

Isolation and Global Sameness. About Critique. Interview with Peter Deckers



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Klimto2 has started a discussion about critique and shows various perceptions. We have been choosing different interview partners from the field of art and design. Working in art and design might seem like a wonderfully idyllic and relaxed career choice, where you have the pure freedom to let your creative juices flow. Each of them represents a unique view and gives us an overview of their own experiences. This is the third interview of seven.

We talk with Peter Deckers, who immigrated to New Zealand in 1985 and completed a Master of Fine Arts at Elam, Auckland University, in 2003. Peter is Head of the jewellery department, senior tutor, lecturer in

contextual and exhibition practice at Whitireia NZ, Wellington. He founded and developed the award-winning HANDSHAKE project, an international mentor and exhibition programme for emerging New Zealand makers from 2011. This unique project has inspired the international art careers of several emerging NZ art jewellers.

A University is a safe place for failures, developing new ideas and the own identity as well as a place where most of critical thoughts are generated. The relative physical isolation of the campus, in case of many universities in the world, has been seen as a symptom of the social isolation of the academy or between expert culture and life. How can this be „dangerous“ for the emerging artist and their work and how do you deal with critics in this surrounding?

The institute I teach at, *Whitireia New Zealand* went the other way and invested heavily in a five-story creative hub in the heart of New Zealand's capital city, Wellington, called Te Auaha, which means 'the creative' in *Māori*. Isolation never works well if the focus of a course is communication. It might work well as an incubator for students, but at the end, communication is needed to engage with culture and its audience. Our programme, therefore, includes student organized solo exhibitions at a graduate level.

Jewellery production nowadays is connected to fashion and design, but also to visual arts. Whatever the focus, contextual support from other media is required. A campus that provides students the opportunity to participate in history, culture and contextual practice classes alongside students from other disciplines adds value to its teaching and student engagement. Isolating jewellery students does not broaden their minds. Also if educational institutes only look at what 'industry' wants or need we quickly lose the critical discourse students should bring to further or renew culture. So far contemporary jewellery has been able to develop artistically by the fresh influx of many art graduates.

The real danger we face regarding cultural isolation is global sameness. The fast delivery of ideas and designs from artists and galleries via social media drives instant global trends. Teaching, therefore, needs to support individual student's pursuits that strive for artistic diversity and experimentation.

My response to New Zealand's emerging jewellers' isolation is to offer a bridging development programme that connects with the wider world. It's not academic but is instead fully applied and practical. It's called the *Handshake Project*.

With the assistance of an international or local mentor, this project supports emerging New Zealand jewellery artists to progress ideas and works for a succession of exhibitions.

The *Handshake* participants develop their practice through a number of challenges, masterclasses, collaborations and networking opportunities with both national and international exposure. The progressive nature of the programme aims to develop independent makers with an innovative and energetic art practice.

'Art criticism is massively produced and massively ignored, just as art itself'. says Elkin James in his book called "what happened to art criticism?" One of the main causes might be the so-called "academization" of critical thinking. Considering that, what institutional changes would you like to induce?

A writer needs to know who their audiences are. If the audience is academics, then they must write for them. But if their critical writing is for a casual interest group, they need to simplify their language. Institutions need to simplify their language too without losing depth. I am intrigued by the thinking of *Jacques Derrida*. My understanding of his work is not through his difficult-to-understand academic writing, but through his talks via film and *Youtube*.

Your involvement with art began as a jeweller. What was it like to begin teaching and to find yourself in the role as a critique for your students?

My jewellery training was through a technical industry school. My art training was through a fine-

arts university. The two approaches have merged by reducing or simplifying my technical know-how. Techniques are for me more of an obstacle. In my teaching, I show how things are done, but never insist that it must be done that way. Techniques, context, and ideas need to be taught in a healthy relationship with each other. My teaching, therefore, is more about empowering students rather than imposing ideas, techniques, and solutions. I am totally for team teaching. The consensus of two experts is a special moment and makes judgment calls around marking, for example, more quality assured. My first teaching experience was also juggling language. My English was not very sophisticated and therefore I had to use my hands and feet to make a point. It probably did make me more effective as a tutor.

