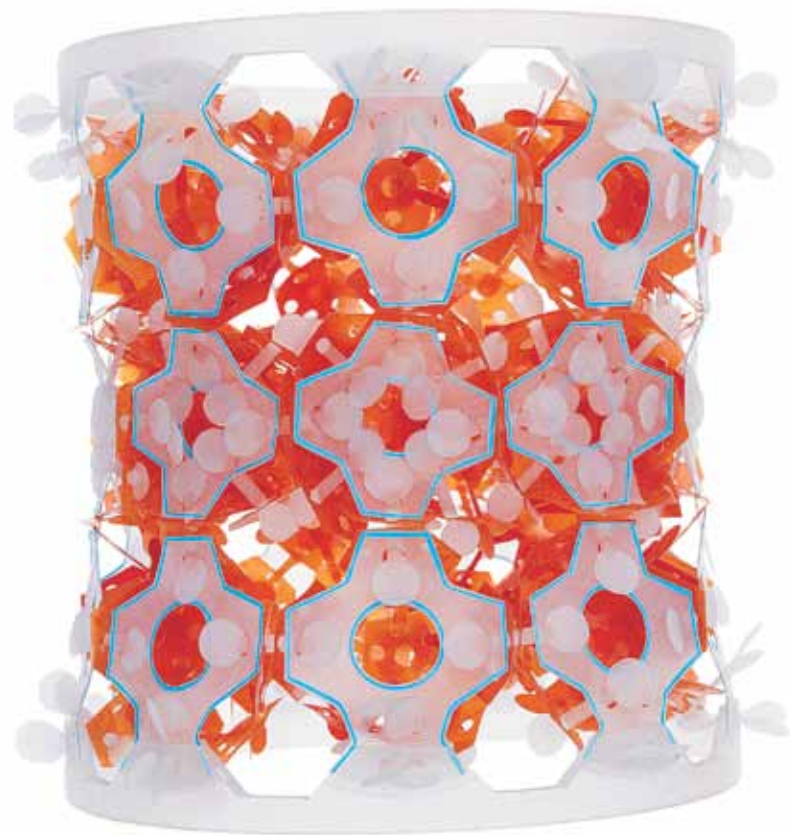


Svenja John

Jewelry Auteur

BY MARJORIE SIMON



Lapido (bracelet), 2001
polycarbonate
width 4 3/8"
PHOTO: SILKE MAYER



Breath (brooch), 2001
polycarbonate
diameter 3 1/2"
PHOTO: SILKE MAYER

OF JEWELRY MAKING, German artist Svenja John muses, “I think you must be an auteur.” Coined by French film director Jacques Truffaut, the term describes directors whose command of the medium, technical competence, personal style, and “authorship” of their work is unmistakable. John believes jewelers must do no less: they must “own” their work, it should be well made, and like that of no one else. If this is true, John is the Werner Herzog of polycarbonate, the plastic from which all of her jewelry is made.

Plastic can no longer be considered an alternative material in jewelry. “Auteur jewelry” is already being made from many different kinds of prime and recycled materials. Assembled like some ethereal yet indestructible twenty-first-century origami architecture, John’s kaleidoscopic brooches and bracelets are sliced and slotted from flat sheet into three dimensions, resulting in a fractured repetition of elemental colored forms. As if seen through a microscope, the pieces recall scientific models of crystalline, organic structures such as diatoms, or tumbling pollen grains realized in international colors: Dutch orange, Caribbean blue, Mexican yellow. *Maros*, a bracelet from 2002, resembles nothing so much as a blastula, the early embryonic stage in animal development. Transparent, it contains a secret collection of colored nuclei.

The potency of John’s jewelry stems from her skill in balancing form and color. She uses color visually and emotionally, deftly pairing and contrasting complementary hues and playing with translucency and opacity. Asked about her “heroes” or influences, she names American painters Frank Stella and Peter Halley, artists who use light and color in geometric arrangement, though in truth her understanding of color puts her in league with the Impressionists too. As a colorist, Halley does seem to be a kindred spirit. John’s translucent jewelry is reminiscent of Halley’s palette of near-fluorescent, urban pink, aqua, orange, and acid green. And like Halley, her themes have to do with repetition and change, expressed through color.

