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M(eat) et al: art jewellery as a means to explore body boundary?

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Abstract

Throughout its 60 year history the art jewellery field has been creatively interrogating jewellery's craft traditions and its role as social signifier. Den Besten's (2014) recent manifesto for contemporary jewellery invited art jewellers to re- "Focus on the "why" and "how" of jewelry, on people and jewelry". Through practice-led research I am investigating the public's response to the crafting and transformation of food-stuffs, including the flesh of meat and fruits, as materials with which to create a collection of jewellery and decorative wearable artefacts titled 'M(eat) et al'. There are several art jewellers who explore alternative organic, animal and human matter in their creative practice, such as Marta Mattsson, Eunmi Chun and Stefan Heuser; however, few have gone on to study and analyse the subsequent impact of their designs on the wearer/consumer. In Hindle's 'Strange Pleasures' study (conducted in 2014), where members of the public were invited to experience and engage with a range of art jewellery examples, a participant selected my work to interact with. She stated that "it was almost like that weird attraction/revulsion thing" (Hindle, Colley, Boulwood, 2016 p.304), evidencing threads around abjection (Kristeva, 1984) and body boundary (Rozin et al, 1995) that occur due to the material make-up of the jewellery. As a result of this study, I am exploring ways in which to more effectively promote and exhibit 'M(eat) et al' alongside a developing complementary collection of 'Ambiguous Implements', to enable an immersive and experiential presentation to the public that more directly questions body boundary.

Keywords: art jewellery; meat as jewellery; material transformation; body boundary; abjection

Art jewellery

In his essay *Material Typographies*, Forrest (2014) states that ‘craft can be imagined as a cultural prosthetic’ (Forrest, 2014, p.39) and goes on to describe ‘craft as one of the most important drivers in material culture’ (Forrest, 2014, p.40). Throughout its 60-year history the art jewellery field has been creatively interrogating jewellery’s craft traditions, its connection to the wearer and its role as social signifier.

‘The work of certain jewellers can be read as engaging with definitions and critiques of the body which reinvigorates the possibility of the applied arts as critical practice, rather than merely a supplementary, decorative one’ (Sandino, 2002, p.107).

The use of organic materials in art jewellery, as well as themes around abjection, are evident in the work of Marta Mattsson (*Rebirth/Skin* collection, 2010), Eunmi Chun (*Flora & Fauna* solo exhibition, 2014) and Stefan Heuser (*Fisherman’s Ring*, 2010) (figure 1).



Figure 1: Marta Mattsson, brooch in calfskin and silver from *Rebirth/Skin* collection, 2010 (left), Eunmi Chun, Polar Bear pendant, cowgut and silver, *Flora & Fauna* solo exhibition at Ornamentum, 2014 (centre) and Stefan Heuser, *Fisherman’s Ring*, breast milk, resin and metal, 2010 (right).