Has teaching affected the way you think about the critics' relation to the artist and its pieces?

Whitireia visual arts' students do many presentations and practice how to talk about their work. Our students are also more 'hands-on' and will not be interested in becoming critics. I teach a paper called Contextual Practice that over the years has been shaped and fine-tuned to provide a space for creative and artistic discoveries. Degree level students explore the work of their hero artists, as well as given artist models. They critique the work for what is or isn't appealing. They define what appealing means. They explore these discoveries and integrate them into their experimentations and critiques. This results in well-researched ideas without academic deformation or definite outcomes. The intention is for students to make discoveries that open up further opportunities. This class is run for all visual art students and that fertilizes across the disciplines. This all safeguard towards art practices with flexible rigor and critically capable.

How do you experience changes in the world of contemporary jewellery and the education system in the past decade? Do you see any changes in qualities and/or the abilities to be criticised?

Criticism is about creating the right questions. I do not think that negative criticism is effective if nothing is done about solving the problems that have been identified. For example, the amount of academic work our students have to do for their three-year degree does not allow them sufficient practice in the workshop. I cannot talk for other countries, but it does mean that graduated students might lack practice in basic skills. That often is brought up. *Handshake Project*, the bridging programme I mentioned earlier, provides participants with a lot of feedback from their hero mentors that they use to develop work for a series of exhibitions over a two year period. *The Handshake* participants blog about their experiences with their mentors and how they develop their work from the feedback and critique. Nowadays artists need also to be writers and successful communicators.

You've spent a lot of time investigating contemporary jewellery, both as Jeweller and as Professor. What criteria do you use in judging art?

I like to make the comparison with speaking. We learn the words, we learn the grammar, but when we speak, all of that flows naturally. The sentence forms itself when the concept and content are clear. I guess that it's similar to criticism. My number one criterion in judging art is to look for the student's signature - how much comes through that is uniquely developed through research and experimentation. As a tutor, I need to be well informed and my long career helps that. I look at how creative processes have been used for the student's artistic communication. Technical achievements are low on the list for me. Nowadays extended techniques can be learned without tutors on the side. Youtube and the internet are full of tips and demonstrations.

How do you see the place of an art critic in the so-called Jewellery bubble?

A critic needs to be a well-informed communicator. Our jewellery world is small and nobody is given with negative criticism for the sake of it. But it is a big skill to point out what is wrong with a show or a work. Artists and curators are so fragile. Nowadays hardly any debate or issues are communicated by critics. I have noticed that critics who are not makers are called theorists, but are also thought of as being ill-informed. This has happened within fine arts too. There is hardly any

critical discourse being written. Naming and analyzing the periphery of a show is not enough to communicate informed opinions. This week in New Zealand the daily papers decided to remove the arts' columns. Now only selective announcements can be seen. Only niceties thrive as a critical platform. But criticism will always be there living underground in certain communities. Criticism as a discipline is waiting for new ways and platforms. I am sure that the Likes of Facebook and Instagram do not help this.

How important do you think is it to reach out to a broader audience and make an impact on how things are approached/perceived in society?

The danger we face is that contemporary jewellery as we know it could disappear or be seen only as fashion or design accessory. Within our jewellery communities we know there is so more to it than that, and we makers and educationalists see the clear distinction between fashion and art. We need to communicate that 'specialness' to the wider community with the understanding that they do not have the history and context. We have great support here in New Zealand from the major museums and public galleries. They embrace contemporary jewellery and you will find that there are currently several important jewellery exhibitions on at national level. Our national funding agent also has great vision in funding projects that enable opportunities for our jewellery community. If great people are behind what we do, then we will survive, but without them, makers are merely restricted bench workers.

