

## *Susan Kingsley*

### **ETHICAL METALSMITHS:**

Jewellers for Social and Environmental Responsibility

Ethical Metalsmiths is a collaborative project launched by Christina Tatiana Miller and I in 2004. When we met, Christina had researched the co-dependency of mining and metalsmithing, which was the subject of her master of fine arts degree. I had just completed writing an article for Metalsmith, The Price of Gold, (Kingsley 2004) which added up its true, disturbing costs to people, communities and environments around the world.

As metalsmiths, we shared a near obsession with the impacts of mining and were deeply troubled by the supply chain linking it to jewellery and our craft. We sensed an ethical disconnect between sourcing and making that was not being addressed. As artists, Christina and I were interested in exploring new paradigms of artistic and collaborative practice. We were fascinated and inspired by the work of artists who intervene in unexpected ways to address various 'lacks' of understanding, connections and possibilities in this century.

This artistic collaborative practice we entered, bridging specialized knowledge fields and the public sphere has been described as assuming the role of 'Public Amateur.' It is public because the risks, pleasures, mistakes and insights are the results of an autonomous learning process that is transparent. It is amateur because knowledge is pursued out of curiosity, enthusiasm and personal need, and is obtained outside professional goals and training. (Pentecost 200?) We are serious about our work, but find pleasure in acting in this role.

Between the years 2000 and 2007, nearly 20,000 metric tones of gold have been mined from the earth. Approximately eighty per cent is used to make jewellery. Most gold comes from vast open pit mines in remote locations operated by large, multinational corporations. New mining technology includes the use of cyanide to process ore that has lower gold content than in the past, and we are in the midst of a worldwide gold rush. Industrial mining consumes excessive amounts of water and energy, fills acres of ponds with toxic chemicals and creates mountains of waste rock. On average, seventy-nine tons of waste rock produced for every ounce of gold.

When sulfide-bearing rock is exposed to the oxygen in the air and to water, a dilute sulfuric acid is formed. The problem known as Acid Mine Drainage (AMD) occurs when heavy metals such as arsenic, cadmium, copper, lead, mercury, selenium, and zinc are dissolved from the rocks and washed into surface and ground water. An acid-generating mine has the potential for long-term, devastating impacts on rivers, streams and aquatic life, becoming in effect a perpetual pollution machine.'

As much as half of the gold production between 1995 and 2015 is likely to come from the traditional territories of indigenous peoples. In many instances, mines are operating without having the 'free, prior and informed consent' of communities that is required in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

As much as forty per cent of the world's gold output each year is produced by thirteen-million artisanal and small scale miners in Africa, South and Central America, Asia and the Pacific. Small scale operations often degrade the environment, involve child labour and endanger the health of workers and communities, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and further impoverishment.

In many parts of the world, efforts to secure natural resources are a constant cause of conflict among people, communities, governments and corporate interests. In recent months, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton brought world attention to the horrific violence and widespread use of rape by militias in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and linked to the mining of gold, diamonds and coltan.

In the US, corporate and political interests control mining. The General Mining Law of 1872 was intended to encourage settlement in the west. Public lands were sold for \$2.50 per acre mining was a 'pick and shovel' operation. The law has never been changed and mining is still prioritized in every land use decision. Mt. Tenabo is a long-recognized sacred site in northeastern Nevada. It is a central part of religious practices and worldview of the Western Shoshone, who have always lived on and cared for this land. In 2006, the UN committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination urged the US to 'freeze, desist and stop' actions against the Shoshone people. However, a recent court decision, upheld upon appeal, has granted permits for a massive project that will turn Mt. Tenabo into a massive open pit mine. This is only one story of many around the world in which the rights of indigenous people are being violated.

Few materials used by jewellers; precious metals, diamonds and gemstones can be traced to their source, let alone a responsible one. When we purchase materials, make jewellery and sell it we complete a supply chain that economically links us to their untenable sources. It is true that people who make jewellery by hand consume very small amounts in comparison to large manufacturers and retailers. We are definitely not responsible for the ever-increasing worldwide demand for jewellery, but our precious metals and gemstones come from the very same sources. It is a matter of ethics.

Again, eighty per cent of the gold mined each year is made into jewellery. However much we wish it otherwise, jewellers are caught in production and consumption capitalism, using resources and producing objects. Moreover, the world's obsession with gold and desire for jewellery is not likely to change. Eighty percent of the gold mined each year is made into jewellery. The international gold mining industry depends on jewellers using materials of unknown provenance to design, make and sell desirable luxury objects that perpetuate their irresponsible mining. Goldsmiths and everyone else who depends upon a supply of precious materials have no choice.

Many studio jewellers now choose alternative materials, some to separate themselves from traditional jewellery forms and the use precious materials, and others because they can no longer afford to work with them. A number of jewellers and metalsmiths, particularly those who have university backgrounds, distance themselves from the materialism of craft and the function of jewellery altogether by identifying themselves as artists.