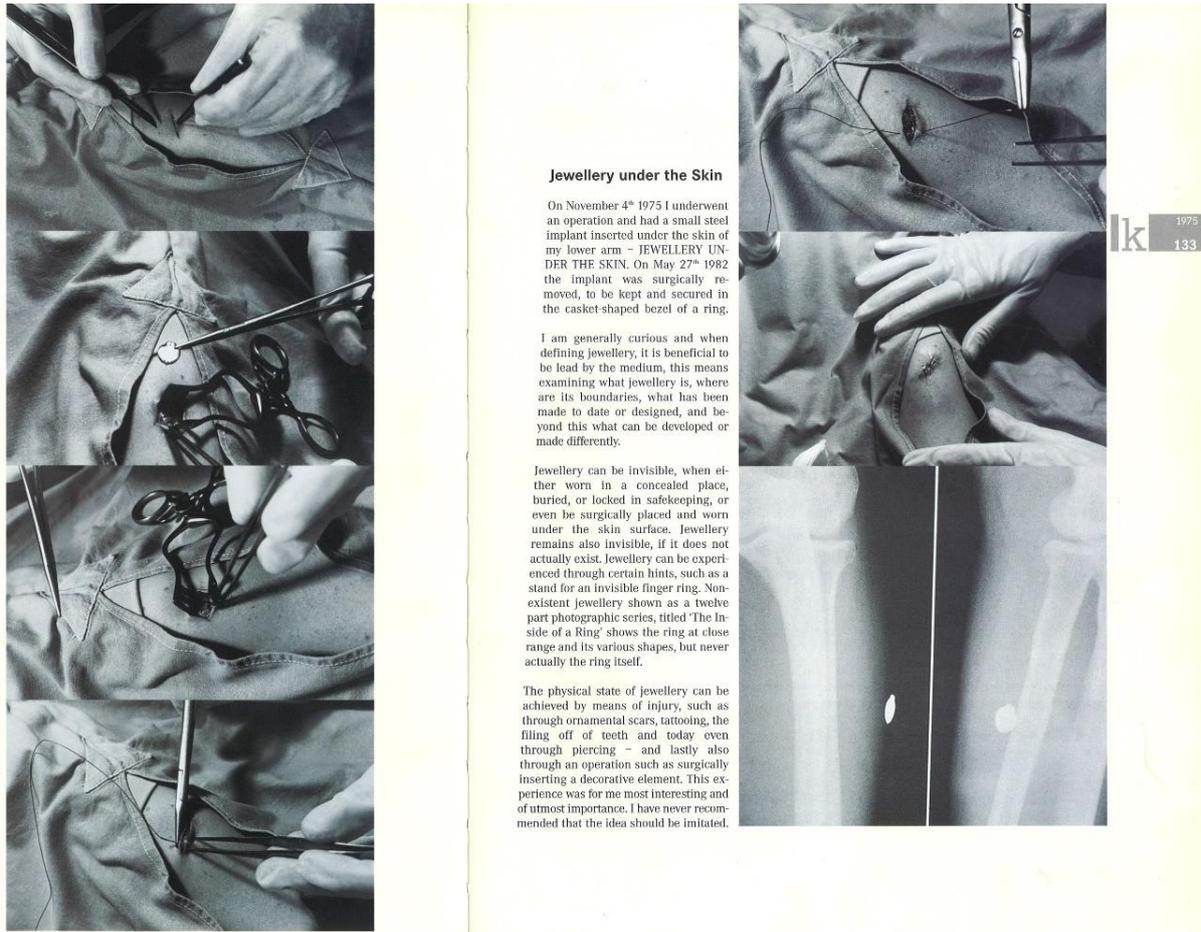


Figure 2: Peter Skubic, *Jewellery under the Skin*, steel implant, 1975

On November the 4th in 1975 Peter Skubic 'performed' *Schmuck unter der Haut* (*Jewellery under my Skin*), which can be described as an art jewellery act (figure 2). Skubic had a surgical steel implant inserted under the skin of his lower arm for seven years, after which it was removed and set into a ring; siting the jewellery on both sides of the skin. Christoph Zellweger's *Foreign Bodies* (2007) publication and collection of the same name feature a range of pieces with highly polished stainless steel surfaces that have been inspired and informed by surgical implants. Zellweger has also created leather holsters for hip replacements, performatively re-presenting them through contextual imagery as external wearables that mirror the wearer's hip position, marking 'an externalisation of the inner body, of that abjection which has formerly been hidden' (Sandino, 2002, p.107).

The relationship art jewellery has to the wearer has been a constant strand of exploration that runs throughout the field's history. Since the early 2000's some more pointed issues have been raised regarding art jewellery's apparent disconnection with the body, as the traditionally pivotal site for the work. Staal's (2005) *manifesto for the new jewellery* comments on the fact that contemporary jewellery has shifted away from 'its actual calling: as an accessory that ultimately expresses the aspirations and achievements of the wearer'. Den Besten's (2014) more recent manifesto for contemporary jewellery invited us, as a field, to re- 'focus on the "why" and "how" of jewelry, on people and jewelry'. As requested, certain aspects and areas of the field of contemporary, or art jewellery, are currently reconsidering various forms of engagement with the public sphere, with the wearer re-presented as the central focus of art jewellery practice. The seminar '*Re-Public jewellery – Social Potential in Contemporary Jewellery*' took place during Munich's annual Jewellery Week festival in 2015 at Galleri Handwerk. Gali (2015) explains that 'the seminar's intention, as part of a larger project, is to return jewellery art to its natural habitat', that of public space, as opposed to the white cube, with the hope of rekindling the relationship between the wearer and the work. Hindle's *Strange Pleasures* study (conducted in 2014) also uncovered possibilities for public interaction and 'play' at the hands of the wearer, stating that 'the art jewellery that they explore during the study points to how the wearing of adornments can constitute a leisure experience that is one of freedom and play' (Hindle, Colley, Boulwood, 2016, p.310). The study observed the invited group's varied responses to the range of art jewellery they were invited to interact with. The selection included *Doggy Dodger* (figure 3), a brooch from my 2010 *Subdivision* collection. This piece, constructed mainly from CNC milled roast beef, was selected by one participant who found its material make-up intriguing. It was both pleasing and useful to receive intuitive, thoughtful reflections from an individual who stated that the piece aroused 'that weird attraction/revulsion thing' (Hindle, Colley, Boulwood, 2016 p.304). After having handled the piece the participants began to reflect on the nature of their own flesh and the moments it seems to be out of their control (in adolescence, pregnancy, etc.), as 'memories were evoked of being reduced to their bodies' (Hindle, Colley, Boulwood, 2016 p.308). The participants physical interaction with and exploration of this piece highlighted the fleshy material's subtle, tacky reanimation, an almost imperceptible reaction that occurs in response to changes in temperature and moisture levels due

