

OF CARATS AND CALORIES. AN ARTISTIC EXPLORATION ABOUT BODIES, RITUALS AND NORMS.

AUTHOR

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ABSTRACT

The body has become a luxury item, a malleable precious matter, which can be sculpted, sucked, lifted and invested into. These emerging practices of self-optimisation are offering aesthetic possibilities that have irreversibly changed the way we deal with our bodies and indirectly have challenged our understanding of jewellery and objects to wear. This paper establishes an analogy between the aesthetic promises made by plastic surgeons and the medical industries and the cultural functioning of jewellery as identity and community building artefact. The basis of this analogy will be constructed by means of a conceptual journey that will transit from the realm of carats (jewellery) towards the realm of calories (the body).

The arguments will be developed against the background of research into the public discussions on health, beauty canons and the mediated body that are particularly taking place in social media, scientific and pseudo-scientific internet platforms. Reports from field research conducted as a participant observer in operation theatres will be also presented as a crucial experience that has given valuable insights to move further the artistic exploration of the topic and place it in an interdisciplinary context. Finally, the paper will introduce Zellweger's artworks created during and after the investigation, including art jewellery, fictional products, installations and photography that pose questions on body norms, social pressure and freedom of choice.

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INTRODUCTION

“Once people had an interest in how their souls appeared to God; today they have an interest in how their bodies appear to their political surroundings ... The techniques and practices of self-design are questions no one can escape anymore.” (Groys, 2010:36)

Starting from the theses that the human body is unspecialised, not particularly well adapted to any ecological niche and for this reason rather vulnerable, humans unavoidably have transformed themselves into ‘prosthetic animals’ (Catton, 1980). As lacking beings, a term coined by the philosopher Arnold Gehlen in the 1940’s, they use tools to increase their physical and mental abilities and beyond securing the most essential survival needs, they invent artefacts distinctive to communicate their social belonging or define and sharpen their identities. Much of the artefacts made to be worn on the body, like clothes and jewellery, are in addition powerful means of non-verbal communication

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The practices of customising and enhancing the body, through technological modifications and replacements has revolutionised the thinking about the human body in the age of the prosthetic impulse (Smith and Morra, 2005). According to political theorist Pietro Morandi ‘Yesterday, the lacking

beings invented wheels and metal wings, in order to increase their mobility. Today, thanks to medical advancements and plastic surgery, they enlarge their breasts or genitals in order to increase their attractiveness, or they modify their facial features and body contours in order to compete with members of the same species for jobs in an increasingly competitive environment' (Morandi, 2007:46). Within the arts, the phenomena gained momentum in the beginning of the 1990's around the 'Post human' exhibition, which explored the implications of genetic engineering, plastic surgery, artificial intelligence, and other forms of body alteration, questioning what it means to be a human being (Deitch, 1992).

As a traditionally trained goldsmith, artist and researcher in a university, I interpret these new realities as an invitation to redefine what body adornment may mean in the 21st Century. It seems that the pertinence of placing objects ONTO the body in order to enhance people's identity and to reflect their social and cultural standing coexists with practices INTO the body itself, as if this were a precious material, a site for design interventions.

Back in the 1980's, after having completed a goldsmith apprenticeship, I got my first job in the luxury jewellery trade in Geneva, Switzerland, where I worked with the most precious materials, 22 carat gold and platinum, as well as weighty gems and where I learned how to compose with their colours and shapes. At that time, I would have never thought that someone would prefer to have their breasts enlarged as a present instead of desiring a fancy necklace from the top-end jeweller I was working for. After an artistic re-orientation in the early 1990's and completing an MA in the metal department at the Royal College of Art in London, I started to deal with the subject of value as a conceptual territory, leaving behind the narrow understanding of preciousness that the realm of pure carats had offered me until then. The carats of my jewellery were not manifested through gems anymore but through material research, aesthetic innovation and social

comment. Despite the use of unconventional materials like polystyrene and medical steel, my enquiry was very much about exploring the notion of value through the creation of jewellery FOR the body, during a period of around 15 years. In that phase, I specifically looked at jewellery, as cultural prostheses and as a poetic extension of the self (Zellweger, 2008 and 2011). After 2009, the aspect of wearing jewellery was gradually losing centrality in my work and I started to capture environments and practices, enlarged dimensions and adopted the language of installation and object art. I found myself creating work that was less FOR the body than ABOUT the body in order to explore the phenomena of body customisation from the perspective of a jewellery maker without explicitly making jewellery. I left the realm of carats to step into the territory of calories. The background of 'jewellery knowledge' informed my questions on how people aesthetically optimise their bodies through surgical interventions for as many reasons as there has been jewellery produced in the past.

