

This essay, written by Lisa Gralnick, Professor of Art at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, was published in Fall 2005 as a catalog essay for the exhibition *Proximity, The Sensory, and Displacement* at the Elaine L. Jacob Gallery at Wayne State University in Detroit.

### Making Sense

*Thought long ago stopped assigning to art the sensible representation of the divine.* Hegel, *Aesthetics*

Years ago, when I first met the man who would later become my husband, I was compelled to make him a gift. On our first meeting, I had been rendered almost paralyzed by the beauty of his feet, long and sinewy and sprouting from the most delicate ankles, and I imagined those sandaled feet in a near biblical context. Within a few weeks and without hesitation, I began fashioning a golden shackle for my lover's ankle, and he, in turn, demanded it be made without a clasp, the final hinged links permanently riveted together as he lay prostrate on my studio floor, foot propped up on my anvil as I hammered it closed, quietly eager to feel the daily constraint of this new encumbrance. After a brief period of wearing the all-too-snug fitting gold shackle, he announced that it had broken while running, and deposited the disjointed parts in my studio for repair, where they lay for months into years. It seemed that its moment had passed, along with the blush that had prompted its making, and, one night, in a fit of anger over this or that and without remorse, I dumped it into a crucible and reduced it to an anonymous fiery mass of molten metal.

The history of man is a history that includes both the creation and destruction of potent objects and the cause and effect of such activities.

I will forever love the way people love things, objects of all kinds, from televisions to track shoes, automobiles to autoclaves, silver candlesticks to seven hundred dollar sinks. We collect objects for many reasons: sentimentality, beauty, functionality, pleasure, status, proof of intellectual prowess, investment potential. The objects we surround ourselves with become indicators of what we have achieved and what we value, collectively or individually. They are the components of an elaborate tableau, a self-perpetuated mythology that signals who we are and who we yearn to be. In the manner of the great Han Dynasty funerary models-- ceramic depictions of the domestic dwellings of the deceased that were buried with them--the objects become us. They are silent, yet we give them voice. We are essential participants in this dialog that we have initiated, and which we generally refer to as interpretation. The nature of this dialogue is often complicated, as in the case of art objects, because it contains a sometimes contradictory pair: sensory interpretation, which is by nature fragmented and phenomenological, persisting as an end in itself but wholly contingent on the object, and language-reducible content or meaning, which may be appreciated separate from the artwork, but which may render the object impotent at the moment of its disclosure if not accompanied by the first.

The value of non-linguistic, sensory interpretation as the currency between an art object and its viewer has been all but lost in contemporary discourse, and that loss has been related to the demotion of certain art forms that actively engage in its practice. Unfortunately, the systematic preservation and codification of artworks that has evolved over the last

thousand years, culminating in two hundred years of museum practice in the West and a policy of genteel stewardship and conscientious preservation, has left little or no place for the possibility of artworks functioning as a genuinely persuasive and immediate currency of social, spiritual and intellectual negotiation, except perhaps in the realm of performance works and participatory installations, which are by nature short-lived and experiential in nature, more aligned to performing arts than traditional visual arts. Our contemporary cultural experience has been reduced to ideological symbols, objects that act as stand-ins for doctrine. As the cultural institutions have flourished, charged with a mission to protect and provide meaningful context for our venerated objects, contemporary objects have increasingly and purposefully accommodated the needs of these institutions. Not surprisingly, this has bred a self-sustaining community of theorists, critics, curators, patrons, and art practitioners. Their conversations amongst themselves dictate what kind of art will be validated, and how that art will be understood. As the distinguished critic Dave Hickey put it so succinctly during a recent lecture here at the UW, artworks are validated because they service a clientele. Art-making has become a political activity.

I am no longer surprised when I visit a museum of contemporary art and notice that the majority of patrons are reading the text on the wall before looking at the object. They assume they will need to know something to inform their experience, and in a majority of the cases they are right. We expect and demand that our interpretable objects be important and that their profundity be judged by a process of distillation of meaning that reduces the object to the role of carrier of that which is already available to us through language. When artworks do support our current notions of how they should behave, we, in turn, reward them with a cool, white, temperature-controlled environment in which to be suspended indefinitely. Sadly, they often become mere hollow souvenirs-- reminders of a memorable conversation but unable to unfold in their disjointed parts and perpetually stuck in a kind of aesthetic and corporeal limbo. They are neither alive or dead. They are preserved.

