

METALSMITH

JEWELRY ■ DESIGN ■ METAL ARTS



volume 27 number 5
\$7.50 usa \$9.00 canada
www.snagmetalsmith.org

Identity and Hybridity
Decoration Deconstructed
Crossing Over

Ted Noten

Decoration Deconstructed

by Brett Littman

Although Dutch artist Ted Noten is often labeled as a conceptual jewelry maker, a more accurate description would be part economist, part performance artist, part psychologist, and part storyteller. Much of Noten's work comes from his "annoyance and frustration" when looking at traditional jewelry and the value systems it promotes. He feels compelled to "tell the truth" about what precious and non-precious materials mean to him and to society at large. Accordingly, he experiments with a wide variety of techniques, materials, and formats, driven by the desire to create objects that are grounded in the most contemporary philosophical, aesthetic, and social issues. Noten deconstructs our pre-conceived notions about jewelry, valuation, beauty, and the functionality of decorative things.

Since graduating from Amsterdam's Rietveld Academy in 1990, Noten has enlisted a number of creative strategies in an attempt to broaden the parameters of jewelry. These include: encasing objects in acrylic; do-it-yourself projects; jewelry that foregrounds its materiality; performative works; and commissions that mine the client's psychology and personal history. Noten's most frequently employed method is encasement, a technique that allows for the preservation of animate and inanimate objects, while removing the sensation of touch. An early and crucial encased work, *Turbo Princess* (1995), features a dead mouse wearing a pearl necklace embedded in a clear acrylic pendant. About the work's origins Noten relays, "A pearl necklace? As the subject of a contemporary art event? I guess at the time I was infuriated by the idea someone had even dared ask me to join a group of designers who were invited to work with this most bourgeois and boring icon in the whole history of jewelry: a string of pearls. I'd rather string myself up by them! A new take on the pearl necklace for me would

mean unconditional surrender and probably that was the reason I decided to take part. Not to join, but to battle from within."¹ A photograph of the piece caused quite a stir when it appeared in the Amsterdam papers. The local chapter of the Society for Protection of Animals protested outside of his studio, and someone accused him of trying to play God for denying the