I will describe in greater detail the creative journey from carats to calories through four sections in this paper:

Firstly, I will lay out the context for my investigation, developed against the background of the public discussions on health, beauty canons and the mediated body, which are particularly taking place in social media, scientific and pseudo- scientific internet platforms.

Secondly, I will report on field research conducted as a participant observer in operation theatres that has given me valuable insights to move further in this artistic exploration.

Thirdly, I will describe several artworks created during and after the investigation, including art jewellery, fictional products, installations and photography that pose questions on body norms, social pressure and freedom of choice.

And *finally*, I will construct theses on why jewellery offers a valuable perspective that informs a view on

the cultured body as a modifiable artefact, and how an interdisciplinary approach within artistic research can move the discussion further.

CONTEXT OF INVESTIGATION

“Over the past thirty years the new grammar of visual culture, the notion of the consumer as empowered, the workings of the diet, pharmaceutical, food, cosmetic surgery and style industry, and the democratisation of aspiration have made us view the body we live in as a body we can, must and should perfect.” Orbach, 2009 p.135

Through her work as a therapist and author, social critic and psychologist Susie Orbach raises awareness of the problematic relationship that many people, especially women, develop to their bodies. She points out that nowadays nobody takes for granted their bodies anymore and that the imperative of self-improvement has spread amongst neo-liberal post-industrial societies.

Take as an example plastic surgery, which started out as a medical necessity to reconstruct the body parts of heavily injured soldiers after World War I: today it has turned into a flourishing industry concerned with normative aspects of aestheticizing the body on an inter-cultural scale. One can integrate plastic surgery into a much longer and ancient lineage, if you consider that tattoos, scarifications, (de)forming skulls and feet are interventions probably as old as creating sophisticated objects attached to garments, which is currently dominating our understanding of body adornment. Our bodies are increasingly being experienced as objects themselves to be improved and worked on. In the quest for an optimised body that incarnates beauty, wealth, health and success, larger parts of society on all continents and beyond social classes are engaging in various fat managing



Figure 1. Ritual object III. Ironing board, leather, steel. Exhibition view Rituals of Self Design. Photo: C.Zellweger

activities. Beyond calculating calories or burning fat on workout equipment, modifying and adorning the body now takes place in operating theatres, which, besides irreversibly changing peoples' perception about their body-image can be potentially addictive (Pitts-Taylor, 2007). The human body and the personal objects that we wear on and below our skin are shaped by social and cultural forces, which are in constant definition and negotiation. The body has become a discursive battle ground, where actors coming from such diverse fields as fashion, health and nutrition industry, social media or marketing, all of them have a say. From these stake holders, I am going to focus on the mediatisation of the body in the context of Internet platforms as an influential context of discussion. (Figure 1)

The visual culture of the internet provides not only a flow of real and manipulated images but also brand new beauty canons, body ideals and fantasy features

that contribute to the discussion on reshaping the body. Artists have reflected on and reacted to these rising issues through “carnal art” (Orlan), “technological enhancement” (Stelarc) and disquieting images of branded bodies through photography (Buetti). The media broadcast a reality, where skin imperfections, double chins or a hairy belly simply do not exist. Especially for young people it is difficult to not feel excluded if the hegemony of perfect images becomes the standard. It needs some confidence, life experience or wit to stand up and reclaim territory against the uniformisation of the body discourse. For example, internet platforms where fat women discuss strategies to contest the gendered anti-fat discourses perpetuated by the media, governments and institutions of public health (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). There are bloggers who retouch the images of celebrities in order to ridicule them by making them look just ‘normal’, as a way to inspire some kind of collective catharsis against the pressure to look always perfect. Making people feel inadequate in their skins, insecure about their weight, their diet, their look and therefore in need of professional support, are strategies that are promoted by the food, fashion, pharmaceutical and medical industry. A superficial web research provides an immense amount of results when health, beauty and business are at stake. The food industry finances research studies that both inform and dis-inform the population.

