A new type of jeweler has emerged since mid-century. Usually trained in a University-level art program, she is fully aware of the achievements of modern art. She often regards herself as an artist, and compares her activity to that of a sculptor. Frequently, assuming the role of artist means she feels responsible to artworld concepts, alongside (or, if she's lucky, instead of) the economic demands of making a living. For increasing numbers of jewelers, jewelry has become a pure expression of thought and feeling, only loosely connected to the traditional roles of ornament.

The incursion of artworld values into the craft of jewelry-making has been ongoing for most of this century. Ever since the 1940's, textbooks on the craft emphasized design over social meaning, which was an ideological position advanced by the Bauhaus and other early Modernist institutions. As jewelry instruction became a fixture of the art academy, it's not surprising that the artworld's privileging of concept (over materiality, function, or social meaning) should be internalized by young jewelers.

The same shift in values has affected all the craft disciplines that are taught at the University level. Fiber arts, ceramics, glass, woodworking, and enameling have all followed the same trajectory. (Blacksmithing, leather-working, and musical instrument making, not having found a place in the art academy, are much less influenced by formalist design and conceptual art.) The result has been the production of much sculpture made from craft materials. The vestige of function has become a referent, establishing a historical context for an object, rather than serving a physical or psychological purpose.

Of course, as jewelry embraces formal design values and art concepts, some of the old purposes of jewelry are diminished. As inventiveness becomes more important, the social coding of jewelry is neglected. Jewelers ambitious to become artists rarely make straight "social jewelry" that have familiar meanings: class rings; wedding and engagement rings; picture lockets; or religious symbols. Additionally, the rich and varied meanings of traditional non-white and non-European jewelry appear to have no place in college curricula. Among artist wannabees, jewelry's former role as status symbol and portable bank account has been devalued. Of course, this development seems to be confined to the industrialized countries, where the influence of 20th century Western art is strongest.

Stripped of familiar codes and functions, jewelry has become a vehicle for purely artistic issues. Just as the rectangular canvas was freed from representation and became an arena for the exploration of a range of other themes, so has jewelry become a device for conceptual exploration and personal expression. The subject might be reductivism (Emmy van Leersum), social critique (Otto Kunzli), or the limits of jewelry itself (Pierre Degan),* but in each case jewelry becomes a platform for the artist's agenda.

A friend of mine once said, "Jewelry is a small vehicle." I think it's a very accurate statement. As jewelers look to the ambitions of painting, sculpture, performance and installation, they find that many of the concepts originated in these art forms are poorly suited to jewelry. For instance, artists in the 1980's found that photography was a perfect device to illustrate theories about how mass-media images control the construction of the self. Cindy Sherman's famous series of self-portrait photographs, in which the artist's identity seemed fragmented and completely flexible, is only one example. Although jewelers have used photography — Eleanor Moty's work from the 1970's comes to mind — and a few have considered the social construction of identity, nobody in the field has yet addressed the intersection of mass-media and the formation of the self as convincingly and powerfully as Sherman. The problem of shoehorning such ideas, which depend on using mass-media imagery, into the vehicle of jewelry has proven very difficult. There are, after all, limits to what a jewelry object can do effectively. The relative smallness of objects that might attach to the body, the limits of weight that portability imposes, the impracticality of directly employing certain mediums (like video or holograms): all these restrictions mean that jewelry can serve some intentions well, but many others poorly.

A new generation of jewelers are addressing issues of identity and social construction, but they are not using devices imported from the artworld. Instead, they employ forms and devices from traditional jewelry. (Jan Baum's lockets, which contain mementos and texts, are an example where an artist uses a familiar jewelry context to speak to the identity question.) It's significant that this new work appears to accept the limitations of jewelry.

The inherent restrictions of jewelry-making is simultaneously the greatest liability and the greatest asset of jewelry as an artform. While jewelry may not be suitable for many artistic agendas, its limits have a potent attraction: the majority of jewelers are interested in jewelry

because the discipline offers a set of limits. These people disagree with one of the basic groundrules of modernism: that limits exist only to be surpassed.

