

Reconfiguring artistic paradigms in contemporary jewellery: sustainable practices, upcycling and eco-ethical discourses

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Abstract: In the current ecological and socio-cultural context, artistic practices have become dependent on sustainable behaviours. The transition from the use of conventional materials to media with a neutral environmental footprint represents a new direction that we find in full development. Moreover, 21st-century jewellery, perceived from a perspective closer to that of the arts than to the term “functional object” for mass or luxury consumption, is the focus of a case study that seeks to identify ecological solutions in artistic endeavours, particularly in the field of contemporary jewellery. If popular materials are replaced by alternative media whose original function is changed through methods such as recycling or upcycling, does the artistic result lose its value or acquire a new set of values and a different meaning? At the same time, we may ask ourselves, what are the possible results of using unconventional materials and integrating eco-ethical behaviours into art? Artists concerned with this issue represent a starting point for this analysis, which focuses both on identifying ethical behaviours in artistic practice and on the aesthetic changes that contemporary jewellery is undergoing in this context.

Keywords: sustainability, contemporary jewellery, ecological art, *upcycling*, alternative materials.

Introduction

This article explores a series of sustainable behaviours in the art of jewellery. We have identified the 20th century as the zero moment of the transformation of jewellery from a luxury accessory to an autonomous art object. This moment occurs at the beginning of the century, within the Art Nouveau movement, when atypical materials are introduced in comparison to the jewellery of previous centuries. It is only in modernism that we can truly speak of a paradigm shift, as artists gradually managed to break away from the functional character of jewellery. The postmodernist period consolidated this area of interest.

Considering the theme of sustainability, it is important to establish its relationship with art and identify the manifestations of such behaviour. Later, we will find out how contemporary jewellery adapts to the theme of ecology by referring to the creative universe of artist Shinji Nakaba. He provides a context

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in which sustainable processes such as *upcycling* or *recycling* steer the sterile and precious space of jewellery in a new direction. Consequently, this research aims to provoke a series of reactions and questions regarding the effects that sustainability has on the art world, particularly in the field of jewellery.

Context

In order to understand the integration of sustainability into artistic jewellery, we must analyse its transformation into art¹. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Art Nouveau movement proposed a break with the Victorian style, introducing an abundance of anthropomorphic forms and unconventional materials such as glass and enamel.² This moment marks a re-evaluation of materiality in jewellery, a subtle transition from its decorative function to situations where pieces become artistic products. This trend continued in the interwar and post-war periods, when many European artists emigrated to the United States to leave behind the brutality of war. In this context, the *mélange* of artistic movements in New York had a profound impact on the evolution of jewellery. In 1946, the MoMA exhibition “Modern Handmade Jewellery” introduced the concept of *wearable art*, promoting jewellery as an artistic object in its own right. The concept proposed a departure from mass production, targeting decorative objects in particular³. The exhibition was only the first of many such events presenting an alternative image of jewellery. Avant-garde movements such as surrealism, cubism and abstract expressionism had a significant influence on artistic jewellery, as can be seen in the creations of artists such as Alexander Calder, Méret Oppenheim, Salvador Dalí and Man Ray⁴. Alexander Calder introduced a sculptural approach to jewellery, with an emphasis on innovative forms⁵. Although not specifically an example of jewellery, his work entitled “Silver Bedhead” (Fig. 1) is an object that straddles the boundary between sculpture and adornment. The object stands out for its almost two-dimensional structure, but also for its materiality, being made entirely of silver. In this sense, the distinction between sculpture and adornment is blurred, as the piece can be mistaken for an oversized piece of jewellery. Calder manages to question the status of the object, proposing a solution in which sculpture and jewellery intertwine. In a sense, his work approaches the

¹ Charlotte Gere, Judy Rudoie (2010). *Jewellery in the Age of Queen Victoria: A Mirror to the World*, British Museum Press, London.

² *Ibidem*.

³ Ralph Turner (1996). *Jewellery in Europe and America: New Times, New Thinking*, Thames & Hudson, London.