John works exclusively in Makrolon brand polycarbonate,



Bugi (bracelet), 1996
polycarbonate
width 2 3/4"
PHOTO: JÖRG FAHLENKAMP

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almost infinitely recyclable. Easily worked, molded, and thermoformed, it is highly impact resistant, and able to tolerate a wide temperature range.¹ Due to its high refractive index, it retains a luminous translucency, even when abraded. Like metal, Lexan can be bent on a brake at room temperature or in a tight radius while cold. It absorbs paint and the surface can be sanded to a frosty finish and otherwise treated much like metal. Among its many uses are numerous medical applications, eyeglass lenses, riot shields, CDs and CD cases, toys, bulletproof windows, automobile headlights, and greenhouse enclosures.

Born in 1963, the year of President Kennedy’s triumphal visit to Berlin, John grew up in Duisberg, an ancient town in the great steel-producing Ruhr region of West Germany. She came of age during a divided Germany and now lives in Berlin, an international city with its own haunted past. After studying archaeology at Ruhr University for² two years, her true interest prevailed and she went to study goldsmithing at the Goldsmith’s School (Staatliche Zeichenakademie Hanau) in Hanau, an industrial town that has been a leading center of jewelry manufacturing since the sixteenth century.

German education for jewelers is a long and thorough process. Higher education is followed by technical training, which is itself followed by a “Master’s Diploma.” Students must have “praxis,” a practicum with a working artist; as many as ten years might elapse between entering university and emerging into the field as a working jeweler. It goes without saying that by the time these young jewelers enter the world arena, they are skilled and confident practitioners. John received her first degree in Hanau in 1989. A few months later came the first of two global events to affect the course of her career: the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The full impact of German reunification may not be clear to outsiders, especially to Americans.³ The partition and occupation that followed World War II affected the arts, as well as every other part of German culture. In contrast to the dominance of social realism in the East, “in West Germany the pluralistic movements of the postwar Moderns were influential,” says art historian Dr. Renate Luckner Bien.⁴ Yet both East and West shared the values of “usability, artisanal perfection, simplicity, [and] appropriate materials” in the decorative arts.⁵ In the end, the postwar period led to very different kinds of jewelry. Until 1989 East German artists worked in virtual isolation. Because materials were scarce, they were accustomed to improvising, and their work had a raw and primeval beauty.⁶ As a student in West Germany in the 1980s, John was certainly aware of the differences between East and West German artists. Then after 1989, everything changed. A unified Berlin meant not

a thermoplastic polymer manufactured by Bayer AG and known in the United States as Lexan. It is lightweight, stable, strong, flexible, and

only a larger community of jewelry artists, but also access to inexpensive and available East Berlin real estate. The city was on its way to becoming the vibrant and creative center that it is today.

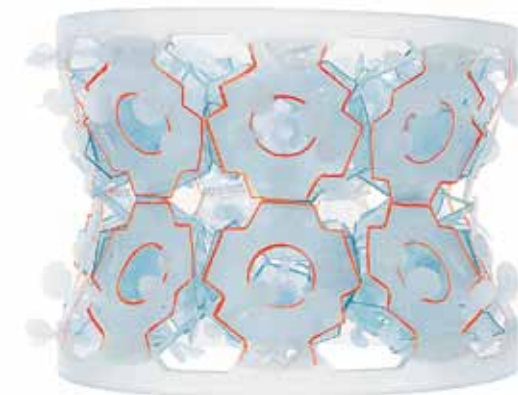
In 1991 John returned to school in Hanau for her Master’s Diploma, and it was during this time that a professor introduced her to polycarbonate. Then, with her newly minted degree and several years’ experience behind her (between degrees she supported herself and learned the value of benchwork by designing for industry in platinum), she headed for Berlin. She joined a group of seven young companies who shared an old factory floor in an affordable neighborhood near the former Wall. Among them was an advertising studio whose proactive approach to marketing helped her get the word out about her exciting and original plastic jewelry. She began to attract a new client base outside traditional goldsmithing circles. In the studio she fabricated her new jewelry from sheets of polycarbonate film, cutting out the multiple parts by hand with nail scissors. She was aware of waterjet cutting, a cold cutting process controlled by computer, but it was not until 1996 and 1997 that she began to have components cut with this technique.