Looking at the history of art criticism, we witness the constant change of the field. From the archaic to a more admiring observer, who looks at the work and 'contextualises' it.

How do you position yourself within this archetypical spectrum?

Nowadays everybody is in the game through the Likes of Instagram and Facebook but spans the spectrum from informed to ill-informed. Critics who are able to analyze through observing and contextualizing can keep jewellery criticism safe and positive. This more informed approach gives a solid platform to their audience and avoids personal likes and dislikes. Therefore informed personal opinions should be expressed because that provides color and a stance. All this can only be done if the critic is also a good writer. Not many, if any, have that combination. Klimto2, AJF, HUM and a few other platforms allow critical discourse but do not provide sustainable financial rewards. So this automatically is destined to implode, because good writers are needed everywhere.

- **Jewellery artists and experts are sensitive people. The smallest hint of criticism puts them on edge. The critic is exposed to small minded reactions and faces isolation. It becomes a game of us and them. A critic is also not paid enough, so automatically no critic will put themselves out there. Everything is connected like an eco-system and unfortunately, if something falls over, the rest will follow. I hope I am wrong.**

As the author Peter Schjeldahl writes in his " *Of Ourselves and Our Origins*": "Critics now are good at answers. We're short of good questions." What do you think, would be a good question to ask?

The connection to self is important in the pursuit of being a creative jeweller and artist. The question we face is how can we sustain contemporary jewellery practice at the level we are at? Prices at the top level are out of reach for middle-income earners. Only the aging elite get access to great contemporary jewellery. With that, the aging gallerists slowly dwindle away with annihilating

consequences. The main question now is ‘who wants to be a gallerist for the promotion of contemporary jewellery’? Who can afford to be a jeweller, or a collector? We can live without the critics for a while, but we do need good artists, challenging exhibitions, quality outlets, a buying public and hardworking gallerists, and when these things are future proofed, critics can review them.

As you mentioned, art critics are not having exactly their best years – what do we risk by losing these writers and thinkers?

Critics are a link in the jewellery discourse chain. We will function without them for a while, but it does not give the community a connection, a voice or an overview that inspires and brings audiences to exhibitions. At the other end, jewellery artists and experts are sensitive people. The smallest hint of criticism puts them on edge. The critic is exposed to small minded reactions and faces isolation. It becomes a game of us and them. A critic is also not paid enough, so automatically no critic will put themselves out there. Everything is connected like an eco-system and unfortunately, if something falls over, the rest will follow. I hope I am wrong.

About the Interviewee

Peter Deckers, a Dutch-born New Zealander, is a multi-functional jewellery activist: i.e. educator, organiser, curator, writer, editor, jewellery maker and contemporary artist. He did his early jewellery training and art education in the Netherlands; immigrated to New Zealand in 1985 and completed a Master of Fine Arts at Elam, Auckland University, in 2003. Peter is the jewellery coordinator and a part-time art lecturer at Whitireia NZ, Wellington. Ideas that make distinctive conceptual connections with jewellery are the inspiration for his practice, which includes his making processes, and is often expressed as installation work. He founded and developed the award-winning HANDSHAKE project, an international mentor and exhibition programme for emerging New Zealand makers (2011–present). This unique project has inspired the international art careers of several emerging NZ art jewellers. To see more about his work for the Handshake project you can order his book at Arnoldsche: [Contemporary Jewellery in Context](#).

About the author



Carolin Denter completed her training as Goldsmith at *Master School for Craftsmen in Kaiserslautern* in 2013. In 2015 she made an Internship at *Klimto2*, where she is working since 2016 as Content Manager. In 2017 she graduated with Bachelor of Fine Arts in Gemstone and Jewellery at *University of Applied Science Trier, Campus Idar-Oberstein*. After her graduation, she started working part-time as Marketing and Design management Assistance at *Campus Idar-Oberstein in the Gemstone and Jewellery Department*.