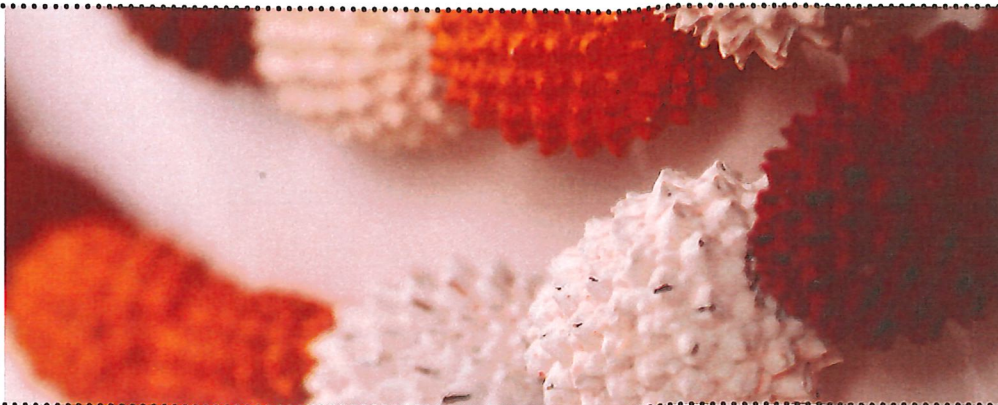
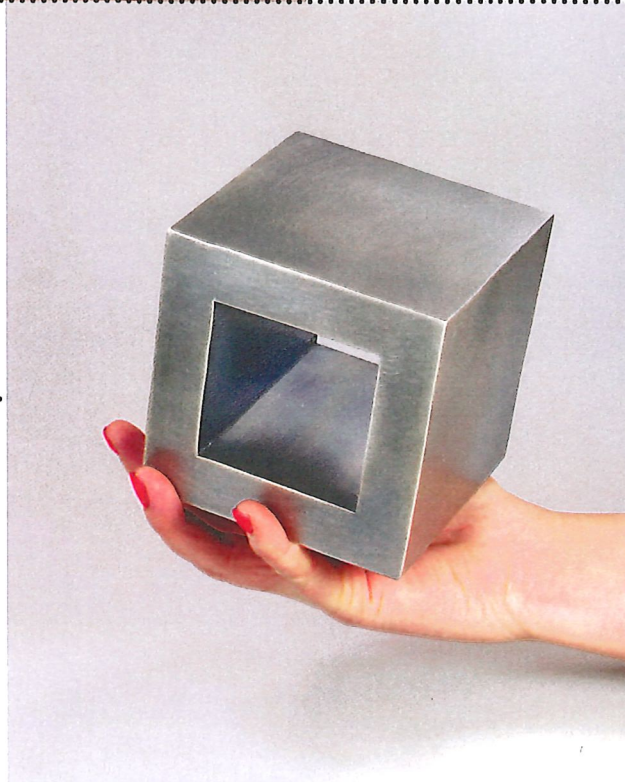
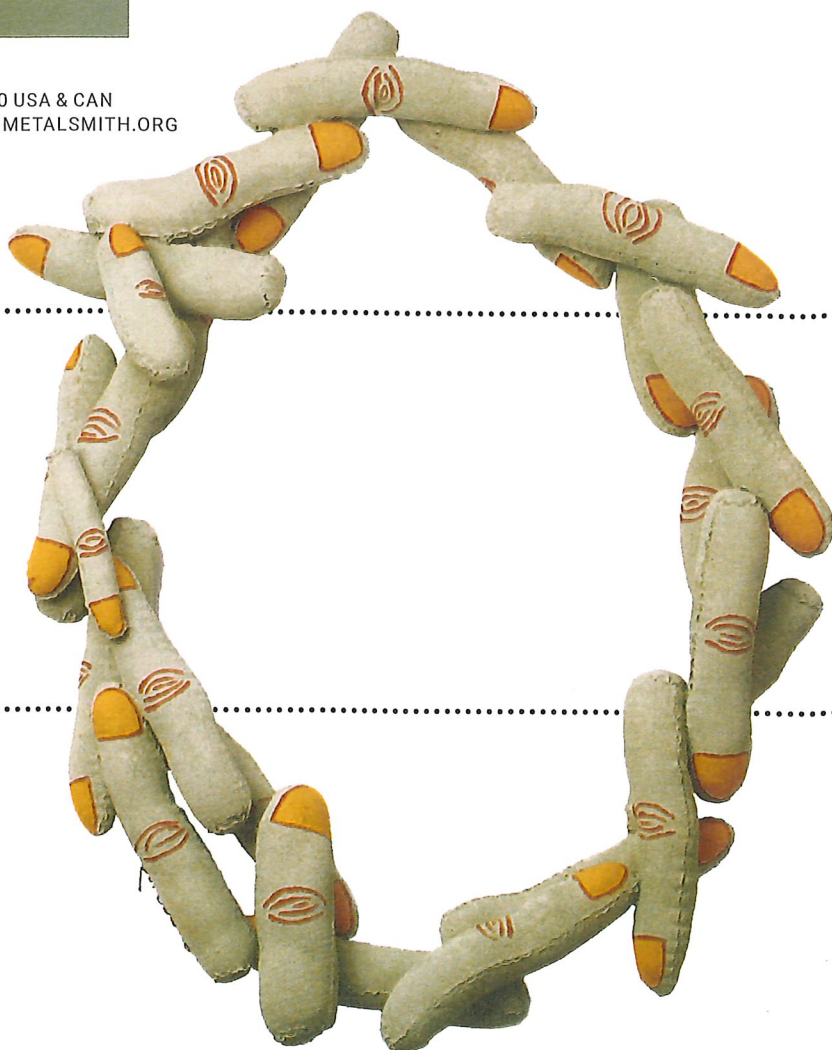


