

## The Language of Jewellery

### Roseanne Bartley

The first series of works I am going to talk about demonstrates a process I call "surface archeology" – this is a method I use for gathering a material trace of the culture I am embedded within. I survey and collect material from sites such as my front gate, sporting fields, car parks, streets, laneways and waterways namely the Merri creek where I live.

The materials I find tell me something about the people, the culture and the environment in which I live, "the unspoken life of things", and it helps determine what I make. I can't necessarily seek out what I want or need to make a piece; I am reliant on those who go before me.

The materials I use are essentially derived from what's left behind, discarded, dumped or destroyed by the processes of everyday use and are what archeologist Michael Shanks calls the "background noise of history and experience."<sup>1</sup>

There is some behavioural predictability that I can rely on for the supply of my material, for example if you find one beer cap walking down a laneway there is a good chance you will find another of the same kind; my house is the distance it takes to eat an icy-pole from the 7-Eleven and there is a radial point of approximately five hundred metres from McDonalds where their plastic ice-cream spoons are discarded.

When I find myself questioning the meaning of the world around me my craft gives me the time and space from which to look upon something that is deemed rubbish and to contemplate what inheres in its substance other than the noise I am initially confronted with.

The relational process of 'surface archeology' underpins a conceptual and material-based enquiry into the importance of "matter" in a material world. Working and creating jewellery with this process provides an intimate framework (in both a physical and emotional way) through which to engage with the larger cultural and environmental narratives that we are faced with. It enables an intimate point of transformation between material, body, culture and environment. The outcome may be whimsical humorous or even beautiful.

I have also worked at this process on overseas trips and residencies. It's a process I use to orientate myself to a new city: it eases my initial sense of discomfort and gives me a structure through which to record my experience and it puts the sense of distance and isolation into perspective.

During an Australia council residency in Barcelona Spain I evolved the technique of gathering a trace of the city and its people into a performative work that involved the collecting of a public trace through a different form of expression.

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<sup>1</sup> **Michael Shanks - Traumwerk: Archaeology and performance**

The project was initiated under the title *Link, link, link.....* (it later developed in to an ongoing project titled *Link Up*) and it is a relational artwork that resonates with a variety of influences including the *Exquisite Corpse* Surrealist drawings, street vending and the designing of jewellery.

This piece invited public participation in the collaborative creation of a “virtual necklace” via the drawing of individual links. The project required each participant to draw a link of a chain that best represented something of themselves with the specific requirement that each link drawn has the possibility to link up with the previous one. This work engaged those who were willing to participate with a design process that simultaneously invites self-expression and the challenge of relating to/interacting with the trace of the previous participant’s expression.

I have trialled this work at several other venues – an art gallery and at small arts/craft conferences. These low-level performance events confirmed for me the value of participation-derived craft. And following the *Material City* workshop (an initiative of City Of Melbourne that I was selected to participate in, October 2007) I realised that this work has the potential to be remounted and developed as a roving street based work; where over an extended period of time craft, performance, jewellery and community interaction can connect, trace and order the life and movements of the city and its inhabitants. I am hoping to develop a catalogue from this stage of the project from which an overview of a creative expression of a community can be viewed.

And briefly, the last work I am going to talk about is a project that developed out of a trip I made to Santiago as a guest of the South Project. The South Project, (initiated by Dr Kevin Murray) is a project interested in creating stronger links between cultures of the south. Prior to this trip I was aware that Australian Aboriginal, New Zealand Maori and cultures of the Pacific made string and jewellery by crafting with hair and I was interested to discover that there also existed a practice of crafting with hair in Santiago.

The working title of this project was *Can you spare a hair?* and involved collecting a single strand of hair from people living along the latitude of 40 degrees (approximately). Participants were asked to extract a single hair, the process of which I captured with photograph. (This is a work in progress as the collection process was interrupted by the birth of my second child.)

The series of photographs I developed from this project captured a sequence of hands in a gesture that were evocative of hands involved in the process of making. As a slide sequence these images suggest a type of collective project of hands at work. The single strands of hair I collected were felted into a pair of rings, the forms of which suggest the coming together of two or more people.

So in a brief summary: I have talked about how my work functions in a point of intersection, how I am interested in the visual and metaphoric language of jewellery and how this language can be used to illuminate and create new ways in which we relate to/with material, each other, our environment and culture.