In the spring of 1996, a pregnant friend invited John to take over her booth at the prestigious Ambiente Frankfurt trade fair, and for the first time John presented her polycarbonate jewelry to an international audience. She showed only two bracelet designs. Taking advantage of the material’s lack of preciousness, she jettisoned the vitrine, and the kinetic, colorful polygons, displayed openly on tables, communicated an unexpected intimacy with buyers. Her fresh designs, in riotous color, supported by her goldsmith’s craftsmanship, created quite a buzz. *Bugi* (1996), a free-form bracelet reminiscent of a Judy Pfaff sculpture with its wildly patterned polychrome elements, anticipated the more integrated designs to come. It would not be an overstatement to say that this exhibition and the ensuing connections she made catapulted John onto the international design map, and she immediately began accumulating awards and prizes. For one thing, the manufacturers of Makrolon supported her because of her innovative use of their material. In 1999, she won the Landespreis Berlin, an international design prize, then twice received the Bayerischer Staatspreis, Munich, and the coveted Herbert Hofmann Prize in Munich in 2004.

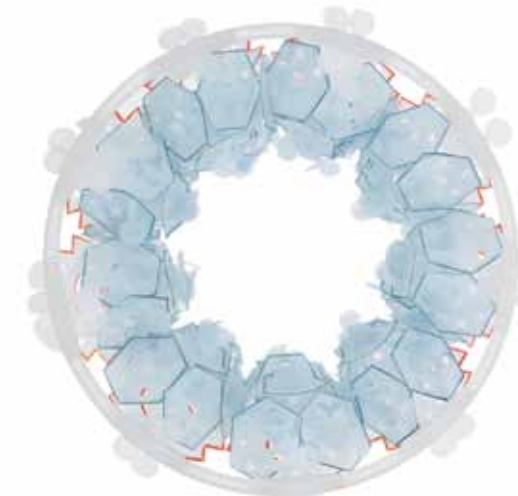
In 1997, John’s *Bracelet No. 1*, a combination of white painted plastic and stainless steel parts, was shown in an issue of *Design Report*, a design magazine printed in Germany but published worldwide. The same year, John’s jewelry was then shown at the opening exhibition of the Material ConneXion headquarters, a global materials consultancy in New York,⁷ which led to an invitation to Premiere Classe, a Paris Fashion Week accessory trade fair considered to be indispensable for fashion designers.⁸ After a few years at Premiere Classe, John met haute couture designer Christian Lacroix, who asked her to design jewelry for his 1999–2000 and 2000–01 collections. Those years