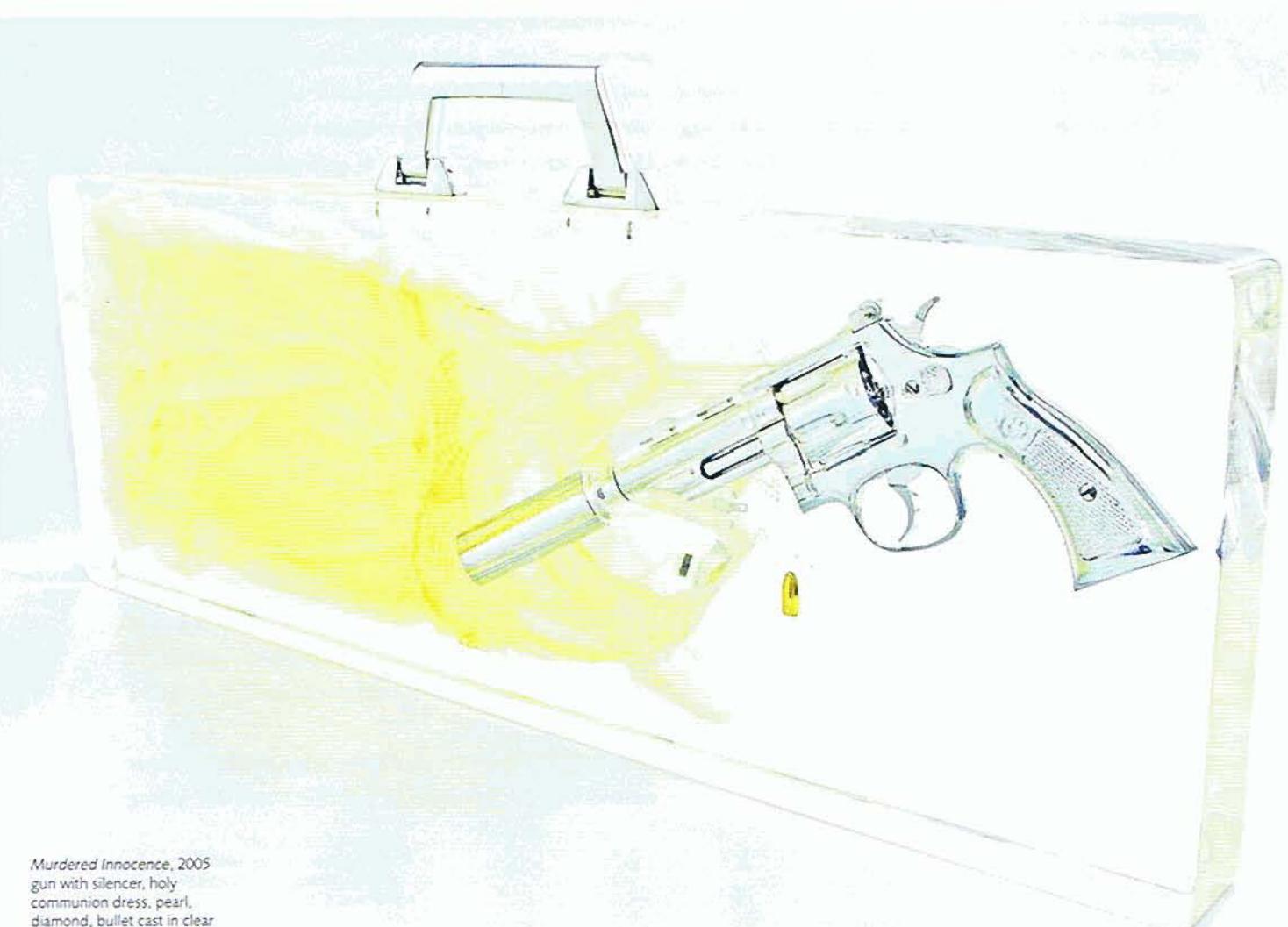
CHEW YOUR OWN
BROOCH

Cheat Your Own Brooch, 1998
chewing gum with cast sculpture
unlimited edition



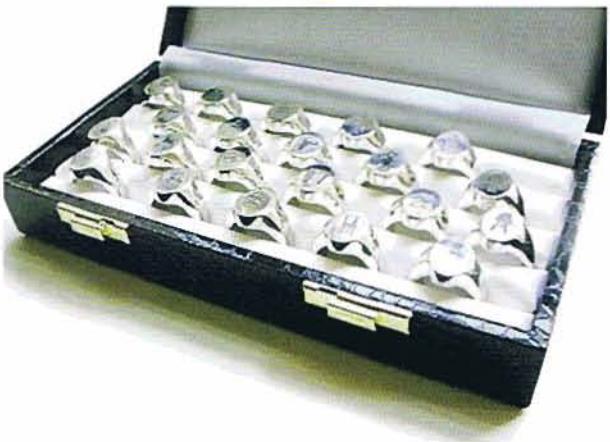
Turbo Princess, 1995

mouse, pearl necklace cast in
acrylic, whitened silver, steel wire
3 x 6 x 1"



Murdered Innocence, 2005

gun with silencer, holy
communion dress, pearl,
diamond, bullet cast in clear
acrylic suitcase
9 1/2 x 26 3/4 x 2 3/8"



By turning the tables on the traditional designer-client relationship, he was able to illustrate "the falseness of the popular belief that making art is easy, and people were made aware of the fact that the profession of designer is to serve."

mouse the right to decompose in a natural way. Noten's impulse to subvert the wearer's expectation of how a pearl necklace is perceived and by whom it should be worn delivered a sharp social statement about this precious material.

In the series "Survival Bags 1-5" (1997-98), Noten set out to cast three species of fish, a piece of meat, and a cracked egg, each in a clear acrylic handbag. Playing off the phrase, "break the glass in case of an emergency," Noten hijacks the wearer's desire and primal need for sustenance by placing these items beyond reach. We are left to only contemplate the exterior surface of the food in a platonic reflective state. With his series "Superbitch Bags 1-6" (2002-04), Noten upped the ante, replacing foodstuff with actual working guns in the acrylic bags. In *Murdered Innocence* (2005), Noten embedded a gun, communion dress, diamond, pearl, and bullet within a rectangular briefcase. Of course, the conundrum is that the guns can never be accessed to commit a crime—or be used for protection.

The artist has also encased hair, crumbs, insects, gold, feathers, and other items in rings, bracelets, and brooches, sometimes in semi-opaque epoxy, which makes them more mysterious and difficult to discern. Perhaps because of their smaller scale and intimate relationship to their wearers, these works seem more poetic and less politically charged than the "Survival" or "Superbitch" bags.