In western culture, artists are considered a category of autonomous individuals with the freedom to create objects that transcend their materiality. Art is made for contemplation, for exhibiting in museums and galleries where it is separated from ordinary life. However, Suzi Gablik argues in her essay, Art and the Big Picture, profit has become the primary criterion by which 'art' is valued in western culture. The artist's social role is to become gain 'professional recognition' and become profitable, which determines whether they are 'winners from losers in the success game.' Art is not freedom. Art and its' institutions are deeply vested in our materialistic world.

Gablik asks, 'Instead of art-as-commodity, deprived of any useful social role, can art actually help us to revision ourselves and our way of living on this earth? Can we learn to participate in the "great work" of our time, which, according to the great geologist Thomas Berry, involves "moving from a devastating presence on the planet to a benign presence?"' (Gablik 2002)

Richard Sennett, in The Craftsman, suggested that 'In both natural resources and climate change, we are facing a crisis largely of our own making.' And that 'We will need to become good craftsmen of the environment.' (Sennett 2008)

Perhaps knowledge and familiarity with materials provide us an opportunity to connect with the world in ways that others cannot. Stepping out of boundaries to re-think our place in the world means rethinking 'craft.' Perhaps we are at a point where mastery and material are no longer liabilities.

Ethical Metalsmiths is investigating the potential of what might be called the existing collectivity of informed jewellers to become 'good craftsmen of the environment.' As 'public amateurs,' our aim is to channel information about mining issues and encourage jewellers to become informed advocates for social and environmental responsibility. Technical knowledge, specialized skills, connections with suppliers and personal relationships with customers place metalsmiths in a unique position to do this.

A person who can transform a gold ingot into a beautiful ring, or sheet silver into a goblet is more believable and may command more authority than we realize. We should take pride in the fact metalsmithing itself is a sustainable practice. We have always recycled metals. We need to emphasize that it is present day mining practices, both industrial and artisanal, that are not sustainable.

One of our earliest decisions was to become an affiliate of EARTHWORKS, a non-governmental organization in the US that addresses mining. Working across disciplines has been beneficial in a number of ways. In addition to perspective, insight and organizational assistance, they have introduced us to other environmental and activist networks. As a result, we have taken part in initiatives to support fair trade, recycling certification and land use. Another result is that studio jewellers have been introduced to new audiences and we been interviewed for numerous articles for jewellers and the public, providing us the opportunity to talk about studio jewellery and craft.

In 2004, EARTHWORKS collaborated with Oxfam America to launch the international 'No Dirty Gold' campaign to bring attention to the social and environmental impacts of mining around the world. As a result, more than 100,000 consumers have pledged not to buy dirty gold. And more than fifty jewellery retailers, responsible for twenty three percent of jewellery sales in the US, have signed the Golden Rules, a set of criteria for more responsible mining based on broadly accepted international human rights laws and basic principles of sustainable development. The campaign developed the rules based on extensive reviews of documents and research prepared by the mining industry, civil society organizations, scientific researchers and technical experts, international bodies such as the UN, the World Bank's Extractive Industries Review, and other multi-stakeholder processes. (2008 Golden Rules in notes)

There are countless large and small organizations working in mining areas around the world to protect communities and the environment, promote fair trade and defend human rights. The ultimate goal is to create an independent, third party assurance system to ensure that mines operate in an environmentally and socially responsible manner.

In order to keep people informed about progress, we maintain a website with information about mining and ethical sourcing issues for jewellers, metalsmiths and the public. We have organized panels and made conference presentations. In 2006, we drafted a *Resolution for Responsible Mining* that was passed unanimously by the Society of North American Goldsmiths. We have taken part in initiatives for fair trade, recycling and certification. We send e-newsletters and action alerts. Jewellers from all over the world are subscribed to our mailing list. We teach, lecture, network and continue to research mining issues.

However, we also create alternative strategies. As artist Nato Thompson, has described, 'Tactics can be thought of as a set of tools. Like a hammer ... they are means for building and deconstructing a given situation.' (Thompson 2004) Our learning about mining was the result of years of research, reading, trolling the Internet and talking with experts. To authenticate our own 'expertise,' we needed more tools.

We decided, as 'public amateurs,' to spend a week in the field, in northeastern Nevada. Nevada has produced 200 million ounces of gold and approximately 9% of the world supply in recent years. If Nevada were a country, it would be the world's third largest producer of gold.

Our project, titled 'Road Trip: going where metalsmiths have never gone before' took place in May 2007. It was an epic metalsmith quest for first hand knowledge and 'grounded' experience. We imagined ourselves living classic American 'road trip' movie. Each day was an adventure, and we returned home 'wiser for our experiences.'

Another tactic, in keeping with our goals of bringing attention to sourcing and fostering collaboration and collectivity among jewellers and metalsmiths has been to organize exhibitions. We chose to do 'virtual exhibitions,' because digital images could be submitted easily and could reach a wide audience on our website galleries.

