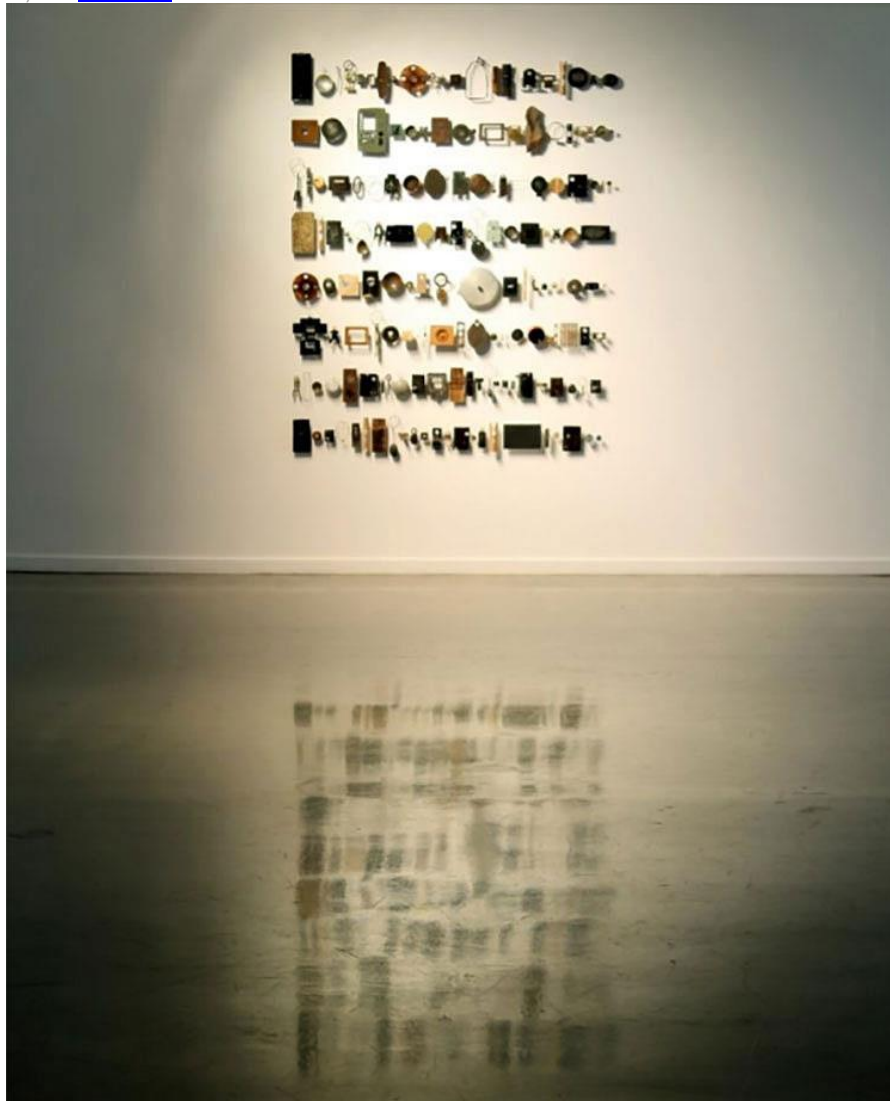


Show it ALL by Peter Deckers

ARTICLE / [CRITICALTHINKING](#) [EXHIBITING](#) [CURATING](#) [ARNOLDSCHÉ](#) [PETERDECKERS](#)

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Kelly McDonald, Manifesto, 2014. Rubber, leather, aluminium, paper, copper, silver, brass, steel, gold, wood, stone, plastic (photo by the artist)



An interesting and critical article about the meaning, the history, the development, the use, the connection and the presentation of an exhibition.

Article published in the book [Contemporary Jewellery in Context](#) by Peter Deckers.

More about the project [Handshake](#) by Peter Deckers.

The exhibition paradigm definitely shifted in the 21st century. The 20th-century kings and queens of the art world sat on the throne of public exposure, while everybody else had to wait their turn – if they ever got one. Often an emerging artist needed first to be introduced into that world. There were no fast lanes or shortcuts. It was all hierarchical and self-regulated. But during the digital revolution these stringent structures and regulations came loose. It shifted the modernist ideology into a more subdued version of itself that allowed the audience and sub-cultures to become engaged, resulting in new platforms for representation. Catalogues, books and other forms of publishing are no longer the domain of big firm publishers, expensive designers, and highly skilled and well-equipped photographers, but are within the scope of the bedroom artist having a go on their computer, using their own high-resolution cameras, with access to self-publishing platforms and social media as their publicist. [1] This exploded the diversity of the art world and for better and worse the artist pool.