Silver Dinner (brooches), 2000
1 kilo block of pure silver cut into
brooches of various sizes
Collection Arnhem Museum of Modern Art,
the Netherlands

Noten has conceived of a number of "do-it-yourself" projects, in which the wearers become the makers. *Chew Your Own Brooch* is one such project. Provoked by his interest in gum stains in public spaces, Noten invited people to chew gum and form it into personalized icons that could later be cast in silver and then gold-plated. According to Noten, the *Chew Your Own Brooch* project "revealed an unforeseen and therefore interesting reflex. Buyers actually suffered from stage fright. They just did not dare to submit the brooches they had chewed."² By turning the tables on the traditional designer-client relationship, he was able to illustrate "the falseness of the popular belief that making art is easy, and people were made aware of the fact that the profession of designer is to serve."³ The *Chew Your Own Brooch* project continues, with a number of institutions and galleries inviting Noten to stage chewing events. A connoisseur of masticated gum, Noten can now analyze the minds of the gum chewers. "It's wonderful to see how the designs often mirror the personality of the chewer," he notes. "You could almost do a phenomenological study linking the design to the chewer's profession....The museum curator who painstakingly tried to emulate a Giacometti sculpture; or the plasterer who just pressed the wet chewing gum against his teeth."⁴

In works like *Silver Dinner* (2000), Noten employs another methodology. For this series of brooches Noten did nothing

Design Icon Rings, 2005
sterling silver with engraved icons
(Thonet, Rietveld, Starck, Mendini, etc.)
diameter 3/4"



more than cut a raw kilogram of silver into smaller pieces, and then sell them according to the value of their actual weight in silver, as it fluctuated on the open market. A *Silver Dinner* brooch's resale value is then only as good as the market performance of silver on any given day. These pieces are prime examples of self-reflexive jewelry that not only reveal their own construction but also address current economic realities. His *Monetary Necklace* (2004) also plays on market forces. After the euro was introduced into the Netherlands in 2002, Noten created the piece, which is comprised of devalued Dutch coins. Applying orange paint helmets, sunglasses, and piercings to the monarchs portrayed on the coins, Noten then strung them into a necklace that could be bought and worn, although now devoid of any monetary value.

For Noten, the Mercedes-Benz represents the most important icon in the western world. "CEOs, real estate agents, small-time hustlers in the building trade, politicians, Mongolian

drug dealers, and Birmingham greengrocers: all around the globe they share a love for a Mercedes. More than any other ornament, it symbolizes success and social status."³ For "The Mercedes Benz Brooches" series Noten conceived of a staged robot performance at a car show, during which a laser would create individual pieces of custom jewelry for the audience by cutting the exterior of a Mercedes-Benz. (Mercedes-Benz was not too enthusiastic about this idea, because the samples of the car chassis that Noten worked on looked awfully thin). Ultimately Noten staged a performance at an art gallery and found one willing participant who allowed him to hand-cut a small piece of his car into a brooch. The owner proudly wears it when he drives his Mercedes-Benz around town, with its matching hole in the exterior. Status icons and logos figure in other of Noten's works, including his *Design Icon Rings* (2005) and *Brand Covers* (1995), a series of metal brooches that can be adjusted to cover up logos on designer clothes and accessories.

100 Brooches, 2003
from Mercedes-Benz E-class 210 exterior
dimensions variable
The Droog Collection

Golden Pig Ring, 2001
18k gold
1 3/4 x 1 1/8 x 3/4"



Noten has also recently explored performance-based jewelry, intended to interact with site-specific environments. The "Global Tactile Pieces" series, started in 2006, evolved from Noten's complex travel schedule for his exhibitions, workshops and projects. Noten often finds his inspiration from the streets of different cities he visits. An active photo documenter of things that catch his eye, he will also sometimes take wax impressions of elements like walls, people's skin, and car ornaments that eventually find their way into compositions. For "Volume 1" of this series, he took impressions from around his hometown of Amsterdam, cast the forms in silver, painted them pink and then mounted the fragments as pendants, brooches, or rings. Akin to souvenirs, the "Global Tactile Pieces" become records of Noten's time-based actions. They are experiments in collapsing the real world into the act of making jewelry and open up lines of inquiry beyond the decorative and status considerations often associated with the medium. Such works fulfill one of Noten's aims: "Jewellery is out on the streets again. To me personally that's a great relief. For most of the audience it is still a bit of a puzzle."