Scientists seem to permanently find new evidence and later on prove last year’s insights either incomplete or even wrong. A wave of critical documentaries have dealt with such contradictions, like ‘That Sugar Film’ (Damon Gameau, 2014) on the scandals of the sugar industry, and ‘Fed Up’ (Stephanie Soechtig, 2014), which also addresses the large quantities of sugar contained in processed foods and the on-going attitude of the sugar lobby to blocking any attempts to enact policies to address the issue. In 2013 researchers at the New University of Virginia (UVA, 2013)

gathered and analysed data from more than 10.000 American children between ages 2 and 4. They found that children drinking skimmed milk were actually more likely to become overweight. If ‘fat free’ was once a successful mantra to attract weight watchers, now it has to co-exist with slogans like ‘Eat Fat, Lose Fat’ (Fallon and Enig, 2005), which is validated by experts, but against the interest of the industries and their commercially highly successful free-fat product ranges. Organisations like the Yale Rudd Centre for Food Policy and Obesity, are non-profit research and public policy institutions devoted to improving the world’s diet, preventing obesity, and reducing weight stigma. This centre raises awareness about the dangers of, for example, energy drinks that will provide you with wings and that zero calories are better for you. Reports (Rudd Report, 2012) have shown that these drinks are likely to confuse the body metabolism and that added sugar is one of the main causes of health problems beyond obesity, but also for learning disorders and depression.

The centre has engaged in the controversy about the decision of the American Medical Association to make Obesity a disease. This step could be seen as a way to undermine the integrity of individuals with over-weight, by defining them as ‘to be treated’. Many times, scientific evidence is instrumentally produced with the intention to serve political or economic advantages, while perpetuating the marginalisation of certain social groups.

The web research on the topic has shown that the discourse on body norms is ubiquitous and of global relevance, while at the same time the information is scattered amongst fragmentary reports, poorly referenced, treated in a sensationalist way and the authorship of pretend scientific reports is often quite opaque. Counting calories, measuring waistlines, stepping on a scale, or calculating BMI index came across as contemporary rituals of self-control and self-evaluation, further encouraged by new software technologies

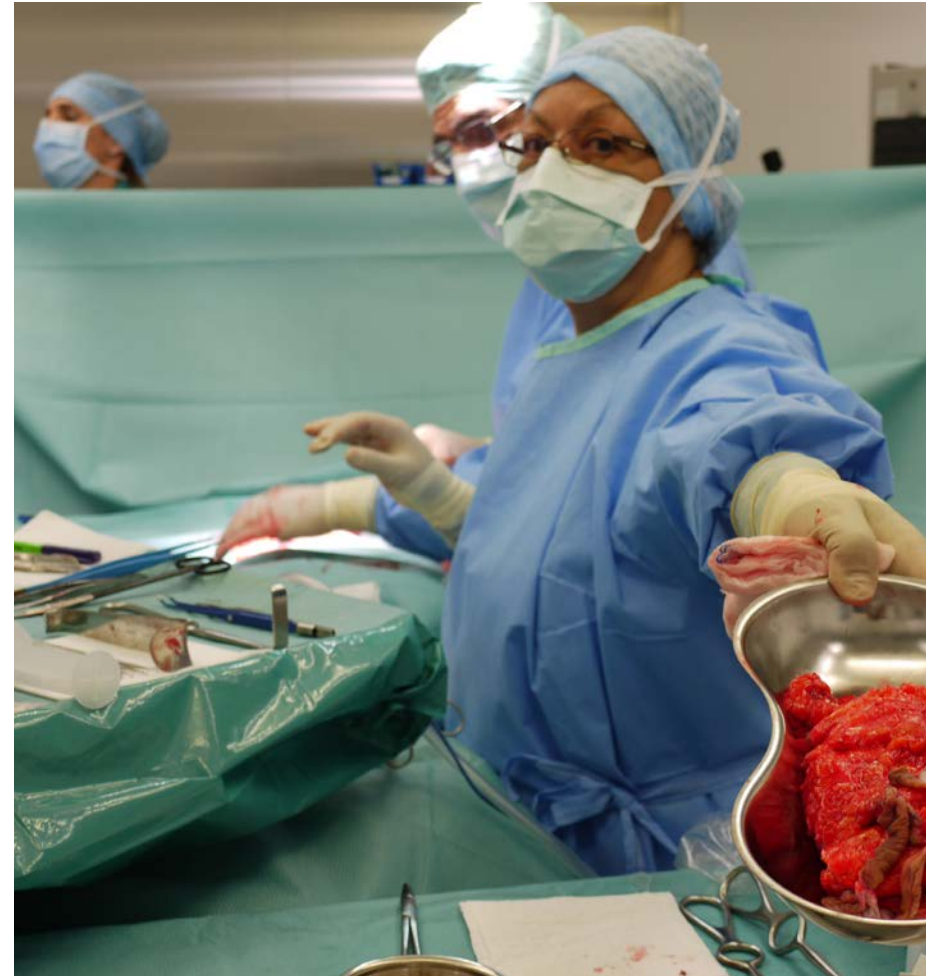
(Apps) that have turned the phenomena of the ‘quantified self’ into a trend. Irritated by how the media narrow perceptions about the right body, the right weight, or the right way of living to simple governance of numbers, I decided to change my strategy.