The very idea of an "avant garde" presupposes incessant progress into ever-new territories, and also subtly implies that territory already occupied is not nearly as interesting. The proposition that established boundaries must be violated is one of the basic assumptions in twentieth-century Western art. The great figures in the Modernist pantheon, from Duchamp and Picasso to Johns and Warhol, all contributed to the revolutions and revisions of how art is defined. Artists like Jacques Lipchitz, who quit abstraction for figuration, are condemned for having abandoned their avant-garde ways. In the mainstream of Modernist art, limitations are automatically suspected of being antithetical to art itself.

Throughout this century, artists have been paring away all the unessential aspects of painting or sculpture. They came up with monochromatic painting and huge stainless-steel cubes, and then moved into conceptual art. Suddenly, in a radical departure from the past, thinking alone was sufficient to the activity of art. But when this process is taken to its logical conclusion, there are no further boundaries to transgress. Everything is permissible and possible: you can paint your face gold and carry a dead rabbit about an art gallery, explaining paintings to it (Joseph Beuys); you can tie yourself to another person for a year (Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh); you can attempt to count to infinity (Jonathan Borofsky); and it's all valid art. Some artists even investigated criminal acts and fatal self-mutilation. Apparently, there is no longer anything that cannot possibly be art. There are no limits. From now on, artists must deal with total and absolute freedom — and also a haunting sensation that every territory is familiar.

Many so-called "fine" artists are proud of the apparent openness of their fields, and disparage craft disciplines for their limitations. A sculpture teacher I know discourages students from taking craft courses, because, in his logic, the medium-specificity of craft imposes unreasonable limitations. For him, the freedom of 20th century art is authoritative, unquestionable, and desirable. However, he never considered the value of limits, nor the possibility that some people might desire a restriction on their choices.

The question of limitation is caught up in the question of freedom and choice. In a condition of absolute freedom, fictitious as that may be, every option is presented and every option may be chosen. But such freedom is useless until one consciously selects an option, thereby

eliminating other possible choices from consideration. By taking action, freedom is voluntarily restricted. In the end, freedom without action is pointless, and action without choice is impossible. This is the paradox of liberty: freedom become useful only when limits are accepted. If you're just standing around in a state of being free, contemplating your choices, you're not taking any action. Your condition would be paralysis. A life devoted to keeping all options open at all times is meaningless. Such a life would be devoid of sustained action and commitment. Ultimately, self-imposed limits are necessary.

I am not speaking of limits *imposed* on the individual, but rather choosing limits willfully. Voluntary choice is the crucial distinction here. Most people have felt restricted by a teacher, or a job, or some voice of authority. They feel compelled to act under duress, and their options are involuntarily curtailed. But I'm talking about choices that are made freely, and limitations that are accepted voluntarily.

I suspect the rhetoric of limits is appropriate to the present age. After all, we are learning what we get when we refuse to recognize restrictions. Limitless resources? Limitless oil and gas? Limitless air into which to dump pollutants? The lesson is becoming clearer, at least in the realm of ecology. The physical sphere is finite, and should be carefully preserved. I believe there might be a parallel condition in the artistic realm. The application of some structure and restrictions to the creative spirit is not necessarily evil.

In fact, many people are attracted to the crafts because they are comfortable with the notion of limits. They like the idea of a boundary within which to work, and they're not terribly interested in crossing those boundaries. Instead of the metaphor of constant advancement into foreign territories, the operative metaphor in the crafts is more like a classroom assignment. One accepts a problem and a series of limitations, and then is expected to find a creative, intelligent solution. The craftswoman doesn't see limits as a prison, but as a structure. She enjoys the technologies of a single medium because it restricts possibilities, but within those restrictions more possibilities arise as the material is mastered. The craftswoman also appreciates a traditional context because it gives her a specific history and heritage: potters make pots; glassblowers make vessels; jewelers make jewelry. All are responding to very particular materials and histories. They are given one arena within which to work, and another much larger one to ignore (or employ) at will. The restrictions inherent in craft bring focus and clarity.

