



Poetic dimensions: Jewellery conversations about design process

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Abstract

The decision by the authors, two Australian contemporary designers, to collaborate in a joint exhibition initiates a process of retrospective reflection as a preliminary strategy to identify common interests and to establish conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Underpinning their project is a mutual understanding and passion for contemporary jewellery forged by many years of academic study and teaching experience in the area of jewellery design at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Sydney. This paper signals the first collaborative venture between the two designers who have witnessed the gradual evolution of each other's distinctive design language over many years.

As a means to extrapolate potential frameworks for the exhibition and to highlight the impact of transnational influences in the context of contemporary design practice, two case studies are presented that include personal accounts by the authors of key research experiences in the Netherlands and Japan. Through these design conversations the authors hope new and serendipitous avenues unfold.

Keywords

Contemporary jewellery, reflective practice, design process, Onno Boekhoudt, CODA Museum, Kitamura Koubou, Japanese lacquer

Introduction

The discussions in this paper on methods of jewellery making are contextualised in the artistic and reflexive practice of the emerging field of Contemporary Art Jewellery. A reflexive approach to jewellery practice considers jewellery as a phenomenon that is analysed and researched with outcomes that are jewellery-related but not necessarily wearable (Den Besten in Reinders, 2010, p. 15). Liesbeth den Besten in her critical text *On Jewellery* (2011) affirms this broad definition when she writes, "Contemporary jewellery not only involves the baubles, bangles and beads but also photography, installation, performance, video and so on" (Den Besten, 2011, p. 15).

Both authors of this paper are research-practitioners and therefore employ practice-based methodologies in their work. This includes examinations of case studies through museum archives and exhibitions; investigations and tests of materials, forms, processes and techniques in the design studio; and studio visits and cultural studies experienced through international artist residencies.

Forming the backdrop for this paper is the decision by the authors to develop new work for a joint exhibition. This partnership is viewed as an opportunity to reflect on past work and to explore a variety of design forms including jewellery pieces, models, box-forms and containers, photographs and graphic design. The initial stage of the project's development, and the main focus of this paper, is a review of key research experiences in the form of two case studies, one selected by each author. The comparative process that takes place with the 'retrospective reflection' (Gray et al., 2004, p. 22) of two influential case studies is a means to uncover similar interests.

Revisiting past ideas and experiences in order to develop new paths via the metaphor of conversation forms an initial scaffold. Here the authors are interested in 'conversation' as a design strategy that is open to the exchange of ideas and to improvisation that relies on "feeling, response and adjustment" (Gray et. al., 2004, p. 22). This initial approach values flexibility similar to Herbert Simon's concept of 'goal-less designing' that is "open to the possibility of being led elsewhere" (Go, 2012, p. 518). It echoes Donald Schön's analysis of design in *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) as a "reflective conversation with the situation" that describes the "gradual give and take of problem formulation, experiment, and reformulation" (Buchanan in Meijers, 2009, p. 451). And it considers the

analysis of design methodology by John Chris Jones in *Design Methods* (1992). “The language of conversation,” writes Jones “must bridge the logical gap between past and future, but in doing so it should not limit the variety of possible futures that are discussed nor should it force the choice of a future that is unfree” (Jones, 1992, p. 73).

This paper analyses two contrasting approaches to design practice through an international lens. The conference theme of ‘transnational’ is interpreted as a synthesis of European and Asian sensibilities in the context of Australian contemporary design practice. The first case study focuses on the “process-oriented working methods” (Den Besten in Reinders, 2010, p.107) of the Dutch jeweller Onno Boekhoudt through a personal account by the first author of her research of Boekhoudt’s work in the Netherlands in 2012. The second case study shifts the focus from the Netherlands to Japan and the lacquer studio of Tatsuo Kitamura referred to as the Kitamura Koubou. Selected by the second author, this case study includes a personal account of her research of Japanese lacquer in Japan from 2009-2011.