GOING IN: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE OPERATION THEATRE

Around 2008, I reached a point where citing the above-mentioned literature and books publically available was not enough anymore. The deeper I got into the topic, the less I trusted the second-hand data I had acquired. The conclusion of the above presented web research was that the widespread acceptance of practices of body improvement had a massive effect on people’s imagination about how to improve their appearance and re-shape both their physical and psychical identities. Amongst several contemporary body modification practices I decided to focus on the phenomena of plastic surgery, since it is an invasive strategy that explicitly involves aesthetic claims. At first, the idea to enter an operation theatre and spend time alongside surgeons at work felt a bit odd for a visual artist and object maker.

Nevertheless, I sensed that extending my enquiry into an interdisciplinary territory would not only challenge my view of the human body, it would offer me new insights and move forward my artistic practice (Figure 2, Figure 3).

The opportunity to enter an operation theatre and observe surgical operations came when I was lucky enough to be introduced to an experienced female plastic surgeon from the French-part of Switzerland who invited me to watch her operate in a private clinic. Interested in art and philosophy herself, we found common ground. Talking to her and ultimately also to her colleagues, assistants and patients opened further doors, so that more questions and ideas continued to evolve through watching and listening.



From 2009 until 2015 I could attend various operations as an observer. I saw breast reconstructions after mastectomy, breast enlargements and reductions, tumour removals, but most of all sessions of liposuction and lipofilling in diverse regions of the body (abdomen, thighs, hips, face). From a methodological point of view, it is important to note that I did

Figure 2. Photography, Excess Fat, 2011. Photo: C.Zellweger



Figure 3. Christoph Zellweger, Excess Fluid, 2012. Pendant, glass, vacuum deposition. Photo: C.Zellweger

not and still do not enter the operation theatre with a specific plan. I go in with an open mind and curiosity and follow what happens in front of me. My camera is usually on my side but not always needed or useful. I watch and listen, I smell, look at tools and processes, I try to predict what the surgeon will do next, I learn and contemplate, I ask questions, I listen

to the on-going conversations of the team at work. I have been astounded by the clinical procedures, initially confused by the forces which are needed to cut and stitch lumps of human flesh. The body appears to be first of all 'material' in the surgeon's hands. Under narcosis, the 'individual', the 'character' attached to the body, as the surgeon said, 'has to move out of my sight'. The surgeon has to deal with the physical body 'safely, effectively, professionally and without delay', to quote the surgeons explanation. It is sometimes hard to understand the reasons that move healthy patients to undergo such heavy and sometimes draining and risky interventions, so I also talked to the patients to broaden my view.

