-relations of which it is a living part. At the same time I acknowledge that there exists a perpetual, infinitely changing conflict between the tendency towards narrative unification and a contrary force that maintains diversity and exploration, at infinitum in a multitude of possibilities

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<sup>115</sup> Ricoeur, P. (1994: 230) *The Rule of Metaphor*, London: Routledge

- each possibility a new aspect of understanding the unknowable, each possibility providing a re-description, a new metaphor.

## 4.2 Hide

In 2004 I was commissioned to make new work for the touring exhibition *Self*. The exhibition tied in with the action research project *The Meeting of Hands and Hearts* described in chapter 3 (in collaboration with the Community Integration Project in Birmingham). The exhibition aimed to explore ideas around narrative identity, questioning the ways in which we contribute to the construction of our identities and the nature of identity itself as a construct. The curators were interested in the use of metaphor, signs and symbols that are represented within jewellery objects and installations that explore ideas around the ‘cultured’ body. I was selected because of the nature of my previous work and because my studio practice crossed the boundaries between craft and fine art, and addressed the complex idea of a ‘self’ and the shifting ideologies that impact upon it.

The exhibition initially developed from a partnership between Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham and Craftspace Birmingham. Both organisations have a history of cross-disciplinary collaboration and presentation. *Self* was a touring exhibition of interdisciplinary work by international artists who explored our complex physical, cultural and personal identities.<sup>116</sup> The artists responded to their own personal experiences as a way to explore the value of difference and challenge accepted stereotypes. Individual artists related to changing social and

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<sup>116</sup> Artists included: Barby Asante, Jivan Astfalek, Ari Athans, Roseanne Bartley, Dinie Besems, Clement Cooper, Martin Figura, Patricio Forrester, Karl Fritsch, Ken Ohara, Gerd Rothmann, Joyce Scott, Lorna Simpson, Pamela So.

Curated by: Andy Horn of Craftspace Touring and Yasmin Zahir of Bury St Edmunds Art Gallery.  
Exhibited at: Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham; Bury St Edmunds Art Gallery, Suffolk; Piece Hall Art Gallery, Halifax; Ucheldre Centre, Holyhead, Anglesey; McManus Galleries, Dundee; Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham; Hove Museum and Art Gallery - with catalogue.

cultural contexts, their experiences of and responses to a complex and multi-cultural society.

As mentioned in chapter 3 the work in the exhibition was presented through the media of jewellery and photography with a secondary reference to clothing and media. Having been suspicious of the title of the exhibition and the implication that there might exist such an entity as a self, I was quickly reassured in the discussions leading up to the commission. The exhibition aimed to look at the in-between and fluent issues of the fixed and unfixed self, the nature of difference, collective and individualised identity and their possible conflicts. Acknowledging a progressively homogenized and mediated society where the cultured body is increasingly commodified, codified, and consumed, the exhibition gave space to counter positions. The exhibition was international in scope, recognising both the global diasporas that impact upon contemporary Western societies and the politics of difference. The exhibition finally gave me the opportunity to address my ideas of the body and allowed me to make work that challenged all my skills.

In his essay *Corpus* Nancy writes 'being exposed, exposing: it is the skin, all the various types of skin, here and there open and turned into membranes, mucous, poured out inside of itself, or rather without either an inside or an outside, absolutely, continually passing from one to the other, always coming back to itself without either locus or a place where it can establish a self, and so always coming back to the world, to other bodies to which it is exposed, in the same gesture that exposes them to itself.'<sup>117</sup> Nancy refers to the writings of the Al Lingis, who describes the skin as exorbitant, shapeless, mute, inoperative, un-expressive materiality, that when stroked, deploys a lascivious and exhibitionist nakedness.

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<sup>117</sup> Nancy, J.L. (1994: 30) 'Corpus' in *Thinking Bodies*, Flower MacCannell, J. and Zakarin, L. (eds.), Stanford, California: Stanford University Press

Lingis, A. (1997) *L'ivresse des profondeurs: et autres excès*, trad. de l'américain par N. et D. Janicaud ; préf. de Dominique Janicaud, in *Traduction de: Eros and culture*, Paris: Belin

Nancy then concludes that the skin is always exhibition, exposition, and that the minutest look is touching like brushes against it and exposes it once more.

My aim for the new work was to address the ambiguity that Nancy describes. Looking up the word 'skin' in the thesaurus I came across the term 'hide', a term that can mean 'to cover or conceal', can mean 'skin' or 'shield', but also has an older meaning that relates to a 'measure of land' in relation to 'a husband, master of a household', the notion was of 'amount of land' that was needed to feed one family and dependents. The piece *Hide* that I subsequently made was ambiguous in its reading, it could be seen a 'skin' that had been flayed of the body by torturous means or it could be seen as an additional layer, a skin T-shirt or 'thick skin', which could be imagined to provide extra protection when worn. Maybe it is a skin left behind, like from a snake(woman) who shed a layer of skin to accommodate a changing body. It should certainly be me and not me at all...

