

**Keynote address: Foreign Bodies / Jewellery as Prosthesis**

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# Christoph Zellweger:

## Foreign Bodies / Jewellery as Prosthesis

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# FOREIGN BODIES / JEWELLERY AS PROSTHESIS

From keynote address, 2008 DRS conference: "Undisciplined"

## CHRISTOPH ZELLWEGER

Professor of Art & Design, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield UK

With my enquiry 'Jewellery as Prosthesis', I aim to extend the definition of body adornment today. I explore the thesis, that jewellery gradually leaves behind the stage of being an accessory, in the sense of an 'appendage' or 'annex', to potentially become an integrated component of man. In my practice-based research, I find common ground, evidence and inspiration in the (post)-disciplinary fields of philosophy, anthropology or, for example, sociology. I observe medical and neurological developments, analyse advertising images, find affinities in artistic currents and in fashion trends. The everyday landscape of designed products and 'designed' news on world politics and economy offer also a continuous source of reflection and critique.

The output of my research may take the form of artistic object, installation, product (as objects to wear), or simply artefact. My practice tries to generate a debate on the new direction of social rituals, the relationship between design and science, and the problems that arise when aesthetics meets ethics.

The following paragraphs are to be read as fragments of a 40-minutes talk, which was conceived as a hyper-visual walk through my research and work. I showed far over 300 images, which ranged from the biographical ('making of' several bodies of work, associative images) to the academic (charts, field research, visual sources, my work in display context). The eminently visual lecture becomes the most appropriate medium to communicate my practice-based research.

How do you think will we bury our relatives in 20, 50 or 200 years? Some burial objects survived thousand of years as they were made from ever lasting precious material, gold and silver. In this category, jewellery is paradigmatic. For its symbolic meaning and permanence, jewellery offers a valuable means to know more about our ancestors, their value and believe-systems, their social rankings or assumed rituals.

### Christoph Zellweger:

Christoph Zellweger (Switzerland/UK) is one of the most thought provoking contemporary jewellery designers in Europe. In 2007 he published *Foreign Bodies* which extends the definition of body adornment today. Christoph worked for several years in the trade in Switzerland before attending the Royal College of Art in London. Besides running his studio and exhibiting internationally, he lectures in Europe's leading Design and Art Colleges and holds a Professorial research post at Sheffield Hallam University. He has developed work at the European Ceramic Work Centre in Holland, haute-couture textile at Jakob



Image 1. *Foreign Bodies* #0008720, #0008250 and #000815. 2003. Medical stainless steel, bones

So, what will people find in tomorrow's graves? What story will the remains tell future generations about us? Instead of 'real' jewels, will they find burial sites with metal implants, hip-replacements, stents' and battery-driven pace makers? Will they find traces of silicon and botox in the surrounding earth too? Medical steel will last even longer than precious gold or platinum: it does not corrode, does not wear, it will still be around in a million years.

I come from a family of gold and silversmiths, watchmakers and entrepreneurs in textiles and fabric. As a trained goldsmith I follow a tradition in the 6th generation but I also follow an even longer tradition of makers, alchemists (now they call them 'artists' and 'scientists') and possibly 'shamans', a synonym also for witch-doctors, who dealt with the mental and psychological aspects of body worn artefacts too.

'Classic artists create timeless beauty'. This was one of the slogans for the advertising campaign by Plastic Surgery Arts, a company that I found advertising in a magazine some 16

Schlaepfer in Switzerland and work for the technology-led venture company Scintillate in London. He recently directed the Pro Pueblo Sustainable Design project in Ecuador for the University of the Arts in Zurich. His work features in museums and collections in Europe and in North America. Beside other prizes in Europe and the UK he has won the Swiss Federal Prize for Design three times.