During one operation, I found myself feeling highly empathic with the patient, another time not. I wondered about the anesthetist's state of mind and what concerns her when she is looking bored while keeping the body she is responsible for alive. I quickly learned that my presence in the operation theatre is a welcome challenge to the otherwise monotonous routines. I talked with surgeons and assistants and continued to be impressed by their manual skills and focus. Witnessing plastic surgery operations has made me become further aware of the body's fragility and vulnerability but more so its tremendous malleability and capability to recover. (Figure 4)

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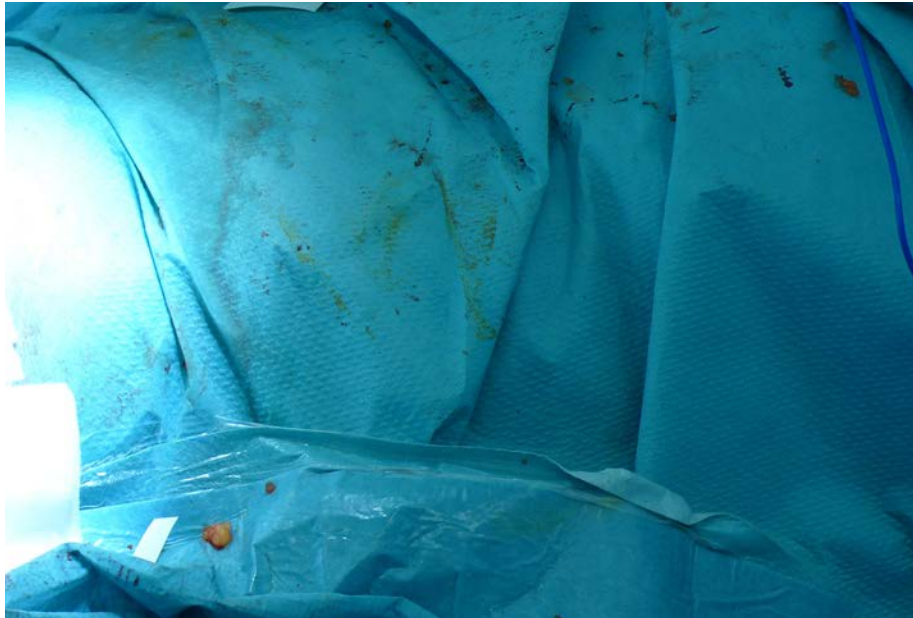


Figure 4. Photography. covered body after surgery, 2011. Photo: C.Zellweger

During one of the operations, I noticed a tiny piece of fat that was left, a bit hidden, but still in the limelight on the large blue tissue that covered the patient after going through some major fat removal from her abdomen. I wondered how exactly this piece got there, I also got a little sentimental, thinking about displacement and the fate of that little piece of flesh in the coming hours. It had once been part of that human laying in front of me. What will happen to that physical token of biographical moments of pleasure and indulgence, which later on caused the patient so much personal discomfort and pain? The question about the fate of fat turned out to become a philosophical one: the displacement of embodied memories, a part of one's identity left unattended on top of a blue blanket. Nevertheless, on my question put to the surgeon about what happens to the removed fat, once it has been weighed on a kitchen scale, there was no convincing answer but I also did not need one. I kept thinking about

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tons of migrating human excess fat being wasted every year. I recalled the artist Stelarc making a dystopian statement about 'a future of organs without bodies and bodies without organs', which has gained an uncanny currency, considering the latest developments in 3D printing of organs in the laboratory. Body parts become commodities, even luxury items in the age of the post-human condition.

BODIES OF WORK: 'EXCESSORIES' AND 'RITUALS OF SELF DESIGN'

The experiences and insights gained during the participant observation conducted in the operating room led to the development of body-related objects and jewellery responding to factual, fictional and ethical dimensions of the subject. The 'Excess' series (2012) in glass and the more complex body of work 'Rituals of Self Design' (2013/14) were the subject of major solo exhibitions. Through these works I addressed the issues I wish to understand in depth and took my findings into the public domain in hope for emotional and intellectual responses. Both exhibitions offered multiple readings of a contemporary phenomenon, that borders issues on health and wealth, on dignity and obsession.

