

text from personal catalogue by christoph zellweger published in 1999

### **a jewel once you say so**

a conversation between Christoph Zellweger and Manuel Castro Caldas  
lisbon, Portugal 1999

Manuel Castro Caldas - Looking at your work in retrospect, the first idea that comes to mind is that you belong to a specific family of contemporary jewellers, whose authors position themselves very bluntly within the tradition of jewellery as a craft, while questioning certain of its basic principles and premises: value and worth, function and aesthetics, what is jewellery, what it once was, what can it be tomorrow.... Do you feel that you're part of this family?

Christoph Zellweger - Definitely...!

mcc - What about tradition? You make works of jewellery and I am thinking, for example, of the critical posture that led some painters to not make paintings...

cz - You can not make a painting without reference to painting, not jewellery either without reference to jewellery and relating the jewellery itself to the body. But you can reject, be critical with one's own tradition. It's just that at certain times, rejection is an option. Radical rejection of what came before is a creative option.

mcc - Do you feel this is still possible now?

cz - Things have changed. Twenty years ago there was a discussion going on among some contemporary jewellery artists in Holland and Germany about whether gold should even be used anymore, because gold was in the midst of a political crossfire in conjunction with the South African system of apartheid. Naturally that was a question of ethics, etc., but it also had to do with jewellery itself and it had a lasting effect on our self-understanding and the way we continue to use non-precious materials now. Today we are moved by very different topics, although, again, this involves ethics and political postulates. Currently, more jewellery makers are thinking about the body, which is being altered and manipulated more and more for medical and aesthetic reasons.

mcc - Some of your recent work addresses that question. You use expanded polystyrene as a material for jewellery, you form body parts or you chrome-plate bone-shaped pieces made of gold. In all of your work, I see this recurring

idea of hidden materials, things that are not exactly what they seem to be at first glance.

cz - Now since CNN and Dolly, it really is not so easy to say anymore what is what, what is real. Manipulation is all around us. It has become a serious question, whether you should spend a huge amount of money on gold jewellery with lots of diamonds, or whether you should have your nose straightened or fat suctioned out or have your hip joints renovated for preventive reasons... I think people accept that now that the body does not have to stay as it is and are willing to also invest in improving their bodies, in cultivating their appearance, the way they used to do especially through the medium of jewellery. A more perfect body increases status?

mcc - Do you see a certain aesthetic appeal in the implanting of silicone cushions or metal parts in the body, rather like the jewel within?

cz - These parts themselves are often quite beautiful. Through an uncle, who is a casualty surgeon, I obtained a number of second-hand models. They are made with great precision and skill; they really are exquisite objects made of special high-grade steel alloys to be inserted in the body. But in order for it to be jewellery, there has to be a conscious intention about it. My works are not intended to be inserted into the body, and I have nothing to do with plastic surgery either. Yet I relate my work to the body, to the parts and shapes of the body, to whatever in our society is becoming technically possible, imaginable, feasible, and of course also to the aesthetics of these implants. Years ago, the jewellery artist Peter Skubic was already experimenting with objects under the skin. Currently an American sculptor is implanting arched steel forms directly under the skin...

mcc - We've come a long way since Otto Künzli's "gold makes you blind", that famous piece where a golden ball was hidden in a rubber bracelet.(1)

cz - That was a crucial, an important piece. He rendered the issue of value visible by hiding the actual precious material. Of course the gold is still there, but it is not the visible material value that is enticing, it's rather the elaboration of the theme that is attractive and has been implemented in a wonderfully aesthetic way. I do see an analogy here to the steel implants, where value and beauty are hidden in the body.

mcc - Your work seems to deny 'mere' form, but one would not call it conceptual either, in the strict sense of the word. Your pieces show that they're made with the utmost care, incorporating a great deal of care and attention to detail, to the craft. However, you're also not a technician...

cz - The challenge is to implement the ideas in such a way that more is created than is actually visible. I am interested in a kind of ambiguity; ... nothing can

really be seen in only one way and no other. ... I am also interested in crossing the borders to other disciplines. The borders between design, fashion and politics, art and philosophy are not static. There is movement at the margins, the boundaries are constantly being shifted, torn down and rebuilt. These boundaries interest me because something is happening there. Jewellery can be very much oriented to function and design, very expressive and personal, but it may also be conceptual - an idea. Jewellery touches on the whole spectrum; it can be anything - for the person who wears it or possesses it.

mcc - In many aspects, you seem to approach the question of meaning and significance like an anthropologist. It has to do with use. What do you see is the role of the body? How does the jewel work as a sign on the body? Why and when and how do people wear it - and is that important?

cz - It is important. I have some kind of a potential wearer in mind, someone with a certain attitude, who wants to get something out of the piece. But it's never related to status, it relates to something much more personal. You wear the jewel or you hold the object and you behave differently, you change your attitude... The object generates this tension, for yourself - but also for others.

mcc - Why do you need this 'powerful' object in the first place? Do you wear it (or make it) because it's missing in the world? And it's powerful because it refers to what is missing?

cz - Someone told me a story about this guy who bought a picture and then he hung it the other way around, turned to the wall, because it was too confrontational, too strong. But it had to be there, it was important. I think the oldest jewel must have been a piece that someone just wanted to carry around - close to the body - wanting it as something that was of significance to him or her - something that would give power. It can do so in the most subtle ways.

mcc - I've mentioned before that your pieces are very carefully done, that obviously incorporates labour. But they end up looking very economical, very light, in the sense that we don't see the hard labour hammered into the piece. The craft is respectful of whatever - whatever else - is already there...

cz - If you don't see the making, then it's all right. I don't like when the craft gets in the way... you did it, the work must go beyond the labour...

mcc - Six years ago you worked with Lego blocks and honeycomb in an installation in Austria, now you work with steel and with polystyrene. Does that mean you start again from scratch with each new idea?

cz - Whenever it is required by an idea I try to learn the necessary techniques, whether it be computer manipulated images or cast steel. With the polystyrene works, for example, I had no idea of how to work with this material, but I was

fascinated by its qualities. Expanded polystyrene consists of tiny, originally opaque little balls, single, cell-like particles, which are made to expand tremendously through the use of steam and pressure. Finally, they condense into a shape. Cell for cell, they form a fragile body.

mcc - It's very biological...

cz - It's very organic, it's about bodies...

mcc - You mean that you saw the material as metaphoric in itself?

cz - A metaphor where you wouldn't know exactly everything that it could be a metaphor for... I became aware of this material for the first time in 1986-87, in Asia, where it floats around in even the most remote little stream. It is an universal waste product, an omnipresent product... and it is beautiful.

Manuel Castro Caldas is an art historian, curator and critic of contemporary art, Director of the independent Art Academy Ar.Co-Centro de Arte e Comunicação Visual, Lisbon, Portugal.

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(1) ...'a bangle of black rubber, the interior consisting of a golden ball - like a snake with a small elephant in its body.'  
original text, Otto Künzli, 1980