

Speech of Marjan Unger, 17th of September 2010 at the seminar
“Exhibiting Jewellery” in arrangement of Gustavsbergs Konsthall.

Jewellery in context.

As a Dutch jewellery lover, I am accustomed to the 'Dutch' way of presenting jewellery, both in galleries and exhibitions in museums. That means space, factual space, but most important, it also means a mental space, to discover and enjoy the way of thinking behind the series of works that were presented. The model for this way of presenting was the way galleries for contemporary art were developing in the sixties and seventies. The emphasis was on the visual quality of the work, on the shapes and the materials being used. This 'empty' way of exhibiting jewellery was a break with history and the way traditional jewellers present their wares, for example on busts and other renderings of the human body. Necklaces were laid on a flat surface; rings, bracelets and brooches as well, or they are pinned on a white wall.

This 'Dutch' way of exhibiting jewellery formed a big difference with for example British places where jewellery was shown. In Great Britain, a new generation of jewellery designers had emerged at about the same time as in the Netherlands and there was a lively contact between Dutch and British makers. But in Great Britain, the habit was and sometimes still is to show as many works as you can on a square of 50 by 50 cm, like two necklaces, five bracelets, some brooches, ten rings and at least twenty pair of earrings, because they are so small. The German way is midway between Great Britain and the Netherlands, if you forgive this geographic incorrect way of putting it.

Except from being Dutch myself, there are more reasons for having me here today. I have stopped teaching, but I am an art historian, you never can get rid of that, and I still am a design critic who travels a lot, because I am so curious at what is happening in the applied arts. In fact, I am most interested in people, in the things people make in their time, why they make it, whom is interested in it and how people live with exceptional products of individual makers like furniture, paintings, ceramics, clothes and jewellery. Fashion and jewellery are special interests for me, because they are worn on the body and people cannot detach themselves from them. One way or another they are part of their identity, of the way they present themselves to other people.

As an art historian, however, there was one thing that started to irritate me in the way jewellery was regarded in the Netherlands

and the way it was described and presented by museums for contemporary art and galleries. The common attitude was that the Lord himself, in all his goodness, had mysteriously blessed the Netherlands at the end of the sixties and thereafter with good jewellery design, and that before that there was nothing, nothing worth mentioning at all. Now it is true that most makers are mainly interested in their own work, and especially in their most recent pieces and the pieces they are still going to make and you cannot blame them for that. But for people like me, that should be another matter. So I started researching Dutch Jewellery Design in the whole 20th century and in 2004 my substantial book on this subject was published. I gave the field its history back, and now my collection is donated to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, where after the opening of the renovated building the whole history of jewellery until the 21st century will be presented.

I could have left it at that, but there was still something nagging in the back of my mind, and that was a theoretic approach towards jewellery. Many books on jewellery have failed to provide a definition of jewellery. Their authors, it seems, did not see a need for defining as common a subject as jewellery. At the same time, however, this allowed them to write whatever they wanted on this matter. They could choose to illustrate their claims with examples from a multitude of pieces that are still with us today, or from the many different ways in which jewellery has been depicted in the course of history. In the Dutch language, it was even more complicated than in English, because there are two words for jewellery: 'sieraad' for all sorts of adornment of the body, and 'juweel' for pieces of adornment in precious metals and with stones. However, in German, French and Italian, there are in fact similar distinctions in terminology. In Swedish, I don't know.

So Two years ago, I decided to go for my doctorate and write a classical thesis on jewellery. I approached this phenomenon from scratch. My thesis, after defining its subject, focuses on an analysis of the diverging aspects of jewellery as a worldwide phenomenon. This comprehensive approach starts from the view that all human fears and desires have somehow materialized in objects of human adornment. Specifically, my analysis aimed at developing a sound theoretical framework for the study of jewellery and for the way it could be presented.

People have always treated precious jewellery seriously because of its economic value. Publication came mostly from within the profession itself. Today the study of jewellery is a sub-category of the study of the applied arts, which in turn is a sub-

category of the discipline of history of art and architecture. In Chapter 3 of my thesis, I disentangle the blessings and shortcomings of the art historians' approach to jewellery. If art history is not a very old discipline, the study of jewellery as a subject in its own right within this framework took off only in the 1950s and 1960s of the last century. But the history of jewellery as a worldwide phenomenon can be traced back, after recent archaeological findings, to some 100,000 years or more. Due to this discrepancy, perhaps, the study of jewellery has been blemished with many misconceptions and stereotypes, for example the notion that jewellery is meant to beautify women only, and not meant for men as well.

Although the obsession of many authors with only the most precious and refined jewels made for wealthy and powerful figures can be considered a matter of taste, it has certainly reduced the social dimension of jewellery to mere proof of envy or naked display of power. My arguments in this chapter also underscore that the art history approach to jewellery has largely been dominated by Western attitudes, like art history itself.