For the first exhibition, artists were offered a Golden Opportunity to contribute to an exhibition about gold. They were asked to explore the paradox of gold, using any material to reflect on any aspect of gold and to send us a digital image. More than eighty artists from nineteen countries responded with work in various media, from metal to digital, from precious to dirt, from performance to paint, from chocolate to wood. We organized a 'digital premiere screening' and reception at the Society of North American Goldsmiths conference in 2006.

Our second virtual exhibition was titled Composting Good and Evil: Redesign for Sanctimonious Sinners. We know we must reconsider how we use the world's resources, and we may want to make changes in the way we live, but our good intentions are often undermined by simple inertia, bad habits or a hectic life. We asked artists to imagine what would happen if we 'composted our shameless sins, our saintly intentions and our fertile imaginations and pledged to use the resulting fecund glory to redesign and nurture the world?' The resulting exhibition is a subtly subversive and engaging visual essay about choosing change. This exhibition premiered at the 2008 Society of North American Goldsmiths conference, with the images displayed on an outdoor, billboard-sized led screen.

Another project developed by Ethical Metalsmiths deconstructs the supply chain and creates an alternative system in the form of a reality-show inspired 'public performance' of creative jewellery making. Radical Jewellery Makeover brings together volunteer miners, people who dig out and donate their old jewellery, with volunteer jewellers and students, working together as refiners and designers. The project concludes with a public event, an exhibition and sale of innovative, 99% recycled designer jewellery. People who have donated jewellery receive discounts on purchases and profits benefit Ethical

Metalsmiths continuing efforts to promote responsible mining. Why is this Radical jewellery?

- Asking people to donate jewellery, including its sentimental value, is radical.
- Collaborating with students, educators, metal workers and the public on a project is radical.
- Transforming all kinds of jewellery into artifacts in through an alternative process is radical.
- Producing multiple pieces of jewellery in intensive workshops is radical.
- Directing the creative energy of jewellers and metalsmiths to a group project is radical.
- Intervening in the flow of regular school curriculums is radical.
- Disrupting the usual flow of commerce is radical.

Thus far, Radical Jewellery Makeovers have taken place in four places in the United States and there have been many requests for more. Along with being a lot of fun, the project encourages people to consider where raw materials come from, how jewellery is produced and that mining for precious materials has social and environmental impacts. As intended, the project draws public attention to the creativity and skills of jewellery makers and the mediocrity of much manufactured jewellery.

Ethical Metalsmiths' mission is to inform people about the harms of irresponsible mining and inspire those who care about jewellery to demand ethical practices. We must demand transparency in the supply chain. We must tell our suppliers and the mining industry that we support responsible mining. We must participate in the creation of a market for change.

We believe a better world is possible and that jewellers and metalsmiths, designers, artists, educators, and students are well suited and well situated to catalyze change. The transition to a more ethical mining industry is not solely in the hands of mining corporations, contained in initiatives drafted by jewellery manufacturers, in the efforts of non-governmental agencies or in the hands of fate.

As Claire Pentecost has written, (Pentecost 2009) 'The more we learn about our world the more we realize that our system of production and consumption is practically and socially untenable. Changing this system is a vast creative project being addressed now by countless artists who have decided that the world we want is something we are going to have to make. No one invested in the status quo is going to do it. To actually live an authentic life richly experienced requires that we create social arenas to remake our own subjectivities.'

**Notes:**

The Golden Rules

The Golden Rules are a set of criteria for more responsible mining, based on broadly accepted international human rights laws and basic principles of sustainable development. The No Dirty Gold campaign developed rules based on extensive reviews of documents and research prepared by the mining industry, civil society organizations, scientific researchers and technical experts, international bodies such as the UN, the World Bank's Extractive Industries Review, and other multi stakeholder processes.

The campaign calls on mining companies to meet the following basic standards in their operations:

- Respect basic human rights as outlined in international conventions and laws.
- Obtain the free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) of affected communities.
- Respect workers' rights and labour standards, including safe working conditions.
- Ensure that operations are not located in areas of armed or militarized conflict.
- Ensure that projects do not force communities off their lands.
- Refrain from dumping mine waste into oceans, rivers, lakes, or streams.
- Ensure that projects are not located in protected areas, fragile ecosystems, or other areas of high conservation or ecological value.
- Ensure that projects do not contaminate water, soil, or air with sulfuric acid drainage or other toxic chemicals.
- Cover all costs of closing down and cleaning up mine sites.
- Fully disclose information about social and environmental effects of projects.
- Allow independent verification of the above.

## References

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EARTHWORKS [www.earthworkSACTION.org](http://www.earthworkSACTION.org) is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting communities and the environment from the destructive impacts of mineral development, in the U.S. and worldwide.

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No Dirty Gold Campaign [www.nodirtygold.org](http://www.nodirtygold.org) is a consumer campaign to educate consumers about mining issues and encourage mining industry reform.

It calls upon the global mining industry to end destructive gold mining practices and provide retailers and consumers with an alternative to dirty gold. It was initiated in 2004 through the partnership of EARTHWORKS and Oxfam America.

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