

Manon van Kouswijk

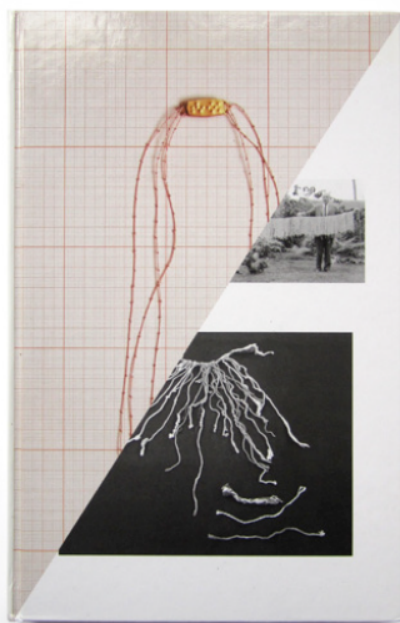
The singular and the generic: portrait of the artist as a maker

by Benjamin Lignel

The cute idea that contemporary practice should come up with bold, iconic statements will have some people complain about Manon van Kouswijk's work: it is subtle, self-similar, and slow going. On the upside – if one wants to stick to artistic clichés – it certainly is obsessive. She has apparently spent the last ten years working solely on the bead necklace, and amassing evidence that it is one of the elementary forms found in nature and culture.

The result of her research –presented in *Hanging Around/the Pearl Chain Principle*, her first monograph– does not meet the eye as much as the mind: both a statement of practice, and the incorporation of that practice in a proliferating inventory of strung round forms, this art book professes an annoying disregard for the conventions of artistic self-promotion. Instead, it spells out, in 132 pages and 168 pictures, van Kouswijk's ongoing conversation with beads, and her love affair with craft at its most repetitive.

The book, more than the individual pieces, is the subject of this essay. Not only because it provides the most comprehensive overview of van Kouswijk's work to date: I also found the complex position it stakes with regard to representation of practice –its unusual combination of iconographic documentation and photographic re-interpretation– impossible to ignore.

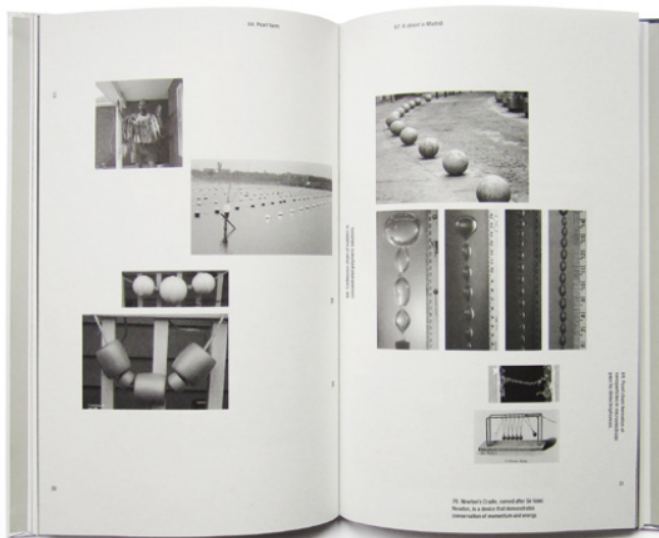


Hanging Around / the Pearl Chain Principle, 2010 (Cover)
 Concept and realisation:
 Manon van Kouswijk
 Photography: Uta Eisenreich
 Design: Niessen & de Vries
 Edition of 500

repertoire

This publication consists in two books interwoven together: a visual essay in black and white, titled the *Pearl Chain Principle*, with a text by Marjan Unger; and a section called *Hanging Around*, with 31 colour reproductions of necklaces made between 1995 and 2009, and a essay penned by Pravu Mazumdar. The two-part visual offerings make clear that the bead is both a means of expression, and the subject of van Kouswijk's practice. This reflexive relationship to the medium is symptomatic of contemporary jewellery, but is pushed here to an extreme. The work may thus appear extravagantly single-minded and, despite her varied technical and material registers, facile: we are, after all, being shown 50 takes on exactly the same necklace format. Since her visual strategy parades repetition, let us guess

the Pearl Chain Principle,
2010 pages 30-31



Re : construction, 2009
In Hanging Around, 2010
Unpaginated
Photography: Uta Eisenreich

that the artist knows –and wants us to know– this.

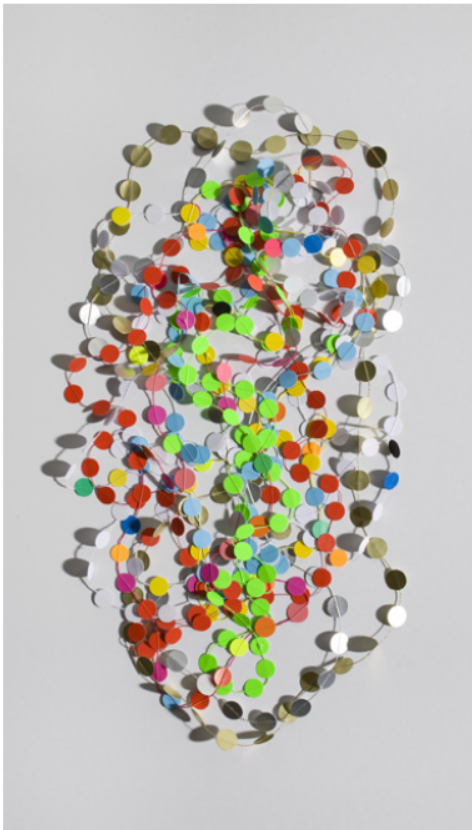
The documentary section –a vast archives of found and collected images of beads, strings, and their ubiquitous occurrence– follows in the footsteps of Aby Warburg, and his study of iconographic types through the trans-historical association of photographs. The images are plucked out of the context that lends them meaning, and re-arranged to create a typological echo chamber.