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Stringing Stories  
and Carrying  
Culture: The Art  
of Lola Greeno



Lisa Walker's  
Disruptive Jewelry

Legnica Festival  
of Silver



# lisa walker

has been called an iconoclast, a provocateur, and (unofficially) a tinkerer and a crook. Her jewelry incites enthusiasm and disgust; it is about our culture, society, her surroundings, and the times we are living in. It reflects and reacts, and is wearable. Her jewelry lets us think about what jewelry is or can be, and at the same time makes us think about our values. It requires engagement from the viewer and wearer.

Although some people shudder at the sight of the New Zealand artist's subversive and utterly un-beautiful jewelry, it was chosen as the subject of the opening exhibition at the new art gallery at the National Museum in Wellington in March 2018—a great honor.<sup>1</sup> Walker is indeed a successful artist. She exhibits and publishes all over the world at a tremendous pace.

According to Walker, "Jewelry is more a medium I landed in than a chosen one." Making art appeals to her because she sees it as the basis of humanity. Yet jewelry has a special attraction: "What I enjoy about making jewelry are the boundaries that define it: weight, size,

Above:  
*Low Culture Necklace*, 2010  
 Magazines, brass, thread  
 650 x 600 x 25 mm  
 Collection: Stedelijk  
 Museum's-Hertogenbosch  
 (Design Museum Den Bosch)  
 Photo: Lisa Walker

Previous spread:  
*Poster*, 2016  
 160 x 120 x 30 mm  
 Collaborative work Åbåke  
 and Lisa Walker, for the  
 $0 + 0 = 0$  publication

*Chicks on Speed*  
 and *Lisa Walker*  
*Brooch*, 2004  
 Plastic, hand printed fabric  
 by COS and Jeremy Scott  
 180 x 40 x 40 mm  
 Photo: Lisa Walker