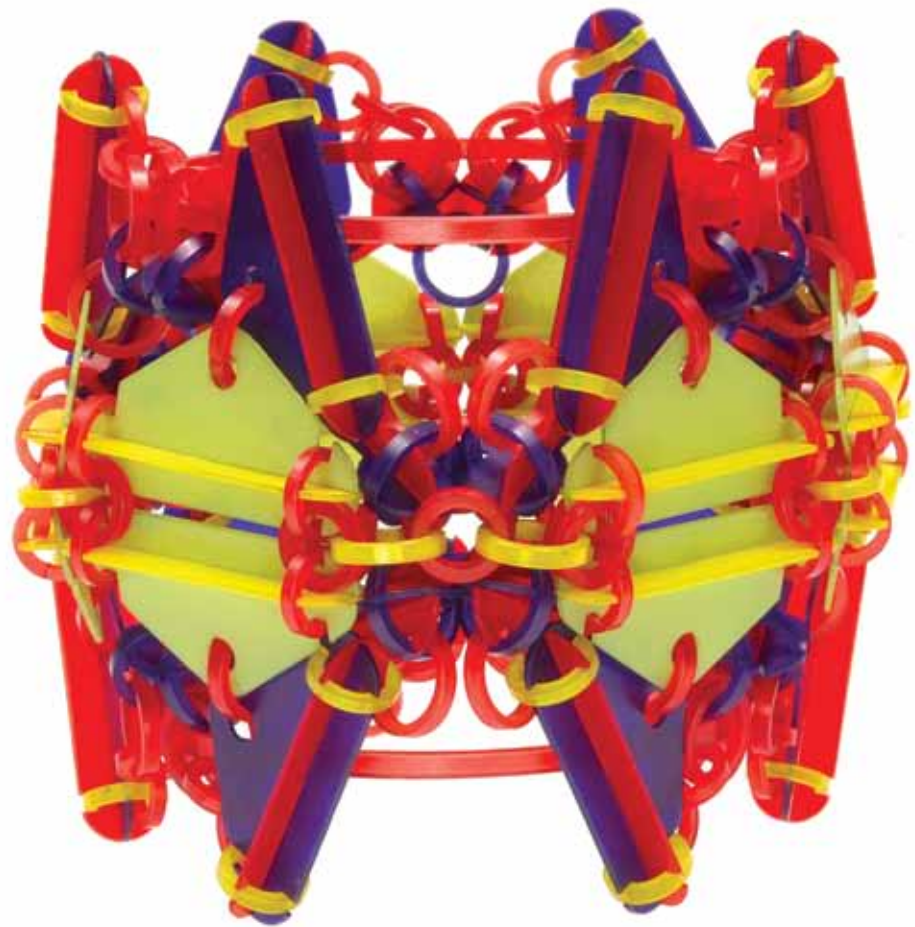
Maros (bracelet), 2002
polycarbonate
width 3 1/8"
PHOTO: SILKE MAYER



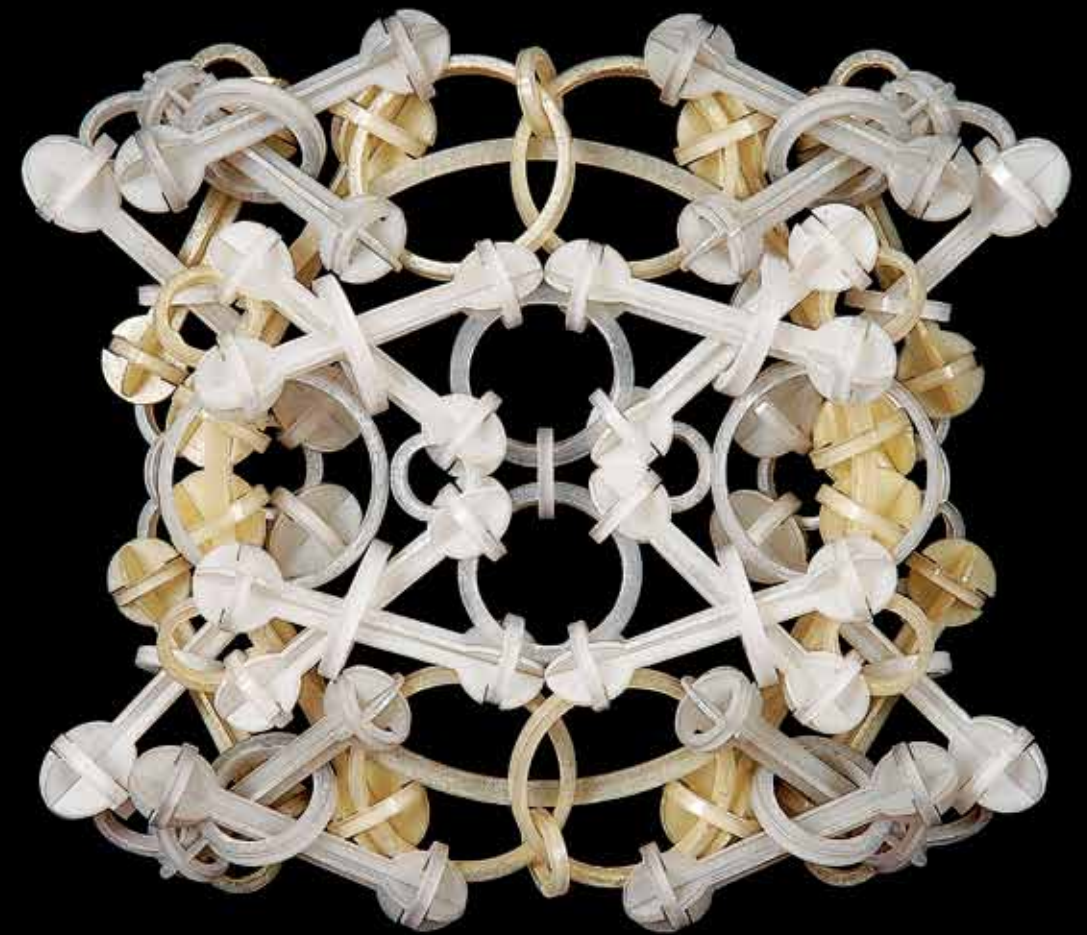
Palido (bracelet), 2001
polycarbonate
width 3 1/8"
PHOTO: SILKE MAYER