Music went through a similar shift in representation, however, musicians could stay on their digital launchpad with their digital recordings, but visual artists need opportunities and also other avenues for experimentation and representation. The few jewellery gallerists in the world became overstocked with artists and the few dedicated museums could stage only a few shows a year, which often were curated exhibitions with a proven audience. Alternative web- and blog sites came to the rescue. Alternative spaces for exhibiting also popped up. [2] One convincing example comes from the centre of the jewellery movement bubble: Munich's annual Schmuck week. Here, we see a pilgrimage undertaken by the contemporary jewellery world, visiting 80-plus uncurated and a handful of curated exhibitions spread all over Munich. Most are by emerging artists and the few top gallery exhibitions are for the more established artists. International gallerists travel from afar to present their top artists at the Schmuck fair. It attracts international collectors who are willing to invest in the odd masterpieces. It also attracts curators, experts, writers, educators, artists, students and enthusiasts.

These week-long celebrations fringed by new-ideas' exhibitions are important events for passionate visitors and those who make a living from contemporary jewellery.[3] We can detect from all the energy and commitment of the many involved or visiting that the contemporary jewellery world is not in decline and that it is carving out a bright future.

In the midst of this revolution the Handshake project originated, with its connections between developing ideas, mentor feedback and testing via a progressive exhibition programme. Through digital media face-to-face workshop meetings were made possible and this new form of communication created a new way of learning.



Dialogue Collective, Galerie Hell, pop-up exhibition, Munich, 2014 (photo by Peter Deckers).

One digital world, one culture

The computer age shifted cultural particulars in a centripetal direction. Ideas, new work and exhibitions posted online are available instantly among social networks. Everybody has access to a large central pool of ideas but this access has slowly turned on itself. Contemporary jewellery has fallen victim to international sameness. Regional characteristics are abandoned, laid to waste by the influence of large amounts of accessible ideas. This swelling shift is unstoppable and only cultures with a strong identity might remain true to their origins. This internationalisation makes us vulnerable to ever-changing trends. Neke Moa, however, follows her Māori roots, and this is detectable in her work. But even her culture is vulnerable to becoming a celebration, or a souvenir. Neke, in a jokey manner, played out these intimidations via a video (*Legend of the pounamu fish*, 2016) that was exhibited next to her work.



Neke Moa, Hei tiki, 2016. nephrite (pounamu), paint (photo by the artist).

The international forces that evoke this consolidated mimicry also make more traditional cultures retract into their origins. They see their traditions as the purpose of their future. These binary opposites are what feed into the destructive tension we hear about and experience in the current state of the world. A desperate measure to call attention to a cause tells us that something more potent is at work than the decision to take somebody's life for a religious reason. To a lesser extent unstoppable 'passion' is what artists need to keep going against commonality.

Lisa Walker shows how the New Zealand 'backshed' mentality can be renewed for the making of jewellery objects. With its non-hierarchic materials, Walker's work displays new values that struck a chord with the New Zealand psyche. It inspired younger makers like Karin Dale, Sharon Fitness and others, who adopted this low-brow attitude, but not her solutions.



Sharon Fitness, Meteors From Space, 2016. Sterling silver, rubber (photo by Peter Deckers).



Karren Dale, White Middle Class Punks, 2014. Sterling silver, brass, fine silver, cloth (photo by the artist).



Karren Dale, exhibition view, Awkward, 2015. Mixed media. Pah Homestead, Auckland (photo by Peter Deckers).



Sharon Fitness and Lisa Walker. Sharon Fitness (left) The Piece Of Broken Chair That I Imagined Lisa Was Going To Send To Me But Didn't, 2011. Vinyl, steel, lacquer, padding, embroidery, cotton (Sharon Fitness, the artist on the right). Lisa Walker (right) Pendant, 2013. Plastic, fabric, padding, embroidery cotton (photo by Peter Deckers).