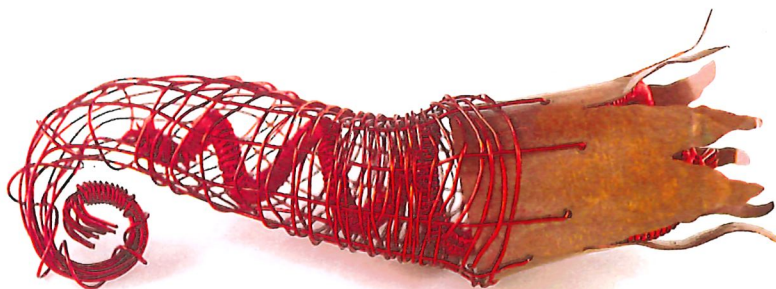
Necklace, 2019  
Merino, acrylic paint,  
stuffing, thread  
680 x 300 x 120 mm  
Courtesy Gallery Funaki,  
Melbourne, Australia  
Photo: Lisa Walker

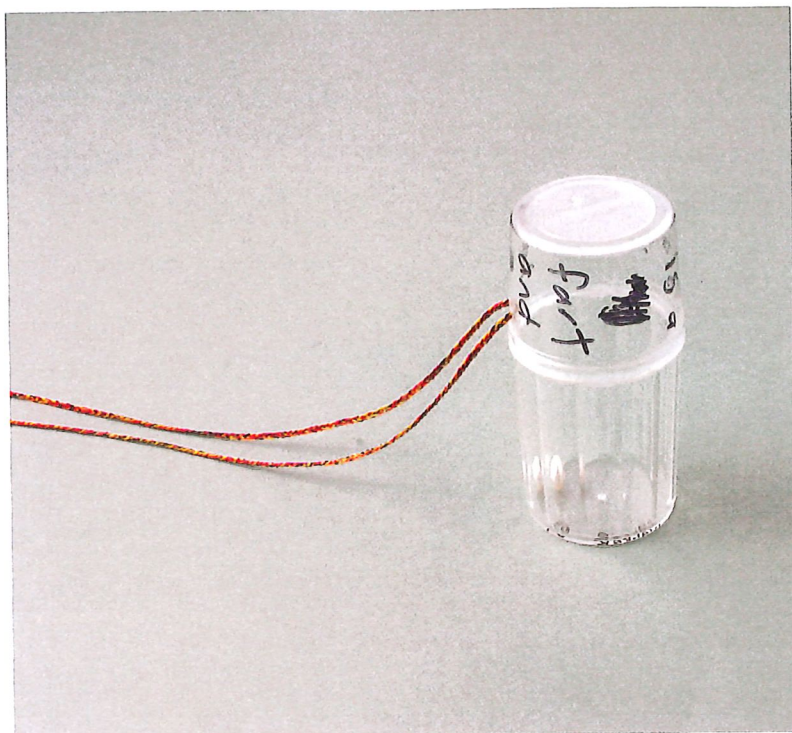
Wire experiments, No.1, 1989  
Copper, thread, photo  
80 x 20 x 20 mm  
Photo: Mike O'Neill

"Jewelry is a perfectly viable medium in which to make art and express what I desire."

materials, connection to the body. I enjoy its history and its contemporary story, both those connected to goldsmithing as well as to jewelry and adornment in other cultures. Jewelry is a perfectly viable medium in which to make art and express what I desire."<sup>2</sup>

Instead of traditional materials, Walker chooses to work with secondhand items of our consumer culture that she sees as imbued with stories. She buys objects on Trade Me (a New Zealand internet auction website), in shops, and other places, but she also notices conversations, ideas, attitudes, a trend in fashion or art, a quotation. "I'm now more influenced by what I find online on sites such as Instagram," she says. "These are the places that are available; they surround me, they are part of my culture and life." How she chooses from the abundance has to do with the impact it has on her. "There will be something





*In here is a fart and a pearl*, 2009  
Plastic, ink, freshwater pearl, thread  
200 x 60 x 60 mm  
Courtesy Galerie Biro, Munich, Germany  
Photo: Lisa Walker