Palido (detail), 2001
PHOTO: SILKE MAYER



Rudny (bracelet), 2007
polycarbonate
width 3 1/2"
PHOTO: TIVADAR NEMESI



Orel (brooch), 2007
polycarbonate
4 x 4 1/4 x 3/4"
PHOTO: TIVADAR NEMESI

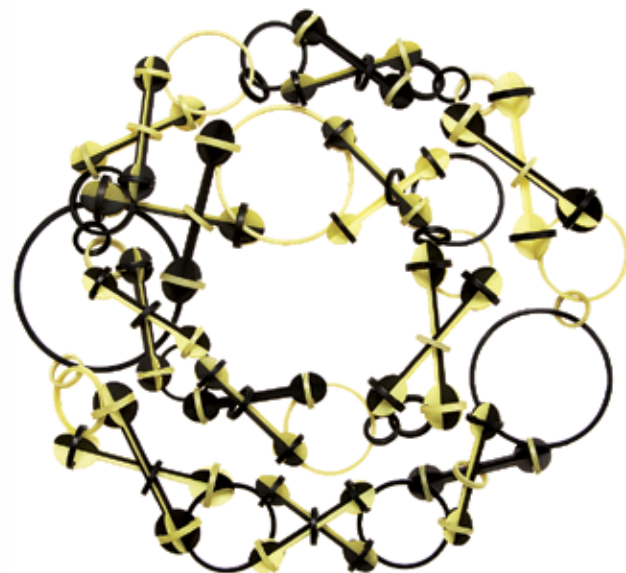


Lipka (brooch), 2010
polycarbonate
diameter 4 3/8"
PHOTO: TIVADAR NEMESI

were a youthful hive of hyperkinetic activity, deadlines, and Parisian excitement.

Then came the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the collapse of the international luxury market. John says, "All the foreign customers who normally visited the fashion shows in Europe, especially Paris, canceled their flights." The two years it took to recover was too long for many small independent designers to wait. Fortunately, John had begun to show her work in art jewelry galleries, the first being Gallery Biro in Munich, the only gallery specializing in all plastic jewelry. Since then she has had more than 25 solo exhibitions in Germany, Italy, Australia, Japan, Holland, and the United States, and her work is in museum collections in nearly all of those places. Her jewelry has been shown at Schmuck in Munich on numerous occasions and was first presented to American audiences at SOFA/NY by Jewelerswerk Galerie as early as 2002. In 2009 she was invited to spend two months in residence in Australia, and in 2010 she became an artist in residence at University of the Arts in Philadelphia.