I have seen a lot of liposuction, lipoaspiration and lipofilling, which made me realise that a lot of plastic surgery is actually about the re-distribution of bodily fat or the faking of fat through implants. I asked the surgeons if there was data about that fat and what happened to it. I gained access to some operation protocols, where the surgical interventions were described and the amount of removed, added, swapped



Figure 5. Christoph Zellweger, Excess 2550, 2012. blown glass, laser-print on glass. Photo: C.Zellweger

or shifted fat was registered in cubic centilitres. When studying these data sources, I saw the pertinence of following the diverse fates of fat and how we deal with it in today's society through the creation of artistic work.

'Excessories- let's talk about FAT' became the visceral title of the solo exhibition I presented at the Gallery Louise Smit in Amsterdam. I chose the title EXCESSORIES since it played with the affinity to the word 'accessory', common in the jewellery and fashion context, and also introduced the idea of 'excess', which best defines today's social habits of consumption. 'Excess' is also contained in the etymological origin of the word 'luxury'. What exceeds, what overflows, is the most exuberant side of nature and this is often manifested in the form of fat. These works were made up of empty, translucent volumes of blown glass with an organic pouches-like quality (Figure 5 and Figure 6). I used laboratory glass and picked up the glass blowing techniques



Figure 6. Christoph Zellweger, Excess 329, 2012. blown glass, laser-print on glass. operation protocol. Photo: C. Zellweger

from a professional to afterwards produce the glass elements one by one in my own studio. I sand-blasted some of the pieces and vapour-coated others, in order to achieve a perfect mirroring surface on a form that resembled a fluid substance. The idea of the excess of fat becoming something precious, where you can reflect yourself in and that invites you to indulge in vanity made a perfect jewel (Figure 11).

Each of the glass objects, mostly pendants, was marked with a weight reference coming from operation protocols. The figures reported on the diverse fates of fat of past operations to become metaphors for absence, gain and loss. The aspect of loss was important in these works, as a way to critique the intense social pressure for breast reconstructions that women undergo, as if they were forced to forget entirely the experience of loss, leaving them with no room to come to terms with their new appearance. My jewellery aimed to objectify the loss into something precious and turn it into

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a talisman with a potential to re-empower a woman. In the exhibition, these works would hang from a steel coat rack with a clinical look, against a backlit shower curtain. Behind that curtain the exhibition continued with more related works (Figure 7). Closest to the entrance a single photograph provided a conceptual and visual link to the surgical practices that related to the objects on display. The opening was busy and the discussions lively with many visitors talking to the invited plastic surgeon I worked with, with the gallerist and myself about their own relationship with surgery and the conceptual link with contemporary jewellery. One highlight of that evening was when a collector felt like sharing her personal story. I was asked if I would consider creating a piece for her after she had undergone surgery to reduce the size of her breasts, a long term wish she had after the birth of her two children. She suggested that to complete the story I should be witnessing the operation to come up with an original artwork. In a check-up in preparation for the operation the doctor found out that there were medical reasons why this operation should not take place, so our project stayed on hold. I felt privileged for having been asked to make an artwork for capturing a major moment in someone's life. This is one of the most fascinating qualities a piece of jewellery can offer: its ability to mark rituals of passage, as physical landmarks of enhanced biographical intensity.

Under the title 'Rituals of Self Design' I brought together work developed between 2012 and 2013 that was



presented in a solo exhibition at the art pavilion of the Overbeck Art Society in Luebeck (Germany). The three rooms of 140 m2 in total offered me the opportunity to test how a temporary exhibition can be used as an artistic media in itself as much as an important discursive element in artistic research. This attitude accompanies me since

Figure 7. Exhibition view from Excessories, let's talk about FAT. Galerie Louise Smit, Amsterdam, 2012. Photo: C.Zellweger



Figure 8. Exhibition view
Rituals of Self Design,
curtain. Overbeck
Gesellschaft, Luebeck,
2014.
Photo: C.Zellweger



Figure 9. Ritual Object II,
scale, glass, sugar. 2013.
Photo: C.Zellweger

2005 and I consciously have left aside the conventional circuit of contemporary jewellery galleries in order to explore alternative venues where to communicate my work. The authors Den Besten (2011) and Bernabei (2015) have respectively analysed this aspect of my practice.