Pendant, 2015  
Pounamu (greenstone), silver, thread  
240 x 170 x 15 mm  
Te Papa Museum, Wellington,  
New Zealand  
Private collection, Australia  
Photo: Lisa Walker

Pendant, 2010  
Paua veneer, wood, thread  
Collection Te Papa Museum,  
Wellington, New Zealand  
220 x 169 x 80 mm  
Photo: Lisa Walker



that resonates with me," she says. "That is not something I control; it just happens. I don't always have to understand why I'm attracted to a particular object or idea. I trust the resonance."

Walker's jewelry shows the chaos that engulfs us, and our dumped possessions that are bounced back to us. Her work can be interpreted as a statement (*Low Culture Necklace*, 2010), as an offense (*In here is a fart and a pearl*, 2009), as disruptive (the cute and fluffy necklace made from real taxidermy ducklings, 2016), as political (*Pussy Riot necklace*, 2013), as recycling (a necklace from made from discarded cell phones, 2009), or as an act of appropriation or stealing (*Painting by A. Wood, Paraparaumu, New Zealand, made in the likeness of Vincent van Gogh, necklace*, 2010).

Although Walker's jewelry might appear simple, sloppy, and unskilled, she has both a diverse and thorough training and an experimental spirit that has moved her forward. In 1988 Walker enrolled at the new two-year Craft Design program at



Otago Polytechnic Art School in Dunedin. Here she attended a week-long titanium workshop with Elena Gee (a New Zealand jeweler from the Bone, Stone, Shell generation<sup>3</sup>) that sparked her love for metal and the tools that shape it. Georg Beer, a German-trained goldsmith, taught her the basic techniques as well as an attitude of respect and honesty in working with metal and goldsmithing history.

In 1989 Walker made *Wire Experiments* a body of work that demonstrated her interest in applying textile techniques, such as weaving, in metal. Subsequent metalwork was based on simple techniques such as bending, stretching, and rolling sheet material, indicative of a directness and spontaneity in the handling of materials that would remain a crucial part of her work going forward.

After attending a lecture in Auckland by Karl Fritsch and Alex Murray-Leslie, two students from the Munich Arts Academy, Walker decided she had to go to the academy to learn more. In 1995 she enrolled in the jewelry class of Otto Künzli. At first she continued working in metal, but began using other materials, intuitively choosing them based on memories from home. "By chance I pulled up another little table next to my jewelry bench and threw some fabric, cardboard, and glue on it," she says. "I was thinking of my mother and her feminist mates, the aesthetic they have in their clothes and houses, and began



throwing together some things that were influenced by them....I didn't see them as a big deal or a big change." It was only after some "dabbling" that she became aware of the potential power of working with alternative materials.

In her early years in Germany, Walker's work consisted of accumulations of found objects and materials. White furniture stuffing found on the road ended up on her little table, because it reminded her of seeing snow for the first time in her life. Glue, a material that opposes our ideas of craftsmanship, became an integral part of her jewelry: she gave it color, mass, and physical presence. The display tables Walker created for her diploma show at the Munich Academy in 2004 were full of small things that had a rather undefined character: some were brooches or pendants, many were not. The subtitle of her exhibition, "a collection of finished pieces of jewellery, experiments, and pieces that may become jewellery," expressed her experimental and ambivalent attitude toward traditional jewelry, in which beauty, perfection, and smoothness reign—even in contemporary work.