Then there is Karl Fritsch (Neke Moa's mentor in Handshake), who moved from Germany to New Zealand and continued his ongoing journey of reinvention. He says, 'I would have to stop making it if you said you'd seen it before.'^[4]

The ease and casualness of his work fits well within Kiwi culture. Walker and Fritsch are as similar as they are different. Even if Walker grabs the aluminium offcuts from Fritsch's workbench, she still manages to find her voice through a personal process of assembling. The work Karl's Offcuts is made to be worn, and comes spectacularly alive on the body – Liesbeth den Besten admits that she always feels happy wearing Karl's Offcuts.



Liesbeth den Besten wearing Karl's Offcuts, by Lisa Walker (photo by MisjaB).



Lisa Walker, Karl's Offcuts, aluminium, ink, silver, 2016 (photo by Peter Deckers).



Karl Fritsch, silver, sapphire, 2016 (photo by Karl Fritsch).

Fritsch has a personal affinity with a New Zealand native plant that over time grows into a giant in its own peculiar way. The northern rātā begins life as an air plant, high in the branches of a mature host tree. Over centuries the young tree sends descending and girdling roots down and around the trunk of its host, eventually forming a massive, frequently hollow pseudo-trunk composed of fused roots. The host tree dies naturally and the strengthened rātā keeps growing into a strangely shaped giant. If we look at the work of Fritsch, we detect all of the classical usage of precious metals and stones and the order of standard jewellery techniques. However, how these traditional materials find their own processes and evolve into new compositions makes them grow around that history. His attitude and sharp artist's eye turn reality into magic. Can we see the air plants Fritsch creates as carving a new structural future for the high-street jeweller? Or do we see Fritsch sitting high in the sky and creating with his magic a solid, strangely shaped new trunk around the host tree of traditional jewellery? The latter is more convincing, because Karl's technique can and has been copied, but without his particular eye and lavish attitude the result is totally lifeless.



Northern rātā (Metrosideros robusta), Kaitoke Regional Park, Upper Hutt (NZ), and Karl Fritsch, January 2017 (photo by Peter Deckers).



Renee Bevan at Specials: a Handshake alumni exhibition, Munich Residenz Palace, 25–27 February 2016, Munich Jewellery Week, curated by Peter Deckers (photo by Kelly McDonald).

