

# People, Objects and Making: redefining practice

by Laura Bradshaw-Heap

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## Abstract

This paper explores my relationship with jewellery: how I have sought to both extend my audience and expand on notions of what and who my audience is and can be. Though increasing numbers of students graduate each year, contemporary jewellery can at times be very inward facing. Along with an aging and declining collector base and an ever-decreasing number of specialist galleries, this lead me, as a research-led practitioner, to question whom was I making jewellery for and who was my audience?

Using Bourdieu's theory of habitus, I unpacked notions of insularity within contemporary jewellery using three projects I have worked on as case studies. The first project **This is Me** explores how a project is reshaped when the audience are encouraged to become participants and control over its direction is placed in their hands. The second case study **JUNK: rubbish to gold** investigates how audiences can be activated to become active participants, promoters and consumers of the project by integrating notions of circular economies both digitally and physically throughout a jewellery specific project by integrating notions of circular economies both digitally and physically throughout a jewellery specific project. The third case study **Mother Makers** begins to look at how it might be possible to use the discipline's inward facing tendencies to the benefit of a group which is often, though unintentionally, pushed out to the peripheries - that of recent mothers.

I argue that through applying Bourdieu's concept of habitus we can begin to understand why it is hard to reach out to different audiences in our projects and suggest ways to in which we as practitioners can begin to rethink who we make our work for and why.

## Keywords

Interaction, interdisciplinary, contemporary jewellery, audience, participant, habitus, Bourdieu.

## Introduction

This paper explores my relationship with jewellery and how I have sought to explore in different ways that my audience is and potentially who my audience could be through three projects.

While visiting the many exhibitions and private views within my discipline (and I include my own in this), I have been repeatedly struck by the fact that vast swathes of those attending are colleagues, friends, acquaintances and peers. And while this makes for a very jovial and supportive atmosphere it led me to question - who is this work really made for? In a design discipline such as mine, how much do we actually reach out beyond our peers and colleagues? And when I make, whom am I making the work for?

These questions have followed me from project to project in various guises. As soon as I began to think about the question of who my audience was, it led to questions about the audience's role. Are they passive observers or can they /should they have more active role? How can we rethink our practices in a way that includes audience development at its core? And if we do this, how might this alter a project's structure and outcomes?

In this paper, I draw on three projects where I approached the idea of audience in different ways as a means to explore what an audience can be and how these ideas impact on the presentation and structure of a project. But first, let me define my discipline and where I sit in it, to give context to my argument.

## Jewellery Roots

Contemporary jewellery is non-traditional approach to jewellery making, be it through materials, concepts and/or techniques. It comes under a number of different guises- art jewellery and author jewellery, research jewellery and contemporary jewellery (to name just a few) each name reflecting the variations of thought processes, emphases and foci (Adamson, 2007, 21; den Besten, 2011).

Within this paper I refer to contemporary jewellery to reflect the particular approach I take within my own practice. Contemporary jewellery has been defined as a "self-reflexive studio practice orientated around the body" (Skinner, 2013:10). For me, what specifically defines *contemporary* jewellery is a reflexive approach to studio practice that draws on and comments on contemporary society. This jewellery 'movement' as described by Susan Cohn has grown and matured since its beginnings in the 1960s<sup>1</sup> becoming increasingly visible as its aesthetics and concepts are taught across the globe; promoted within festivals, on online forums and through a plethora of publications (Cohn, 2012: 221). And while many others have questioned and explored who contemporary jewellery's audience is and how we can reach them, some critics have suggested that contemporary jewellery has often struggled to shake off a perception of insularity giving the impression that it is often its own audience (Lignel, 2006).

To explore why contemporary jewellery has been perceived as inward looking, and to begin to navigate this issue, let us look to the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his theory of habitus.

## Contemporary Jewellery – speaking for itself and the jewellery habitus

A common assertion within contemporary jewellery is the need for the work we produce to be given the space to *speak for themselves*. Minimum supportive text is encouraged and white cube exhibitions are the norm. But for these objects to speak - and be understood - the audience must share the same understandings and

viewpoints as the maker. In short, the audience must come from a similar material culture. To understand this statement, we need to take a step back and look beyond how we 'read' a work of art and examine how material culture itself shapes and defines not just the art we make, but every aspect of life.