The acceptance of limits is a Post-modernist stance. Where Modernism posited art and design in which everything would be new, and newly appropriate to the industrial age, Post-modernism is skeptical. The possibility of endless innovation is questioned, along with the status of artist as singular author. In the Post-modern view, art is so rooted in language and culture, that it is probably impossible to say anything unique. Art is simply a recombination of existing vocabulary. The limitless field of action imagined by Modernists becomes something more like a dictionary, with a finite range of choices. This dictionary includes history, which high Modernists would shun. Furthermore, the artist is restricted by the ideological climate of his place and time. According to Post-modern theory, the old paradigm of art as endless transgression of boundaries becomes meaningless, and the paradigm an art of limits becomes the only option.

Regardless of whether one is Modernist or Post-modernist in outlook, many individuals find the limits inherent in jewelry-making are actually liberating. Limited horizons may be well suited to a certain kind of artistic sensibility.

The concept of sensibility, which refers to artist's psychological tendencies and especially her inclinations of emotion and taste, was once a primary subject of esthetic discourse. Art could not be regarded without thinking of the artist's psychological makeup. The tendency survives in many biographies of artists, which still strive to discover the secret source of creativity. In recent years, the Post-modernist skepticism of artistic genius and the possibility of innovation has called the idea of sensibility into question. However, my experience as an educator has convinced me that artistic predispositions vary widely. Some people need to work large, some small; some love the tactile impression of material in their hands, and some would rather never touch material at all. Quite apart from any consideration of concept, artists respond to something intuitive and deeply ingrained when they choose mediums, subject matter, scale, or style. Those artists who willingly adopt limitations are actualizing a deep and honest predisposition. To dismiss their work as wrongheaded, simply because an art ideology cannot respect their needs, is foolish.

From long observation, I believe that jewelry-making responds to a particular sensibility. I find that most jewelers obtain great satisfaction from working with their hands, and they are capable of extraordinary patience. Most jewelers have a deep and abiding love for small scale, for close inspection of detail, for precision, and for careful workmanship. The sum of these qualities points to a particular temperament, one that is ideally suited to making small objects

out of metal. An artist with a different sensibility might find making jewelry to be uncomfortably confining, and these people usually take up another, more satisfying, medium. But some individuals find jewelry-making to be liberating because it offers a fitting way for their natural inclinations to take form, to have a voice. That's exactly the way I felt when I discovered metalsmithing: it was as if I suddenly found myself a home. What intellectually might appear to be limiting, might in fact be liberating for the right sensibility. A small vehicle might be the perfect vehicle.

However modest jewelry may be, the field still encompasses an amazing breadth and depth. A perusal of pre-literate, historical and contemporary personal adornment will show astonishing variety. At one extreme, jewelry shades into costume: masks, hats, badges, buckles, and insignia can all be regarded as versions of jewelry. At another extreme, jewelry has taken a remarkable variety of forms, from the forged gold kwottenai kanye worn by Fulani women in Mali, to the abstract art deco bracelets by Jean Fouquet. The only real restriction inherent to jewelry is that it must relate to the human body. The human figure remains the site for jewelry, which imposes qualifications of scale, weight, and perhaps expressive potential, but there's a great deal of ground within those boundaries.

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As jewelers become aware of inherent limitations, they will also realize the special potential that jewelry as an art form has. One potential lies in jewelry's ability to communicate to a large audience (quite a bit larger than the audience for fine art), and its ability to speak about human connectedness. Jewelry still has the power to intimately connect the artist and her public.