In the theatrical *A Robot and a Ring*, made for an exhibition titled "Unstaged" in an Amsterdam Arts Club, Noten devised a robot arm that extracted a plastic ring from a safe, displayed the ring to visitors, then returned it to the safe. *Mr. Claw*, first installed in 2004 in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam for an exhibition of jewelry designs that used gold, encouraged visitors to play the standard funhouse game involving a joystick to pick something up and retrieve it as a prize. Instead of junky toys and trinkets, Noten installed a bar of gold worth about 13000 euro as the prize. At first no one would touch the machine, since it was considered part of the exhibition. Only after Noten installed a sign that said "Play and Win!" did the museum visitors start engaging in the game. "It was obvious

"With Ted it is all about the surprise, the tension between the new and recklessness, his permanent desire to perform magic."



Hotel Acacia, 2006
from the series "Global Tactile Pieces 1,
Amsterdam"
photograph symbiotically related to jewelry
11 x 15"



The City Muse, 2006
from the series "Global Tactile Pieces 1,
Amsterdam"
necklace, ring, hair pin, earrings, pocket piece,
silver 925 - 1000, pink lacquer, nylon wire



that the bar of gold would never come out," says Noten, "but people were attracted by the idea." At the end of the exhibition, Noten collected more than 4000 euro, which covered the purchase price of the robotic claw.

The *Golden Pig Ring* (2001), also commissioned by the Stedelijk Museum, is another example of Noten's performance jewelry. The museum's ticket cashier wore a large gold ring in the shape of a pig on her hand, a reference to a Jeff Koons sculpture in the museum's permanent collection. A live-feed video camera in the ticket booth focused on the hand of the seller, and all of the transactions with the customers were filmed and screened in the lobby. Of course the ring featured prominently in every encounter, forcing both the wearer and customer to interact with this unique work.

Jewelers often take on private commissions for wedding bands or other special occasion jewelry. Often the client looks at the artist's standard forms and chooses custom materials, jewels, and details with which to embellish the final product. For

Noten, the private commission represents an "open field" to work with the client, to explore their own history and personal narrative. *Ageeth's Dowry* (1999) came about when a soon-to-be groom asked Noten to create a special piece that could be presented to his future wife. Other than the budget, not much else was discussed. Noten wrote to family members and close friends of the bride and groom and asked them to send a ring and the story of the piece of jewelry as a contribution to her "dowry." He received family heirlooms, ordinary rings, and even a ring used in a motorcycle. Once collected, the rings were cast into a clear acrylic handbag, which the groom presented to the bride on their wedding day.

Noten completed three commissions for the Dutch physician and art collector Dr. Jeu van Sint Fiet and his wife, Netty, in 2004. "With Ted it is all about the surprise, the tension between the new and recklessness, his permanent desire to perform magic," says Dr. van Sint Fiet. "When we discussed the idea for the *Physician's Bag*, he had just completed *Ageeth's Dowry* and

Mr. Claw, 2004
1 kilo gold block, joystick amusement game
Installation at "Geel Metalliek," Stedelijk
Museum, Amsterdam



Ice Necklace, 2007

18k gold, birch branches, ring, golden pistol,
grasshoppers, clump of gold, housefly with
diamond, synthetic medallion, cultured pearls,
cast in clear acrylic
largest sphere diameter 3"



Jewellery," which asserts: "The moment the wearer was banished from the equation and the very social codes that had provided it with its most specific meaning were vilified, contemporary jewellery gave up its *raison d'être*.... Unless the self-inflicted isolation is radically abandoned, the discipline will have to settle for its position in the fringes of the fringes."¹

One can only hope that more jewelry designers and artists take a serious look at Noten's practice and incorporate the social and economic dimensions of making into their own day-to-day thinking. Such explorations into the realms of what it means to be an object maker will only enhance our understanding of the status of art and creativity in our contemporary society. □

Brett Littman is executive director of The Drawing Center in New York and an active art and design critic. His April 2007 audio interview with Ted Noten is available at www.wps1.org, under the Material Culture show archives.

"The moment the wearer was banished from the equation and the very social codes that had provided it with its most specific meaning were vilified, contemporary jewellery gave up its *raison d'être*...."

this motivated us as collectors to commission him. Ted requested a set of typical physician's instruments, the tools of my trade, and eventually he also asked me to part with the handle of the doctor's case I was using at the time. People outside of the profession might not appreciate the importance of that handle. It is, in fact, your only lifeline when you visit a patient at home."² In this case, the commission takes into consideration a very deep understanding of not only the individual, but also his profession and aesthetics as practiced in his everyday life.