It is undeniable that it has become unpopular to speak of interpretation as aesthetic response--that is, the process by which an object that is otherwise silent becomes supercharged and is able to act as a negotiator between the mind and the senses, and, by extension, the sublime. But the fundamental necessity of the senses, both as a private and collective tool of perception, cannot be overestimated. When one enters a home on Thanksgiving day, and smells the overwhelming sweet and familiar aroma of a turkey being roasted, it is a private experience that seems to exist for our pleasure alone. Yet, indeed, others are capable of a simultaneous experience, or their own version of it with its own individualized memory, and they are able to use that communal sensual experience as an unspoken mode of contact. Unfortunately, the importance of the senses has been greatly diminished in modern theological, aesthetic, scientific, and epistemological inquiry. There is a deeply rooted moral suspicion of the senses, at least partially attributable to their ability to deliver pleasure, and the association of pleasure to depravity. They are understood primarily as trustworthy and irrefutable, but symptomatic--only significant as an effect of a cause that is more important. But what if that "something more important" is unknowable any other way, and the senses provide the only way in? What if the cause and effect implicit in an object

can only be known through the senses? Clive Dilnot makes a case for economical ways of thinking about art objects:

***But this means that to make and design something isto create something whose end is not itself butis rather "in" the subject for whom the object is made (whether thatsubject is individualized, or is ourselves, collectively, as a whole). Onthis argument, then, the object is never autonomous, never just "foritself".***

Miguel Tamen, in his brilliant essay "Friendsof Interpretable Objects", makes a compelling argument in which he tracesthe unfortunate effects of the institutionalization of art back to the ultimatevictory of the Anti-Iconoclasts that ended both the destruction, andparadoxically, the creation of powerful, potent religious icons. In hisfascinating account of the discourse that took place during the Early Christianyears and Middle Ages, he outlines several of the arguments with whichtheologians defended or disputed the inherent heresy of icon veneration,arguments that can be thought of as eventually cementing the relationshipbetween art objects and doctrines about art. Paramount to thesediscussions is the ever-nagging issue of what to do with the senses, and how toreconcile sensory cognition with theological (or, for our purposes,epistemological) truth.

In his discussion of these arguments,Tamen investigatesa dialectic between economy (cause and effect co-existing on a sensorial level[4]) and reduction ( the sensesallowing for the perception of natural form and hence for the acquision ofmeaning and, dare I say, doctrinal certainty. See Bonaventure.). In an attemptto provide the kind of argument offered for by those who exalted certain typesof religious images by reduction to doctrine, he quotes an obscure passage fromTheodor of Studion, from the early ninth century, in which the thereconciliation can be seen as a kind of tautological brain teaser reminiscentof Aristotle's ***Categories of Related Things***:

***The prototype and the image belong to the categoryof related things, like the double and the half. For the prototype alwaysimplies the image of which it is the prototype, and the double always impliesthe half in relation to which it is called double. For there would not be aprototype if there were no image; there would not even be any double, if somehalf were not understood. But since thesethings exist simultaneously, they are understood and subsist together.Therefore, since no time intervenes between them, one does not have a differentveneration from the other, but both have one and the same.***

I find this passage, which was written by a theologian twelvehundred years ago to defend the veneration of religious images, particularlycurious because it suggests a symbiotic relationship between the art object andits subject matter that disallows the possibilty of a work of art transcendingits subject matter. I am reminded, at once, of the Impressionist painters, andthe radicalism of the notion that the senses provided a temporal truth, throughthe causality of light, that superceded what was known by the mind. It's a notion that now seemsalmost quaint and naive in the context of what would come later in art, an over-intellectualized post-modernreturn to reductionism that favored ideology over ambiguity, concept over "objectness".

The apparent victory that led to the proliferation ofreligious images throughout the western world was, arguably, a victory ofideology over interpretation. Ultimately, what was deemed dangerous aboutcertain kinds of images was not inherent to the images themselves, but lay inthe effect

those images had on the individuals who venerated them. Passionate veneration of the type that allowed the divine to enter the viewer via an image, with the senses acting as conduit, the images were granted a potency to move the viewer in a powerful way that was to be reserved for the contemplation of the divine, in this case, Christ. So what changed, and culminated in the writings of such great theologians as Aquinas and Bonaventure in the 12th Century, was the notion of icons as didactic tools, stand-ins for the authentic religious experience, fully reducible to doctrine. Their role would be primarily propagandistic, and they continue to function quite well on that level all over the world today. But in many ways, the iconoclastic debates can be seen as paving the way for a distance between object and viewer that has continued to characterize much of the current art of the Western world in the sense that art objects have become vehicles for the transmission of ideas. The idea has become the justification for the vehicle, which precludes the possibility that the vehicle provides any service that is not expressed as an idea.

I am interested in the contemporary art jewelry and metals field for precisely the reasons that have continued to define it as a lesser art, and because, in the context of the larger art world agenda, it refuses to behave. Contemporary art jewelry specifically, and skillful material-based art objects in general, can provoke an efficient, authentic and sensually-transmitted aesthetic experience that supersedes but doesn't replace the object's reducibility to language-based theory. Even within the more intellectualized climate of contemporary art jewelry and metalwork, the objects often inspire a veneration that can only be explained as an occasion with the sublime. The viewer is often moved to comment "its so beautiful" over and over again, but in truth, words disappoint, because the experience is primarily sense-induced and intimate, directly triggered by a manipulation of materials whose flawless mastery provides a direct link to the otherwise uncircumscribable through a process of vague similitude and well-defined causality. A shimmering, rhythmic planished surface on a piece of hand-wrought metal is like skin but not skin itself - it is both familiar and engagingly otherworldly. Its "objectness" is inseparable from the process which allowed for it, ie. skilled hammering, and it is never intended to have full autonomy from its maker, making, or viewer. In the best examples, contemporary art jewelry manages to straddle two worlds: fulfilling its more contemporary obligations as a didactic vehicle, yet providing the opportunity for a "sensible economy" that is at once private and public. These powerful hybrids may well represent some of the most fascinating and optimistic arguments for the future of art. It is, however, legitimate to fear that, in an attempt to be recognized by the greater art establishment, their singular contribution may be annihilated by their own apologetic propagandists.