This is an important issue in the artworld, and it gets to some of the basic assumptions about the whole business of being an artist in an industrialized culture today. In a New York Times book review, Wendy Lesser questions the alienated position of contemporary art. . She was writing about a recent novel written in the Victorian mode, which is to say, the book had straightforward narrative description, central characters, and a plot development with a beginning, middle, and resolution. The book relied on all the conventions of writing that avant-garde literature kicked out the door decades ago.

Ms. Lesser contrasts the two modes, as follows:

"The Victorian-Edwardian novel rested on a firm belief in the intimate link between the individual lives of its readers and the public reality of its era. In contrast, most modern novels seem unable to represent anything more than the thoughts and experiences of their authors. And this distinction is reflected in the stylistic and emotional differences between the two literary periods. With its acrobatic, self-referential use of language and its dependence on clever, unexpected structural experiment, the modern novel trumpets the individuality (not to mention the very existence) of its author; whereas the more continuous, transparent, 'realistic' mode of the Victorian novel reflects a sense of the continuity between one individual and another, a belief that there is a larger reality that we all share. ... And while the modern novel is shaped by disjunction and arbitrariness, the Victorian novel took as its first principle a belief in a guiding pattern in existence - a pattern that might stem from God, or science, or comprehensible social forces, or simply from mutual human love."

This is a powerful idea. Lesser is saying that Modernist art forms have dissolved the link between the artist and his audience. The prototypical artist is now an isolated individual who rarely considers how he and his audience share a bond of common experience, and are subject to the same guiding pattern. The modern novel, and by implication modern art, are controlled by the idea that there is only disjunction and rupture between individuals. The model of modern art is a state of self-involved and self-referential alienation.

For the best part of two centuries, the Western ideal of the true artist has been an isolated visionary, apart from his culture. We recall Irving Stone's Michelangelo performing anatomical studies in the dead of night, or Van Gogh's lonely suicide, or Rothko's (supposed) despair over the spiritual ineffectiveness of painting. The prototypical modern artist should be deeply immersed in the continuum of art, but distanced from society. Fortunately, that model is starting to change, especially under the influence of feminist and activist artists, but a state of alienation still seems to be obligatory.

The myth of the alienated artist used to be an artworld standard. Much of the rhetoric connected to visual arts in the 40's and 50's was openly contemptuous of the masses of great unwashed, and artists were encouraged to see the common citizen as too uninformed and ignorant to bother with. Here's Clement Greenberg, writing in 1947, on the small group of abstract painters in New York facing the "dull horror" of American life:

“Their isolation is inconceivably crushing, unbroken, damning. That anyone can produce art on a respectable level in this situation is highly improbable. What can fifty do against a hundred and forty million?”

Greenberg imagines the artist as a solitary pioneer stuck inside a culture of ignorant boobs. Communication was relegated to mass-media: illustration, photography, movies, and television, all of which were beneath the consideration of art critics. While Pop Art opened critic’s eyes to mass culture, the artworld continues to show little more than contempt and suspicion for the American masses.

At the same time, art’s theoretical underpinnings have become increasingly esoteric. An audience that isn't wise to the discourse about modern art itself is excluded from understanding and enjoying it. Because the vast majority of people don't feel that a state of alienation is valuable, and they don’t understand the theory-of-the-season, they have no use for art, either. It's no wonder that most ordinary people speak of contemporary art in a tone of defensive scorn.

The abyss between ordinary people and the fine arts is especially sad, considering that the traditional role of visual art was to bind people together, not to hold them apart. The art of every ancient culture, of so-called "primitive"art, religious art, and folk art all spoke to the common experience of common people. The underlying assumptions were that basic beliefs are shared, that the artist is not superior to his audience, and that every individual has an essential place in society and the cosmos. Art spoke of commonalities, not disjunctions, and art used to bring people together. Nor has that role been totally suppressed: if there is any contemporary art form that still emphasizes the relation between artist and public, it is jewelry .