The photographs of the work, by Uta Eisenreich, follow a mock ethnographic approach: stripping bare known display situations (the jewellery shop, the museum catalogue, the archaeological documentation), Eisenreich favours typological and quantitative concerns over dramatic effect. The pieces are shot in three ways: on variously lined, graduated, woven or blank surfaces (occasionally featuring measuring tools); against depthless, shaded backdrops; on duotone backdrops that provide an ascetic, short-hand version of high-street window displays. The effect in all three cases is brutally barren and suspends the pieces in an artificial

no-man's-land: are we supposed to read these objects as new evidence of the old phenomenon documented everywhere else in the book?

The juxtaposition of bead *references* and bead *work* does several things at the same time: it reinforces the power of

type over its isolated incarnation (whether by the artist's hand or not). It claims a long history of forms as the context for her work, thus running the risk of relegating its artistic significance to the footnote of human history. But it also pits the very clear object-ness of her necklaces – their existence as finite products – against the fragility of anecdotal evidence: pin-hole views of science and holiday *curiosa* that do not quite manage to swamp van Kouswijk's work under the weight of their repetition. The black and white images may set the stage for her variations, but she is the one doing the interpretation.



Paper Pearls, 2000
Archive stickers, thread
Photography: Uta Eisenreich

exercises in style

Cast beads, cut beads, drilled beads; glued, stitched and re-strung beads: the captions in the book allude to a systematic exploration of bead-making, to a continuous to and fro between *this* timeless archetype, and *that* version of it. In effect, it is impossible (and uninteresting) to insulate van Kouswijk's neckpieces from either the shadow of the archetype, or the operations that give it a twist. Each version has its own bead-making protocol and its tease is in the way the resulting assemblage both matches and belies the archetype. You will enjoy, as I have, to recognize that old thing repeatedly skinned and then revived in the hi and lo of her postmodern appropriations (one of my favourites is the oxymoronic *Paper Pearls* (2000), whose 'beads' are coloured stickers stuck on a thread. Its title does not begin to exhaust the pleasure of seeing Mum's string of pearls shed a dimension, and take flight.)

absence

One of the most remarkable things about *Hanging Around* is what is absent from it. There is no introduction, almost no biographical springboard from which the

[1]. this argument owes a great debt to French sociologist Nathalie Heinich, and her analysis of the conflicting agendas that oppose the artist (who deals in the singular) to the sociologist (who tries to reduce art to universal propositions). See *Ce que l'art fait à la Sociologie*, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1998: Paris

modern reviewer might happily jump to silly conclusions, no direct reference to Manon van Kouswijk as a maker. This absence is a theme that runs through the book: it makes room for her associative visual approach and allows us to navigate between the *found* and the *produced* without the burden of authorship.

But what kind of authorship does the book illustrate? Indeed, the bead-making project is affiliated to two very different types of gestures: one that is repetitive, stationary, and predictable, and another that progresses through experimental iteration, shortcuts and ruses. The former gesture is mimetic: it appeals to the universal (as van Kouswijk does, by imitating a generic form that exists everywhere and belongs to everyone). The latter gesture is craft's answer to the modern definition of the artist: disruptive and singular, it seeks to challenge the convention of the medium (as van Kouswijk does, by using an extended technical repertoire, and making the self-conscious absence of style her recognizable signature).^[1]



Perles d'Artiste, 2009
Modeling Porcelain,
glaze, thread
Photography: Uta Eisenreich

performance

The dénouement of the book comes with *Perles d'Artistes*, a series of "necklaces made on the basis of a strict method; the beads of no.1 are made with two fingertips, no.2 with four fingertips, no.3 with six, no.4 with eight and no.5 with ten."

First exhibited in 2009, the objects offer up to

scrutiny little else than just that: a series of white (and then coloured) strung beads sporting a growing number of facets, arranged on the page (and in the gallery) as one would geometric models, from the simplest (a large lentil) to the more complex (an irregular decahedron).

More than any other works in the book, they flaunt the systematic, the serial, in the face of whatever notion of artistic spontaneity we hold dear. Each necklace implies a 'how to' that frames the way it looks, and spells out its position in a series. Not only do we know exactly what to expect, but the gesture of making a bead is already a classification, a standard of measure: *that* bead is *this* gesture.

There are several things at play in this redundant operation. To begin with, it shifts our attention away from the object as commodity, onto the performative act of making. Second of all, it slips a mirror between history and the maker. Gone the pretence of paying homage to the archetype: this is about listing the tools of one's trade and drawing, one set of fingers at a time, a negative portrait of the maker's hand. The result is a conflicted statement of authorship. At once ironic (any child could have done this) and nostalgic (this is, after all, the ultimate hand-made piece, all fingerprints and signatures), it means to plot, on either side of the same coin, the particular position of craft in the fine arts: singular *and* generic, authorial *and* derivative, spectacular *and* predictable.

epilogue

It takes a while to get a sense of van Kouswijk's practice: the multiplication of visual reference, mentioned at the beginning of this text, does a good job of hiding the complexity of her interpretations behind a veil of evidence. Nor does she let us get away with a clear definition of her practice. Too many mirrors bookend her library of forms: her research pegs her as a detective, an imitator, a commentator, and an historian – all roles with a different relationship to reality. But caught in the glare of these various disguises, like a fisherwoman in her own net, you will find the author, whose invention is the purpose of the book.