I asked the filmmaker Anthony Budd and the choreographer and video artist Dennie Wilson to assist me realising *Hide*. Anthony filmed the whole process of making and performance; his film material was later used to create the documentary film for the exhibition and footage for the video, edited by Dennie, that was to be exhibited together with *Hide*. I used latex again, but as the material was meant to be applied directly to the body I had to find a product that was extremely low in ammoniac, so that my skin would not be damaged. I found such a product, a latex liquid produced by Kryolan, which is being used by professional make-up artist for theatre and film.<sup>118</sup> The idea was that my entire upper body, including arms but not hands, would be painted in latex, which after sufficient application of layers would be stable enough in itself. I then would have to come out of it, without help, like a snake, and a full latex body cast would

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<sup>118</sup> For serendipitous reasons the product is manufactured in Berlin, which tied in neatly with the autobiographical content of the work.

exist. I had shaved all body hair and was oiled to assist the formation of a separation barrier. My arms have been propped up and Dennie proceeded to paint layers of latex on to my skin. The whole procedure took six hours, with each layer of latex needing to cure properly before the next layer could be applied. As Dennie continued painting me she asked me questions about *Hide* and we engaged in conversation about the body, the female body, the aging body. While the first view layers were applied the latex had an extreme lifting and tightening effect, my body looked very young. As the layers grew heavier so did the appearance of the skin, till finally, by changing my posture, I could make my skin wrinkle in such a way that it implied a much more aged body.

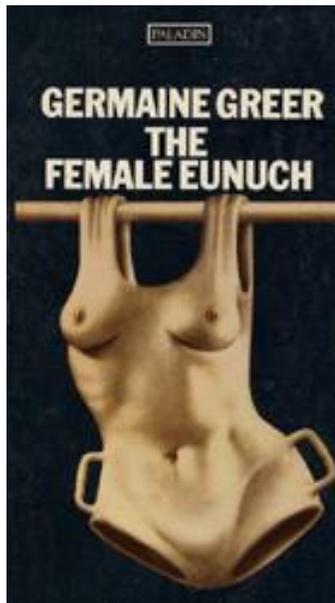


Goya's witches came to mind and the fact that the skin on their bodies looks so loose. Aging female bodies, when they are represented at all, are often associated with the witch trope, implying threat, danger or madness.



Francisco de Goya - *Mestra Bonica*

Even the image on the cover of Germaine Greer's original publication *The Female Eunuch* in 1970, which shows an uncanny resemblance to *Hide*, the body implied is youthful.



The aging body and its associations have a complex relationship to unreason; it is both part of unreason and separate from it. It is essentially constructed and controlled by the intellectual and cultural forces that operate within society. The perception of the aging female body depends fundamentally on how perceptions are narrated in society. The body might be associated with dark secrets, impurity, associated with deviance and excluded from social gaze. This process of exclusion takes place at a general level, one moreover, at which a whole system of concepts, sensible-intelligible, ideal-real, internal-external, fiction-truth, nature-culture, speech-writing, activity-passivity etc., are governing the operation of thought in the West, come to be instituted. 'Myth ends up having our hides. Logos opens up its great maw and swallows us whole' says Helen Cixous.<sup>119</sup> *Hide* made it possible to display different, if not contradicting, points of view and to simultaneously communicate these diverse layers of meaning. *Hide* is, ugly and beautiful, fascinating and repulsive at the same time. Rather than establishing a distinction between reality and appearance a plurality of possible descriptions is offered. We are used to a view of the world where things are apparently bordered off from each other, where demarcation lines are in their proper place and identities of things and bodies are clearly perceptible. *Hide* is work that like the arabesque ornament or in language metaphor, infringes those borderlines and merges the one with the other, connecting previously distinct and static representations of reality, a finished and stable world, into an ornamental interplay that reveals, in my view, an almost laughing liberty, freely indulging in sensual pleasures. The 'carnivalisation' of the piece turns conventional values and classical notions of the beautiful upside down, or rather inside out.<sup>120</sup> The work arises from a deeply felt need to unveil that, which is obscured, hidden from view and excluded from discourse. The work is fundamentally different to other work with transgressive

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<sup>119</sup> Cixous, H. (1991: 14f) *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

<sup>120</sup> My use of the notion of the Carnival is informed by my reading of Bakhtin, M. (1984:7f) *Rabelais and his World*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press

or fetishist agendas, simply because of its playful willingness to supersede an official prohibition of certain kinds of laughter and irony with sensuality and the imaginary freedom in the idea that it would be possible to change one's skin. The celebration of this freedom is linked to moments of crises in the creative process.

During the long time that was needed to stabilise the latex, my body got very stressed, partly due to the exclusion of air from the skin, partly due to the effort of standing still (with propped up arms) for six hours. The resulting sweat layer between latex and skin offered a sufficient separation barrier that made it possible to attempt coming out of 'my skin'. The German proverb 'aus der Haut fahren' or 'das ist ja zum aus der Haut fahren' guided the performance, and I certainly was 'itching' in my skin by that time.<sup>121</sup> The coming out of the skin was filmed outside against the later afternoon light that gave a very light, creamy appearance, which tied in beautifully with the colour of the fresh latex and my purposefully over-bleached hair. But it also demanded a steely control of my exhaustion. While I carefully stretched my *Hide* in places and was easing out of it I completely lost my concentration and my temper; I had ripped the latex on the shoulder. I could have patched the rip with latex, but it represented such an important moment of crisis that I wanted to keep it in the work and later stitched it together like a surgeon would a wound.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup>A literal translation into English would be 'to drive out of one's skin' or 'reason to drive out of one's skin'. An equivalent proverb in English would be 'to fly of the handle' which does not offer the amusing word game relating to one's skin.