Virtually everyone in western culture utilizes some kind of adornment, from wristwatches and crucifixes to engagement rings. The same audience that the pioneering Modernists reviled have a built-in understanding, and need, for the jeweler's art. No matter how up-to-date and rational we want our culture to be, people continue to employ jewelry for all kinds of spiritual, social, and personal purposes, marking passages and commemorating special relationships. The ritual use of jewelry is still very much alive. Even though it may be employed reflexively, jewelry has never been divorced from modern culture.

People also respond to jewelry because they can use it to alter their own self-image. Jewelry can change how a person is perceived: the wearer can employ the coded messages of different jewelry objects so she might appear radical or conservative, glamorous or frumpy, young or old. (This is also true of clothing.) Similarly, jewelry can alter how the wearer feels about herself. The psychology of adornment is not well understood, but it is obvious that outward image and inner image can be connected.

Robert Lee Morris speaks of the psychological impact of ornament. He recognizes that personal appearance, being so intimately connected with self-image, is the site of both anxiety and satisfaction. Morris relates how some of his jewelry is large and dramatic, and thus difficult for an introverted woman to have enough confidence to wear. Knowing she will be the center of attention, and knowing the large scale and unconventional materials will make her conspicuous, she might hesitate. But if she can rise to the occasion, and take pleasure in the drama of her newly spectacular appearance, her psyche has to change. Having challenged herself and successfully worn the jewelry, she can gain confidence.

In a sense, Morris makes props for a theater of the self. He considers how adornment can transform a personality, heal a damaged self-image, or encourage a small performance where there might otherwise be only hurry and neglect. For him, jewelry not only creates glamorous images, but it's a device or establishing and enhancing identity.

People also invest jewelry with personal significance, to the point where the objects become amulets and talismans. The New York jeweler Cara Croninger speaks with special fondness of a woman who insisted on bringing her favorite heart-shaped pin to the hospital as a lucky charm for the birth of her first child. Not only did she meditate on the pendant during the birth — using the jewelry in a fairly straightforward way — but then the pendant became a memento of one of the most important events in her life. Of all the art forms, jewelry is uniquely positioned to receive this type of deep personal meaning.

This is not mere mumbo-jumbo. Far from being superstitious, the habit of imbuing objects with meaning is related to the psychological technique of imaging. If a person holds an certain thought in mind, whether it be a phrase or an image or a prayer, the thought starts to influence attitude and behavior. Imaging techniques are often used by professional athletes to improve their performance. This phenomenon is the basis of rituals in all cultures since before recorded history, from the Cha-no-yu to the High Mass. In less institutionalized

settings, an object can serve as an aid in the process of imaging. An amulet may or may not be magic: its power lies in the way the wearer believes she is more confident or more capable or more liable to succeed. In so believing, she's less likely to be discouraged by misfortune and more likely to take advantage of happy accidents. Jewelry can support the human instinct to cope with stress by controlling consciousness.

In addition, jewelry is one of the most intimate of art forms. Only garments also have such a direct relation to the physical body. After all, the jewelry object sits directly on the body, its weight and texture and size a constant reminder of its presence. The motion of jewelry on the moving body creates a subtle tactile experience. Hanging earrings might make a small noise, creating music that only the wearer can hear. If a ring is worn for years, it acquires a patina of age and even conforms itself to the shape of the finger. And lastly, jewelry can be exceptionally durable, staying with people for decades, and even passing from one generation to the next.

A good jeweler considers all of these qualities. With the exception of objects that are never intended to be worn, jewelry implies a transaction between the artist and the wearer. There must be an imaginative connection between the two, and it's generally a sympathetic one. Instead of choosing to see people as estranged from the artistic process, the majority of jewelers see people as essentially like themselves, capable of dignity and intelligence. As soon as jewelry is worn, it can establish an intimate link between maker and audience, and a common ground is shared. As Wendy Lesser would say, jewelry by its nature "reflects a sense of continuity between one individual and another."