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years ago. Interesting to me at the time was that the trade of medical and plastic surgeons positioned themselves as artists and, not less surprising, that they claimed the creation of 'timeless beauty'. Ten years later I found myself invited to be a member of a panel discussion at the Design Museum in Frankfurt with Dr. Panvilov, a current authority in plastic surgery art. Presenting himself as an artist and sculptor he stated: 'Plastic surgeons learn operative techniques from teacher surgeons, but the anthropometrical harmony they pick up from sculptors: from Phidias, Michelangelo, Leonardo, Rodin or Dalí.' When preparing for this talk I checked several web sites of plastic surgery companies and came across Plastic Surgery Arts again. A picture of the team shows three ladies (doctors? artists? muses?) with obviously customised bodies and incredible smiles and one of the doctors, also 'wearing' that particular smile. There was something uncanny about it ... . Do we really want to leave it to them? And, yes, it is true, it is us scientists, medics, designers and artists who alter, create and beautify the world for good or worth.

One could ask critically why someone has his/her nose straightened or fat removed or have a hip replaced for prevention, but any answer will have to count valid. Today people seem to have accepted that the body does not have to stay as it is and they are willing to invest in improving their body's functions and cultivating its appearance. Historically, this has often been achieved through various forms of more or less permanent body alterations, such as head-bindings, wearing tight corsets or scarification, just to mention a few.

Recent developments in medical science, reconstructive and plastic aesthetic surgery offer endless new possibilities on changing a body's visual features, its feel and overall look. It is to be assumed that a chosen appearance may also irreversibly change our view on how we define a person's identity or how we create identities.

'trade marks on the body' is a hypothesis that reflects on the advancements made in medical and surgical science in recent years. It points at the development of an increasing market for plastic aesthetic surgery and other invasive and irreversible body altering technologies. It is concerned with the lasting impact on the development of identity for the contemporary individual.

**homo sapiens invents himself**

- the human body can be / will be designed
- the desire to improve the body and to specify it's functions rule the way we customise it
- following the mechanisms of a liberal market, the human body becomes a luxury item, a commodity

...which will ultimately lead to a new species

**homo faber**

the man who makes,  
the craftsman, designer and artist

**homo sapiens**

the thinking (wise) man

**homo ipsi faber**

the human who is the 'creator of the  
human's self

**homo sapiens** (as we know it) **becomes obsolete**

~~homo sapiens~~

**homo ipsi faber™**

Somewhere, nowhere, far away from even a small village, I once sat on the bank of the Mekong river in the very north of Thailand watching the vast flowing water. Beside entire trees and other bits of jungle drifting down this amazing stream I also saw clean white pieces of polystyrene passing by. The sight of this material made evident to me that

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there was civilisation up the river. The material also told me about all kinds of products that had been traded and by now consumed up the stream but the polystyrene packaging itself had been disregarded. Nobody found good use of it. That afternoon I identified expanded polystyrene as a no-material. Expanded polystyrene is omnipresent, it refers to the world of commodities and consumption but to me, it was never recognised for it...so I started thinking how to make its meaning visible.

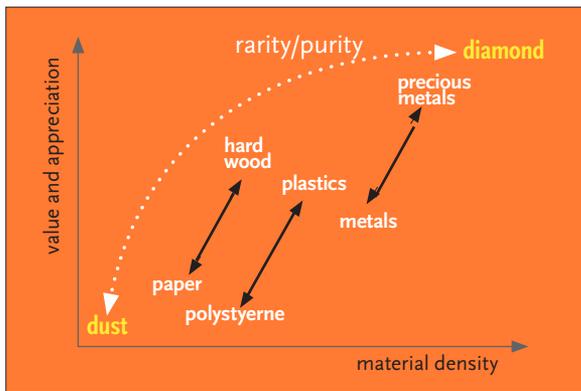


Figure 1. Material chart: the more dense the material the higher its value

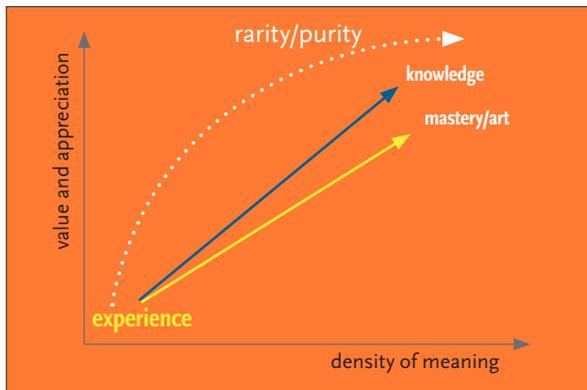


Figure 2. Information chart: condensed information increases meaning

Over years I kept contemplating about this mysterious material and saw its conceptual possibilities when relating the material to the human body. I discovered its unique cell-like structure and on the ‘material chart’ (on the scale of density and value) I draw out at the time (fig.1), it was exceptionally low. It therefore appeared suitable for me to make a

point about value and the body and looked at possibilities to make work from expanded polystyrene; but how to manufacture it?