The exhibition *Rituals of Self Design* was articulated through the following analogy: Home improvement as the activity of decorating domestic interiors and body improvement, as the optimization of one's own body, which is also home of the self. Between design fictions and object-based art installations the show set up to investigate the merging between medical techniques of self-design and the everydayness of domestic interiors. I wanted to expose the domestication of the operation theatre as a result of the increasing popularity of plastic surgery, which has become an accessible consuming habit to large parts of society that consider the body as a design matter. Some of the works had indeed a furniture-like character. Other works were more sculptural, simulating devices to measure the body (Figure 9) and that visitors were allowed to interact with, like a scale that didn't register any weight but confronted the viewer with two glass spheres, half filled with sugar that seemed to remind that "the body is a site of corporate inscription" (Jain, 1999). By utilising chrome, leather and glass amongst other well established and understood materials, I appropriated in a critical manner the grammar of modern design. Regardless of the size of the works, my approach remained the one of a precious jewellery maker, which means that each object was made well and subject to the symbolism of the chosen materials. The exhibition composed a conceptual environment, where both aesthetic contemplation and interaction were encouraged. The artworks had an affinity to *Critical Design* (Dunne and Raby, 2014), in the way that I confronted the audiences with future scenarios and fictional products through a rigorous merging of artistic, social and medical approaches. The show turned out to attract



Figure 10. Wall of Ovals, leather, steel. 2013. Photo: Christoph Zellweger

an unusual high amount of public, over a thousand counted visitors saw the exhibition, which was extended for two additional weeks.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have established a link between the aesthetic promises made by plastic surgeons and the medical industries and the commercial and cultural functioning of jewellery as identity building artefact. In order to do so, I have followed two strategies.

The methodological shift from a studio-based individual practice to an interdisciplinary collaboration with plastic surgeons, which offered me first-hand insights and original data. I have learned and adapted surgical techniques into my work and established aesthetic and conceptual links with a medical iconography.



Figure 11. Christoph Zellweger, Excess Fluid, 2012. Pendant, glass, metallised (vacuum deposition). Photo: C Zellweger

Secondly, expanding the traditional understanding of jewellery has allowed me to unleash its embedded knowledge, i.e. jewellery's ability to deal with perceptions of identity, meaning and distinction.

In the contemporary quest of self-improvement, adorning the body means re-designing and re-imagining

it. Much like what happens in the art-world with its value creating mechanisms around the artist's signature, operated people recognise each other, mingle or avoid each other, create subtle or obvious communities by identifying the surgeons', the designers', the artists' hand. My research has confirmed that both, jewellery and plastic surgery, articulate acts of identification and community building in a similar way. The engagement in designing the body towards our ideals and desires, means objectifying and commodify it and turning it into something, that can be sculpted, polished and invested into.

Witnessing plastic surgery operations has made me become further aware of the body's vulnerability as much as of its resilience. The making of artistic work informed by these insights has proved effective to generate public debate, where jewellery simultaneously enables, accompanies and denounces rituals of self-design. In particular, jewellery's ability to objectify loss and attachment in the tradition of sentimental and mourning objects, adopted in this context an unexpected new currency.

From the interdisciplinary collaborations, I learned about the surgeons' pride as 'designer-makers' and that their reflections in action, to use Donald Schön's terminology, were involving several aesthetic and intuitive decisions, that are not being addressed in the public discussion I have described in the first part of the paper. Therefore, the two introduced bodies of work (Excessories and Rituals of Self Design) confronted the medical community with a possible 'blind spot': on the one hand, there seems to not be much awareness about how normative their aesthetic decision-making is; on the other, that there is little debate on aesthetic visions in relation to mental and physical health. As a surgeon said at a conference on ethics and the integrity of the body, (University of Zurich, 2013) my work was contributing to visualise a necessary discourse. From the incursions in the fields of medical and social sciences it became clear,

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This research has shown that carats and calories are in fact both sides of the same coin. In the face of the new directions of social rituals, alternative socio-political scenarios and technological departures, jewellery continues to provide a valuable perspective that informs a view on the cultured body as modifiable artefact. Through a jewellery perspective it is possible to create engaging work, meaningful body images and generate a critique 'from within'. Blurring the borders between design and ethics, medicine and art, responding to the current phenomena of de-territorialisation and de-hierarchisation of aesthetic practices, is where the interdisciplinary work presented in this paper proved to be most promising and where further research could be carried out.

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