Noten continues to push the boundaries of his own artistic practice. A recent commission for the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam interfaces his jewelry to demographic studies. All visitors to the museum will receive a special brooch designed by Noten, which allows entry into a special exhibition in exchange for their demographic information. This way the museum, the visitors, and the artist exchange something useful. Public projects like this realize the directives expressed in the manifesto, "In Celebration of the Street: Manifesto of the New

¹ Gert Staal, *Ted Noten, CH₂-C(CH₃)C(-O)OCH₃ enclosures and other TN's*, (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2006), p. 2. In my opinion this is one of the best books ever published on artistic process. Its anti-chronological structure, innovative design elements by Joost Grootenhuis, unusual chapter titles, self-critical cataloging of his complete output, texts ghost written by Gert Staal in Noten's voice and its "international yellow page" listings for other jewelers, supply stores, fabricators, manufacturers, galleries and design shops make it an indispensable resource for anyone interested in better understanding the organized chaos that often accompanies the creative impulse.

² Staal, p. 30

³ Staal, p. 30

⁴ Staal, p. 38

⁵ Staal, p. 56

⁶ Staal, p. 238

⁷ Staal, p. 214

⁸ Staal, p. 187

⁹ Staal, p. 115

above left

Ageeth's Dowry, 1999
56 gold rings and other objects cast in clear acrylic, pearl handle
7 x 10 x 3 1/8"

In Celebration of the Street

Manifesto of the New Jewellery

by Gert Staal in consultation with Ted Noten

Originally published in Gert Staal, Ted Noten, *CH2-C(CH3)C(+O)OCH3 enclosures and other TN's*, (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2006), pp. 113-116

Contemporary jewellery is dead. It crashed right before our eyes. See how it now hangs from the wall of the gallery, bent, broken, rigor mortis setting in. Protected by the stylised gravediggers of the art world, on display in its transparent coffin, the stench of rot swirling safely behind the glass. The obituary, *comme il faut*, is subtly disguised as an invitation or included in a catalogue, sustaining the semblance of life a little while longer. At the appointed time the crowd, elegant as always, swoops into the great hall to grace the official ceremony with its presence. Glasses are raised in memory of the deceased, astute analyses exchanged, the lack of recognition lamented. It seems as if everyone, excepting of course those who faithfully attend the High Mass of contemporary jewellery design, is visually impaired.

As the jewellery piece was being nailed to the wall it had let rip one last cry for help. Just when everything was going so well, fate had struck. The visual arts just within reach, cruising round the next bend right in front of it instead of the usual full lap ahead. Almost bumper to bumper... all it needed was the extra spurt in a game of catch up that had started somewhere in the heroic nineteen sixties. What hadn't it done in the intervening years to fall into the good graces of its devotees? Its reputation as plaything of the rich finally cast off, its abstraction embraced, only to be swiftly replaced by the lyricism of the individual artist railing against the dictate of good taste. Museums had become an accepted podium and jewellery decided the time was ripe to celebrate its worth in all its godforsaken vanity once more.

In the pursuit of a place amongst the visual arts, jewellery design had reinvented itself aplenty and now finally the finish was in sight. Justice at last, mission accomplished: game over. But along the way it had become so fixated on acquiring status that it had lost its purpose and hence control over the wheel. The struggle for emancipation had become its ultimate goal. Then the crash came. And now here it hangs on the wall of the gallery like an X-ray of a cardiac arrest. It nestles in its glass case, oblivious to the fact that it already stopped breathing on the workbench of its maker.

Contemporary jewellery is an illusion. As artificial as the stories told by the scribes who with their apologetics try to invest a whiff of credibility. By appealing to the

uniqueness of every single creation process, they try to justify its existence; not just of one piece in particular or of a designer's entire oeuvre but of the discipline as a whole. They tirelessly advocate a myth. In their hands, every piece of jewellery is interpreted as something without precedent. It's a one-off, singular and brilliant—the work of a genius. And yet it simultaneously turns into a *pars pro toto*.

