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21 September 2012

ANJA EICHLER: URBANAUTS

Vander A Contemporary Art Jewellery, Brussels, Belgium

Vander A Contemporary Art Jewellery in Brussels, Belgium, owned by Françoise Vanderauwera, is doing some very interesting things to bring jewelry into the contemporary art scene there. This wonderfully quirky show by Anja Eichler currently on view at the gallery became an occasion for the gallery to plan a project based on the jewelry, which resulted in a video.

Susan Cummins: Your new show at Vander A Gallery is called *Urbanauts*. What does that word mean?

Anja Eichler: Urbanaut (pl. Urbanauts) is an invented word. Its roots come from Latin 'urbanus' = urbanized, courteous, witty and from Greek: 'nautés' = sailors. An Urbanaut cruises the cities as a sailor does the seas. I am an Urbanaut. I sail through the life of Shanghai. I navigate in a culture that is not mine, among people who are foreign to me and who do not speak my language. The pieces that I made last year in Shanghai reflect my impressions and experiences in the city. Hence, I called this series 'Urbanauts.'

I understand that you are German but now live in Shanghai. Why are you there?

Originally I lived in Berlin and I moved to Shanghai a year ago. My husband wanted to live abroad for some time after having been in Berlin for ten years. So we were looking for a place where we could both pursue our careers. That place was Shanghai. Funnily, there is also another part of that story. My husband and I were in Shanghai seven years ago and at that time I was already fascinated by the city. And I said to my husband, 'I could very well envision living here for two years.' Back then, it was just said in a rush of emotions as a tourist being fascinated by 'exotic' and foreign surroundings. But it became real.

I have already lived in foreign countries: in the United States, in Italy and for a few months in France. I am very curious about foreign cultures and environments and love to explore them. Of course, traveling is also a possibility for getting new impressions. However, I think that one is much more forced to reflect on oneself and to challenge traditional perspectives when living in another country and experiencing the daily life.



As a foreigner and a jeweler in Shanghai what are you finding of particular interest?

Shanghai is a very modern and extremely fast changing city, which fascinates me. I am intrigued to learn more about the Chinese culture and the way people are living and thinking. One big part of this is learning the language. The language and especially some of its characters are very poetic. The difference between my culture and the Chinese culture makes me reflect a lot about the way I am thinking and about my values and changes my views. All these observations certainly influence my work as a jeweler and lead to new projects.

Shanghai is China's economical hub. The people here can afford consumer goods and are very brand and luxury oriented. Contemporary jewelry does not play a big role in this context. However, as I said, things are changing extremely fast and the visual art scene in China is already very important and vast. Hence, I think that in the coming years, also the contemporary jewelry scene will develop further. With the 'twocities' art gallery, Shanghai already has a gallery showing contemporary jewelry next to modern glass, ceramics and lacquer. And in Beijing, a new gallery for contemporary jewelry will open soon.

How did you connect with Vander A Gallery?

A year ago, I graduated from Alchimia, a school for contemporary jewelry in Florence. At Alchimia great care is taken about making the students' work public. In this way Françoise Vanderauwera became aware of my series *Restrictions* and offered me a

solo exhibition. I am very grateful to her for sticking with me once I told her that I was going to move to China. She did not shy away from her invitation and instead said that she was glad for me and that my work would certainly gain new aspects through the move. We stayed in contact and a year later, the exhibition has become a reality.

Can you give us the story of how you became interested in making jewelry?

In my 'first life,' I studied business administration and economics

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and worked in this field. I had been interested in fine arts since I was a kid. However, like many others, I decided for safety reasons to go for a 'bread-and-butter' career and leave arts for my spare time. Then, during the years, with less and less time for my 'hobby,' I realized how important this part of my personality was. So finally, I decided to change my life and to go and study contemporary jewelry at Alchimia.



I chose contemporary jewelry because I see a jewel as a sculpture for the body. It means exploring the relation between the jewel, the body and the potential person wearing it, the main question being, 'What changes in the relation between a person and a sculpture when the sculpture is supposed to be worn on the body?' Even if a sculpture was shrunken to body size and would fit perfectly on the body, people would not like to wear every sculpture sitting somewhere in their room. What is it that triggers people to want to wear something or not? Finally, what also fascinates me about jewelry is technical issues, like how to make a good brooch or how to find the perfect closure for a necklace. So taken all together, the challenging issues, unsolved questions and the love of creation is what attracts me to making jewelry.

You are using work gloves to make your jewelry and they are sometimes very mysterious, sometimes very familiar but kind of funny. What inspired you to work with gloves?

So far, my jewelry work has been a lot about 'everyday-objects' – noodles, sepia bone and finally the glove. It fascinates me that there is a lot to discover in these seemingly well known objects. All that is needed is time and something that I call a 'loving eye.' Prepared like this, one spots interesting surfaces, colors, shapes and much more. It intrigues me to set these objects, to which we have an already plugged in relationship, into a new context with us and our bodies.

One day walking through a hardware store, I spotted various kinds of work gloves. First, I was attracted by the color (back then, it was a different kind of glove than I currently use) and I could not get it out of my mind. Later on, the fascination became so big that I started to look at all kinds of gloves and finally I truly fell in love with one. On the outside, it is grey and wrinkly, which reminds me of the surface of a coral or elephant skin. The inside, however, is white, woolen and soft.

I first explored this glove in my series *Restrictions*. At that time, I restricted myself to only use the glove's 'natural' grey and white. In Shanghai, however, I started to experiment with coloring the glove as a response to my fascination with the city's colors, especially at night when many buildings are illuminated and brightly lit kites roar into the sky.

You are also working with a choreographer and dancer, an electro-acoustic musician and a visual artist. What are you producing? And how does your jewelry work within the context of your shared vision?



Françoise from Vander A gallery had the wonderful idea to involve several artists in the exhibition. She brought us together and organized everything. She commissioned a visual artist, Laura Colmenares Guerra, to produce a video where a contemporary choreographer and dancer, Lise Vachon, wears my jewelry and dances based on the theme of the *Urbanauts* as expressed in the artist statement. For one and a half days, Françoise, Laura, Lise, several camera people and I worked at three different locations in Brussels to provide the base material to the video 'Oracular' that was later created by Laura. The composer, Todor Todoroff, added the music. On top of that, Françoise commissioned Lise to dance twice on the vernissage, wearing my jewelry. Again, Lise's dance, accompanied by the music of Todor was based on the *Urbanauts* theme. I strongly support the idea of connecting jewelry to the contemporary art scene and to emphasize that contemporary jewelry can be one artistic expression among several.



I thank Françoise very much for her investment into this exhibition and into world of contemporary jewelry in general.





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