



Manfred Nisslmüller, *Taschenrecorder*, 1984–1993, hand-held recording and playback device, set of eight mini-tapes, box, overall dimensions: 234 x 213 x 57 mm, photo: artist

Brosche, or the jewelry without object of Manfred Nisslmüller

Monika Brugger

Jewelry is a perturbation.¹
—Manfred Nisslmüller

For the Austrian artist Manfred Nisslmüller, jewelry is a disruption, an object that clashes, interrupts the flow of an ensemble, disturbs our habitual perception and our aesthetic sense, and derails the appearance of the person who wears it.²

From time immemorial, jewelry has anchored its modes of production, its use and its reception on different systems of signs that permit communication between groups or individuals. In contrast, Nisslmüller calls into question how we, as a group of people, perceive things, by dispensing with formal actualization and the material reproduction of what we are used to seeing (in contemporary as well as classical jewelry). And so he continuously evaluates, compares, reflects on, and questions the public about jewelry and about its own intellectual and aesthetic conditioning toward it.

Nisslmüller looks at the world and the history of art analytically, critically, sometimes ironically, and often subversively. He questions the established historical values of classical jewelry, as well as some aspects of contemporary practice, and he proposes pieces so diverse that his creative approach remains singular to this day.

The work *Taschenrecorder* (1984–1993, made in eight examples) is one of his key works. There are eight cassettes named *Brosche*, *Visage (die Augen ... die Nase ...)*, *Geräusche*, *Vögel am Bach*, *Lärm*, *Hundegebell*, *Musik*, *Kirchenglocken*.³ There is also a pocket tape recorder of a model that is no longer fashionable. These objects are arranged together in a red box. In this rather austere container, the tape recorder does not reveal anything about its “creator.” It is industrial object, already-made, available to everyone. Devoid of personal workmanship, or technical know-how. Nisslmüller offers to us a

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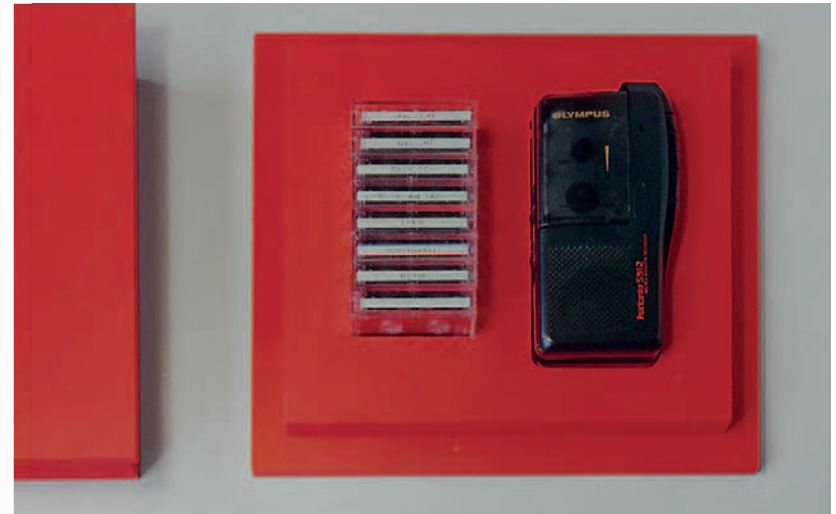
conception of jewelry totally freed from conventional modes of representation as much as from the material world.

Taschenrecorder is an object which resists “classical” display strategies: that is to say worn, hung up, or suspended behind glass. It underlines the limits of most exhibition spaces dedicated to jewelry.⁴ Carried in a pocket, Taschenrecorder can be turned on at the carrier’s discretion, at the opportune moment, in the most diverse locations. Though it can only be seen face-to-face on rare occasions, Taschenrecorder remains easier to understand if you look at and listen to it attentively, rather than if you try to analyze it. And since it ultimately speaks to our auditory sense, I propose that you now try to perform your own approximate copy of it.

Relax, take the time—you are going to say that it is precious ... that it is money ... worth, perhaps, this piece’s

weight in silver?—to settle yourself in your workshop or your living room. Give it a deep voice, speak very softly and enunciate the word clearly: Brosche, in German, like the original.⁵ You will discover that the meaning of the word progressively evaporates. It becomes a chant, an obsessive litany; it insinuates itself into your brain and will disturb you perhaps just enough to become this Störung, this disturbance, which stands for the whole history of the brooch.

Brosche is the most abstract and the most pertinent of the eight cassettes. There is no definition of the concept, just the word: Brosche. A brooch is a piece of feminine jewelry par excellence—that is in fact its definition



in French dictionaries. It is also the most common piece of jewelry, open to all forms of reinterpretation—even the most insignificant ones. As Nisslmüller says, a simple pin back transforms everything and anything into a brooch or Schmuckstück.⁶

Brosche is a work that borrows and transfers into jewelry history what Malevich did by erasing the subject matter in White Square on a White Background, and Marcel Duchamp by appropriating aesthetically neutral objects and requalifying them as art.

Brosche is a radical proposition; it marked an important stage in confronting the question of “dematerializing,” and thus liberating jewelry from its symbolic and representational tethers.

Translated from the French by Sara MacVane

- 1 In German: Schmuck ist Störung. In this context, “Störung” can mean disturbance, perturbation, disorder.
- 2 For Nisslmüller this means all pieces of unconventional jewelry; jewelry that is not designed according to the classic tenets of compositional harmony or brilliance, or invested in reproducing recognizable forms or symbols.
- 3 Brooch, face (eyes ... nose ...), sounds, birds at the stream bank, noise, a dog’s bark, music, church bells.
- 4 I “saw” or rather heard the piece—beautifully displayed in the pocket of a red leather jacket, suspended in space—at the show Das Schmuck, Gewerbemuseum Winterthur, Switzerland, 2001–2002.
- 5 You can hear it in German at <https://translate.google.fr/#de/en/Brosche>.
- 6 Literally “a bit of jewelry.” Nisslmüller, Werkstatt-Galerie Friederike Glück, Stuttgart, 1991.

Further reading

Martha Buskirk, The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003)

Lucy Lippard, Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997)