Raw polystyrene consists of tiny gas filled beads. These beads are expanded in two stages with the help of steam and pressure. After a year of technical experimentation and progressing through trial and error I found a way of adapting a complex and bulky industrial process to fit my small studio environment. Industry uses aluminium moulds in which the material expands to receive its final shape. I produced copper moulds in a self-built electro-forming unit to lower the costs. In my kitchen, a customised pressure cooker was finally used to expand the polystyrene in. In the resulting series *Body Pieces* I subverted the conventional dialectic between material and meaning: Through exhibiting the *Body Pieces* as wearable jewels, the polystyrene became precious in order to embody a discourse about fragility and emotion.



Image 2. *Body Pieces*, 1997-98. Expanded polystyrene

In a body of work, entitled *Foreign Bodies*, I focused my research on the increasing amount of highly refined bio-compatible objects that are being inserted as implants into the human body for medical or aesthetic reasons. Although visually referring to implants, *Foreign Bodies* are worn traditionally, as adornments, on the outer surface of the human body. Executed in medical steel and mirror polished they show no trace of the handmade craft process. Looking like hi-tech artefacts, they set up parallels between body organs and luxury items.

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The conceptual and critical design approach of making body-related objects led me to reconsider how to meet and increase my audience. The departure from displaying jewellery works in specialised contemporary jewellery galleries into exploring more versatile spaces, has become a crucial way for me to create and extend the discourse I anticipate through my work within and beyond my field. The following public exhibition events and installations exemplify how I went about it.



Image 3. *Fluids*, 2002. Medical stainless steel. 45 x 45 x 50 mm.

*Medical Grade 316* was an intervention in the Metalwork Gallery, a precious room inside Sheffield's Millennium Gallery. I replaced the content of several drawers, displaying the permanent collection of precious 19th and 20th century silver cutlery, with a large number of Foreign Body pieces in bio-compatible medical grade 316 steel. Alongside these pieces commercial orthopaedic components of the same material were on display. In the context of the Metalwork Gallery the display reflected on the definition of preciousness and value today and cast a new light on contemporary metalwork today. The intervention aimed to shift the concept of value and luxury towards a debate on medical science and body design. Some time later I was invited to talk at the Orthopaedic Congress, *Orthopaedica Belgica*, in Gent (2006). In 2008 I displayed my work in medical showcases at the same biannual orthopaedic event, this time at a conference centre in Antwerp. Next to my presentation about twenty industrial producers of real medical components showed their latest developments to the orthopaedic community. My display was provoking a kind of 'interference' and there was debate about the nature of my inquiry.



Image 4. *Fluid*, 2002. Bio-compatible medical steel, leather. *Medical Grade 316* intervention, Metalwork Gallery/ Millennium Gallery, Sheffield 2006

In the Swiss National Museum *Foreign Body* pieces (this time ancient bone fragments combined with 'made to fit' medical grade steel elements) were shown as an additional layer on top of the permanent exhibition display of the archaeological museum of a burial site. As burial objects from the future and imaginable implantable artefacts the installation enhanced the ambiguity between the autonomous contemporary art object and the applied, historical artefact.



Image 5. *Foreign Bodies* #0008720, 0008250 and 0008150, 2003. Medical stainless steel, bones

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The National Museum of Natural History in Lisbon, Portugal, provided a perfect space to show a body of work entitled *Ossarium Rosé*. Here I displayed over one hundred artefacts in one old Museum's cabinet that was hidden in a side room of the museum. It was the only original showcase left after a big fire some forty years ago and it connected well with my aim to link the reading of the pieces with history. On closer observation the natural bone-like objects appeared as if altered, suggesting new or imaginary functions or mutations.