Continuity implies reparation, an idea that has recently been raised in the artworld. Reparation, defined in Webster's 7th New Collegiate Dictionary, is "the act of making amends...or giving satisfaction for a wrong or injury." Artists and writers are starting to think that maybe art should not just stand on the sidelines and offer smart remarks, but must make amends for the damage incurred in modern society. In some ways it's a radical notion, because it must overthrow the centuries-old myth of the artist as alienated visionary. A few people, John Perrault and Robert Natkin among them, are proposing that the artist must take on a different role: art must heal.

Probably the notion can be traced back to feminist artists in the 70's, such as Miriam Shapiro and Judy Chicago, who rejected rarefied high art in favor of a version that celebrated familiar

domesticity and life-as-lived. Those women favored an orientation toward the joys and pain of ordinary existence rather than the grand theories and difficult abstractions promoted by the art press. Their message was that artists must eschew alienation, and that they can exercise social responsibility by influencing people in beneficial ways.

Perhaps the reader will recall a BBC television series written by the mathematician and humanist Jacob Bronowski called "The Ascent of Man". The series came out in 1973, and one of the programs contained the most moving passage that I have ever witnessed on television. In the last moments of the program, Bronowski walks into a shallow pond at Auschwitz. He grasps a handful of mud, and says,

"Into this pond were flushed the ashes of some four million people. And that was not done by gas. It was done by arrogance. It was done by dogma. It was done by ignorance. ... I owe it as a human being to the many members of my family who died at Auschwitz, to stand here by the pond as a survivor and witness. ... We have to close the distance between the push-button order and the human act. We have to touch people."

Bronowski was speaking directly to the tragedy that comes from imagining that there are others — in this case, Jews — who do not have a human face. It was the arrogance and ignorance of the Nazis to believe that the Jews stood irreparably alienated from the German people. Bronowski was speaking of the absolute necessity of reparation: we have to touch people, or somebody suffers the consequences.

Bronowski's simple prescription suggests how every individual shares a collective responsibility for the fate of the world. Every war, every oppressive regime is a sum of individual acts, which can be resisted or permitted. The basic act of resistance to the forces of destruction is not in further violence, but in reaching out to make contact. In touching another person, each of us must confront their humanity, and admit our humility. This touching, which is deeper than just physical sensation, is a profoundly moral act. In touching, we resist arrogance, ignorance and despair.

Artists are not exempt from Bronowski's insight. The belief that alienation is a necessary precondition for authentic art, suggests that the superior artist will be remote and removed from his neighbors. This is a dangerous lie. The Modernist fascination with disjunction and distance encourages precious little contact. If we insist on isolation and alienation, we

relinquish our primary gesture against destruction. In opposition to the Modernist stance, Bronowski implies that the moral responsibility of artists is to facilitate human contact. If we have to touch people, then artists must point the way.

And that is the great potential of jewelry. By the very nature of the form, it touches people. It's worn: a person can feel the thing on their skin. But more importantly, they can sense the maker's empathy and compassion. Jewelry can be a benevolent act.

This is not to say that jewelry cannot be corrupted, that it can't be debased by shallow motives or thoughtlessness. Surely, it can, and it is, all the time. And certainly, no jeweler imagines that their work will usher in a new age of social harmony. Seeing art or craft as social intervention is much more pragmatic, resting on the perception that most change is incremental, and most improvement is slow in coming. Jewelry is not revolutionary, but evolutionary. Throughout history, jewelry has defined one's place in society and the cosmos, it has provided security, it has added color and drama to the human form. And while jewelry is a small vehicle, it is also a pervasive one. It can help, hinder, or heal. I ask you to consider the healing power of jewelry.

After all, the artist can project an image of the world as alienatedand disjointed, a site of only victimization and terror. But the artist can also project an image of the world where the human touch comforts and redeems, where we maske the world essentially humane. Such a project does not require difficult theories or grand monuments. An accumulation of small gestures will suffice, but each gesture must actually touch another person. A small gesture, like a pin, or a bracelet, or a ring.