to bodily contact; thus, wearing brings a far less controllable dynamic, breathing 'life' into the artefact. However, the degradable material's limited lifespan also highlights the fleeting and complex nature of human existence and the passing of time, suggesting the ultimate end that conventional jewellery circumvents through its endurance.



Figure 3: *Doggy Dodger (chewed a roast)*, *Subdivision* collection 2010 (CNC milled British roast beef, gold-plated silver and stainless steel)

Developing collections: *M(eat) et al* and *Ambiguous Implements*

Food is a far-reaching language that both reinforces and transcends class boundaries and enables more fluid cross-cultural communication. It is more than likely that participants have already had first-hand experience of the materials, although those interactions have tended to occur through their consumption of food, rather than through their consumption of luxury goods such as jewellery. Over the past eight years I have experimented with a range of organic, food-based materials, with the aim of using them to create intriguing outcomes. As materials, food-stuffs awaken the senses, with the more visceral of these tending to initiate instinctive 'gut' reactions from those experiencing them. Through practice-led research I have

attempted to re-appropriate, control, craft, denature and transform these materials, fashioning them into art jewellery. I have responded to the findings of Hindle's *Strange Pleasures* study (conducted in 2014) and continued to develop my use of food-stuffs, including the flesh of meat and fruits, as materials with which to create a collection of art jewellery titled *M(eat) et al.*

As the title suggests, *M(eat) et al* combines a mixture of meaty or fleshy organic materials with a series of 'others'. It is generally these 'others' that provide varying degrees of stability and structure, enabling secure methods of connection and attachment to be built into the designs. Materials such as metal, wood, fabric and leather are additional materials I tend to favour when designing and creating my work. I spend a lot of my time testing and experimenting in order to transform the materials I have selected, thus creating a range of initial primary research tests that form the basis of my investigation. Denaturing processes and forms of digital manufacturing have been researched and utilised to underpin the techniques and methods I have developed. The processes used to manipulate, craft and transform these fleshy foods have been refined through the testing and problem-solving of a range of equipment and tooling, which I, mostly, design and create myself.

Having been born and raised in Sheffield, cutlery and the use of steel tooling are particularly relevant to my practice: I have always found the city's industrial heritage fascinating and inspiring, with members of both sides of my family having worked in the Sheffield steelwork and cutlery trades. Aunt Mabel applied knife handles, Uncle Arthur was a little mester (self-employed craftsman working from a small workshop) and my Aunty Vic was a buffer girl (polisher in the cutlery trade). In the summer of 2015, during Nottingham Trent University's *Summer Lodge* residency, I began collaborating with the cross-disciplinary artist Nuala Clooney and developed a series of two-fingered, double-lobed copper spoons. This initial foray into experimental cutlery has developed to form a collection of *Ambiguous Implements* for eating, to be displayed alongside *M(eat) et al* collection. This complimentary juxtaposition aims to highlight the somewhat indefinable, nebulous body boundary through the presentation on the body of skin-like jewels alongside the complimentary use of 'bodily' tools for eating that serve-up edible, nutritious materials that then cross the body's internal/external threshold. In order to indicate both visual influences and the

various underpinning personal narratives, *M(eat) et al* neckpieces and the *two-fingered spoon* series from the *Ambiguous Implements* collection have been documented, using double exposure film photography, in and around the run-down industrial areas of Sheffield (figures 4, 5 and 6).