<sup>122</sup>I received an email from a visitor to the exhibition at Bury St. Edmunds, who said 'I was intrigued by your piece. A little disturbing I have to say, in a pleasant/unpleasant. I'm not particularly claustrophobic, but the thought of, and your video of, you extracted yourself from the (latex) second skin did make me feel somewhat uncomfortable – the difficulty you were having, the struggle to free yourself – made me shudder and brought out goose bumps. It brought to mind some situations from my past – one being in a long queue of people going up (very slowly) some narrow and quite dark stone spiral stairs to gain access to a church bell tower, and it made me think how it would feel to be deep down in a cave system. All about the struggle to 'get out' of where you are, I suppose. But, like someone afraid of a particular animal, I continued watching!' John M., 30.1.2005



Over the previous months I had collected all the hair that had been cut from my head and attached this hair like a bracelet on the right arm of *Hide*, emphasising the inside-out, up-down reversal and adding another suspicious material to the work.



It took only a few days till the latex started to change in appearance; the previously creamy and opaque material transformed into a translucent and much darker materiality that closely resembled aging skin, uncannily displayed in the absence of a body, but supported by the video, edited by Dennie Wilson, that visualised its origin.



*Hide* exhibited at Angel Row Gallery

The work received a variety of responses, like for example in *Crafts Magazine* March/April 2005 where it was called ‘extraordinary’. All exhibition venues collated visitor responses to the exhibition, but it was at McManus Gallery in Dundee where *Hide* was received as most controversial and elicited most comments referring to the perception of ugliness and threat; with one visitor saying ‘as a woman, Jivan Astfalck’s piece made me really uncomfortable - it looks like a horrific sort of striptease’.<sup>123</sup> These responses did not take me by surprise, expectations and perceptions of the jewellery crafts arena do not invite

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<sup>123</sup> McManus Gallery Facilitators Report, Visitor Questionnaires, 2005

notions of the viscosity of the body and the grotesque; body certainly exists as codified idealised form, but not necessarily as matter, porous, visceral and in flux. The body I am interested in is grotesque in comparison to conventional conceptions of the beautiful, the lawful and the linear; these notions are overturned in favour of an embodied ambiguity. In this sense, according to Bakhtin, in grotesque realism the bodily element is deeply positive and it is treated as a universal, which is connected to other spheres of life.<sup>124</sup> Bakhtin describes the material bodily principle as a triumphant, festive notion, a celebration, which in our own contemporary culture exists only in the margins of artistic production such as *Hide*, where ‘upward’ and ‘downward’, ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’, ‘life and death’, have an topographical meaning, body area and value levels are juggled and cross-referenced, not hierarchically ordered. This is the ever-unfinished body that needs to be narrated repeatedly anew to make any sense. *Hide* is a dialogical device, a visible trace fictionalising invisible things, things inside, things, which are desired, dreamed about and feared. It exteriorises reflective practice and is bringing to light an underlying unconscious: sexuality and death.

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<sup>124</sup> Bakhtin, M. (1984: 19) *Rabelais and his World*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press

## *C o n c l u s i o n*

The research project described a journey that started with the identified need to further the understanding of body-related crafts objects that emerged from my studio practice. The exploration is a contribution to the theory of crafts and by extension brings a distinct sensibility and position to the fine art discourse. Rather than using hermeneutic methodology in a reductive way that aims to explain work, I engaged with that aspect of hermeneutics and literary theory, which engages with revealing hidden meaning in the layered narrative structures embedded in my practical work. The theoretical concerns explored as part of the research informed and advanced my studio methodology, and developed into a dynamic that engages making and theoretical exploration in dialogue. Furthermore the theoretical investigation supported the formation of understanding of the work itself and increased awareness of semantic interventions that are sensitive to intuitive perception and conducive to the development of new work.

My work, which at the beginning of the research was rooted in the traditions of goldsmithing skills and the small-scale wearability of precious metal pieces, evolved into a fine-art practice that uses handcraft skills and material exploration together with strategies of creative development, presentation and contextualisation. These new formats offer valuable material for further research and creative investigation. In extension, from the investigation of invested narrative structures, a studio methodology developed that can be adopted and adapted to the research needs of other practitioners and can be regarded as a contribution to research methodologies that arise from and are motivated by the practical work itself.

The dialogical and dynamic relationship between the surveying of relevant literature and the creative development of practical work made it possible to elaborate on the narrative context of the work itself and to use this emerging strategy to motivate new work. This in turn informed the creative process and facilitated representation that uses the heuristic power of fiction and fictional re-description to articulate intuitive perception.

In a largely under-theorised subject area as the crafts, the research adopted and adapted existing procedures and concepts from hermeneutic philosophy and literary theory to expand on the understanding of the body related crafts object in this new context. Future research and debate will need to continue to formulate appropriate theoretical language for practices concerned with material and making. The convergence of crafts and fine art practices will be conducive to extend the theoretical vocabulary and map out new territories where crafts practices contribute to cultural production and dissemination. My researched ideas, practical work and developing studio methodology have been explored and tested in exhibitions, written publications, conference contributions, teaching projects and artists residencies. These activities indicate that the work and theoretical dissemination has reached an audience in the UK and abroad, and actively contributes to the discourse and development of the subject area, as much as being a reflection on the perceived value of the work itself.

The extension of the work into interactive and socially motivated practices needs to be developed further. Valuable potential is indicated that not only advances areas of activity for makers, but also engages with questions of the social function of creative practices. A wide variety of activities are indicated that include teaching projects and projects that address and facilitate access to the appreciation of creative production.

