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# Manon van Kouswijk and Fabrizio Tridenti

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Contributing writers: Benjamin Lignel  
and Meredith Turnbull



# Introduction

# Manon van Kouswijk and Fabrizio Tridenti

Philip Clarke  
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February 2012

Manon van Kouswijk (Netherlands/Australia), Fabrizio Tridenti (Italy) and Ted Noten (Netherlands) are leading practitioners of contemporary jewellery with highly distinctive practices. The possibility of these makers, who currently reside in three different countries, exhibiting at Objectspace together, arises because they are in New Zealand as keynote speakers at the February 2012 international contemporary jewellery symposium **JEMposium**.

For their installations at Objectspace, *Anything* (Tridenti) and *Perles d' Artistes* (van Kouswijk) the artists have, while conferring with each other, individually responded to the gallery space. It is truly exciting for Objectspace to present work by makers of the stature of Fabrizio Tridenti and Manon van Kouswijk. Objectspace has engaged two international writers, based in different hemispheres from their subjects, to write about these jewellers. Benjamin Lignel (France) has written about the practice of Manon van Kouswijk and Meredith Turnbull (Australia) has written specifically about Fabrizio Tridenti's installation for Objectspace, *Anything*. Since its establishment Objectspace has made a substantial commitment to a publications programme. Nowadays most Objectspace publications are published online however our commitment to stimulating local discourse remains. Again it is very exciting for us to have the opportunity to work with Benjamin Lignel and Meredith Turnbull: their writing is an important contribution to New Zealand jewellery discourse. Our thanks go to the artists and writers of *Manon van Kouswijk and Fabrizio Tridenti*. This project at Objectspace would not have taken place without **JEMposium** and we extend our thanks to the organisers especially Peter Deckers. Objectspace would not be able to present and publish in the fields of craft and design without the major support of Creative New Zealand the support of the ASB Community Trust, Auckland Council, Pasquale Viticultura and the Objectspace Donors.



# Manon van Kouswijk

## The singular and the generic: portrait of the artist as a maker

by Benjamin Lignel

The cute idea that contemporary practice should come up with bold, iconic statements will have some people complain about Manon van Kouswijk's work: it is subtle, self-similar, and slow going. On the upside – if one wants to stick to artistic clichés – it certainly is obsessive. She has apparently spent the last ten years working solely on the bead necklace, and amassing evidence that it is one of the elementary forms found in nature and culture.



The result of her research – presented in *Hanging Around/the Pearl Chain Principle*, her first monograph – does not meet the eye as much as the mind: both a statement of practice, and the incorporation of that practice in a proliferating inventory of strung round forms, this art book professes an annoying disregard for the conventions of artistic self-promotion. Instead, it spells out, in 132 pages and 168 pictures, van Kouswijk's ongoing conversation with beads, and her love affair with craft at its most repetitive.

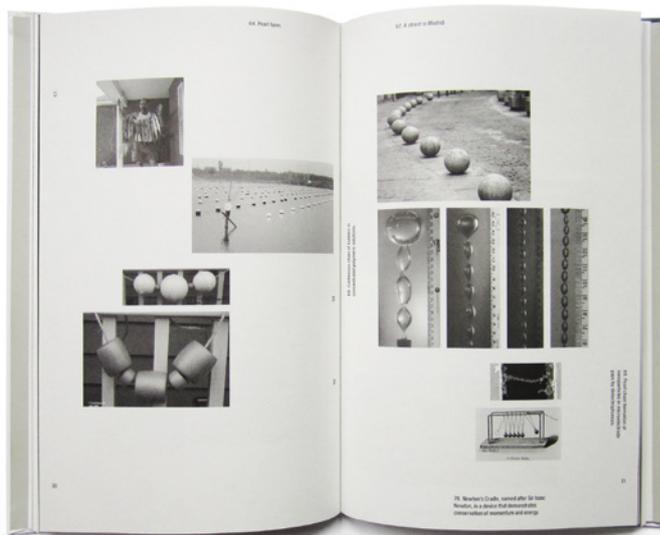
The book, more than the individual pieces, is the subject of this essay. Not only because it provides the most comprehensive overview of van Kouswijk's work to date: I also found the complex position it stakes with regard to representation of practice – its unusual combination of iconographic documentation and photographic re-interpretation – impossible to ignore.