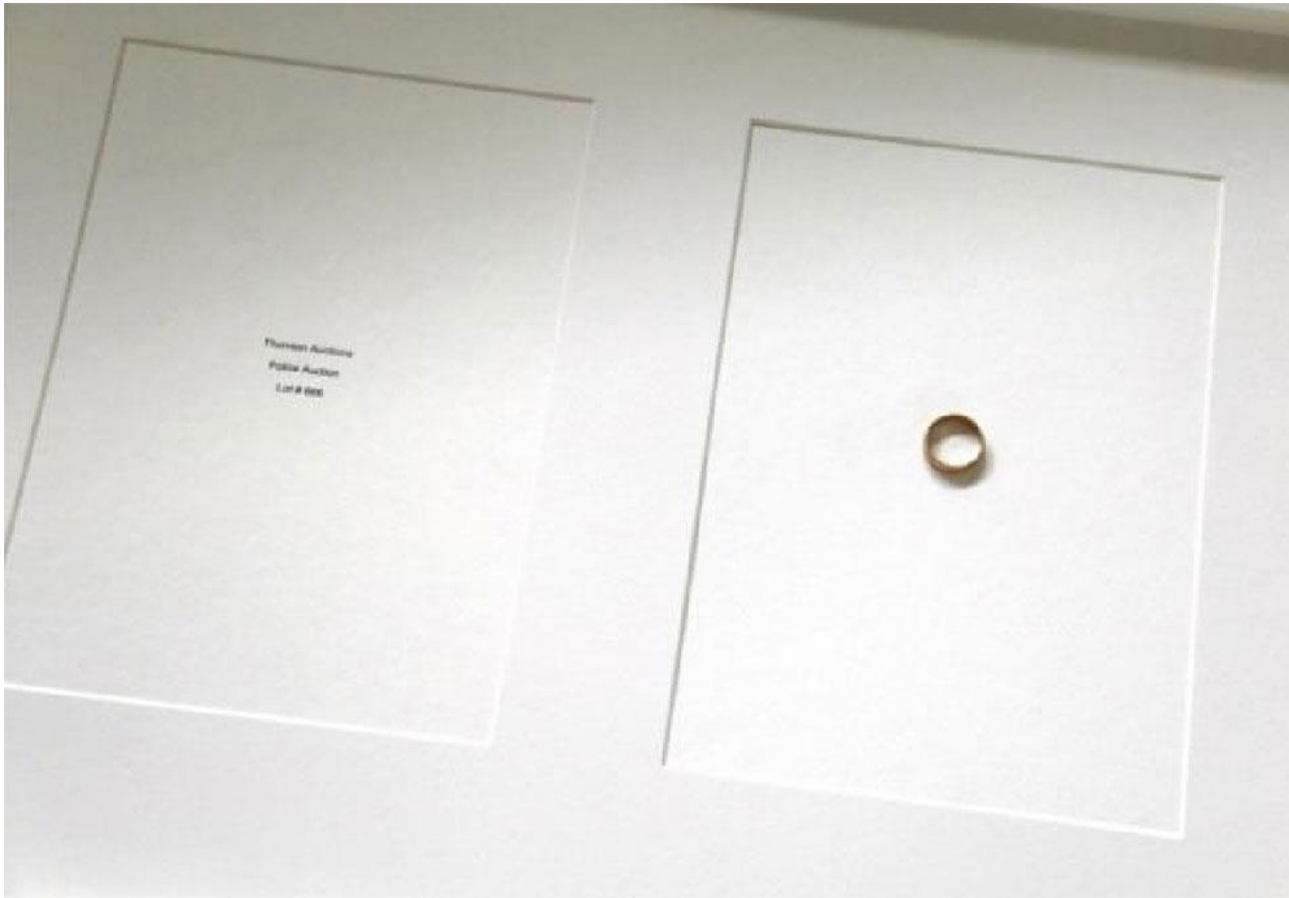
Decipher and interpret

The Handshake project has one particular maker, Renee Bevan, who does not want to conform to craft rules like routine, schedules, product development, exploring shape, form, surface tensions and textures. Bevan is instead occupied with the common denominator of ideas that deal with jewellery discourse, but her work is not or does not necessarily contain jewellery objects. At exhibitions the public only sees the tail end of the intense process, in the form of still image(s) or object(s), maybe video. Her work comes alive when you know its background, and that takes effort and takes it away from what jewellery wants to be: to be worn.

Bevan wrote on her HS2 blog:

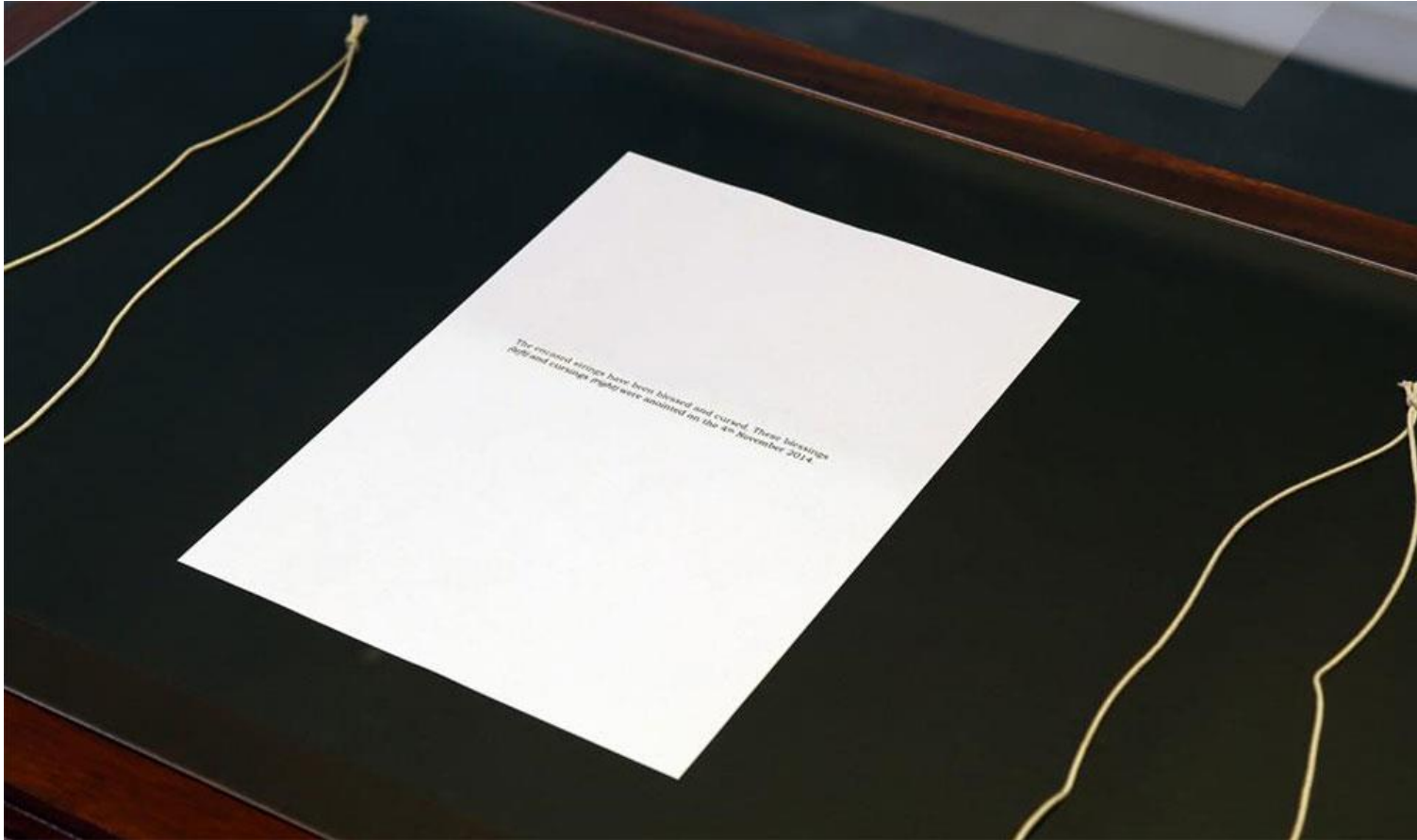
You see, for a couple of years now my thoughts have been consumed with this idea of making work that's alive ... I guess this is why I like collaboration, performance, shared authorship, exchange, work that can be activated. This is also why I enjoy photography as a medium – because it documents, captures and freezes life ... This too would explain my interest in other media like moving image, performance and participatory, relational projects – they all capture, document, highlight life ...[5]