While we make culture, culture in turn makes and defines who we are. In simplified terms: babies and children learn through the material – the houses we live in, the clothes we wear, the food we eat and the objects we surround ourselves with. Each experience shapes our understanding of the world and in turn shapes our biases and assumptions. This habitus Bourdieu explains, is the unconscious understanding of the world built from our experiences of it. Usually we only become aware of our own habitus when it is challenged, i.e. when we encounter a different set of cultural norms - otherwise known as 'culture shock' (Bourdieu, 1990; Miller, 2010; Wagner, 1988).

Habitus as a concept is important to understand as a maker and is a theme I have touched on in the past. If we assume that the objects we make can speak for themselves, i.e. that our audience can translate our intentions without aids, then we are assuming that our audience shares our habitus. To read an object without aid, the audience by necessity is required to understand the *material language* of the discipline and the *cultural language* of its roots. If the audience does not have the same material language it does not have the required knowledge to access or understand this discipline or its ideas. Therefore, it is inevitable that contemporary jewellery's audience is predominantly itself.

As a practitioner, I believe it is important to try to look beyond this insular gaze and to begin to take a more progressive view of project development and dissemination. The audience's role in this, for me, is the key. I will now outline three projects in which I sought to explore the potential languages of contemporary jewellery and experimented with alternative ways to structure and disseminate these projects. Each project approaches the question of who contemporary jewellery's audience is – and could be - in different ways.



(image LBH-0)

Photo credit Laura Bradshaw-Heap

## Case study one: This is Me

**This is Me** explores what a jewellery project could look like if it is taken out of its usual contemporary jewellery habitus and placed within another – that of the participants.

The project worked with a group of Irish Traveller women in collaboration with Brent Irish Advisory Services (BIAS). Irish Travellers are a nomadic group originating from Ireland. They have historically faced widespread institutionalised discrimination.<sup>ii</sup>

It was clear from the beginning that it was important not to assume the role of ‘expert’; as this risked my ‘expertise’ being seen as speaking for the women rendering them voiceless. This would in turn risk disenfranchising the participants before the project even began. So, I developed a structure based on an approach by artist Jon Lockhart: that of the ‘co-conspirator’. Lockhart sets out a common problem to be solved and then gives space for the participants to take the lead (Lockhart, 2010). Following this format, the question I posed to the group was: *What is it that we want to do?*

We began with a coffee morning in a local community centre. I provided basic craft and jewellery materials and tools. My initial plan was to encourage conversation through the provision of basic jewellery classes and to find out what women wanted these mornings to become. Conversation was slow to begin. Some of the women had not spoken to non-Travellers before and sometimes it was required to build up trust. As trust built, conversations grew.

This project was a means for me to explore how an audience from a completely different background, worldview and no previous experience could take part in a making project, taking the lead and becoming participants and creators. This was a significant turning point for me. While the offer of jewellery-making sessions encouraged women to come together to begin, once given control over the direction of the coffee mornings, they pushed it in new and surprising directions to suit their own ideas and needs, rather than to fit with my own preconceived ideas. They wanted to go out and visit places, see things. They wanted to get work experience. They pushed to get better infrastructure for their council run site. This was an empowering act for the women. They became less interested in learning craft making skills but sought to find ways to make real positive changes in their lives. Thanks to a very proactive support staff member, the group began to visit museums, the cinema, and the local theatre, things the women had not done before. An unexpected outcome was that three of the women decided to return to education and two subsequently became employed.

Since the objects made during our time together were not the main focus of the project, (it was the women in the group during the process of the project who changed the direction of the project and who made an active decision that the objects made were not the focus for the project), I created a book to document our process, which was launched at the Irish embassy in London. Alongside this, I used the experiences to develop my own visual response.

The colour palette was inspired by the women themselves, while the use of Swarovski crystals was in direct reference to Channel Four’s *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, a highly contentious and problematic series which glossed over many real issues faced by Travellers and glorified others – in particular the suggestion that crystals are a must have on every Irish Traveller woman’s clothing. This had become an in-joke within the group. When this work was exhibited, all the women – plus their children and friends - turned up to celebrate.