Figure 4: *Balsa'd bacon, M(eat) et al Collection 2016* (denatured bacon, balsa wood, copper, leather and butchers twine)

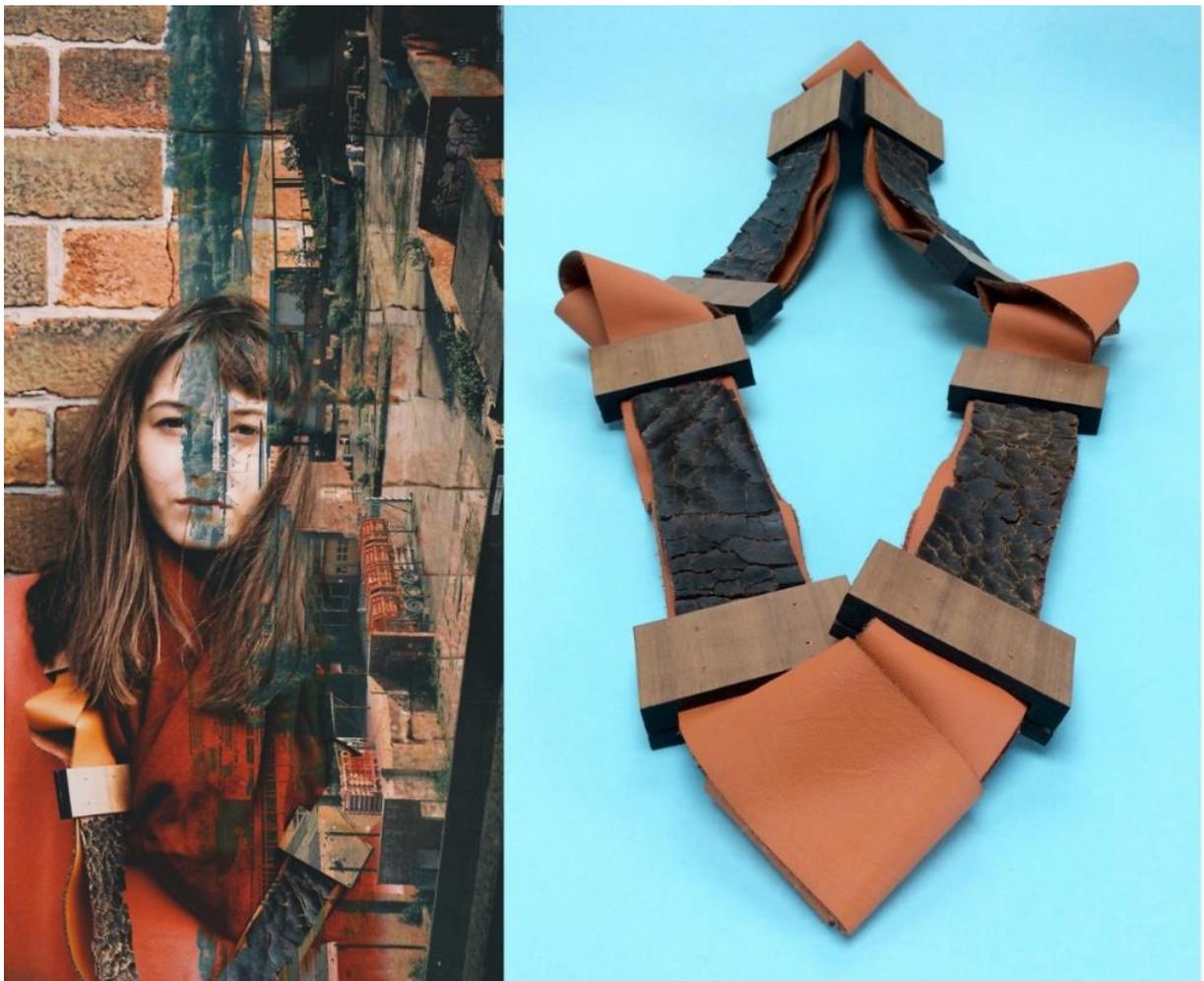


Figure 5: *The Untanny, M(eat) et al Collection* 2016 (denatured beef, leather, walnut and copper)



Figure 6: *Two-fingered spoon, Ambiguous Implements Collection* 2016 (press-formed copper)

The *M(eat) et al* collection seeks to defamiliarise flesh, utilising denaturing processes to transform and partially stabilise the materials used. The desiccated nature of the materials also references inspiration from the historical contexts of wearable relics, mourning jewellery and memento mori more generally, reinterpreting the significance of corporeal interaction as a means of providing a physical connection or open line of communication (May, 2015, p.49) between the wearer and the 'Other' (Kristeva, 1984, p.10). As discussed earlier, due to the Maillard reaction (a chemical reaction between amino acids and sugar in foods when heated) and the caramelisation of sugars in the materials, they tend to subtly reanimate when their immediate environmental conditions change, due to wearing or other factors. *M(eat) et al's* two initial neckpieces, *Balsa'd bacon* and *The Untanny*, are intended to be worn directly next to the skin, juxtaposing human flesh with consumable flesh, with the aim of exploring the notion of 'society threatened by its outside' (Kristeva, 1984, p.71). They are designed to encourage a reactive response, communicating material connections to the wearer regarding their bodily make-up. All of the pieces within