⁴ Marbeth Schon (2004). *Modernist Jewellery 1930-1960: The Wearable Art Movement*, Schiffer Publishing, Pennsylvania.

⁵ Alba Cappellieri (2010). *Twentieth-Century Jewellery: From Art Nouveau to Contemporary Design in Europe and the United States*, Skira, Milan.

aforementioned concept of *wearable art*, but the size of the piece makes it impossible to use it as adornment.

Margaret De Patta, on the other hand, explored sculpturality (fig. 2) while also introducing an unconventional solution for late modernist jewellery. She uses beach stones to create structures visibly influenced by movements such as Bauhaus or Constructivism⁶. The combination of accessible materials and precious metals in the artist's creations sets a precedent for what sustainable practices in jewellery would later come to mean.



Fig. 1 Alexander Calder, *Silver Bedhead* (1943) made for Peggy Guggenheim, Photograph © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. Photo Archivio Cameraphotoeopoche.



Fig. 2 Margaret De Patta, sterling silver, gold and pebble brooch (1950), artnet.com

The choice of materials is closely linked to the social context in which artists practise. While for Art Nouveau jewellery, the introduction of materials atypical of early 20th-century trends was a reaction to the industrialisation of jewellery production, modernism marks a subtle return to the intimacy of studio

⁶ Cathleen McCarthy (2013). *Women Who Paved the Way: Margaret De Patta*, The Jewelry Loupe| A Celebration of Human Ornament, 18 June, <https://thejewelryloupe.com/margaret-de-patta-space-light-wearable-sculpture/>

practices through movements such as *studio jewellery*. Curator Kelly L'Ecuyer defines the movement as follows: “Studio jewellers are independent artists who handle their chosen materials directly to make one-of-a-kind or limited-production jewellery... The studio jeweller is both the designer and fabricator of each piece (although assistants or apprentices may help with technical tasks), and the work is created in a small, private studio, not a factory.”⁷

We thus understand that *studio jewellery* is a kind of artistic resistance to the creative standards imposed by mass production practices. In this sense, we can observe a return to unique jewellery, in which the choice of materials and techniques is itself a tool for artistic exploration.

Sustainability and ecological art

Postmodernism consolidates a new perspective in art. Practices, techniques, or materials are chosen so that their impact on the environment is at least neutral. Sustainability appears in art as a response to major issues, such as the global climate crisis. Faced with vulnerable social situations, such as global warming, artists use ecological solutions, thus charting a new direction for the cultural space. Ecological art, for example, is an artistic expression that addresses environmental issues through creative and sustainable solutions. The late 1960s marked the beginning of ecological art, characterised by the relationship between cultural diversity and biodiversity, as defined by artists Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, pioneers of this movement: “We believe that in a well-functioning system, cultural diversity and biodiversity exist in a state of mutual interaction – the former self-conscious and able to intend and transform, and the latter the pattern of self-organisation from which we all spring and to which we all return, and which ultimately determines the possible.”⁸

According to the two artists, it is human beings who can influence the environment in which they live through their relationship with biodiversity. The relationship that forms between the two subjects creates a complex system. They suggest that this co-dependency is based on a pattern that we are all part of and to which we inevitably return. From the perspective they propose, there is a departure from the idea of nature as a passive element and a reorientation towards nature as an active partner in the organisation of human life.

The context of eco-art proposes an alternative space in which environmental crises are addressed on a collective basis. The movement gained momentum when artists such as Bonnie Ora Sherk, Helen and Newton Harrison, Patricia Johanson, Alan Sonfist, Joseph Beuys, Nancy Holt, Mierle Ukeles and

⁷ Kelly H. L'Ecuyer *et al.* (2010). *Jewellery by Artists: In the Studio, 1940-2000*, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston.

⁸ Sacha Kagan (2014). *Art and Sustainability: Connecting Patterns for a Culture of Complexity*, Verlag, Berlin.

Agnes Denes clearly outlined the importance of ecology in the contemporary art landscape.