Image 6. *Ossarium Rosé* installation 2005.  
National Museum of Natural History, Lisbon

Some of the *Ossarium Rosé* pieces, which had been previously displayed as autonomous contemplative artefacts in the museums context, I had now made functional to become wearable objects, jewellery, newly re-titled *Relic Rosé*. These works were shown in the Belgian Art Deco Villa, Villa de Bondt, a space for contemporary jewellery. In a specialised jewellery gallery, the work was perceived differently and triggered off contradictory feelings of attraction and rejection because of its new body related function. The play between distance and closeness to the body became an issue and often the visitors were demanding answers on what the material underneath the flocked surface would be. This had been a key question to the understanding of this work that was not meant to be answered.



Image 7. *Relic Rosé* pendant, 2006. Mixed media, flock, silver

Porcelain is a material not dissimilar to the substance bones are made from. I applied for a three months working period as artist-in-residence to the European Ceramic Work Centre (EKWC) in Hertogenbosch (NL) with this in mind. The intense confrontation with the substance clay and porcelain and the working processes lead to a body of work concerned with vulnerability which made reference to bones, genes and seeds. To me, the choice of a material to work with is already a statement in itself. It can be about value, preciousness or a particular associative chain of thoughts, more or less dependent on the intrinsic meaning of the material.



Image 8. *Seeds*, porcelain, 2001.  
Work developed at the EKWC, Hertogenbosch (NL)

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The ProPueblo Sustainable Design project was a collaboration between the Design Department at the University of the Arts in Zurich and the Foundation ProPueblo in San Antonio, Ecuador. Ten industrial design students alongside local craftspeople worked together for several weeks with the aim of sharing skills and developing products to be fabricated locally. The experience was intense and the knowledge-transfer heterodox. As a project leader, the vivid and complex crossover of mentalities, standards and cultural differences made me reflect critically about the activity, both fragile and bold, of making and interpreting objects.



Image 9. *Bones*, 2006. Tagua nut  
Reconstructing a bone out of several pieces

One day Mercedes, one of the ProPueblo members we worked with, came with a match-box and showed me its contents. We touched upon the subject of death in a side conversation the day before. Inside the box was a tiny bone, the only remains of her father, whose grave was washed away during an El Niño related flood. The woman's intensity and seriousness touched me and at the end of that week I found myself carving and constructing little bones out of the local tagua-nut, an organic material also called the Ivory of South America because of its precious ivory-like qualities. This incident led me to develop a new body of work that I called *Fakes*, a new interpretation on the (re) construction of the body with a strong narrative attached to it.

The series *Body Supports* in natural rubber has been designed to support and extend the functioning of the fragile body. When I designed them I thought about them as emotional prostheses. I saw them as communication devices, and this, to me, links them to all jewellery, of the present and of the past.



Image 10. *Body Support*, 2006. Natural rubber



Image 11. *Skin*, 2006. Natural rubber.  
Computer generated drawing (detail)

**I would like to sum up my presentation with the following thoughts:**

As a designer of jewellery and body related objects I see jewellery as a form of body extension, which oscillates on multiple levels between foreign body and ones own body and mind. Thereby, it raises questions: What does bodily integrity and the integrity of identity mean? How far can and will human beings go in determining their own body and its identity? What are the implications on the individual and on the mental constitution of a society as a whole that has taken its physical and mental make-over into its own hands? These questions are to be raised at the threshold between design, art, fashion and science.

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My work as a designer does not provide answers, nor is it meant to be immediately understood. Last year, a monography about my work was published (Actar, 2007). For this book I involved theorists on bio-politics, design and art historians and colleagues of different design practices in order to open the discussion in a cross-disciplinary way and involve a wider audience. It is not only about speaking out loud these questions of mine but proposing work that can trigger off not only emotional responses but critique, reflection and ground for theory and debate on something beyond my own understanding.

My engagement with the artificial, the constructed world of objects, bodies and identities also implies taking a critical stance to reflect on that essential human activity of 'making', of designing the world. Developing the appropriate means for a self-reflective design practice has become a challenge in itself.

I conclude in the expected undisciplined way with a reflection on body design. Please enjoy the You-Tube clip 'Poodle Exercise with Humans'.



[http://fr.youtube.com/watch?v=vdX\\_OBUeHb4](http://fr.youtube.com/watch?v=vdX_OBUeHb4)

*Christoph Zellweger*

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