Diploma exhibition (with detail),  
Munich Arts Academy, 2004

Photo: Karl Fritsch

Necklace, 2007  
Plastic, glue, wool  
Courtesy Masterworks,  
Auckland, New Zealand  
450 x 400 x 100 mm  
Photo: Lisa Walker



Rubbish From My Workshop  
Floor (brooch), 2006  
Various materials, glue  
100 x 80 x 15 mm  
Photo: Lisa Walker

Opposite:  
Necklace, 2016  
Taxidermy ducklings,  
thread, steel compound  
300 x 220 x 60 mm  
Te Papa Museum, Wellington,  
New Zealand  
Photo: Lisa Walker

In 2004 Walker exhibited at Galerie Oona in Berlin with the electroclash and performance group Chicks on Speed (Alex Murray-Leslie, Melissa Logan, and Kiki Moore), which formed at the Munich Academy. She collaborated with the group for about seven months, using their leftover fabrics and other scrap materials, inspired by their lyrics and conversations. Walker made a collection of fast, cheap, and not very solid jewelry with safety pins.<sup>4</sup> Each piece cost ninety-nine cents, the title of Chicks on Speed's second album (*99 ¢* released in 2003, Chicks on Speed Records). In this period, stuffed textile pieces also entered her work. The collaboration was important for Walker, as it set free ideas that were already latent, and made her aware of the importance of being influenced by other artists, trends,

and cultures. Her work grew bigger and more colorful.

As a lover of visual culture and communication, Walker is interested in the book as a medium. After the publication of her first small book, documenting her diploma exhibition in 2004, Walker published *Unwearable* (2008). With its unusual size of 13 by 51 centimeters, the book is the physical manifestation of a comment that is often delivered about her jewelry: the misconception that it is unwearable. Her next book, *Wearable* (2011), was a collection of full-page selfies of Walker wearing her jewelry. Then came *0+0=0* (2016), a collaboration with the transdisciplinary design collective Åbåke.<sup>5</sup> The book's design played with images and fonts in ways that validated the in-between, elusive, and subversive nature of

Walker's work.<sup>6</sup> In early 2019, *An unreliable guidebook to jewellery by Lisa Walker* was published by RMIT Design Hub Gallery in Melbourne, Australia. Apart from the images, central to the book are the many quotes that are important to Walker from her writing and the writings of others.

By the time *Wearable* was published, Walker had already moved back to New Zealand with her partner Karl Fritsch and their children. After fifteen years of living in Germany, she looked at New Zealand with fresh eyes. Everything amazed her. Inspired by this new awareness, she made *Newtown necklace* (2010), named after the neighborhood where she had her workshop. Says Walker, "The Newtown Necklace (...) was made of finger puppets bought at the Newtown festival, held once a year, filled with music, hippie crafts, and food stalls, a throwback to my childhood. The finger puppets became symbolic of that attitude: my childhood and life in New Zealand in the '70s, mixed with contemporary culture."



*"If someone gifts me an object, then the act of giving it to me is enough reason to use it somehow in my work..."*



*Unwearable* (special editions), 2008  
 Darling Publications, Cologne/New York  
 520 x 150 x 25 mm  
 Photo: Lisa Walker



As an artist who is strongly influenced by her surroundings, it's not surprising that Walker also reflects on the influence of Maori culture in her life and society. Her Maori-inspired jewelry is blunt, unpolished, and offers a new chapter to the interpretation of Maori influences by New Zealand artists that began in the 1980s with artist such as Alan Preston and Warwick Freeman. Where the artists of *Bone Stone Shell*, the landmark 1988 exhibition developed by the New Zealand Craft Council, paid respect to the utterly ignored indigenous art of the Maori, Walker's answers came in the form of a series of pendants made from colored paua shell veneer, a kitschy material with a sticky back that is mainly used in the tourist industry. Her pounamu stone pendants, compositions made of glued-together leftovers of indigenous greenstone, are a painful break with the much appreciated and honored stoneworking tradition in New Zealand. These pieces speak about respect and care for the leftovers of our consumer society, confronting us with our waste.