Moreover, in ecological art practice, the material becomes a channel for communicating environmental concerns and, in some cases, can be an ecological action in itself. In her article “Ecological Art: A Call for Visionary Intervention in a Time of Crisis,” artist Ruth Wallen analyses the concept of sustainability in art. As in the statements of the artists mentioned above, she observes the connection between human beings and the environment, arguing that: “The concept of sustainability potentially offers a robust perspective. It takes the crucial step of placing humans within ecosystems, instead of conceiving of 'natural environments' as outside of human domains and therefore not intrinsically of human concern.”⁹

For Ruth Wallen, ecosystems are not entities independent of humans, but systems in which human actions and decisions have a direct impact on ecological balances. Thus, it is essential to understand that ecological approaches in art are not limited to providing a visual response to climate issues by aestheticizing them, but are active commitments to recontextualising the relationship between human beings and the environment.

Sustainability in art is not based solely on the use of ecological materials or sustainable techniques, but also on a paradigm shift in which nature and culture are seen as two interconnected components. In this context, art becomes a form of creative intervention in the ecosystem, with the role of stimulating collective awareness of the impact of human activities on the environment and proposing alternative solutions.

Case study: Sustainable implications in the jewellery of artist Shinji Nakaba

Shinji Nakaba is a Japanese artist known for using unconventional materials in the artistic jewellery he creates. His work in the field of jewellery began in 1974, having already gained experience in related creative fields¹⁰.

His creations stand out for one aspect, which is also essential to this research, namely the use and seamless integration of sustainable solutions such as *recycling* and *upcycling*. From the description provided on his website, it appears that his sculptures are polarizations of materials, in which the preciousness of gold, stones and pearls is contrasted with the of ordinary materials such as aluminium, plastic, waste, but also organic elements. His visual language challenges the hierarchy of materials in jewellery. In this regard, the artist states: “I’m dealing [with] all the materials equally no matter how precious

⁹ Ruth Wallen (2012). *Ecological Art: A Call for Visionary Intervention in a Time of Crisis*, “Leonardo” 45, no. 3, pp. 234–42, https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_a_00365.

¹⁰ SHINJI NAKABA in “SHINJI NAKABA”, accessed 9 March 2025, <http://work.s-nakaba.com>

or not precious they are. Bring out their hidden talents and beauty, then being re-born as unknown treasures”¹¹.

His artistic approach defies aesthetic conventions, as well as the status of materiality and functionality in jewellery. Nakaba creates objects that lie at the intersection of art and ecology, redefining contemporary jewellery¹².

Shinji approaches his creative work with sensitivity. In an interview with French Jewellery Post, he talks about the source of the materials used in his creations. During his walks in the forest near his studio, he collects dry leaves and twigs, which he then places next to plastic and industrial metal objects. Initially contrasting, these materials are meticulously processed and framed in structures made of gold, silver or other metals, so as to form a harmonious whole¹³.

He creates aluminium ornaments whose grace gives this industrial material the status of a precious metal. It had the same status for a short period of time when the process of extracting it from aluminium oxide was still difficult to achieve, its value being close to that of silver. It was only at the end of the 19th century that it became accessible and, therefore, used in the production of tableware, in medicine, *design* and art¹⁴.



Fig. 3 Shinji Nakaba, *Chrysanthemum* brooch in aluminium cans, gold and steel, series of 6 (2023), www.reeditionmagazine.com

¹¹ SHINJI NAKABA, “SHINJI NAKABA”, accessed 9 March 2025, <http://work.s-nakaba.com>

¹² Sandrine Merle (2024). In Japan, *in the Workshop of Shinji Nakaba - The French Jewelry Post*, “The French Jewelry Post”, 22 April 2024, <https://www.thefrenchjewelrypost.com/en/style/shinji-nakaba-japan-jewelry-designer-workshop/>

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ Sarah C. Nichols *et al.* (2000). *Aluminium by Design*, Abradale Press, New York.