Another "hero" is the indefatigable Dutch designer and auteur jeweler Gijs Bakker. John admires Bakker for at once designing multiples, one-offs, and objects for use, while commanding significant prices for his work. Like Bakker John controls all aspects of her work, from installations to catalogue presentations. Under her direction, for example, the models in the photos make eye contact with the camera, reinforcing jewelry's fundamental human connection. Work represented in her first catalogue published in 2003, called simply *Svenja John*, floats ethereally on the page, allowing light to illuminate the layers and interior structures. Because the images are



X001 (necklace), 2004
polycarbonate
length 22 3/4"
PHOTO: SILKE MAYER

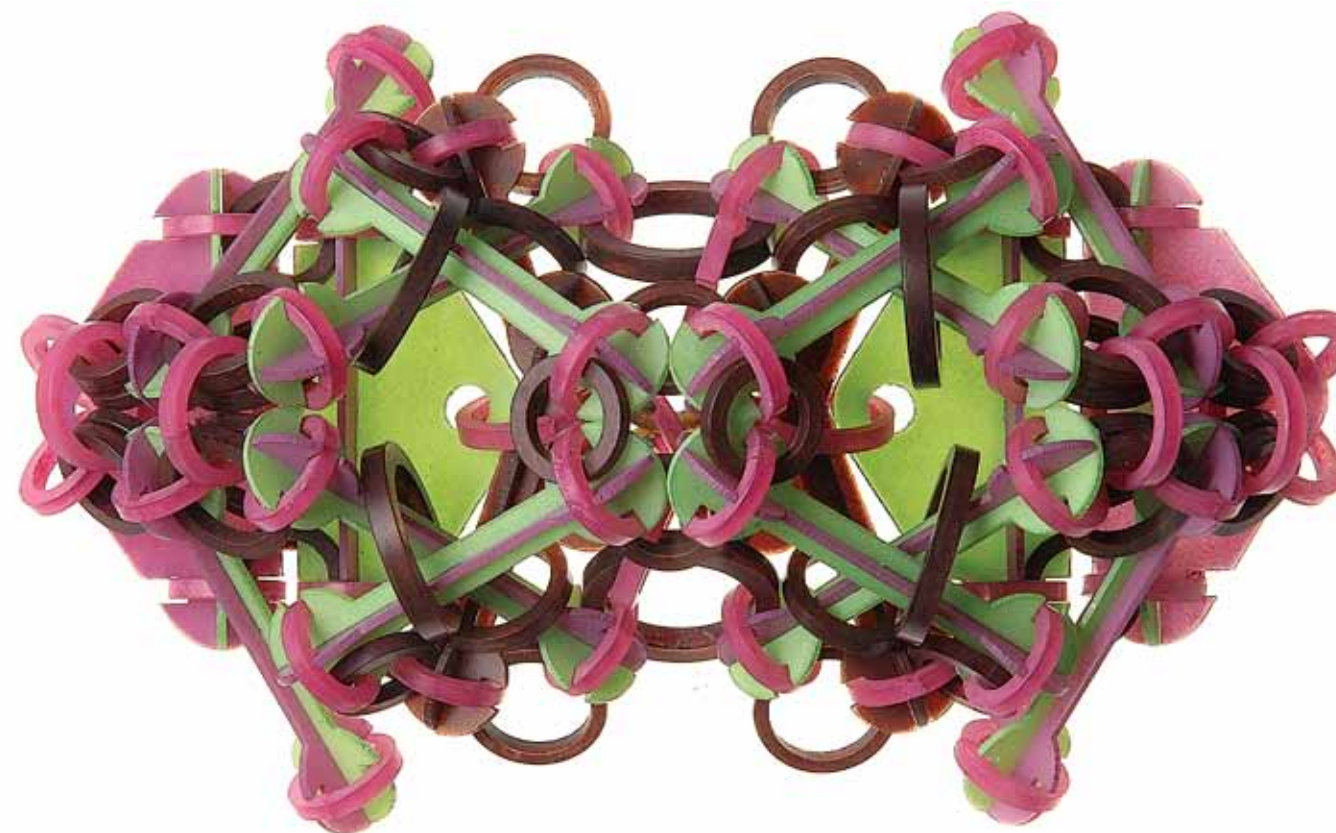
larger than life, the pieces' miraculous construction is visible, allowing viewers to see how a component might be configured to create an entirely new form with an entirely different emotional valence.