Fig. 1: Archival boxes of jewellery from the CODA Museum Collection. Photograph by the first author. October 1, 2012, CODA Museum, Apeldoorn, the Netherlands. Photograph used with permission by the first author and CODA Museum.



Fig. 2: Onno Boekhoudt: Silver ring from Box 1. Photograph by first author. October 1, 2012, CODA Museum, Apeldoorn, the Netherlands. Photograph used with permission by the first author and CODA Museum.



Fig. 3: Onno Boekhoudt: Box 5. Photograph by first author. October 1, 2012, CODA Museum, Apeldoorn, the Netherlands. Photograph used with permission by the first author and CODA Museum.



Fig. 4: Notes written by the first author about boxes 1-6. 1/10/12, CODA Museum. Photo used with permission by the first author.

Case study #1: Onno Boekhoudt

I like the fact that there's mistakes (?) maybe they are not mistakes, experiments, risks, I like the fact that they are left, he hasn't thrown them out, he hasn't seemed to worry... (First author, written notes, October 1, 2012, Apeldoorn, the Netherlands).

Onno Boekhoudt (1944-2002) was an influential jewellery-practitioner and lecturer. He followed a process-oriented approach in which test pieces, found objects and finished wearable items were valued equally and presented accordingly in the same exhibition context (see Larsen, 1984, p.91). An examination of his work reveals a perpetual search for form shaped by the principle of honesty. Liesbeth den Besten remarks that, “it is testimony to his courage that, as an artist who enjoyed international respect and as a lecturer at the Rietveld Academy, he continued consistently to reveal his doubts, try-outs, investigations and failures to the outside world” (Den Besten in Reinders, 2010, p. 103).

Boekhoudt had requested that his “artistic legacy, both work and experiments, to be kept together” (Schrijver in Reinders, 2010, p. 116). So after his untimely death in a car accident in 2002 the CODA Museum in Apeldoorn, the Netherlands purchased Boekhoudt’s complete studio contents. This significant decision to honour Boekhoudt’s request enables members from the public including practitioner-researchers to access his collection and gain further insight into his working methods.

The CODA Museum Collection: A personal account

In 2012 the first author travels to the Netherlands to study a selection of Onno Boekhoudt’s work as well as other examples of Dutch jewellery design from the CODA Museum archives. Intrigue and surprise accompany the experience as the museum staff leave the stack of archival boxes unpacked (Figure 1).

The contents of each box is systematically examined by the first author with photographs and notes taken throughout the study session (see Figure 4):

Box no. 1: Lots of riveted elements, very fragile, scared to touch [. . .] Repousse rings and brooches with no thicker than 1 mm sheet silver. Left to tarnish, the finish isn't perfect [. . .]

sliced strips of silver reassembled and then soldered I assume. Extra frame on back to prevent soldered/raised elements catching on clothes.

Box no. 5 (Figure 3): Beautiful object, lead, soft – too soft to take out of box without potentially damaging it or at least altering the shape. Looks like its been folded down the middle then opened back out, then folded vertically. Lead has a beautiful lustre, like soft grey, matte, can be pushed back into place really easily, very sensuous, seductive material . . .

Box no. 6: Four bangles/bracelets or objects that could be bracelets. Aluminium with repousse sections that have split, some thinking maybe with one by gluing three sections of black card to repousse area. I like the fact that there's mistakes (?) maybe they are not mistakes, experiments, risks, I like the fact that they are left, he hasn't thrown them out, he hasn't seemed to worry (?) about the possibility of others seeing these mistakes but were/are they actually meant to be seen, are these private?

(First author, written notes, October 1, 2012, Apeldoorn, the Netherlands).

Each piece appears to be inconclusive confirming Boekhoudt's preoccupation with the 'unfinished'. "Making - breaking", he wrote in one of his many sketchbooks (Den Besten in Reinders, 2010, p. 99), what psychoanalyst Adam Phillips describes as a "mock-Punch-and-Judy dialogue" (Phillips, 1988, 131) to convey the process of destroying something in order to create something new. The idea of revealing mistakes and failures, of pulling apart and destroying previously made work is new terrain for the authors. How much vulnerability should one reveal through their work? Are jewellery secrets meant to be sacred? (Schrijver in Reinders, 2010, p.116).