Over the period of the research the work engaged with new territories and succeeded in the formation of a unique position. Conscious of its crafts roots my work extended into a fine art practice that brings a distinct sensibility and understanding of the narratively inscribed and decorative body-related object to conceptual considerations and contemporary criticality. While my work is informed by my understanding of already mapped out artistic territories and strategies, it actively re-evaluated narrative investments and succeeded in embedding ambiguity and cross-referencing deeper into the work itself. Further research would aim to bring the reference and context that in previous work was explored as an extension of the crafts practice and existed in the framing of the work, back into the work itself. I am interested to research further the potential of cross-referencing, evocative and richly narrative found pieces that have a strong reference to historical trauma in relation to private and subjective mental experience. My artistic aim would be to re-configure these pieces to achieve an imagery of the unconscious and address symbolisation by using metaphoricity to cross-map emotional investments conducive to new creative articulation and representation. Evocatively Angela Carter writes:

“I think it was Rilke who lamented the inadequacy of our symbolism – regretted so bitterly we cannot, unlike the (was it?) Ancient Greeks, find adequate external symbols for the life within us – yes, that’s the quotation. But, no. He was wrong. Our external symbols must always express the life within us with absolute precision; how could they do otherwise, since that life has generated them? Therefore we must not blame our poor symbols if they take forms that seem trivial to us, or absurd, for the symbols themselves have no control over their fleshly manifestations, however paltry they may be; by nature of our life alone has determined their forms.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Carter, A. (1982: 6) *The Passion of New Eve*, London: Virago Press

Carter succinctly expresses a reflective thought that converges with my developed research interests. Within the area of metaphorical symbolisation I remain interested in jewellery pieces that map out the demarcation lines, where body meets world, a place, or idea of a place, where narratives are invested in objects with the aim to negotiate that gap, complexity, confusion or conflict. In our contemporary culture we might regard any attempt to re-connect with a personal or cultural point of origin as nostalgic; we find ourselves much more in a world of shifting, flexible frameworks in which our origins, bonds, traditions, our sentiments and dreams, exist alongside other stories, other fragments of memory and traces of time. The ambiguous nature of the notion of the author, the narrative incompleteness of life, the entanglement of life histories in a dialectic of remembrance and anticipation it all adds to the way in which we apply fiction to life. Because of the elusive character of 'real life' I use the help of fiction, a narrative invention and construction, to deal with imaginary and real events and to organise my experience of it. I like to rethink our ideas of tradition and the status of objects in a way that allows me to perceive the old and tired clichés in a new way, full of possibilities.

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(2006) 'Lifelines' at *Schmuck-Denken 2 - Unterwegs zu einer Theorie des Schmucks*, Idar-  
Oberstein

(2006) 'Stories of the Beautiful' at the Ulster Museum, Belfast

(2005) Chair of Symposium *Maker-Viewer-Wearer, on European Narrative Jewellery*,  
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(2004) Seminar leader for the international writing seminar *Thoughts on Beauty*,  
IASPIS, Crafts in Dialogue, Stockholm

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1998 'Poima' at the Museum of Art and Design Helsinki

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### **Artist Residencies**

(2004) *The Meeting of Hands and Heart*, with Craftspace Touring, Midlands Refugee Council, Community Integration Project Birmingham

(2002) *Bohemian Princess*, at XIV. International Jewellery Symposium, in connection with the Okresni Museum, Turnov, Czech Republic

### **Funded Commissions of New Work:**

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(2001) *On Memory and Loss*, commissioned for 'Acknowledged Sources', Hastings Museum and Art Gallery

## Exhibitions

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(2006) *Love Zoo* (solo), Hnoss, Gothenburg, Sweden

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*A p p e n d i x 1*

Jewellery as a Fine Art Practice

published in

*New Directions in Jewellery*

Grant, C. (ed.) (2005), London: Black Dog Publishing

Jewellery is a multi-faceted and vibrant art form, which exists at quite different levels of commerce, design and fine art. An object created as a commodity to succeed in a post-capitalistic market needs to be examined and understood in a different way than an object, which has a conceptual, narrative or purely formal agenda as its driving force. Not only for the sake of art historical and critical clarity, but also for the makers themselves and an appreciating public, it has become increasingly important to differentiate between the contrasting, and sometimes conflicting, attitudes and approaches, which are brought to the making of jewellery and to acknowledge the distinct contributions these jewellery practices make to visual culture.

Jewellery brings to the fine art discussion a distinct sensibility of the relationship between object and the body in its wider sense. It might be helpful in this context to consider a distinction between three critical positions regarding the status of the jewellery object. The first position treats the object as an independent entity - maybe a piece of jewellery or clothing. Even though these objects have been generated by design processes, have definable sculptural identity and can be formally analysed, they offer nothing in excess of decoration when worn on the body. The second position, by contrast, is occupied by a generation of artists whose conceptual concerns transgress the definable object; the object literally merges with the body. Conceptual work such as this makes visible the fuzzy

boundary between the body-related but independent object and what is more appropriately termed Body Art. The third position considers the object in dialogue with its framing device, might this be the body itself, social or psychological phenomena or other theoretical concerns. In excess of their own materiality and formal qualities, objects made in this mode have often strong narratives inscribed, which are concerned with the symbolic and emotional investment we all have in the objects we make, wear and love. Such objects can be used as devices for the visible transmission of messages, a way of communicating by means of visual signs and signals.