*Hanging Around/the Pearl Chain Principle*, 2010 (Cover)  
 Concept and realisation:  
 Manon van Kouswijk  
 Photography: Uta Eisenreich  
 Design: Niessen & de Vries  
 Edition of 500

### repertoire

This publication consists in two books interwoven together: a visual essay in black and white, titled the *Pearl Chain Principle*, with a text by Marjan Unger; and a section called *Hanging Around*, with 31 colour reproductions of necklaces made between 1995 and 2009, and an essay penned by Pravu Mazumdar. The two-part visual offerings make clear that the bead is both a means of expression, and the subject of van Kouswijk's practice. This reflexive relationship to the medium is symptomatic of contemporary jewellery, but is pushed here to an extreme. The work may thus appear extravagantly single-minded and, despite her varied technical and material registers, facile: we are, after all, being shown 50 takes on exactly the same necklace format. Since her visual strategy parades repetition, let us guess

*the Pearl Chain Principle*,  
2010 pages 30-31



*Re : construction*, 2009  
*In Hanging Around*, 2010  
Unpaginated  
Photography: Uta Eisenreich

that the artist knows –and wants us to know– this.

The documentary section –a vast archives of found and collected images of beads, strings, and their ubiquitous occurrence– follows in the footsteps of Aby Warburg, and his study of iconographic types through the trans-historical association of photographs. The images are plucked out of the context that lends them meaning, and re-arranged to create a typological echo chamber.

The photographs of the work, by Uta Eisenreich, follow a mock ethnographic approach: stripping bare known display situations (the jewellery shop, the museum catalogue, the archaeological documentation), Eisenreich favours typological and quantitative concerns over dramatic effect. The pieces are shot in three ways: on variously lined, graduated, woven or blank surfaces (occasionally featuring measuring tools); against depthless, shaded backdrops; on duotone backdrops that provide an ascetic, short-hand version of high-street window displays. The effect in all three cases is brutally barren and suspends the pieces in an artificial

no-man's-land: are we supposed to read these objects as new evidence of the old phenomenon documented everywhere else in the book?

The juxtaposition of bead *references* and bead *work* does several things at the same time: it reinforces the power of

*type* over its isolated incarnation (whether by the artist's hand or not). It claims a long history of forms as the context for her work, thus running the risk of relegating its artistic significance to the footnote of human history. But it also pits the very clear object-ness of her necklaces – their existence as finite products – against the fragility of anecdotal evidence: pin-hole views of science and holiday *curiosa* that do not quite manage to swamp van Kouswijk's work under the weight of their repetition. The black and white images may set the stage for her variations, but she is the one doing the interpretation.



*Paper Pearls*, 2000  
Archive stickers, thread  
Photography: Uta Eisenreich

#### exercises in style

Cast beads, cut beads, drilled beads; glued, stitched and re-strung beads: the captions in the book allude to a systematic exploration of bead-making, to a continuous to and fro between *this* timeless archetype, and *that* version of it. In effect, it is impossible (and uninteresting) to insulate van Kouswijk's neckpieces from either the shadow of the archetype, or the operations that give it a twist. Each version has its own bead-making protocol and its tease is in the way the resulting assemblage both matches and belies the archetype. You will enjoy, as I have, to recognize that old thing repeatedly skinned and then revived in the hi and lo of her postmodern appropriations (one of my favourites is the oxymoronic *Paper Pearls* (2000), whose 'beads' are coloured stickers stuck on a thread. Its title does not begin to exhaust the pleasure of seeing Mum's string of pearls shed a dimension, and take flight.)