Next, the relationship between jewellery and the human body is explored in chapter 4. Jewellery is made by human beings, but, just as important, it is worn on the human body. The wearer can give his or her own meaning and even a certain quality to a piece, without altering it. In the study of jewellery, one should carefully address the triad of maker, wearer and onlooker. The basic shapes of pieces of jewellery such as rings, bracelets and necklaces have been remarkably constant, throughout the world as well as across the centuries of which pieces have survived.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the analysis of various disciplinary lines of approach: psychology, sociology, anthropology and material culture; fashion history, with emphasis on recent developments in fashion theory; literature, economics and moral attitudes based on religion, philosophy and distinctive notions of beauty. In my thesis, the economy of jewellery is discussed in terms of the legal, material and technical aspects specific to jewellery.

Many of the reflective points of view from the various disciplines are useful for the general study of jewellery, even if so far most authors have paid little attention to them. Exceptions are mostly found in specialised studies and in studies of adornment in non-Western cultures, which discuss interesting social functions and distinctions, as well as relevant ritual values.

The symbolic meaning of jewellery is an infinite theme when considered as a multilayered and many-cultured phenomenon with a history longer than that of any other artefact, except weapons. In chapter 6, I have systemized this symbolism somewhat by distinguishing three main categories: power, fertility and sexuality, and remembrance or memento.

Another element I want to stress in this meeting is that in many publications from the last decades, the focus has been on aspects and forms of jewellery that are considered to be new, while the backbone of jewellery making is rather the continuity of its symbolic shapes and meanings. Jewels are first of all signs of coherence in a society; people recognise them as signs of distinction only from a certain cultural perspective. What is fascinating indeed is the endless way makers and wearers have been able to vary on jewellery over time. But in fact, we know it all, or almost all, one way or another.

The results of this research are summed up in chapter 7, where I evaluate the values and functions that can be ascribed to jewellery, and the way they relate to each other. By distinguishing between artistic or cultural values, historical value or jewellery as sign in social relationships, emotional or personal values and the unavoidable issue of the economic value of jewellery, this thesis develops a set of standards that can serve as a model for the study of many more subjects within the crafts, applied arts and design.

Finally, my conclusion is quite straightforward: I argue for the need to combine many different points of view and to balance them in sensible ways as the basis for a new theoretical framework for the study of jewellery. In this respect it is appropriate to advance the discipline of art history. After all, the careful material, aesthetic, cultural and historical analysis of objects, which forms the basis of this discipline, is equally crucial in the study of jewellery. In addition, specific knowledge of materials and techniques is needed.

The title of my thesis, *Jewellery in context*, reflects a multi-disciplinary approach. Among other things, such an approach has particular implications for the presentation of jewellery, and even more so for the historical research of this subject. Especially in the Western world, it is important to address the adornments of the not so happy few and the many layers of the upper and middle classes. In this respect, there is much to be learned from anthropology and the study of material culture.

Of course, with my background you never work completely from scratch; inevitably you bring in a lot of things you have seen

and read, and, in the case of jewellery, also things you have worn yourself. In the process of writing this thesis all my own notions about jewellery, my assumptions and my experiences in wearing it have been pushed around and around. My travels to different continents have also contributed to this dynamic. In the end, however, all these notions and experiences have found their way into the theoretical and multi-disciplinary framework for the study of jewellery.

I now have given you the summary of my thesis and I have defended my thesis on March the 17th of this year. The good thing about the whole exercise for me is that I love my subject more than ever, and I can play with its content. For the subject of this meeting, exhibiting jewellery, I can simply refer to the five main values in jewellery and talk freely about its consequences for the way it is presented.

The artistic or visual value

The historical value

The social value, jewellery as a means to make the identity of the wearer

The personal and emotional value

The material and financial value.

To sum up my talk, my statement for this meeting is like the title of my thesis: Jewellery is in great need of context again, in exhibitions and publications. Like in other fields of design, so much of what you should do in exhibiting the works is story-telling and creating the right context to judge the pieces themselves. More often than not, there is a lot of narrative in the work itself and that has to communicate. Use the body or a rendering of the body, use text and historical documents, portraits and fashion images or dollar signs when needed. The Dutch way of presenting jewellery in a wide and white space, with emphasis on its visual value, may have raised the esteem for work of the best contemporary jewellers in a cultural sense, but you can easily state as well that it may have alienated the work from most of mankind. Looking at the best qualities of the work, and putting those values into perspective in the way the work is presented, is to my opinion the best way to grasp the attention from many more people than the happy few who visit jewellery galleries and exhibitions. Jewellery in exhibition needs its context back, to emphasize its many intrinsic values, values that are already there to begin with.

Marjan Unger