Jewellery as a fine art practice could not exist without its historical and indeed traditional roots in materials and processes, adornment and ornamentation. A generation of jewellery artists is practicing now, who have not only been trained within the tight parameters of a skills-oriented craft, but also been educated by studio crafts people, who themselves revolutionised jewellery design in the 60's and 70's. Then, ideas of bourgeois taste and status were challenged by jewellers with a passion for modernist form, sculptural identity and a much wider interest in different materials. Now, informed by current visual culture and the history and theory of modern art, new artistic strategies and enquiries are being formulated.

It is not necessarily the art-full crafting of the object or an obvious radical aesthetic, which defines some jewellery as a fine art practice; but, more interestingly, it is the integrity of enquiry, knowledge of contemporary cultural issues, confidence in using artistic strategies and the thought processes which inform the making practice and thus push the boundaries of the discipline. These artistic methodologies differ from a 'classical' design process in so far as they take their dynamic from a content-based enquiry rather than from a purely formal, material-based or skill-driven approach. The aesthetics of different jewellery

artists' work are frequently developed by this process of enquiry, rather than being the stated aim of their practice. In the case of Ted Noten's *Chewing Gum*, the fact that most frequently used pavements in most European cities are littered with bubble-gum stains led to the idea to ask people to '*chew their own brooch*'. The project was set up in the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, and 800 people followed the invitation to chew their own brooch. The winning entry of a juried competition was then cast in 24ct gold and finalised as a wearable piece of jewellery. What was at first recognised as an 'ornamentation' of debatable aesthetic value littering our environment, was re-configured and re-introduced as a precious piece of body adornment, thus re-arranging the everyday order of things.

**image**

Ted Noten: *Chewing Gum*

The thought processes, which inform most of Jewellery Art unfold across larger groups of work, rather than an individual piece, and are often dependent on careful staging and environments. This trend required of jewellery artists to look for new presentation formats and different exhibition opportunities. Photography, video, installation and performance, interactive work generated in social contexts and artist collaborations have become environments in which such work can be situated. This does not, in my view, mean that the work has lost its identity as jewellery. Jewellery Art is informed by these other art disciplines, but does not so much address them within their own self-referential histories; rather these other disciplines are used as framing devices for the all-important work, the jewellery object.

**image**

Ruudt Peters: *Red* (jewellery object + 'yogi' photograph)

Objects framed and presented in installation or photographic/video contexts enable new possibilities of visual perception and subsequently interpretation and understanding. The often rather more ‘introverted’ objects acquire heightened theatricality and performativity. It is a powerful strategy giving more artistic control over the interpretative reading of the work. Hidden layers of meaning can be played with, as the objects assume new identities while dialogically interacting with their environment. What is denied is a standard version of what is commonly thought of as jewellery; what is created is the condition for the emergence of new dimensions of experience and reality, and the possibility that old and empty worlds, old and tired formulae, can be made new.

In the case of my own work this dynamic is explored by placing replica of traditional pieces of jewellery onto early 1960’s ‘Steiff’ animals. The jewellery has been made specifically to suite the characters of the soft toy animals, which have been collected over two years. These animals have been chosen because they are exquisitely made, have ‘collectors value’ in their own right and refer to the autobiographical aspects of the work. Their cute pre-|Disney nostalgic quality replaces the traditional display prop and re-configures the objects, offering reflection on the sentimental, emotional qualities jewellery and transitional ‘loved up’ objects share.

### **image**

Jivan Astfalck: *Siggi (Siegmond) - transitional object no.1*, part of *Love Zoo*

Jewellery Art, which has a conceptual narrative enquiry at its core locates itself between discourse, that is, what is thought and said about the subject area itself, and includes the history of traditional jewellery design, and the world. The

creators of such work are faced with a multiplicity of possible trajectories that have already been established by social consciousness and cultural production.

A different strategy can be observed in Gabriela Felgentraeger's *'Cup-Rings'*. Here an everyday object has been 'de-constructed' and put to new use. Only what seems to be the shard of an ordinary cup is selected for aesthetic reasons, beautifully crafted and made specifically so it can be worn as a ring. The investigation of the status and value of objects is a concern shared by most jewellery artists. Things, which we are familiar with, domestic or otherwise, and which often carry specific cultural meanings are taken out of their context, they are re-assembled, re-contextualised and re-interpreted. This is nowhere as obvious as in the spectacular *'Mercedes'* project by Ted Noten.

### **image**

Ted Noten: *Mercedes*

A Mercedes has status value, which is recognised across the world; to take such a car apart to make brooches from it is an act of knowing re-configuration of value. The brooches are minimalist, highly wearable and crafted with great skill. They are successful jewellery pieces in their own right; to know where they came from adds another level of interpretative meaning to the work, since it subverts value hierarchies and undermines conventional understanding of materialistic status.

Similar dynamics can be observed where jewellery work turns its attention to the body itself. It is important to point out that *all* Jewellery Art implies the body, but some work is specifically focused on enquiries around the body, real or as a culturally formulated idea. Along with all the internal complexity of the work, the makers are faced with the multiple layers, and confusion, of meanings

surrounding the body. This is well expressed by Auli Laitinen's '*I am Human*' brooches.

### **image**

Auli Laitinen: *I am Human*

The brooches are made from common office labelling equipment and offer no material value or skill-based surprises in themselves. We usually experience people wearing such name badges where the attempt to personalise human interaction should be helped by such 'body-signs'. In an almost cynical contradiction to their primary aim these labels are used in work environments, which usually are not concerned with individualised needs or subjective creativity; the badges signify their wearer as social bodies. Auli Laitinen's brooches, which read '*I am Human*', capture this complex dynamic; instead of individual names we read a much deeper, if not surreal, cry for recognition.