Although John produces her bracelets in series, each one is unique, with designs reconfigured with new colors every six months. She also adjusts the size of her bracelets every two years because arm diameter is increasing. Most titles of works are chosen almost at random from an atlas, tiny villages that have meaning only to her. To English speakers they read like the faintly quizzical names of IKEA furniture.

All of John's jewelry is produced in editions, though the coloring of each piece is unique. The evolution of her "Breath" series of brooches (2001) shows this process. *Breath 01*, a dense, transparent cluster of petals, seems a whisper of thistle in a field of summer sunlight. As if later in the day, in the blue of late afternoon, *Breath 02* takes on a cooler



Sketch for *Kabake*
brooch, 2007



Kabake (brooch), 2007
polycarbonate
4 1/4 x 2 1/2 x 1 3/8"
PHOTO: TIVADAR NEMESI



Svenja John composing *Nowa Nowa* (sculpture), 2009 polycarbonate diameter 5' 3" PHOTO: MARCUS FOLEY



Svenja John's workbench with studio rags and paint, *where?*, 2010 PHOTO: MARJORIE SIMON

palette in lavender. The trifoliate heart shape emphasizes its triangular stability. In *Breath 03* another change of palette dominated by an even cooler green makes it appear even more solid. A muted undertone of complementary orange, seen behind a translucent structural layer, enlivens what might otherwise be monochrome. Re-imagined once again in red, the simply-titled *Breath* becomes a solid-looking scarlet hydrangea.

John's work from the early 2000s is densely three-dimensional. *Palido*, one of a bracelet series, is an icy, futuristic cousin to Barbara Seidenath's contemporaneous enamel brooches, in its chilly transparency and suggested glacial strata, cracks rimmed with the glow of the long rays of the rising or setting sun. Shown in the catalogue shot from overhead, it seems to be *Maros* turned inside out, revealing its cellular structure. "Palido" translates from Spanish or Portuguese as pale, colorless, or white, any one of which applies to its implied fragility. Another in the series, with the title *Lapido* (an anagram of *Palido*) suggests stones used by more conventional traditional jewelers.

Reconfigured components continue to tumble from John's workbench. *Rudny* (2007), possibly named for a Russian village, is a taut spiky spidery cirlet, reminiscent of a sleeping bat; unfolding and dominated by opaque primary colors, it seems the opposite of the ethereal *Maros*. The bleached bones of *Orel* (2007), (an area in Russia) emphasize the connections rather than the form. Many pieces from this time use an X and O combination that offers a maximum flexibility in both linear and volumetric design. Barbell-shaped connectors have elongated to femur-like

solidity and the whole configuration emphasizes the angularity of line and connections. The recent *Lipka* (2010) (referring to a group of Lithuanian Tatars) is airier, lighter, stripped of its contents, an opaque desert star in sand and yellow or a glance back to the '70s.

"Series X001," from 2004, marks the beginning of John's newest work, with interlocking X structure, in which the connecting elements actually become the structure. The new handbags and "X001" series of necklaces are cut from heavier stock than the foil used in earlier work. In general, the work has become more linear, cleaner, lighter in feel, and more accessible. With the handbags, John has become, like Bakker, more of a product designer. As varied as the brooches have been, the necklaces appear to offer virtually endless variations of point and line linkages. According to German curator and journalist Gabi Dewald, in this work "light plays an entirely new role....it now flashes in points of brilliance on the corners and edges of the jewelry which twists and turns as the wearer moves."⁹ It's the perfect travel jewelry in an age of metal detectors: lightweight, boldly ornamental, yet with little intrinsic value.