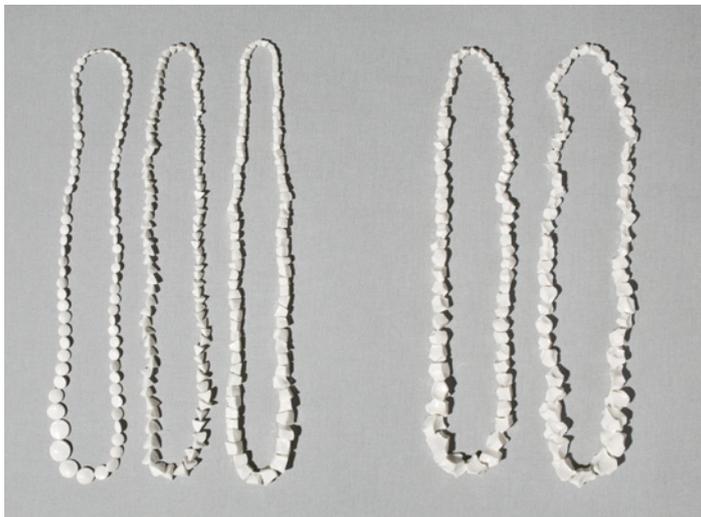
#### absence

One of the most remarkable things about *Hanging Around* is what is absent from it. There is no introduction, almost no biographical springboard from which the

[1]. this argument owes a great debt to French sociologist Nathalie Heinich, and her analysis of the conflicting agendas that oppose the artist (who deals in the singular) to the sociologist (who tries to reduce art to universal propositions). See *Ce que l'art fait à la Sociologie*, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1998: Paris

modern reviewer might happily jump to silly conclusions, no direct reference to Manon van Kouswijk as a maker. This absence is a theme that runs through the book: it makes room for her associative visual approach and allows us to navigate between the *found* and the *produced* without the burden of authorship.

But what kind of authorship does the book illustrate? Indeed, the bead-making project is affiliated to two very different types of gestures: one that is repetitive, stationary, and predictable, and another that progresses through experimental iteration, shortcuts and ruses. The former gesture is mimetic: it appeals to the universal (as van Kouswijk does, by imitating a generic form that exists everywhere and belongs to everyone). The latter gesture is craft's answer to the modern definition of the artist: disruptive and singular, it seeks to challenge the convention of the medium (as van Kouswijk does, by using an extended technical repertoire, and making the self-conscious absence of style her recognizable signature).<sup>[1]</sup>



*Perles d'Artiste*, 2009  
Modeling Porcelain,  
glaze, thread  
Photography: Uta Eisenreich

### performance

The dénouement of the book comes with *Perles d'Artistes*, a series of “necklaces made on the basis of a strict method; the beads of no.1 are made with two fingertips, no.2 with four fingertips, no.3 with six, no.4 with eight and no.5 with ten.” First exhibited in 2009, the objects offer up to

scrutiny little else than just that: a series of white (and then coloured) strung beads sporting a growing number of facets, arranged on the page (and in the gallery) as one would geometric models, from the simplest (a large lentil) to the more complex (an irregular decahedron).

More than any other works in the book, they flaunt the systematic, the serial, in the face of whatever notion of artistic spontaneity we hold dear. Each necklace implies a 'how to' that frames the way it looks, and spells out its position in a series. Not only do we know exactly what to expect, but the gesture of making a bead is already a classification, a standard of measure: *that* bead is *this* gesture.

There are several things at play in this redundant operation. To begin with, it shifts our attention away from the object as commodity, onto the performative act of making. Second of all, it slips a mirror between history and the maker. Gone the pretence of paying homage to the archetype: this is about listing the tools of one's trade and drawing, one set of fingers at a time, a negative portrait of the maker's hand. The result is a conflicted statement of authorship. At once ironic (any child could have done this) and nostalgic (this is, after all, the ultimate hand-made piece, all fingerprints and signatures), it means to plot, on either side of the same coin, the particular position of craft in the fine arts: singular *and* generic, authorial *and* derivative, spectacular *and* predictable.

### epilogue

It takes a while to get a sense of van Kouswijk's practice: the multiplication of visual reference, mentioned at the beginning of this text, does a good job of hiding the complexity of her interpretations behind a veil of evidence. Nor does she let us get away with a clear definition of her practice. Too many mirrors bookend her library of forms: her research pegs her as a detective, an imitator, a commentator, and an historian – all roles with a different relationship to reality. But caught in the glare of these various disguises, like a fisherwoman in her own net, you will find the author, whose invention is the purpose of the book.

