

Taste Remakers: On the Radicality of the Radical Jewelry Makeover  
by Claire Pentecost

*“Change your life!”*

*--Ghanaian saying to answer any complaint.*

It is said that the conquistadors of the 16<sup>th</sup> century were so intent on finding gold that natives of the subsequently American continents thought the European strangers must eat the stuff. Despite the world changing power of the appetite for precious metals, in the end we must agree that it does not sustain life. However, in the capitalist system that has developed since that era, it certainly can be difficult at times to separate our needs from our wants.

In an affluent society like ours the better part of economic circulation is not around basic needs but around ever shifting desires. If all our economy had to do was satisfy our need to be fed, clothed and housed, ours would be a different world and we would be a different sort of creature. But the imperative of our economic system is growth, and the genius of capitalism is that it stimulates and satisfies our desires in a potentially infinite cycle. This is growth based on luxuries, whether it's a fabulous pair of earrings, a snazzier cell phone, or simply bath towels in a novel color. It's complicated because self-perception has become so deeply associated with taste.

There are of course, at least two serious problems with such a system. One is that growth is completely out of control and our biosphere can't absorb the heat and the waste of such feverish production. The other problem is that it is based on relations of violence. Almost all of those things so widely available to satisfy our desire for a richer life are produced by people whose material needs are barely met by the fruit of their labor, whose health is threatened in toxic and dangerous conditions, who witness daily the trashing of their immediate environment and whose basic security is left to bad odds.

The system is partly perpetuated by keeping those people out of our view; they are over there—even if they just on another side of town. Over here we are a bit bewitched. The spell is cast by the aestheticization of daily life; aesthetics intensify experience, multiply meanings, and diversify communication, all of which elicit deep responses in us. This is the realm of subjective experience constituting who we are. Ethics is also part of who we are though our ethical selves are rarely called out by the aesthetic economy. The two are inseparable however, as they both entail value judgments.

How can we make decisions based on both aesthetics and ethics? The first necessity is to inform ourselves in the precise ways that our “here” is connected to someone else's “there” and confront the violence embedded into most links of that asymmetrical relation. More than ever we have the tools to pursue the cognitive experience of research. In some frameworks, politics too is thought of as a cognitive activity, exercised through rational discourse, reasoned argument in the public sphere. History teaches us that this is an

illusion but the illusion still grips us and may be part of the reason so many people find politics dry or boring.

Today the emotional nature of politics is perhaps more deeply relevant than ever because of the aesthetic economy. We expect our lives to be richly expressive; every aspect of our existence—our home, our clothes, our music, travel, entertainment—is a vehicle of communicative feeling, meaning and social connection. But the cognition of the relations of production that provide these things impinges on the enhancements they offer and stimulates another sort of feelings. We are aghast to learn that the gold in our wedding ring was extracted by pouring cyanide into an ecosystem, the coltan in our cell phone was mined by slaves at gunpoint, the organic cotton in those towels was harvested in a sweatshop of the fields. Aesthetics becomes a battleground.

The Radical Jewelry Makeover is a performative event that takes on every dimension of this battleground. Based in solid research detailing the economic, social and ecological violence of mining precious metals, it offers us more than troubling knowledge about the objects that attract us. It invites us to play with the aesthetic paradigm that locks our subjectivities into normative desires. It proposes to us that we can challenge the tastes we have acquired in a predatory market system and form new tastes that can transmit informed ethical desires.

The three designer/organizers behind the jewelry makeovers could just create a line of “ethical jewelry” and market it as such. What extends their project into radicality is that they are staging the entire process as a widely inclusive public event: —the research, the call for unwanted jewelry, the redesign and remake, the exhibit of wildly inventive alternative ornaments. By doing so they constitute a counter public sphere, one that activates a politics fusing the expressive realm of aesthetics with the affective realm of ethics.

The more we learn about our world the more we realize that our system of production and consumption is practically and socially untenable. Changing this system is a vast creative project being addressed now by countless artists who have decided that the world we want is something we are going to have to make. No one invested in the status quo is going to do it. To actually live an authentic life richly experienced requires that we create social arenas to remake our own subjectivities.