Implicit in the format of the jewelry object is an association with the body that has always rendered it too messy and visceral to be truly reducible. The most intellectually challenging works will still unfold in their disjointed parts and materiality as they are touched and manipulated in the most intimate manner. Often, contemporary art jewelry objects are uncomfortable to wear, or nearly unwearable, demanding a level of submission that is painful to imagine. Even that, I confess, I find invigorating. Jewelry objects that are a thousand years old and lie

silently in vitrines can still provoke a physical reaction. Rarely have I seen a modern day parishioner wince at the stylized unbloody crucifix hanging in their local reformed church in the same way that a four-pound golden nose ring from the 5th C BC might provoke such a response. I am reminded of the now famous "wedding ring chain" by the Swiss goldsmith Otto Kunzli, in which he methodically bought and collected, then linked together, discarded wedding rings from those willing to part with them. The resultant chain had a weight, both physical and symbolic, almost impossible to bear. Kunzli himself confessed that viewers would often wash their hands after touching it.

One of the unique characteristics of jewelry and body adornment is its ability to function mercurially on a sensual level. As objects that are both public and private, they are capable of continuous renewal, and, once associated with a wearer, their currency changes. Many makers of contemporary jewelry—including myself—refuse to acknowledge this fact, and it remains a clumsy issue to be reckoned with. It may be, indeed, one of the inherent problems of straddling the two worlds of sensual interpretation and ideological reducibility. How can an object be, simultaneously, both fully autonomous and fully interpretable? The answer to this question may be rooted in a larger one in which jewelry practitioners must decide if, indeed, they care about the social obligation of their chosen format:

***Adornment creates a highly specific synthesis of the great convergent and divergent forces of the individual and society, namely the elevation of the ego through existing for others, and the elevation of existing for others through the emphasis and extension of the ego. This aesthetic form itself stands above the contrasts between individual human strivings. They find, in adornment, not only the possibility of undisturbed simultaneous experience, but the possibility of a reciprocal organization that, as anticipation and pledge of their deeper metaphysical unity, transcends the disharmony of their appearance. Georg Simmel, Adornment, 1909***

The definition and critique of the current landscape of art jewelry is that it is fragmentary and diverse. There are really several quite divergent fields that are being considered under this umbrella, and making any generalized statements about the whole would be even more futile than trying to generalize about contemporary painting and sculpture. A shortlist would include: those investigating the theater of body adornment as an issue larger than the metalsmithing tradition; jewelry makers who see themselves as more aligned with industrial design; object makers who slap a pinback on their otherwise fully-realized small-scale sculpture and call it jewelry but really don't necessarily deal with issues of the body; makers who are fully entrenched in the historical and political baggage of the field, including status, power, imperialism, gender, etc., and use jewelry objects as props in a content-based event; those investigating notions of beauty and adornment that choose the jewelry format for its already convenient location within the codified conversation about craft objects; and, finally, those exploring the nature of solipsism within a format that is inherently charged with a public/private dialectic.

This is why exhibitions of the present kind, which attempt to isolate specific trends, are so important to our conversation. However, there are a few things we do know for sure, and all are apparent in the works assembled

at Wayne State. There is a continued interest in materiality and masterly craft—even when the objects are made of fiber, or rubber, or plastics—and their materiality is essential to both their interpretability and their content. The objects are nearly always poetic in a very specific sense of the word. They construct non-verbal and non-reducible meaning from some process of sensory stimulation. There is, also, a healthy suspicion of building content from the ashes of the historicized agenda, and by this I mean that the field is thankfully beginning to question the dogma by which it defined itself for all too many years. Its *raison d'être* can no longer be its distinguished past, its noble materials and its difficult processes. And, finally, and especially in this exhibition, there is a phenomenological aspect to much of the work that is so refreshingly anti-doctrinal as to be nothing short of poignant. These objects are self-confidently ambiguous, and they demand that we bring more than one tool of perception to the table. They are the artifacts of a culture-in-process, and, as such, will not release their meaning quickly. They embrace the tension between the sensual and the theoretical, and provide inquiry into the relevance of functionalism, ornament and adornment in a field that is clearly splintering. Whether or not they are jewelry is a debate that it may be too early to have. The works invite us to go on from here, sensing and thinking simultaneously.

*This essay came out of a lecture given at the 2004 National Conference of the Society of North American Goldsmiths, held in St Peterburg, Florida. The writer also wishes to thank Rod Slemmons for his helpful and insightful editing, and David Norr, for a series of conversations that couldn't possibly have transpired with anyone else.*