# Fabrizio Tridenti

# Anything into Eternity – Fabrizio Tridenti

by Meredith Turnbull

[1]. Michael Madsen, *Into Eternity*  
Mouka Filmi, Finland and ATMO and  
Film i Väst, Sweden, 2009

‘I would say that you are now on a place where we have buried something from you, to protect you and we have taken great pain to be sure that you are protected. We also need you to know that this place should not be disturbed and we want you to know that this is not a place for you to live in. You should stay away from this place and then you will be safe.’<sup>[1]</sup>

These are the opening words of Michael Madsen’s 2009 documentary *Into Eternity*. The film follows the construction of Onkalo, Finland’s first permanent underground repository for nuclear waste. The aim of the facility is to provide stable and secure storage, capable of lasting 100,000 years, for waste produced through the process of creating and using nuclear power. The film is part documentary and part message from Madsen to the future inhabitants of the earth. It explores some of the issues central to storing nuclear waste. Including, the use of interim facilities that are vulnerable to natural disaster, and how to warn a future culture that may not share our languages or technologies, of a danger buried 500 metres down into the earth.

The words are one response among a series of interviews with employees of Onkalo and the Radiation and Nuclear Safety Authority of Finland. This warning comes in answer to a question posed by Madsen; what message would they give to a distant future in the face of Onkalo’s discovery?

If markers in the form of monoliths, treasuries or archives were constructed to warn of Onkalo’s existence and purpose, the film discusses what images or signs could be used. What languages could be employed when there is no guarantee a future culture would share or understand them? In addition to these questions is the belief, held by some of the film’s protagonists that we should leave no trace or sign of Onkalo, its purpose and location; that we should simply remember to forget.

Onkalo itself and Madsen’s film carry within them a complex sense of time, conflating both real and imagined, pasts, presents and futures. A present of a world consumed by the need to source and produce energy. The imagined future: who if anyone or anything, will inherit the earth? And the past: what we have done on this planet and what horrors or treasures other cultures have left behind to be pillaged or discovered?

[2]. Fabrizio Tridenti in conversation with Jewellery Design Professor Alba Cappellieri published in her text 'Naturales Quaestiones' in *Hard Wear Beauty*, Darling Publications, 2009, p. 26



Fabrizio Tridenti, *Pendant*, eco-rubber, 2011 (130h x 111w x 8d, length 520mm)

Artists and those who participate in cultural production are often thought of as agents of time. Each work created by them forms a capsule, telling the viewer a little of its present, its time of production, its past, its inherited cultures, and possible, future imaginings. This is also how I came to approach Fabrizio Tridenti's micro-sculpture and jewellery. That by coincidence I saw *Into Eternity* one evening during a period of sharing emails with the artist and researching his practice, and was struck how each in their own way, Onkalo, Madsen's film and Tridenti's creations were a type of time capsule waiting to be discovered. To be viewed, worn, worshiped, damaged or possibly destroyed.

In his work, Tridenti himself has often reflected on the misused, remnants and remains, such as 'dumps, abandoned building sites, demolished quarters, industrial waste, run-down warehouses full of contorted and rusty wrecks, bituminous or concrete colour surfaces, and decomposed plastic.'<sup>[2]</sup> He has observed some of the problems of culture, the negative aspects of the decay of society and a broader concern with ideas of dystopia including social and environmental catastrophe. His work also reflects on the impossible object, an optical illusion within geometry and the conceptual transmutation of this idea into the realm of artworks. What has emerged from Tridenti's observations and experiments is a particular philosophical approach to making jewellery and objects. A sort of oppositional methodology – that comprises a conceptual approach to making that draws on ideas such as assemblage, disintegration,

construction and imperfection. This is combined with a formal aesthetic language that renders opaque each object and series' distinct narrative: keeping the purpose of the object partially hidden or dormant until it is activated by display, use and wear. Through notions of opposition we encounter moments of contrast, variation, harmony and disharmony. This oppositional approach is also apparent in Tridenti's reluctance to prescribe the use of his wearables and micro-sculptures preferring instead to leave some of these questions, such as which of his works function as *jewellery* and which as *sculpture*, to the decisions of the viewer, wearer and collector.