While the experience of handling Boekhoudt's work indeed clarifies many questions regarding how the pieces are made, the magic, or more precisely the poetry of his oeuvre remains 'intact'. Ward Schrijver writes similarly,

When preparing for the exhibition in CODA I came across large numbers of these form-studies in the depot, and although I have been able to hold them in my hand one by one, they have meanwhile become more inaccessible than ever. (Schrijver in Reinders, 2010, p.118).

A poetic dimension is discovered through the first author's authentic encounter with Onno Boekhoudt's work as well as a richer understanding of the reality of contemporary practice as an expression of the human condition. Compared to the objects made by Tatsuo Kitamura in the following case study, Boekhoudt's poetic objects appear *of* this world. Boekhoudt 'cultivated the unfinished' while Kitamura searches for perfection.

Case study #2- Tatsuo Kitamura

Every studio has their secrets and so does the Kitamura Koubou.

(Second author, recorded conversation, 4 February 2016).

Tatsuo Kitamura (born 1952) also working under the studio title 'Unryūan' is one of Japan's leading contemporary lacquer artists. An insight into his work reveals a commitment to upholding this traditional craft in the contemporary context. "He is not about imitation or fakery" writes Daniel McOwen in *Unryūan: master of traditional Japanese lacquer: selected works* (2002), "but is respecting what has gone before and re-expressing it in today's terms, albeit with that reverential sense of the past that is such a rich characteristic of Japanese art."

The world of Japanese lacquer art reflects a revered history associated with technique, narratives and materiality. Japanese lacquer's application is broad and encapsulates painting, prints, objects and boxes. Examples of utilitarian objects of containment include 'natsume' (traditional tea caddy), writing boxes, and 'inros' (case with small compartments).

Two considerations are essential to the lacquer design process. The first consideration is the execution of technique via experimentation with materials and application methods. The second is the surface design, the narrative behind the graphic and how it envelops and embeds the three-dimensional space. In this synthesis of narrative, technique and materiality is the search for a unified form. The lacquerware produced in the Kitamura Koubou appear to have arrived in this world fully formed so unlike Boekhoudt who turns the garment of jewellery inside out to reveal the seams and loose ends of thread, Tatsuo Kitamura illustrates an approach to making that covers any tracks like a hunter in snow.

Yagihashi Shin, director of the Lacquer Art Museum in Wajima, provides a poetic description about the objects from the Kitamura Koubou in *Unryūan: master of traditional Japanese lacquer: selected works*. Shin writes,

In eastern philosophy, not only in Japan, but also in China and Korea, there exists the idea that

the complete universe is contained in small objects. For example, the whole world is encapsulated in a vase and at any given moment may be set free. Kitamura's detailed *maki-e* works are not defined by only detailed design and technique, they condense the whole universe. To go further, this condensed world makes us conscious of the unifier, the master, of the presence of gold (Kehoe, 2002).



Fig. 5: Second author: Line drawings in March 2009 showing initial skills followed by line drawings in June 2009 showing improvements after three months. Photograph used with permission by the second author

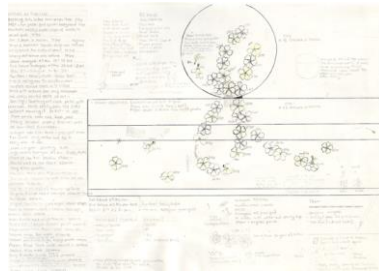


Fig. 6: Second author: A personal chart recording the applied techniques and development of processes. Photograph used with permission by the second author.



Fig. 8: Once the image is established further experimentation on a panel board is conducted to select colour sequences before applying to the *natsume*. Photograph used with permission by the second author.