M(eat) et al will, due to their material's composition, have varying lifelines and will degrade over time. Wearing destabilises them further, increasing their risk of damage, decay, destruction, decomposition and - given the materials used - a kind of 'death'. Through the wearing of this time-sensitive jewellery collection each participant is challenged to consider commonalities of aging and death that are relatable, in that, along with the consumption of food, they are embedded in everyone's narrative. I will continue to simultaneously develop these collections of jewellery and tools for eating, utilising this work and their interactive presentation and display to explore 'corporeal orifices' and 'the differentiation of proper-clean and improper-dirty', investigating what 'shapes the body into a *territory* having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows' (Kristeva, 1984, p.71-72). When displayed alongside one another, these collections aim to more directly highlight body boundary (Rozin et al, 1995) by prompting similar questioning and discussion to those engaged in by the *Strange Pleasures* participants.

I intend to respond to the need to find engaging, interactive ways of enabling art jewellery to more openly involve the public by undertaking a deductive approach to research, as the jewellery and tools for eating that I produce will be used as a means of testing hypotheses. During 2017-18, I will be collaborating with Nuala Clooney and the curator and editor of *FEAST* Journal Laura Mansfield to present an Arts Council England funded national touring exhibition. This series of exhibitions and events will enable me to present these collections across a range of public contexts, such as interventions, workshops and meal events. I propose to combine the 'active' presentation and wearing of *M(eat) et al* collection by 'setting' it, not with precious gemstones, but as an integrated part of the set table. The emphasis on play and the participant's freedom to explore identity in Hindle's *Strange Pleasures* study may also resonate with this form of presentation. There are well-established social structures surrounding 'dressing-up for dinner'; however, they could traditionally be considered as rather more formal than as a playful form of identity exploration. Rich (2003, p.49) states that 'a dinner party was as much an opportunity for display as it was a risk of social embarrassment. The setting for the meal was judged by the guests and if found lacking could have an effect on that most highly valued of bourgeois possessions: reputation'. The use of indistinct or confused tools - *Ambiguous Implements* - for eating aims to subvert etiquette, as they are designed

with the intention of questioning modes of interaction and to reintroduce a form of 'play'. The juxtaposition of the original, or raw materials alongside those that have been manipulated and transformed indicates the nature of the jewellery's material make-up. The sensory interaction and consumption of these materials also sets the context for exploring themes around abjection; enabling a more immersive, experiential and questioning presentation to the public. The events will be documented through photography and audio-visual recordings, as well as through a series of questionnaires and interviews in order to effectively capture information that will enable me to thoroughly explore, analyse and evaluate the participant's experience of art jewellery as a means to explore body boundary.

Conclusion

I am in agreement with Den Besten (2014) and Staal (2005): art jewellery has divorced itself from the wearer and should aim to re-focus on the connection jewellery has with people, and those who choose to wear it. However, there are several practitioners, such as the art jeweller Zoe Robertson (*flockOmania* series, 2015-present), who are actively seeking to engage the public by inviting them to interact with their work more directly in an exhibition context. Through my continued practice-led research I intend to explore the extent to which art jewellery with a food-based content, when presented alongside food and tools for eating, has the potential to create a new bodily experience for the participant.

Throughout 2016-17 I have continued to work with the cross-disciplinary artist Nuala Clooney to lead a series of *Ambiguous Implement* interventions. The first of these was held at the *In Dialogue* symposium at Nottingham Contemporary, where participants were invited to explore the boundaries of the body and taste by consuming flavorsome morsels from purposely designed tools for eating, enabling the consideration and observation of those close interactions and alliances of the adorned table and adorned partaker. As stated previously, during 2017-18 I will be collaborating with Clooney and Mansfield to present a touring exhibition titled *Ambiguous Implements*, featuring work from a range of designers. This exhibition series will be supported by additional events, such as interventions, workshops,

talks, meals and other engagement opportunities that will enable me to continue the development of my practice-led research. The *Ambiguous Implements* touring exhibition will launch in July 2017 at the Roco Co-op in Sheffield.

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