[3]. Graziella Folchini Grassetto, *Fabrizio Tridenti's Materials*, www.klimt02.net, 2010

[4]. 'The Interview', Rafael von Uslar in conversation with Fabrizio Tridenti, trans. Dr Giorgio Tomasi, *Hard Wear Beauty*, Darling Publications, 2009, p. 91

[5]. <http://www.klimt02.net/jewellers/fabrizio-tridentit>, 2011



Fabrizio Tridenti, *Necklace*, pressure tank membrane, 2011 (245h x 200w x 180d, length 830mm)

Italian gallerist and jewellery historian Graziella Folchini Grassetto has described Tridenti's approach as a convergence of a 'constructive project and the chaos of matter'.<sup>[3]</sup> Berlin based art-historian Rafael von Uslar has observed the complex narratives at play within Tridenti's works. He described an untitled oxidized silver ring from 2006 as disparately resembling 'a piece of late Fifties European sculpture, as well as the ruins of some pre-historic South American architecture, or a sci-fi model of a wrecked space ship'.<sup>[4]</sup> Herein lies the nuance and active force of the impossible object and the artwork as time capsule. Parallels have been drawn between the formal conventions and construction of Tridenti's geometric abstract works, and

English abstract artist Anthony Caro's large-scale sculptures. Tridenti's use and manipulation of metal and other materials has also been compared to effects produced in American Pop artist Robert Rauschenburg's assemblages. Accumulated, Tridenti's artworks create a colony of simultaneously geometric and organic abstraction, and a temper between the willful assemblage of found objects and the systematic fabrication and construction of production materials. The active potential of Tridenti's micro-sculptures and jewellery lies in the chameleon nature of each piece, the artwork's in-between state and ability to be and show us many things at once. While these narratives are both implicit and explicit within individual objects the artist also leaves markers for the viewer and wearer, through piece and project titles such as *Misuse*, *Hard Wear Beauty*, *Under a Volcano*, *Talisman* and *Flowers of Mars*. In a

recent artist statement Tridenti observed 'Jewels cannot be confined within the limits of their function. Through liberating Jewels from these limits, infinite experimentation fields are opened'.<sup>[5]</sup> Through this process of emancipation, Tridenti aims to establish intangibility as a central function of objects and jewellery that have a *priori*, existed solely in the realm of the tangible.

Two of Tridenti's recent projects, *Misuse*, for Louise Smit Gallery in Amsterdam, (2012) and *Anything*, for Object-space, Auckland, (2012) continue his exploration of oppositional methodologies, cultural maladies and complex



Fabrizio Tridenti, *Necklace*,  
 auto parts, exhaust rubber hanger  
 + one unknown element, 2011,  
 (dimensions variable, length 550mm).  
 All images courtesy the artist

narratives. For *Anything* Tridenti has focused on the translation of objects and materials from one realm of production into another, specifically of materials from technical, mechanical and industrial contexts into fine art wearables and sculpture. Drawing from components more regularly found on the assembly line or in the hardware store, Tridenti creates ready mades and assemblages. The sense of decay evident in past series' is in part replaced in this new generation of objects with a playful process of sustainable appropriation. Tubular gaskets, exhaust rubber, gas pipe, wheels, pulleys, auto-parts and similar industrial materials are rehabilitated into necklaces, pendants, bracelets and rings. Each function as past, present and future objects. They belong to the industrial and mechanical worlds from which that are sourced. To the present world where they will be observed, handled and worn and to future worlds where, given time, others will wonder at their purpose and bring new readings to their forms and function. Perhaps, at some distant future point, when the dark grey gloss of a pressure tank membrane on a necklace has become faded and scratched its initial use will no longer be remembered. Instead it will become a vessel for carrying water or sacred objects. Or a flat section of variegated ecorubber, will no longer be a minimal pendant but a talisman indicating the wearer holds some arcane knowledge or secret from the past.

Meredith Turnbull is a Melbourne based artist, curator and writer and most recently a teaching associate in Theory of Art and Design at Monash University and Art History and Theory at RMIT. Meredith is a current PhD candidate in Fine Art at Monash University in the Faculty of Art and Design.  
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