Their pens scour the brains of the true bearers of the Word: the artists who tend to intuit what a particular jewellery piece should tell if it is to fulfil its ambition of the new. Personal fear, euphoria and associations form the uncompromising basis from which jewellery will stir towards a new meaning. These are the stories recorded by the chroniclers of jewellery, like telegraphers of the holy above. Take them at their word and you will find yourself dangling from a very thin rope. It seems as if the world of jewellery design is created anew every day and with every invention the truth of that world becomes a little more definitive. They avow a dogmatic faith in the incessant urge of contemporary jewellery design to be innovative, but forty years on in this alleged revolution their creationist stories can no longer conceal the epileptic fit convulsing the heart of this discipline. Contemporary jewellery pieces are like Rotary badges. As functional and just as steeped in the conventions they once tried to undermine. They have become the shorthand gesture of recognition for those who speak the same language. A rusty code that only has value for the intimate few.

Contemporary jewellery is autistic. It doesn't read

newspapers or books. Not out of principle but because of a lack of interest. It distrusts history as much as it wishes to sidestep reality. It cherishes and nurtures its own, often incomprehensibly cryptic language to avoid criticism, questions, comparison and even the smallest expression of doubt concerning its intentions. Entrenched behind a parapet of silence it resists criticism and refuses to engage with the banalities of daily reality. Sometimes with such virtuosity that the parapet itself takes on meaning; when the sublime silence develops an autonomous power that lifts the result over and above the natural boundaries of a particular jewellery piece. But as often as not, there reigns a petulant silence, like that of a child trying to get its own way, pursing its lips and with folded arms striking a stubborn pose. It's a battle against parental authority that is lost up front because winning or losing in the end simply boils down to who has the longest breath.

In its ambition to remove itself from any form of critical context, contemporary jewellery has only managed to further isolate itself. Not only from the art world but from its public as well. It complains of a lack of attention, yet wilfully retreats into the shadows of provincial life. Here, in the safe isolation of the artist studio, passions that run high are hammered into every square millimetre of material and moulded into shape. That process, characteristic for the creation of every piece of jewellery for thousands of years was kept in balance by the astute awareness of its actual calling: as an accessory that ultimately expresses the aspirations and achievements of the wearer, not those of the designer. Yes, conventional, and yes, inevitably judged on craftsmanship but for that fact also recognisable and appreciated by the many. The goldsmith followed the market and was – depending on his talents and skills – able to influence the tastes and fashions of his time; in exceptional cases even successfully introducing an indelible signature that bore the hand of its maker.

Modern jewellery lost this simple logic along the way. Every designer started to believe him or herself to be that exceptional case. Each of their stories took precedence over that of the end user, the wearer. His personal signature no longer had to be proven, was no longer *a priori* under discussion, now that it was simultaneously the source and ultimate goal of every creation. This transformed the typically extrovert ornament of yore into a piece of almost completely introverted sculpture. It chose the gallery over the shop, the collection over the street, the conversation

between friends over social interaction.

Contemporary jewellery is superfluous. After all, what could it possibly contribute what other visual arts do at least equally as well? Intimacy, unease, voyeurism, consolation, exuberance, silence, beauty...? None of these belong exclusively to the domain of the jewellery designer. The moment the wearer was banished from the equation and the very social codes that had provided it with its most specific meaning were vilified contemporary jewellery gave up its *raison d'être*. What followed was a turbulent but futile search for an emergency exit in a tunnel that just got darker and darker. Unless the self-inflicted isolation is radically abandoned, the discipline will have to settle for its position in the fringes of the fringes. Barely noticed and certainly unchallenged. Striving for a safe, because enemy-free existence that is thoroughly uninteresting since it is validated only by those few square inches necessary for its own conception. If it wants a chance of survival its maker will have to step out into more dangerous terrain. Return to his craft, if only to forget it. That means ditching forty years of dogma but getting in return centuries of conformism and defiance that will doubtlessly prove a far richer source.

Jewellery must be sentimental and never look for compromise.

Jewellery must be owned by the public if it wants to touch the public.

Jewellery must steal and seek to be stolen.

Jewellery must cherish its enemies in order to make friends.

Jewellery must forget the psychoanalysis of the studio.

Jewellery must go out into the street to eat and be eaten.

Jewellery must be shamelessly curious.

Jewellery must look where to attack and neglect its defences.

Jewellery must use traditional codes in order to break them.

Jewellery must neither forgive nor forget.

Jewellery must ignore all prescription.

Gert Staal is a design critic and writer based in Amsterdam.