

Petra Zimmermann – vanities and transiency in lavishly adorned jewelry
by Liesbeth den Besten

Vienna used to be a cosmopolitan city in the heart of Europe, the city of music, the Austro-Hungarian empire, and of the Kunst und Wunderkammern (Cabinets of Curiosities). Today Vienna is foremost a city that once was all of these things, a city of nostalgia - the grandeur of the city has become a scenery. The bloom of contemporary art and design during the early 20th century movement of the Wiener Werkstätte, could not prevent the city's gradual change into a place that is today known for a rather conservative and restrained taste. Yet the city is not devoid of adventurous artists.

Petra Zimmermann (Graz, Austria, 1975) is one of them. Zimmermann's jewelry takes a special position in the world of contemporary jewelry. Although working with themes, materials and processes (recycling vintage jewelry, casting acrylic, using print and imagery) that are widely accepted in contemporary jewelry her approach shows a specific sculptural characteristic, and a strong alliance with her cultural context. The city of Vienna provides an interesting hunting area where a Saturday visit to the flea market is part of her job. A good chance that she will find outstanding pieces of 20th century fashion jewelry. These conditions, and especially her conceptual approach to jewelry, contribute to the special atmosphere of her work.

Zimmermann came to jewelry by chance but her initiation was probably the best one can get. Before even starting to study art or jewelry, she subscribed to a 5-weeks course at the Summer Academy in Salzburg in 1996, which was run by Peter Skubic. Here she learned for the first time about the idea of jewelry as an artistic medium. In this period, you could not study jewelry at an Austrian art academy, as Zimmermann explains: "In the 1990s there was this tendency in Austrian art education to adapt the classes to the new developments in art. This is how at different places interdisciplinary classes came into being where not the medium was central but the idea or concept from which one wanted to work." After the Summer Academy she wanted to learn more about jewelry, and so she started her studies in Bratislava (Czech Republic), at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in 1996, as a student of jewelry and metal under Karol Weisslechner. At the same time, she felt attracted to fine art, and almost simultaneously (in 1997) enrolled in the Class for Transmedial Art, at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. The education suited her as she explains: "I think this open discourse shaped my view, and incited me to start making jewelry. It was not about starting something from the point of jewelry but starting from an interest, an idea, and every time again to decide for the medium jewelry." Zimmermann is interested in art that is difficult to categorize, that hovers on the crossroads of art and not-art, fashion or design, and in designer-artists such as Martin Margiela, and Manfred Nisslmüller. "To ignore Nisslmüller's work in jewelry", she says, "is as if you deny Marcel Duchamp's importance in art." For many Americans and most non-German speaking people, Manfred Nisslmüller will be a rather obscure figure in the world of jewelry. But by referring to Nisslmüller (Vienna, 1940) Petra Zimmermann shows her indebtedness to conceptualism. Nisslmüller, who was trained as a goldsmith, is known as an artist who since the mid 1970s tried to broaden and deepen the idea of jewelry through texts often holding analytical questions, and not devoid of humor.¹ The material jewelry of Nisslmüller has a radical character, sometimes reworking fashion jewelry or jewelry of a colleague, sometimes replacing a gem for a piece of meat, or a brooch for a voice recording of the

repeated word brooch. Petra Zimmermann's jewelry, intensely material and made with an obvious eye for the effect, owes more to the concept than one would recognize when encountered with her work for the first time. Attractive as it is because of its design, and colorful and ornate character, her jewelry comes from another more reflective source.

In 2000, only 4 years after she first heard about contemporary jewelry, she had her first solo exhibition at Galerie Biro in Munich. The work and the exhibition was called "Schmuck im Schmuck" (Jewelry in Jewelry) – a title that exactly described what was shown: pieces of second hand costume jewellery, partly encapsulated in colored translucent plastic jewelry after her design. The shapes (mostly rings) were sculptural, and contrasted with the vintage brooches or rings that bulged on the upper side. Petra Zimmermann is the first to acknowledge that she is a child of her time, she explains: "To deal in a self-referential way with art or one's own medium was in the air in those days. I wanted to thematize in my work the essence of jewelry as such. It was evident to work with a visual vocabulary that is understood by everyone in the world as a sign. Costume jewelry components can of course be interpreted as the epitome of false shine, superficiality and hedonism. The aesthetics of conventional fashion jewelry was condemned at that time in author jewelry but that was alright for me. Even today it is as if everything that shines and radiates is not trusted."

Zimmermann calls the vintage jewelry she uses "a cultural semi manufacture, and carrier of a narrative". Therefore, not every second-hand piece is the proper material to work with. She can only use vintage pieces if there is a history written in it, which fits in the new piece of jewelry she wants to make. As a material it must have something stereotypical, generally understandable, and it must have a certain quality in the way it is made and by material.