Fig. 7: A three-dimensional paper model for visualisation. Photograph used with permission by the second author

Kitamura Koubou: A personal account

In 2009 the second author travels to Wajima, the lacquer centre of Japan, for a two-year residency to study traditional Japanese lacquer techniques. The residency is lead by *tōryō* (lacquer master) Tatsuo Kitamura of the Kitamura Koubou where through the making of objects she records the design processes of a particular technique called *maki-e*. Her training over this two-year period involves a series of projects that incrementally increase in skill requirements. Her first lacquer project is a painting of irises completed in silver powder on a small panel. The feedback to this initial study is simply that the lines captured are 'not beautiful'. The next three months focus on line drawings with a brush through repetitive exercises for six days a week in the studio until the brush strokes reveal a sense of exuberance, elegance and definition (see Figure 5).

After gaining fluency and confidence with the brush she moves to the next project, a painting on a small two-dimensional panel that introduces her to basic traditional *maki-e* techniques and the use of gold. On completion of this painting she progresses to a three-dimensional object, a tea caddy or '*natsume*'. The following sequences of photographs visually document the design process for the *natsume*.

Following the *natsume* project the second author works on a small box. Each project is designed to gradually increase the level of skill and understanding of lacquer. Under the guidance of the studio master and supervision from the other studio members the second author achieves five lacquer *maki-e* objects. Her final work created at the Kitamura Koubou is a jewellery piece, a contemporary ring, which merges the traditions of Japanese lacquer with new computer aided design, an appropriate way to symbolise the completion of her lacquer training by fusing old and new methods.

Conclusion

Everything is a study. I'm still studying, I'm searching for forms.

(Den Besten quoting Boekhoudt in Reinders, 2010, p. 99).

The decision by the two authors to collaborate towards a joint exhibition instigated a period of reflection about their individual practice as a means to identify similar interests and potential conceptual frameworks. Both authors are design graduates from the same university however each designer has since explored distinctly different paths in their jewellery practice. In this paper the subsequent cross-fertilisation of their research interests and experiences highlighted two opposing methods in the studio practices of Onno Boekhoudt, a Dutch jeweller and Tatsuo Kitamura, a Japanese lacquer master. The first author reflected on her experience of viewing some of Boekhoudt's objects at the CODA Museum in the Netherlands. This was followed by a personal account by the second author of the incremental design processes encountered at the Kitamura Koubou during her two-year study period in Wajima, Japan. Through these comparative encounters differing sensibilities were revealed.

The 'process-oriented' design practice of Onno Boekhoudt represents a mentality of making objects that is "open to the possibility of being led elsewhere" (Go, 2012, p. 518). Indeed as Ward Schrijver has stated Boekhoudt "was a man keen on exploration, an artist who considered the journey to an unknown objective more important than a glittering final result" (Schrijver in Reinders 2010, p. 118). In this paper Boekhoudt's open approach was contrasted by the 'traditionally bound' and "reverential" (Kehoe 2002) practice of the Kitamura Koubou reflected in the personal account by the second author of her lacquer training with the Kitamura studio.

In the initial stages of the authors' design dialogues these two approaches to object-making form an interesting dichotomy. Boekhoudt's object-making inspires the authors to reveal some of the 'doubts and try-outs' of the design process as a means to think more poetically. And the Japanese sensibility of the objects of the Kitamura Koubou influences their search for the 'unifier', for an ideal balance between surface detail and form, and between notions of old and new.

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Biographical note

Dr. Zoe Veness is a contemporary jeweller and Lecturer of Object Design at the Tasmanian College of the Arts, University of Tasmania in Hobart, Australia. Her work is held in private and public collections including the National Gallery of Australia and the Art Gallery of South Australia.

Ms. Bic Tieu is a contemporary maker of jewellery and objects. She is also a sessional academic and teaches into Design, Jewellery and Object at the University of New South Wales. Alongside this, she has the Bic Tieu Studio practice which often extends to projects, exhibitions and publications