Fig. 4 Shinji Nakaba, cameo, pearl,
lizard leg toy, Ring
© Shinji Nakaba



Fig. 5 Shinji Nakaba, steel, cubic zirconia
(2011)
© Shinji Nakaba

In Shinji Nakaba's practice, aluminium is recycled from beverage cans and carefully cut and joined to create massive necklaces and brooches in floral shapes. For example, his chrysanthemum-shaped brooches (fig. 3), meticulously constructed petal by petal, demonstrate remarkable technical skill and, at the same time, reflect his ability to transform everyday objects into works of art.

In addition to aluminium, Nakaba juxtaposes hard industrial materials with elements found in nature or *ready-made* objects. The “Ikebana” series of rings (fig. 4, fig. 5), for example, is based on the Japanese art of flower arranging. The stainless-steel structure of the rings serves as a support for flowers, leaves or *upcycled* objects¹⁵. His works raise fundamental questions about aesthetic value and functionality in contemporary jewellery.

Another significant direction in his practice is plastic recycling (fig. 6). Various plastic objects, kitchen utensils, pipes or containers are transformed into jewellery pieces¹⁶. His technical skill confirms that any material can become an artistic expression in this field. For Nakaba, recycling materials is a natural practice, organically integrated into his artistic process.

In his essay on plastic in *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes analyses the symbolism of this material and its paradoxical nature:

“So, more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation; And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature. Plastic remains impregnated

¹⁵ SHINJI NAKABA in “SHINJI NAKABA”, accessed 9 March 2025, <http://work.s-nakaba.com>

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

throughout with this wonder: it is less a thing than the trace of a movement. And as the movement here is almost infinite, transforming the crystals into a multitude of more and more startling objects, plastic is, all told, a spectacle to be deciphered: the very spectacle of its end-products. At the sight of each terminal form (suitcase, brush, car-body, toy, fabric, tube, basin or paper), the mind does not cease from considering the original matter as an enigma. This is because the quick-change artistry of plastic is absolute: it can become buckets as well as jewels. Hence a perpetual amazement, the reverie of man at the sight of the proliferating forms of matter, and the connections he detects between the singular of the origin and the plural of the effects.”¹⁷

Roland Barthes' observation about plastic – a material that is not defined by its essence, but by its infinite capacity to transform – provides a theoretical framework for interpreting Shinji Nakaba's work. Similar to Barthes' vision of plastic, the materials used by Nakaba in his jewellery undergo a similar process, a metamorphosis of objects considered banal or worthless. If, as the philosopher states, plastic is “not so much a thing as the trace of a movement”¹⁸, then Nakaba's jewellery can be understood as expressions of the same dynamic.

Furthermore, Barthes emphasises that plastic, through its versatility, is a “spectacle to be deciphered”¹⁹.



Fig. 6 Shinji Nakaba, Ring (2010) PVC pipe, amethyst
© Peter Jacobs, artjewelryforum.org



Fig. 7 Shinji Nakaba, We Are So Precious, carved IKEA salad server, forged steel
© Peter Jacobs, artjewelryforum.org

This aspect is also found in Nakaba's creations, which challenge the viewer to re-evaluate the status of materials and discover their aesthetic qualities where they are not obvious. Like plastic, which Barthes says can be transformed into a

¹⁷ Roland Barthes (1991). *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, The Noonday Press, New York.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

bucket or a piece of jewellery, the materials processed by Nakaba transcend their usual status. Therefore, Shinji Nakaba's work confirms Roland Barthes' observation that material is not a fixed given, but an element in constant transformation.

Conclusion

Finally, we understand that artistic jewellery is a phenomenon in continuous development, deeply influenced by social, cultural and ecological changes. The precedent set by avant-garde movements for sustainability has led to the popularisation of the concept and, implicitly, to the finding of creative solutions. In the work of artist Shinji Nakaba, the integration of recycled materials and sustainable processes represents a reconfiguration of aesthetic values in jewellery. The analogy with Roland Barthes' analysis of plastic is relevant to understanding the dynamics of perception of materiality. In this sense, jewellery not only adopts sustainable practices, but also frames a new perspective on the aesthetic value of materials.

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