(image LBH-1)

*Images of the book produced as part of This is Me. Graphic design Vita Dobson, Image credit Vita Dobson.*

As the artist, taking myself outside my comfort zone and placing the project into another group's habitus enabled me to have a much deeper understanding of those I was working with, enabling my research to be much richer as a result. By handing over some of the control of the project and its direction, I found a way that enabled the participants to gain ownership while I was still able to draw what I needed from the project. Rather than me mining them for information, the project sought to work alongside the women, and to project their voices back through the book and the titles of the jewellery pieces, which were shown in international competitions and exhibitions and are now part of a few collector's private collections.

This project was one of the first in which I began to explore the role of the audience and began to realise the potentiality of developing an audience that has an active rather than passive role in a project. My visual responses, in turn, were shaped by these experiences. While it is clear that this approach will not suit every project, it did help me to begin reimagine contemporary jewellery's audience and the ways in which we as designers could think about our own work as well as how we could connect with, engage with and develop more mixed and varied audiences.

There are of course strong arguments for and against how collaborative any such project can be, as writers such as James Clifford and Robin Boast have debated<sup>iii</sup>. By focusing on those within a position of power (be it the lead artist, project organiser, curator et cetera) they recognise the inherent asymmetry that is created between the specialist and the community and how this may affect the outcomes of any proposed collaboration. They demonstrate that the desire to create relationships does not in itself mean that these relationships will be evenly reciprocal or positive, as good intentions on their own do not alter underlying power structures (Boast, 2011; Clifford, 1997). As makers, we may not enter a collaborative project necessarily feeling like the specialist or person of power, however this is the role that we take on, as it is usually us who initiate a project and direct its aesthetics and physical manifestation. And while in certain instances this may be of benefit, it can be a problem when seeking to actively engage new audiences from outside the discipline, especially if those audiences are already vulnerable or marginalised as the group I worked with were. By coming into a project as the specialist we place ourselves at the top of a hierarchy in which the participants are placed below us and as a consequence usually see their voices and opinions as less important. However, by taking on the position of co-collaborator, as explored in **This is Me**, it is possible to begin to break down some

of these hierarchies and, in turn, begin to hear the voices of our audience. By doing so, we begin to step out of our own habitus and gain an understanding other peoples' material and cultural languages in a way that is not manipulative or exploitative.



*(image LBH-2)*

*Two brooches I designed as a result of and inspired by the This is Me project.*

*Image credit Laura Bradshaw-Heap*

### **Case study two: JUNK: rubbish to gold**

**JUNK: rubbish to gold** explores how a project firmly rooted within a contemporary jewellery framework could stretch out beyond its traditional audience through focusing on community and circular economies.

It was a research project, an installation, an exhibition, a performance, an auction and a collaboration. Traditionally centred as a jewellery project on the surface it upcycled discarded jewellery, worked with trained jewellers and makers and took place within the jewellery department of a university. But it did do more than this. It playfully explored a layering of ideas - of exchange, bartering, gathering, earning, harvesting and giving.

It did this by inviting 31 national and international makers to come together to turn the 732 kilograms of collected junk jewellery into new and desirable objects within a large installation, with the whole process live streamed on YouTube. The discarded jewellery was re-imagined using low-tech tools in a high-intensity environment. We partnered with charities that provided the broken, discarded and rejected jewellery as material for the project with tools, equipment and materials donated from a variety of businesses.<sup>iv</sup> (Astfalck et al. 2015; Astfalck et al. 2017).

Although we were lucky to secure the Atrium gallery at the school of Jewellery for the performance, this also proved to be one of the project's biggest challenges in relation to audience development. Its position as an academic institution, somewhat off the beaten track within the jewellery quarter in Birmingham, meant we could not rely on walk in visitors. Unless we tackled this issue, we risked creating a project whose sole audience were the jewellery students and tutors and supportive staff at the university. Our solution was this: to create a strong digital presence in real time, alongside the physical performance, installation and exhibition

and to find ways to promote this through the complex web of suppliers, partners and networks who were connected to the project.