Her mentor Harrell Fletcher is not a stranger to social practice as art. He is a key figure in the development of this kind of practice and relational art. And it was with him that Bevan stuck to the development of her 'work that is alive' projects. Bevan began employing the services of psychic mediums (who told her what she should make), seeking objects and stories from people working in and around her neighbourhood, making work that engaged family, friends, strangers, the gallery audience, and even attempted participation with her grandmother who had passed away).



Renee Bevan, History undisclosed, 2016. Gold wedding ring purchased from police auction; lot #666 (photo by the artist).

Her stories and photos became the work, a practice that does not always sit well within the makers' community, who want to see 3D objects that speak for themselves. This unspoken rule came from jewellery's artisan history mixed with the modernist approach of reduction, that less is more. There is something paradoxical within this: these 3D objects cannot be didactic, illustrative or explanatory. They need signs and codes that can be deciphered. This contradiction dictates the general paradigm of visual arts. Objects that 'speak for themselves' demand the knowledge of a contextual history and the ability to decipher and interpret their signs and codes.[6] The more art is studied and becomes common knowledge the more integrated and deeper this reading can be. New Zealand educational institutes have taken art history off their curriculums. This collective reduction of knowledge does not encourage the understanding (and future beginnings) of conceptual jewellery makers who are sitting on the fringe of the jewellery paradigm – and whose practice is to work with the floating signs of meaning.[7] They need space where concept and practice can meet in unknown territory and, with that, the necessary writing that introduces their thinking, so the audience can, as Duchamp once said, 'finish' their artwork.[8]



Renee Bevan, Absent Presence, 2014. Cabinet encasing two strings; one blessed, one cursed. (photo by Peter Deckers).

Not many jewellers and commercial galleries are concerned with intellectual approaches. Most makers and gallery owners are interested in exploring materials to magic up sometimes more decorative concoctions. For years, contemporary jewellery tried to integrate itself into the fine arts world but finally gave up. The result is that those still teaching and working with conceptual platforms have been denied further encouragement. 'The work needs to speak for its self.' 'Jewellery is for the sole purpose of wearing.' But jewellery is for the body as well as for display in a museum, and both are valid. In these cases the work can be enjoyed and experienced in a ritual way. Items of jewellery in a museum display 'are also more than simple autonomous sculptures – in part because of their link and co-dependence to the body'.^[9] Jewellery by nature searches for the body and has that ability when it is unanimated on display, therefore museums make perfect sense. Each museum can explore chronologically their national interests and cultural connections. Some of their collecting choices or exhibition themes might be questioned,^[10] but overall a museum collection is a permanent respectful resting place where items are conserved and cared for, and where they have the future prospect of public access.