What is achieved by the controlled introduction of text in Laitinen's work is accomplished in Gabriela Felgentraeger's '*pink tubes*' by the juxtaposition of materials and suggested imagery.

### **image**

Gabriela Felgentraeger: *Pink tubes*

The plastic tubing used in the jewellery pieces is the clinically approved material used in surgery. Unless one is medically trained one would not know how this material, which eventually exists inside bodies, looks like, let alone know that it has aesthetic qualities. Felgentraeger combined the pink tubing with silver castings of tree twigs, suggesting affinity of mater and passing comment on the

ambivalence of notions like the natural and the artificial; notions, which become increasingly ambivalent and trigger more and more complex ethical debates.

I suggest that the use of visual metaphors in such work achieves the construction of subjective meaning and can be regarded as a total re-evaluation and a re-description of reality; it allows for intervention and discovery. Similar to the operation of metaphor in language, where the metaphorical quality allows the image to give body, shape, contour to meaning and furthermore, actually participates in the invention of meaning. New meanings emerge with the introduction of new metaphors. In this respect, the metaphorical quality of an object can be used as a device. A metaphor, in short, tells us something new about reality. This to me implies that innovation and the all-important shift in the status of the work can be obtained through the metaphorical 'twist' in the object or the discourse around the work.

### **image**

Kadri Maelk: *Fata Morgana*

Jewellery Art has the capacity to deal with complex ideas whose components are derived from simpler images or previous experience, which are then combined in new and unexpected ways. They derive from a shift in the referential status, which takes place in the transition of the image as replica to the image as fiction. The new combination might have no reference to the previous original from which the image could be directly taken or copied.

### **image**

Eija Mustonen: *Heart*

Human life itself is organised by behaviour and cognition, it is already infused by value systems and worldviews at the point where it is transformed into an artistic structure. Art then, in my way of thinking, is the transformation of this pre-organised material into a new system and in doing so marks new values. When looking at Jewellery Art it remains to be important to remember that behind each created object stands a 'speaking person', who is constantly involved in dialogue with the world around him/herself. The objects, like speech or written text, are always socially charged and thus necessarily 'polemical'. Jewellery Art, because of its intimate relationship to the physical and cultured body, is perfectly placed to explore and communicate the nature of our conflicted existence, as well as the pleasure we take in being alive. What is required in a sense is that we, as jewellery artists, explore the multitude of possibilities, each possibility a new aspect of understanding, each possibility providing a re-description, a new metaphor – to quote Jean-Luc Nancy: “ one must think the thought of the body thus. A double genitive: the thought that is the body itself, and the thought we think, we seek to think, on the subject of the body. This body here - mine, yours - which attempts to think the body and where the body attempts to be thought, cannot do so rigorously. That is, it cannot give up signifying the body, assigning signs to it - except by allowing itself to be brought back to its own thinking matter, to the very place from which it thoughtlessly springs”.

*A p p e n d i x 2*

Difference and Resemblance - The Reconstruction of Signs

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It is well understood that when we talk about the realm of objects we have to consider a paradox. We, as private individuals, still view consumption as an independent activity, which marks the expression of our own personal preferences and desire. At the same time, however, it appears that production is planned and controlled, fashion manipulated and advertisement based on market research in order to sell back to us our dreams and hopes. We can observe this apparent contradiction when we look at contemporary crafts practice. The Swedish crafts and hobby catalogue 'Panduro' serves as a very good example. The catalogue, which also sells in the UK, used to be consulted by crafts students of all disciplines. In the last few years its volume increased to a massive 420 pages. Only, the catalogue does not sell the carefully sourced materials anymore, which were so difficult to find, but a wide variety of ready-mades. The catalogue advertises itself with the slogan "developing your creativity" in a bid to sell its goods. Unfortunately, and easily overlooked - otherwise it would not be such a successful business, there is hardly anything on sale anymore with which one could be creative in the first place. Not only is 'crafts' reduced to a mere consumer activity, which requires little thought, skill or indeed meaning, but the idea seems to get lost that to make something involves the investment of time, dedication and at least the acquisition of some basic skills. Mass and machine-produced crafts objects are on sale everywhere, permeating crafts markets, mail order catalogues, department stores and so called boutiques. Still, even in the face

of the pressure to desire only what others possess and thus to succumb to what Jean Baudrillard has termed *a culture of profound monotony*<sup>126</sup>, we want to distinguish ourselves as individuals. One way to attempt this is through the acquisition of objects, which via their symbolic assimilation mark us as individuals. Consumption is in this respect not only understood as acquisition, but as expression as well. What is experienced as the expression of individualism, is individualism only as long as the pattern of consumption responds to the aspirations of the group and can be recognised as such. Some of Baudrillard's writing has been thoroughly disseminated in the late 80s and early 90s, so much so that his thoughts have become part of the fabric of cultural and art historical discourse. Baudrillard suggests that in an idealist-consumerist society, the lived and conflictual human relations are substituted with personalised relations to objects. The criticism of psychological regression implied in this suggestion does not make Baudrillard very popular with people who fetishise objects or at least invest objects with deep affection and devotion, like most crafts people inevitably do.