Zimmermann's way of using ready-made material is fascinating because it is based on her appreciation for the second-hand jewelry. Each cast acrylic form that carries an old piece of jewelry is a bespoke sculptural body – especially made for the vintage piece, and cast in brightly colored acrylic with touches of gold leaf as finishing touch. They look like a throne for the historical piece, supplementing and surrounding it, lifting it up to let it shine and blaze once again. Through her treatment she is able to merge two different bodies into one - a hybrid that still carries the stories of its origin and former life but already points at future new stories to be attached to it. The way she exhibited her rings (and some bracelets) this very first time at Galerie Biro, and 2 years later at Galerie OONA in Berlin, showed her sensitivity for the aspect of time by using early 20th century wallpaper as a setting.

Being interested in jewelry as a cultural phenomenon Zimmermann was faced with the brooch as a medium. There are many brooches to be found among vintage jewelry, and it struck her that the brooch is not directly body-related or as she puts it 'the brooch does not bear the mark of jewelry'. She started to ask questions about the supposed freedom of form of a brooch, that is so beloved among contemporary jewelers. Her first involvement with the brooch was a series of figurative work, the so-called 'Cut-Outs and Pin-Ups' (2003-04). Images of people in jewelry are always personal, and in general not meant to show on the outside; mostly they are locked (in a medallion) and used in the private sphere. She took women in stereotype 'sexy' poses as the subject of her brooches, and found out that an image on a brooch is a very offensive dealing. Says Zimmermann: 'By just detaching the image from its media context and using it as a

subject for jewelry, it becomes an ironic commentary to the subject and to the brooch likewise.'

The cut-out image is not simply used as a ready-made but instead it is meticulously reproduced in another medium by painting directly in acrylic, a technique that she invented herself. She discovered that there is a certain moment in the process of the hardening of the transparent acrylic when it behaves like wet watercolor paper. You have to be very quickly though when painting with the liquid colors that are normally used for coloring transparent acrylic. Finally, she applied layers of colors, and gold leaf on the back- all aimed at making the image visually and literally more layered, while emphasizing the subject. The process is like reverse glass painting. Only at the end she turns the image around for polishing, and adding an extra layer of strass stones. She sees the strass stones on top of the image as 'a sort of sketch for the painted layer underneath'. While the mannequin in photoshoots is deprived of her individual character Zimmermann magnifies her as a gem in a setting - the cliché is beautified, and made unique.

As Zimmermann states 'Jewelry is my art, and I have quite a clear idea how my jewelry should be. I want it to be wearable, and be worn. I want it not necessarily to be worn to exist. It is all happening in this area of tension between autonomous object and body related appliedness.' For some years Petra Zimmermann experimented, also using other techniques, with the image in long chains with (double) pendants. She exhibited these at Gallery Ornamentum in 2013. Finally she found out '...that image and jewelry is not going well together' and in more recent years her work seems to take a more abstract turn. Her involvement with vintage jewelry stays a constant factor in her work, and over the years the shape of the second-hand jewelry appears to get a more prominent place in the design of the new piece. For instance, when she started using shoe buckles, belt buckles and clasps from handbags that cover or determine the top of a ring or bracelet. A recent ring, conceived in 2017 shows the encapsulation of a metal mesh purse in a blue acrylic body. The gilded clasp of the purse becomes the setting for a colored stone mounted in claws that are based deeply in the open 'mouth' of the clasp. More recently, she started taking clasps and handles of bags as an independent subject in her work. Strangely re-arranged these handles are transformed in refined abstract compositions adorned with glass beads, (precious) stones, and pearls. All components of the former clasp or handle, little eyes, hooks and studs form part of the composition and serve as the setting for stones.

Her effect full use of trinkets mirrors our hedonistic search for ornament and decoration, which explains the next step in her work towards the old theme of vanitas. In the Skull necklace (2017) a copper mesh is transformed in a flexible skull pendant, hanging from chains. Another necklace consists of the old-testament text Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas (vanity of vanities, all is vanity) in which she uses the word vanitas only once. Arranged in a circle the text receives an endless character. She used a typeface from 1901, the Behrensschrift by Peter Behrens which was quite revolutionary and novel in its time but seems rather outdated and typical German today. Again, Petra Zimmermann shows that there is meaning in every detail of her work, and that transiency together with vanity is a proper motive for jewelry of our times.

ⁱ A famous text of Nisslmüller is the following: “NOT COMPLETING - NOT SUPPLEMENTING - BUT IRRITATING - THEREFORE DISTURBING - DISTURBANCE IS JEWELRY”, from: Manfred Nisslmüller – ÜBER (und) SCHMUCK, Galerie für Angewandte Kunst München, 1993, p. 96