Jewellery and curators in the display and off the body

The reason given for exhibiting jewellery is to celebrate the intense concentration of the artist's ideas that have developed through their unique making processes. It also sets out an intrinsic connection with a potential body. Liesbeth den Besten in her book *On Jewellery* discusses jewellery as a connection between the symbolic and subject of the body.[11] Exhibiting work in the white cube makes the reading of jewellery physically imaginative. So often people buy from a jewellery exhibition without first trying on what they've bought. The relationship of buyer to artwork explains well how jewellery exhibits complete or share the artist's intent, with buyers wanting to be a part of or own the final result of a successful art process. This is not much different from the jewellery on display at a high-street store. Except, the shop owner needs to bring their customers into a not dissimilar imaginative mode with the trickery of shiny surfaces, clever props and elegant salespeople.

We see exhibitions where the curator is the exhibitor. This might work well in a deconstructed construct, but using art to make art is not my sort of show. However, this attitude can be successful if it is done thoughtfully. A fine example is Karl Fritsch's curated exhibition at the Danner Rotunda at Die Neue Sammlung – The Design Museum in Munich. He created an exhibition with jewellery works from the large Danner collection[12] and additional works by contemporary artists. The mixtures and differences of attitudes, the depositions and reformations of the displayed jewellery collectively made a rare statement of how contemporary jewellery is positioned in the 21st century, with diversity and creative freedom as the norm. Fritsch casually and aesthetically composed and mixed famous and unknown works without a hierarchical perspective. Each display read like a visual sentence. The exhibition was ambitious, hugely risky, but managed to create a new excitement by its well-considered outcome. At the time, this exhibition broke precious museum rules; it did not pretend to celebrate the curator, or place the artists on a pedestal, but was a space where the attitudes of current and past practices were shared – a real handshake.



Works exhibited at the Danner Rotunda at Die Neue Sammlung. From left to right by: David Bielander, Peter Deckers, Klaus Buergel, Peter Deckers, Lisa Walker, Gerd Rothmann, D&F (Gabi Dziuba and Karl Fritsch). Courtesy of the Neue Sammlung (photo by Peter Deckers, 2011).

Objects that speak for themselves

The total package for an artist is the connection between the idea, its making and its presentation (and its recognition through sales, etc.). True collectors like to be connected to more comprehensive knowledge; therefore they often ask the artist about the background of a work. Some makers have an explorative attitude towards their materials and processes; for others their conceptual ideas infuse the choices of material and processes, and both have stories to tell. Postmodern thinking demands that the audience needs to own the work, therefore the artist should not give more than the work. But what if the work is more mysterious by the absence of information, or when audience interpretations add to a richer reading.

On 9 March 2013, a retrospective exhibition Otto Künzli: Die Ausstellung opened at Die Neue Sammlung. Over the years, Künzli operated on a large number of conceptual platforms which he explored with his unique almost emblematic precision. What Duchamp has done for the fine arts, Künzli has done for the craft arts. A retrospective is a rare occasion, and in general has the ability to confuse, because the context made by the chronologically placed artworks often interferes with the original intentions of the work.[13] They act more as crowdpleasers or artist's souvenirs. Fans of Künzli know that most of his work carries a story or has a conceptual connection that adds up to a rich reading. However, all the works in this exhibition came without information and only played out an aesthetic game in their display. A new museum visitor from the street would not have had a clue what the work stood for – or how the particular story behind each piece could have added to the understanding and context of the work. The rules of reduction did not add value, but instead diminished any comprehension of the unique abstract values in Künzli's work and flattened the experience of his amazing work. Only the 969-page tome on sale at the exhibition unpacked parts of his work.[14] In a review of this exhibition, writer Damian Skinner explains that the lack of information nullifies the understanding of work that bears a strong authentic concept.[15] The only time work needs less or no information is when the language that makes the work comes from its own materiality and (poetic or design) manipulated processes.