Still, consumption is not interaction, but a system of signification, where needs are integrated into products. The needs Baudrillard talks about are not the needs, which we have to satisfy for survival, or are necessary conditions for flourishing, nor are they needs that have to be satisfied on the level of artisan production, where a task demands a product. The system of needs in the post-industrial era is much less integrated than the system of objects, which creates its own coherence and can thus fashion society. This leads Baudrillard to one of his core themes, namely that restrictions and censorship in personal fulfilment are, in our society, not anymore enforced by laws or norms of obedience. Instead, our behaviour is

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<sup>126</sup> Baudrillard, J. (1988) The System of Objects, in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, Poster, M. (ed.), Oxford: Polity Press

censored through investment in consumption and internalised in our perception of pleasure 'jouissance'. He compares this system of signification with the simplicity and effectiveness of a code, a code which demands that at least we believe that others sufficiently believe in it too, so that we can enter the game even if only ironically. This in effect means that actions, which aim to resist the code, as in counter-culture, in transgression, but also in alternative artistic practice, are carried out in relation to a society that conforms to it. Seen as such, consumption can be defined as an active mode of relations, to objects, to the collective and to the world. With regards to Baudrillard's thoughts we could view the proliferation of crafts kitsch as stimulated not only by industrialised reproduction, but also by the vulgarisation of objects of distinctive signs - that which makes crafts look like crafts, where crafts objects become knick-knack, where the value of the rare is reaffirmed by simulation. Kitsch, which is never innovative, and the 'authentic' object or at least those objects, which are generated by an original creative process, thus dominate between them the world of consumption. To the aesthetics of beauty and originality, kitsch opposes its aesthetics of simulation, it apes forms without the investment of thought or considered design knowledge.

There exists an interesting dichotomy between mass- or batch-produced crafts commodity on the one hand and conceptually focused one-off crafts work generated by individualised studio practice on the other. Both are called crafts, but demand a different approach in terms of interpretation and examination as cultural production. Because crafts has been traditionally much closer to the realm of commodities than let's say sculpture, crafts practitioners have to engage with the tension between the functionality of the object, its 'status' as a consumer good, and a more ideas-based artistic agenda. This is never a simplistic equation, and it gets even more complicated, and indeed interesting, when studio crafts practitioners start to simulate the visual appearance of banal crafts kitsch,

sometimes using advanced technology together with the hand-made, and in an artistic 'somersault' fill the tired and clichéd object yet again with fresh meaning.

One outstanding example is the work of Frida Fjellman. Clearly, the traditional studio-based involvement with material and form, in her case ceramics and glass, is too limited for her to fully explore her creative ideas. In *Borderline*, for example, she created a group of carefully crafted figurative objects, whose status and identity are very difficult to define. Her ceramic animals are easily associated with the countless porcelain figures, which used to 'live' on sideboards and showcases in well-to-do homes, standing in as signs for homeliness, safety and comfort. Her lightening devices are recognisable as design products and are fully functional. The narrative and theatrical manner in which the objects are combined and in turn exhibited explores and extends the performative aspect of the work. The objects are highly decorative, one would like to call them hyper-decorative, and in an almost uncanny way the installation exploits the viewers' sentimental attachment to such objects. Some years ago such work could only have been made as an ironic statement – but Fjellman seems to bring a much more sincere attitude to her work. She does not deconstruct visual culture nor does she critique any socio-political conventions, her work is easy to consume in that respect; yet it is radical in her rebellion against modernist conventions. "There are countless unwritten laws and rules in this field, that preclude ideas and motifs before they have even taken shape in the mind", she says.

Very different, but no less visually stunning is the work generated by Backa Carin Ivarsdotter. Her work is less narrative in appearance and more interested in the sculptural qualities of object. Whereas many crafts practitioners favour to work small-scale, her work is particularly impressive because of its scale. In *Corridor* she extended her sculptural environment beyond 6m in length and wide enough to invite viewers to step inside, as if into a dream. In *Branches I* each constructed wall

holds 400 hand-made ceramic twigs. Many of her pieces are constructed architectural 'fields', which are created by assembling large numbers of units. Her incredibly laborious installations move, sound, glow; porcelain and stoneware are pushed to their limits. Materials and processes are used in a most skilful way to achieve these results. In *Mountains* she made the porcelain walls so extremely thin that they become almost transparent and can function as light sources, combining voluminous sculptural form with the extreme fragility and vulnerability of the material. She says, "my desire is to give the viewer an impression of life; the encounter between what is beautiful and horrible, the beauty and destructiveness of love, and the fact that we are immortal until we die."

In my view, we need to be aware of the significance of the crafts object as a commodity and at the same time explore the crafts object as a dialogical device of differentiation and of meaning. In accordance with other theoretical thought systems, significantly semiology, I regard the object as a sign, a sign by which human beings, individually or in groups, communicate or attempt to communicate. This applies to a lot of cultural manifestations like clothes, advertisement, food, music etc., and of course crafts are no exception. The object functions as a sign regardless of the maker's intention, and it does so whether it has been mass-produced or is a one-off piece or a conceptual work. The reading of the object as a sign becomes especially interesting in cases where the maker is aware of the linguistic sign function of the object and integrates this awareness into his/her own artistic practice. These makers often develop work methodologies, which on a conscious level attempt to take control over the sign function of the object and intentionally play with the possible readings of the work.