Similar confrontations arise in her necklace made from six fluffy taxidermy ducklings. Walker didn't kill these cute creatures. It is industry that did, a truth nobody likes to face. However, this piece of Walker's evoked much discussion and anger when posted on an Instagram feed.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to notice that people can't accept that jewelry can be used to make a statement. Walker understands the interaction between a statement and the body, but it is telling that this piece ended

up in a museum collection and not around the neck of a dedicated follower of contemporary jewelry.<sup>8</sup>

Someone might think her way of working is easy—putting things together and attaching a cord—but the process involved in Walker's work is very important. Some objects may inspire a direct response, while another object may linger in her studio for some time before she finds a use for it. In rare cases, the story of the process has become part of the piece, as with a necklace made from a leather bag that was given to her: "If someone gifts me an object, then the act of giving it to me is enough reason to use it somehow in my work. The fact they have chosen that material with my work in mind." The bag

(used as a pendant) is covered under a text describing the genesis of the work, how she was gifted this bag, that she imagined it covered with spraypainted dots, and how these dots didn't look the way she wanted them. Here she is actually busy "decorating the decoration."<sup>9</sup> The one who owns this necklace becomes part of the story by reading it and wearing the bag in its new role of a pendant as a testimony.

Walker's 2018 retrospective exhibition *I Want To Go To My Bedroom But I Can't Be Bothered* (a title that deserves careful consideration) opened in New Zealand, and traveled to Australia, and the Netherlands. The installation design (by Walker) was

Someone might think her way of working is easy – putting things together and attaching a cord – but the process involved in Walker's work is very important.



Painting by A. Wood, Paraparaumu, New Zealand, made in the likeness of Vincent van Gogh, 2010  
Canvas, acrylic paint, stuffing, thread  
700 x 500 x 50 mm  
Private collection, London  
Photo: Lisa Walker

Newtown Necklace, 2010  
Knitted finger puppets  
500 x 350 x 60 mm  
Collection: Françoise van den Bosch Foundation / Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
Photo: Lisa Walker

Opposite:  
Pendant, 2010  
Leather bag, spray paint, ink, string  
620 x 450 x 20 mm  
Photo: Lisa Walker

different in each venue. Thanks to impressive architectonic interventions and subtly painted surfaces, Walker created adventurous presentations immersing viewers in her bewildering world. "When the intention is solely to make something weird," she says "the piece is always good."<sup>10</sup> Anyone who takes the time to look beyond the weirdness discovers that Lisa Walker is empowering jewelry with critical and social engagement in ways that have never been done before.

*Liesbeth den Besten is an art historian, based in the Amsterdam region, who works as an independent writer, teacher, lecturer, and curator. She teaches jewelry history at Sint Lucas Academy in Antwerp. Her book, On Jewellery: A Compendium of International Contemporary Art Jewellery, was published by Arnoldsche in November 2011.*



<sup>1</sup> The exhibition *I Want To Go To My Bedroom But I Can't Be Bothered* is a retrospective showing thirty years of jewelry by Lisa Walker. / <sup>2</sup> This and all other quotations are from e-mail interviews with Lisa Walker, answered on February 20, 2018, and May 31, 2018. / <sup>3</sup> The traveling exhibition *Bone Stone Shell: New Jewellery New Zealand* (1988), was the first milestone in New Zealand jewelry. It identified jewelry by the indigenous materials used and the idiosyncratic style that was a result of the materials and the influence of Maori culture. / <sup>4</sup> Andy Lim, Lisa Walker, Lisa Walker: *Unwearable* (Darling Publications, Cologne & New York, 2008), 161-168. / <sup>5</sup> Åbäke in Swedish means 'something in the way, something clumsy, monstrosity'. / <sup>6</sup> *O+O+O* was a collaborative project with Dent de Leone and Åbäke from London. / <sup>7</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/liesbethdenbesten/?hl=en> Posted on April 22, 2019. / <sup>8</sup> The necklace was acquired by the National Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington. / <sup>9</sup> Kate Rhodes, Nella Themelios, *An Unreliable Guidebook to Jewellery* by Lisa Walker (RMIT Design Hub Gallery, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, 2019), 127. / <sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 437.