

Introduction by Susanna Kumschick creatio ex nihilo

"That which inspires us is not what we see but rather that which we sense behind the visible"

Vilém Flusser

Johanna Dahm's jewellery emerges from the concealed darkness of a carefully made clay coat. Like butterflies from their cocoons the pieces slip from this forming encasement, which harbours the invisible empty space where materials of pure in the heat molten gold or silver solidify into new formations.

Observing Johanna Dahm's artful casting technique, one not only would like to immediately slip on one of these pieces peeled from their clay shells, but is also fascinated by the unconventional design process: the artist's skilful play with invisible hollow space, the concealed negative form, her confidence in her artistic experience, as well as her willingness to play with and count on creative happenstance. Even the clay coats fired in an open flame and later cracked open seem like enigmatic, artistic miniatures. And finally, the story of the evolution of her inspiring artistic craft, which she developed and refined over a lengthy period of transformation and assimilation of elements from her own and foreign cultures.

When Johanna Dahm seeks out cultures in Africa and India that are known for their unique hollow casting techniques, she is inspired by the methods and meanings of ancient techniques, thus further developing her own artistic design. In the 1990s she was an apprentice of the Asante king's goldsmith in Kumasi, Ghana; and at a later stage she learned a practically identical "closed cycle" technique of casting from Dokra craftsmen and craftswomen in Orissa, India. Living together with the goldsmiths and the craftsmen, she shared their everyday lives and through intense participant-observation she learned from their cultures. Those who are familiar with the rocky and trying path of serious ethnology know how difficult it is to gain access to knowledge that is often only shared by a small social group. With this in mind, Johanna Dahm's detailed knowledge is all the more significant, and her respect for being fortunate enough to share in this unique knowledge also testifies of the appreciation with which she, as an expert in western jewellery design traditions, seeks contact with foreign expertise. Even so, she wryly notes that a lot remained incomprehensible to her or was withheld, for example secret tricks which she had to discover for herself by trial and error. By virtue of her own experiences and the comparison of three cultures she has become an intermediary of time-tested design techniques. With her intercultural accomplishments and trans-cultural engagement she proven herself to be a bridge builder between cultures.

It is her creative curiosity that impels her to engage in field research. She seeks out these sources of inspiration in order to comprehend and compare the unfamiliar, and to not only develop her artistic skills by becoming adept in the various traditions of her craft, but also to

further her own human development. Just as time and again she experiments with new forms, taking leave of artistic concepts in order to adapt the new, she moves along the perimeters of her own individual culture. This is borne out in her personal history as well as in her intuition that the new emerges along these borders and that "the in between" represents an inspiring place: between cultures, between the external and internal perspective, between polar opposites, between different practices and diverse theories, between art and design, between comprehension and incomprehension. "The in between" is also an unfamiliar place - a third place, where the unexpected emerges, where something is interrupted for something else, where new discoveries and experiments are made and new geographical localisations become possible.

Thus, by engaging with traditional casting methods in Africa and India, Johanna Dahm discovered for herself a crucial inversion of a design principle. Today she no longer works as before with positive models in wax, as used in the Asante and Dokra melted wax casting technique, but instead skips the wax model and forms a cavity directly in the soft clay, a negative form, into which the molten metal later flows. By casting directly into the clay form, the jewellery takes on the surface structure of the clay. In this way, the earth leaves its imprint on the metal's surface, in contrast to the wax method, wherein the jewellery bears traces of fingerprints, thereby immediately evoking the hands that formed it. In this process Johanna Dahm cedes the capacity to design to the earth, whereby the precise finish and form of the piece remain invisible inside the cavity, only coming to light when the clay mantle coat is shattered.

This cavity represents a remarkable element and an important artistic concept in her current artistic approach. Cast in this invisible space, the jewellery piece becomes the antithesis of the manifestly formed, and through its concealment becomes the unknown itself. This method reveals parallels to how she engages with other cultures: just as she searches in the unfamiliar for surprising and inspiring counter-worlds with other forms of life, technical method opens up a creative void, which she seeks to fill with new ideas and unexpected forms in her jewellery.

The creative process as a basic principle demonstrates a dialectical, antithetical method: positive and negative, visible and invisible, being and not being, identity and non-identity. Perhaps the antithetically formed cavity also enters into a game with the negative space as a place for utopias, counter-worlds and projections? Imagined counter-worlds and projections, which are always also linked to foreign art and aesthetics, that find their clichéd expression in exoticised visions?

Her method inspires to further, bolder conjectures: could this moulded void, this space of negation, be interpreted as a space of non-existence, of nothing, and the artist's active creating *en miniature* be associated with the Judeo-Christian principle of Creation "creatio ex nihilo" - creation out of nothing? Along these lines, a further, very daring notion would be, that the artist's work refutes another principle - "ex nihilo nihil fit" - from nothing comes

nothing - or, put another way, that it takes the definition of emptiness as non-existence that existence should be and pursues it *ad absurdum*.

The events that take place in the final phase of the artistic process lead to the following considerations: The jewellery piece, hidden deep in the surrounding material, is only visible, after all, after the clay coat has been shattered. The suspense is high and even more so the surprise, as it becomes clear how intensely accidental occurrences have wrought with artistic control over the development process. Now it is up to the artist to distinguish between accidental flaws or accidental failures and the intentional, in other words, to discern the elements that constitute deliberate creative happenstance. Rejecting some, she ultimately selects those that according to her artistic vision can be regarded as successful.

Undoubtedly the artist has in mind Francis Picabia's dictum "La vérité d'un homme ce sont ses erreurs..." as she evaluates her pieces according to her exceedingly differentiated thinking and especially as she creates her highly specialised art. And surely she will also faithfully bear tribute to contingency, chance's twin sister - things never turn out as you expect.

Johanna Dahm's rings not only beautify us, they also grace us with lofty thoughts: about their function as links in an intercultural development process, about their experimental genesis of the "in between", about their significant creation from nonexistence, about their perilous birth under the united and persistent gaze of the twin sisters chance and contingency and finally about the indisputable origin of the jewellery from a hidden void that stimulates our fantasies, from the invisible, which leads us back to Vilém Flusser's maxim, that we are all the more excited and inspired by that which we sense behind the visible.

2008

Susanna Kumschick (Dr. phil.) studied social anthropology with a focus on art and visual anthropology, film studies and music. She is director of the Gewerbemuseum Winterthur (CH). She curates, teaches, researches and publishes on visual and material cultures in the context of art, design and culture.