The work of Linus Ersson negotiates this complex dynamic with great sensitivity and knowledge. Take for example his multi-media piece *Images of France*,

consisting of six watercolour paintings – painted back in 1998, a castle made of stoneware, a wooden table, a wine barrel made of stoneware and painted with porcelain colour and a set of equally painted plastic mugs. Ersson shows an awareness of his own romantic investment in crafts cultures by referencing the aesthetic appearance of such objects. But the deciding difference, in my view, comes from the fact that the artist acknowledges his own emotional investment by deliberately considering the seductive appearance of such ‘trivial’ objects as meaningful. He creates complex installations, which function on many levels of interpretation. Ersson is aware of the romantic idea of the craftsman, which has been used as a tired metaphor in too many publications; he opts to undermine such conventional expectations and happily allows for chance and impulse to determine the aesthetics of his objects. He engages in an open experimental process of making, where faults, accidents and imperfections are of important value. Even though the narratives of his installations convey a romantic ideal, the surface quality of the work suggests a much deeper and not quite so perfect inner life. Work such as this shows the idyllic as flawed, whilst evoking a sense of melancholy, a nostalgic yearning for a good time long past, an ease in human relations and secure value hierarchies. Like many other studio crafts makers, Ersson seems to criticise a culture in which the generation of unlimited series of variables, like the made-to-measure or the hand-made with its idiosyncratic markings, has been replaced by the machine production of a limited number of constants creating unprecedented boredom. The focus on the every-day, the domestic, the hand-made and idiosyncratic, the marginalized and excluded, which can be observed in so much contemporary craft seems to be a direct reflection of a continuously more homogenous world culture, where difference and individuality come at an increasingly high price.

The crafts practitioners mentioned here serve as illustration for a much wider phenomenon in contemporary crafts practice, which is engaged in developing

work methodologies that enable the re-construction of signs and their creative and social function. Autobiographical and historical narratives need to be integrated into a process of making and desires need to be managed. This does not lead to the representation of the surrounding world 'as it is', primarily an artificial field of signs, which can be manipulated - a cultural artefact. It leads to an approach to artistic production as re-construction, differential perception and a tactical game of significations. Auli Laitinen, a conceptual jewellery artist, uses her practice as a way of challenging stereotypical and clichéd representations of gender, individuality and body decoration. *Out of the Closet* is a series of brooches made from men's tie-fabric, which plays with the visual associations related to gender and male sexuality. She uses provocation to draw attention to conventions of seeing, which can be resisted and re-invested in the design process, what is perceived as problematic can be reconfigured in the creative process. In contemporary jewellery, this dynamic in particular is being engaged with by many practitioners and has engendered a very vibrant making culture where the status of the object is investigated in relation to the body. In *I am Human* Auli Laitinen made brooches from common office labelling equipment, which offers no material value in itself. We usually experience people wearing such name badges where the attempt to personalise human interaction should be helped by such 'body-signs'. In an almost cynical contradiction to their primary aim these labels are used in work environments, which usually are not concerned with individualised needs or subjective creativity; the badges signify their wearer as social bodies. The brooches, which read '*I am Human*', capture this complex dynamic; instead of individual names we read a much deeper, if not surreal, cry for recognition. The re-description the artist mediates in her jewellery work is guided by the interplay between difference and resemblance. Conceptual studio jewellers of this kind create work out of an existing crafts 'vocabulary' and in doing so create new meaning and objects with reinvested emotive value. The objects offer a counter-position to common notions of the beautiful by

infiltrating the wearable decorative objects with unexpected details, surprising choice of materials and/or a 'twist' in the meaning of the work. It is from this tense apprehension that a new vision of reality springs forth, one which ordinary vision resists because it is attached to the ordinary use of forms and signs. The eclipse of the objective, manipulable world thus makes way for the revelation of a new dimension of reality and truth, even if this version is very difficult to share in a culture dominated by a market economy.

The structures and dynamics of culture production involve the crafts in a 'double take on a double take', where crafts' initial resistance to mass-culture makes it an attractive commodity because of it. A market situation is generated where crafts has to simulate itself to be economically successful. Every maker who has not quite made it into the realm of economic self-sufficiency knows how hard it is to sell objects, which remain outside the standard territory of commodity signification, and to achieve artistic autonomy. And every maker, who has made that leap successfully knows, or should know, that the particularities of their artistic production, the recognisable marketable style, is what they sell - and how high the price was to get there in the first place. Contemporary crafts practice occupies a curious place. On the one hand, we find mass or batch production, which simulates the machine-produced, repressing one-off creation in favour of *simulating* variation. This side of crafts is often considered successful practice because it succeeds economically. On the other hand, we find crafts practice, which denies the historical development of a machine culture and nostalgically celebrates the hand-made despite it being often economically unviable.

It is in self-reflective crafts practices where we can observe a relatively new phenomenon. Contemporary studio crafts could not exist without its historical and indeed traditional roots in materials and processes, adornment and ornamentation. Now, informed by current visual culture and the history and

theory of modern art, new artistic strategies and enquiries are being formulated, and a generation of crafts practitioners are extending their making practice by exploring questions of status, meaning and emotional content. These artistic methodologies differ from a 'classical' design process in so far as they take their impetus from a content-based enquiry rather than from a purely formal, material-based or skill-driven approach. It is not necessarily the art-full crafting of the objects or an obvious radical aesthetic, which allows some crafts practices to inhabit the hybrid area between crafts and fine art so successfully. Much more interestingly, it is the integrity of enquiry; sensitivity and knowledge of cultural issues, confidence in using artistic strategies and the thought processes, which inform the making practice and thus push the boundaries of the discipline further.