As we collected the piles of jewellery, we photographed them and posted them online. The performance was live-streamed on YouTube so anyone could 'be part' of it regardless of where they were. This was streamed at the **mac Birmingham** arts centre alongside an exhibition of the project and drop-in workshops to open the project up to an even wider demographic. Each charity and business that supported us promoted the project in their newsletters and on social media, sharing the project to significantly wider audiences. Throughout the performance the makers shared photos of their work as it progressed on social media, drawing their own audiences into the project. Everything made during the week was photographed on the spot and posted onto an online exhibition on the international U.S. based online forum <https://crafthaus.ning.com/>. The exhibition was updated each day and grew over the course of the performance week. At the end of the week, the work was auctioned by silent auction.



LBH-3

Caption: a selection of the jewellery collected. Image credit Rod Gonzalez)

Unlike **This is Me**, **JUNK: rubbish to gold** did not look to place itself into a non-jewellery habitus. Rather, it sought to highlight and put on view to as many as possible, each interaction that goes into the making of the work-of-art. By exposing the sometimes hidden process of creation, **JUNK: rubbish to gold** sought to open the project up to all who were involved in the project, from supplier to donator, workshop attendee to university cleaner. All were given the same opportunity to become engaged with the project, so that those interested in the theme and discipline were giving a way to access it an easy and accessible manner.

It is my contention that to maintain progressive, sustainable practices we need an activated audience. An activated audience rather than simply clicking a like button will share, engage, advocate, buy, and collaborate. They will help grow your project. In **JUNK: rubbish to gold** the circular framework meant that each link in the chain became part of the project's audience; performers, suppliers, supporters, funders. These in turn became advocates, promoters, funders and buyers. The project was shared through newsletters, linked on social media and written about on a variety of jewellery and non-jewellery blogs drawing in audiences from way beyond our own disciplines reach. People who gifted large amounts of materials also contributed to our crowdfunding campaign and placed bids during our auction. Those who found the project through social media nominated charities they were connected to become involved. Makers in the performance placed bids on their colleagues

(and in one case their own) work. Students at the School of Jewellery watched the performance, interacted, bid in the auction and purchased JUNK to transform themselves.

While **JUNK: rubbish to gold** remained within a predominantly contemporary jewellery habitus, it sought to find ways throughout to vocalise and put on view each part of the process in as many ways as possible, seeking to provide a variety of access points for audiences from outside the discipline to step in and engage, connect with and be involved with this contemporary jewellery project. **JUNK: rubbish to gold** remained within its own jewellery habitus, but made a conscious effort putting on display its concepts and ideas to each link within its network of suppliers, participants, performers, customers and donators thus giving audiences from a variety of backgrounds the ability to connect with and be part of the project.



(image LBH-4)

Necklace created by Laura Bradshaw-Heap during the JUNK performance. Photo credit Rod Gonzalez.)

### **Case study three: Mother Makers.**

**Mother Makers** takes a different approach to audience. Born out of frustration and feelings of isolation, it engages with professional makers within design who have found themselves on the periphery of the discipline because they have procreated. Unlike previous projects which sought to look outwards to widen their audiences such as with **JUNK: rubbish to gold**, or sought to place themselves in different habitus' altogether such as with **This is Me**, **Mother Makers** has turned its gaze back inwards; seeking an audience from peers within art and design.



(Image LBH-5)

Graphic design by Laura Bradshaw-Heap

There is a persistent, though extremely outdated - line of thought that suggests that as a woman you have to be 'either 100 per cent mother or 100 per cent artist' - that good artists cannot also be good mothers. This, was infamously summed up by Tracey Emin who claimed:

'There are good artists that have children. They are called men' (Alexander, 2014). But, of course, the act of procreation does not inherently change us for the worse as female makers. Rather it is social conventions and the systems and structures in place that can and do put stain on our time, our abilities, our levels of output - and our sanity. Many drop away from professional life as increasing demands are placed on time and finances, especially for those maker moms where caring full time for their children is the only care option available. Yes, there are expectations. There are those who have found the right balance of support to maintain and grow their practice after the birth of their children. But this is often done despite, rather with the help of the structures and systems around them. This is because the current habitus of design and art in general is one which often excludes children. Workshops and studios are often filled with dangerous materials and tools. A culture of working long and antisocial hours is the norm. Exhibition openings and events are inevitably in the evenings, when most parents of younger children are embroiled in bedtime routines. Residencies by in large exclude children, but rather designed to suit the young solo artist. Integrated, accessible childcare in universities and other workplaces is rare. And with the often prohibitively high costs of childcare, many struggle to maintain previous levels of engagement post-child.<sup>vi</sup>

Feminism has taken great strides in the last few years, as it has begun to include a more diverse understanding of feminism. As Elske Rahill comments: transfeminism, global feminism, queer feminism and womanism are all now seeking an agenda, so is it time that we 'build a motherhood feminism too'? This is important because, as she so clearly puts it;

*'Not all women are mothers. Not all women want to be mothers. Not all women can be mothers. But many of us are, and all of us have come from a womb. As long as we denigrate maternity, we are denigrating women' (Rahill, 2017).*

Mother Makers aims to start putting motherhood feminism into the public eye. While motherhood by many is classed as a private affair, the issues that surround women, motherhood and work are profoundly public. Here the question has been less about how to reach an audience beyond our peer and colleagues and more about finding ways to *be more visible within the discipline*. Mother Makers aims to do this by actively examining and promoting the process of art production as a mother. We have developed a format that publishes regular interviews from artist mothers and leading voices in the industry. Our blog explores not only how to work as a maker mum, but also how to work *with* a maker mum and how to help break down some of the many invisible barriers mothers face. Our first exhibition of mother makers took place in Munich as part of Munich Jewellery Week 2018. We are exploring formats to enable studio practice while caring for children, from one-off

performances as seen with my recent collaboration at Munich Jewellery Week,<sup>vii</sup> to longer term residency programmes for mothers.



LBH-7

Filming for the Mother Makers crowdfunding campaign. Photo by Laurie Schram.

By reflecting the experiences of mother makers back to those within art and design, alongside highlighting the best of positive practice, we aim to seek visibility for mother makers, demonstrating that motherhood does not simply exist within the home in private, but it continues to go on all around us, and that public structures and systems need to adapt and enable these women to fully partake in their discipline.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> For an in-depth history of contemporary jewellery during this period see Liesbeth den Besten's 'On Jewellery' and Damian Skinner's 'Contemporary Jewelry in Perspective.' (See bibliography).

<sup>ii</sup> Core to Traveller culture is nomadism – which means 'not necessarily the intention to keep travelling, but the nomadic mindset' (Kenny 1996, 179). Irish Travellers, like many other nomadic groups face a number of issues such as high unemployment, widespread discrimination, poor education, overcrowded and unsuitable settlement sites and due to the increased privatisation of land and countryside, many restrictions on the ability to travel and set up camp as they once did (Castles & Miller 1998, 22). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish\\_Travellers#Origins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_Travellers#Origins)

<sup>iii</sup> These debates have predominantly revolved around the Museum's role of presenting native communities' culture.

<sup>iv</sup> For more information on this project and the theory behind its conception please see our joint paper in this journal as well as our paper presented at the 2015 Making Futures conference.

<sup>v</sup> See: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ch9\\_zbZT1yg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ch9_zbZT1yg)

<sup>vi</sup> See: 'The Status of Women in the Canadian Arts and Cultural Industries' at: [http://www.arts.on.ca/oac/media/oac/Publications/Research%20Reports%20EN-FR/Arts%20Funding%20and%20Support/OAC-Women-the-Arts-Report\\_Final\\_EN\\_Oct5.pdf](http://www.arts.on.ca/oac/media/oac/Publications/Research%20Reports%20EN-FR/Arts%20Funding%20and%20Support/OAC-Women-the-Arts-Report_Final_EN_Oct5.pdf)  
Also: 'The Mommy Effect: Do Women Anticipate the Employment Effects of Motherhood?' <https://www.nber.org/papers/w24740>

<sup>vii</sup> @themutterschmuckers sought to combine studio and childcare residency over 3 days as part of Munich Jewellery Week in March 2018.