Adding value is an irrefutable part of the human psyche. Provenance, storytelling, falling or being in love, friendship and religious feeling all work on the emotions through psychological rituals. As artists we sell perception with our work. Artists work Gestalt[16] to the max. If we say, Look, there is a sheep in the cloud – all we see is the sheep and not the cloud, until the sheep dissolves. The more famous artists are the more convincing 'sheep' and Künzli is one of those bigger artists who has created massive 'sheep clouds' as part of his end product – but the artist or a curator may have to draw our attention to what transforms the cloud into a sheep. The Handshake blog for that reason gives a platform to describe their 'sheep clouds', making their research, ideas and work available to the audience for a deeper involvement that builds towards extended appreciation.

Objects that are created out of strong ideas need language as their undercarriage. But this should not be an excuse for explaining bad art. Nowadays jewellers who work an intellectual context are criticised for imposing information on viewers that does not connect to the purpose of jewellery as an unanimated extension of the body. Künzli's end-aesthetic is strongly connected to the jewellery paradigm and still fits well within that discourse, but other conceptual art jewellers who use unrelated intellectual contexts and values face little intellectual tolerance of their work and are shovelled off as difficult. Exhibiting experimental ideas is important in finding ways to activate work that enables new experiences. It needs pigheaded willpower to overcome low-brow attitudes from ill-informed enthusiasts. A programme like Handshake has a protective umbrella that encourages experimental practices with its exhibition programme that gives way to discovery in new 'art holes' that are not yet plugged.



Vanessa Arthur, Unmonumental; Fever, 2016. Copper, brass, sterling silver, gold, thermos-set paint (photo by the artist).



Kristen D'Agostino (left) and Judy Darragh (right) collaboration work, 2013. Objectspace, Auckland (photo by Peter Deckers).

- 1 In response to Jean-Marc Poinot, 'Large Exhibitions, A sketch of a typology', in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), p. 39.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ursula Ilse-Neuman, in 'Schmuck, Internatioanle ed. Benjamin Lignel, (California: Art Jewelry Forum, 2015), pp. 24–29. *Shows and Tales: On Jewelry Exhibition-Making Handwerksmesse, Munich, 1959–present*, in
- 4 Neke Moa, *Handshake 1*. 5 January 2017, <https://handshakejewellery.com/participants/neke-and-karl/>
- 5 Renee Bevan, <https://handshake2.com/2015/06/01/23/>
- 6 See Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writing 1893–1913*, vol. 2; and Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, 1977.
- 7 Claude Lévi-Strauss invented the term *Floating Signifiers*, which refers to representations that have no one specific meaning or value and therefore can be interpreted in multiple ways.
- 8 *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (New York and London: Routledge, 1996). p. 245.
- 9 Anne Dressen, 'Display Matters: On Presenting Jewelry At Design Miami/Basel And Beyond' in *Art Jewelry Forum*, 8 November 2016. Accessed date January 2017, <https://artjewelryforum.org/display-matters>
- 10 *Passionate or biased museum curators can over their career cause timebombs and corrupt the historical context of a museum's collection.*
- 11 Liesbeth den Besten, *On Jewellery: A Compendium of International Contemporary Art Jewellery* (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2011).
- 12 *The Danner Foundation (Danner-Stiftung)*. The collection was established in 1927, and from 1983, major pieces of contemporary jewellery were systematically collected.
- 13 John Millar, *The Show you Love to Hate*, *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), p. 270.
- 14 Otto Künzli, *The Book*, ed. Florian Hufnagel, (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2013).
- 15 Damian Skinner, *Otto Künzli, The Exhibition* p. 245, *Shows and Tales: On Jewelry Exhibition-Making*, ed. Benjamin Lignel, (California: Art Jewelry Forum, 2015), pp. 198–205.
- 16 *A configuration or pattern of elements so unified as a whole that it cannot be described merely as a sum of its parts.*

About the author

Peter Deckers, a Dutch-born New Zealander, is a multi-functional jewellery activist: i.e. educator, organiser, curator, writer, editor, jewellery maker and contemporary artist. He did his early jewellery training and art education in the Netherlands; immigrated to New Zealand in 1985 and completed a Master of Fine Arts at Elam, Auckland University, in 2003. Peter is the jewellery coordinator and a part-time art lecturer at Whitireia NZ, Wellington. Ideas that make distinctive conceptual connections with jewellery are the inspiration for his practice, which includes his making processes, and is often expressed as installation work. He founded and developed the award-winning HANDSHAKE project, an international mentor and exhibition programme for emerging New Zealand makers (2011–present). This unique project has inspired the international art careers of several emerging NZ art jewellers.