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Shows and Tales: On Jewelry Exhibition-Making [Book Review]

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Shows and Tales: On Jewellery Exhibition - Making.

Reviewed By Roberta Bernabei

Shows and Tales is a riveting account of the conception, development and installation of jewellery exhibitions. This A5 book details analyses by 21 authors, critics, curators and makers. Edited by the designer, writer, curator and some time jeweller Benjamin Lignel, it consists of 260 pages of reports, essays, interviews and reviews that examine jewellery in the display setting. Initial investigations commence with the foundations of exhibited studio jewellery, with the earliest, *Modern Handmade Jewelry*, dating from 1946. Texts continue through to examples from the second decade of the 21st century, such as *MAD about Schmuck* in 2014. Between these temporal bookends, the remaining texts bear witness to shifts from static display to spaces beyond the fixed gallery; even including portable miniature exhibitions. The writers seek to identify innovation in display beyond the glasshouse vitrine and beneficially, also present salient ways in which discourse can be instigated between the curatorial theme, the works and the audience. For example, *Touching Stories* by Jorunn Veiteberg discusses exhibitions that engage the public through a sensory and tactile experience: *Bei Mir Bist Du Schön* at RAM Galleri, Oslo in 1995 and *Touching Warms the Art* in 2008 at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in Portland, Oregon. In this way, the essays deal with the audience and the interpretation of work, not just the physical means and aesthetics of display.

The book's ethos is neatly summarised by its title: *Shows and Tales; On Jewellery Exhibition – Making*. It was prompted by Lignel's desire to present his position towards exhibitions as "actions rather than reports of practice and exhibition-makers as producers rather than caretaker" ¹. *Shows and Tales* was first conceived to collate texts extrapolated from the Art Forum Jewellery (AJF²) online archive. The commissioning of additional texts necessitated the non-profit organisation to crowdfund. The book is consequentially testament to donor generosity and evidence of a wider desire to study and augment literature examining the display of contemporary jewellery. Intriguingly, it also straddles the digital and analogue worlds; transforming previously virtual text into a tactile object that, like much jewellery, resides in the hands when in use.

The book unfurls through 3 major sections: Reports, Essays and Interviews and finally, Reviews. The first and last use a chronological structure to demonstrate advancements with time. In fact, the book's visually striking cover underlines this logic with the names and dates of the major jewellery exhibitions listed in bold black text on bright yellow card. Within, purple and white takeover the textual aesthetics, thereby heightening the reader's sense of dealing with a designed and crafted medium. In other words, this book is a physical display that exhibits its ideas and wares.

A short introduction outlines the structure and primary aim of examining how curatorial approaches can affect the exhibiting of jewellery and how in turn, the act of displaying jewellery may modulate its production. The concision of aim makes it relatively straightforward to confirm its achievement in general terms. However, some of the texts only deal with the central themes in the closing passages, seemingly as a tagged-on afterthought. This was likely due to having been culled from the online repository of the Art

¹ Lignel, B., ed. (2015) *Shows and Tales: On Jewellery Exhibition – Making*. Art Jewellery Forum, Mill Valley, CA., USA.

² AJF <https://artjewelryforum.org/about-ajf>

Jewellery Forum; with only mild thematic realignment having occurred subsequently. One might argue these texts should have been omitted given the veneer of motif is somewhat transparent. This deficit is very much a minority occurrence, the bulk of texts are convincing in the validity of their critical judgments, which tend to be rigorous in identifying originality and nuance in jewellery display.

The exhibitions selected for exploration are all relevant, in that each is sufficiently nuanced from the others as to be perceived as curatorially distinct. Of course, this means the roster is inevitably not exhaustive; however, this selective approach underlines the book's value. In that it seeks to individuate possible approaches to exhibition development where jewellery is the central component.

Some of the first exhibitions described in the reports section are essential to framing discussions through a global lens, where multiple voices and languages figure amongst the jewellery makers. *Object: USA* by Glenn Adamson and the southern European view proposed by Monica Gaspar in *Joieria Europea Contemporanea* constitute a welcome geographical expansion of contemporary jewellery literature; which is sometimes guilty of adhering to the dominant context of studio jewellery populated by German, Dutch and British makers. Here, the press may be active, and thought-provoking considerations on the impact reviews in magazines such as *Crafts*, *Arts Review* and *American Craft* are outlined by Cindi Strauss, whilst reflecting on the show *The Jewellery Project: New Departures in British and European Work 1980-83*, at the Craft Council Gallery in London, 1983. The role of curators is questioned too; considering whether themes imposed may restrict makers' freedom or when exhibition design may overpower objects, intimacy and connections to the audience.

The texts are complemented by images; not only of the exhibition layouts, pieces of work and performances, but also the associated catalogues. The latter being a welcome addition to the norm. Given this book sought precedence in focusing analysis on exhibited jewellery, the cohort's bibliographies could have been more expansive, or at least present in the case of several writers. The *Further Readings* page only lists 12 books.

In contrast, the checklist of exhibitions is interesting and informative. Moreover, it is a welcome addition to the lexicon of contemporary jewellery research. Suggested by curator Monica Gaspar, it sets a future precedent by archiving details of each cited exhibition's budget, surface area, graphic design, participants and their respective number of exhibits, digital archiving and visitor numbers. This helps expand the book's potential audience to include those with an interest in museum studies and curating. The information was largely gathered through questionnaires to curators. It would therefore have been useful to know in terms of methodology, how each gallery or museum collected their information about visitor numbers for consistency. Was it estimated or confirmed?

Overall, there are many compelling aspects to *Shows and Tales*: its initiative in discussing 'jewellery exhibition making' from a curatorial perspective, alongside the overview of key exhibitions, curators and innovative makers. These combine to make it a book worthy of purchase; and one that will prompt makers and curators alike to reflect on how they display jewellery in the future.