Ultimately, what elevates John's plastic jewelry above a sea of recycled handicrafts is that she speaks the language of classical goldsmithing. The basic building blocks of her unit constructions allow her to create a dizzying variety of configurations. The individual linkages look simple, but like the lock-and-key assembly of proteins, they form strong, stable, flexible bonds that can be applied to assembly on any scale. In 2009 she had the opportunity to prove it. Following an exhibition at Gallery Funaki in Melbourne, Australia, she traveled to Nungurner, Victoria, to the shared studio of Dore Stockhausen, a friend from goldsmith school, and Marcus Foley,¹⁰ where she completed a sculpture commission for a private client. She created the fully three-dimensional orb, more than five feet in diameter, as a gargantuan version of a classic brooch—dense, ingenious, lightweight and light-diffusing—transported it by train to Melbourne, and assembled it onsite. After years of manipulating her modular elements, John knows exactly how pieces will fit together and she can easily visualize their assembly. John frequently envisions her works while she is on vacation, at the seashore in France, relaxed and away from her studio. Working from models cut from travel postcards, she creates the components of the next series. *Kabake* (2007) looks like an x-ray of a louse, and probably makes sense only to John herself. Filled in with color, it gains more of its eventual personality. Such sketches become computer-generated drawings of elements that will then be cut by waterjet.

After receiving all of the components, John begins the task of detailing each piece. They may be hand-sanded before painting. Up to three coats of specially selected paint are applied and manipulated with squares of carefully chosen 100 percent cotton cloth. The soft cotton, like an old diaper, absorbs exactly the right amount of paint, leaving behind exactly the right amount of color. Edges and planes are each treated differentially. By using

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sheets of Makrolon up to four times thicker than the film she started with, John now has visible edges to hold a volume of paint, giving her more color possibilities. This new group of brooches contains elements more openly

suggestive of space travel, rockets aimed toward each other. Saturated complementary colors, cool aqua on top with hot orange visible beneath, form a skeletal but sturdy scaffolding with no sight of the ground below.

Svenja John is emblematic of the many contradictions that characterize modern life. Americans and Westerners valorize the new while searching for roots. Born to a country riven by war in ways most Americans cannot even imagine, John has wedded her ebullient enthusiasm to a German sense of order in the service of jewelry, giving expression to that which remains constant—geometry and nature—in a completely manmade material. She has, perhaps without intention, successfully addressed a conundrum of the decade: she appears to have anticipated the coming economic downturn and stratospheric cost of precious metals by continuing to produce original wearable art in an industrial material. She believes her choice of material is modern, but the way she uses it and the way she puts it together show an age-old respect for craftsmanship and order. As John says, "I am German, after all."

Marjorie Simon is a Philadelphia-based jeweler and writer.

1. See video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsIs5ZPCUnE
2. It is worth noting, however, that John grew up in a society in which making jewelry mattered. The Deutsches Technikmuseum Berlin, the new Museum of Technology, devotes an entire exhibit hall to Jewelry Manufacture, equating it with Air and Space, Navigation, Rail, Photography, and other important technologies. All the tools, machines and processes are illustrated in a life-size walk-through shop, which also contains a working "goldsmith's workbench."
3. The gulf between American educational orientation and the more conceptual approach of Europeans in general, as well as the attention given to visiting West Germans such as Klaus Bury and Hermann Junger in particular in the 1970s and 80s, tended to obscure the very different situations in the East and West.
4. Renata Luckner-Bien in Collection Feldversuch- Klasse Dorothea Pruhl (Nijmegen, Netherlands: The Marzee Collection, 2004), p. 44.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
6. To compare typical jewelry from East and West Germany see the following books: Klasse Dorothea Pruhl, op. cit., and Munchner Goldschmiede, Schmuck und Gerat 1993, Munchner Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany.
7. www.materialconnexion.com
8. www.premiere-classe.com
9. Gabi Dewald, on Velvet da Vinci website www.velvetdavinci.com/show.php?sid=124.
10. See *Nowa Nowa* sculpture

Furthermore:
www.svenja-john.de
www.jewelerswerk.com
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