

# Politely turning our backs to craft

I recently had the opportunity to spend time in Munich during the week of Schmuck. The trip was invaluable and surprising, in that it wasn't the work itself—and there was LOTS—that had the biggest impact. Don't get me wrong, it was amazing to see so much work in such a short amount of time and to experience pieces firsthand that I had only seen in print. Norman Weber's brooches were much less demure than I imagined, having a scale bold enough for a brooch to also exist as a standalone object. Some of the more transient spaces housed work from younger artists I was unfamiliar with but whose work I was happy to be introduced to. Also, it interested me to see some of the work I expected to have a high level of craftsmanship, didn't.

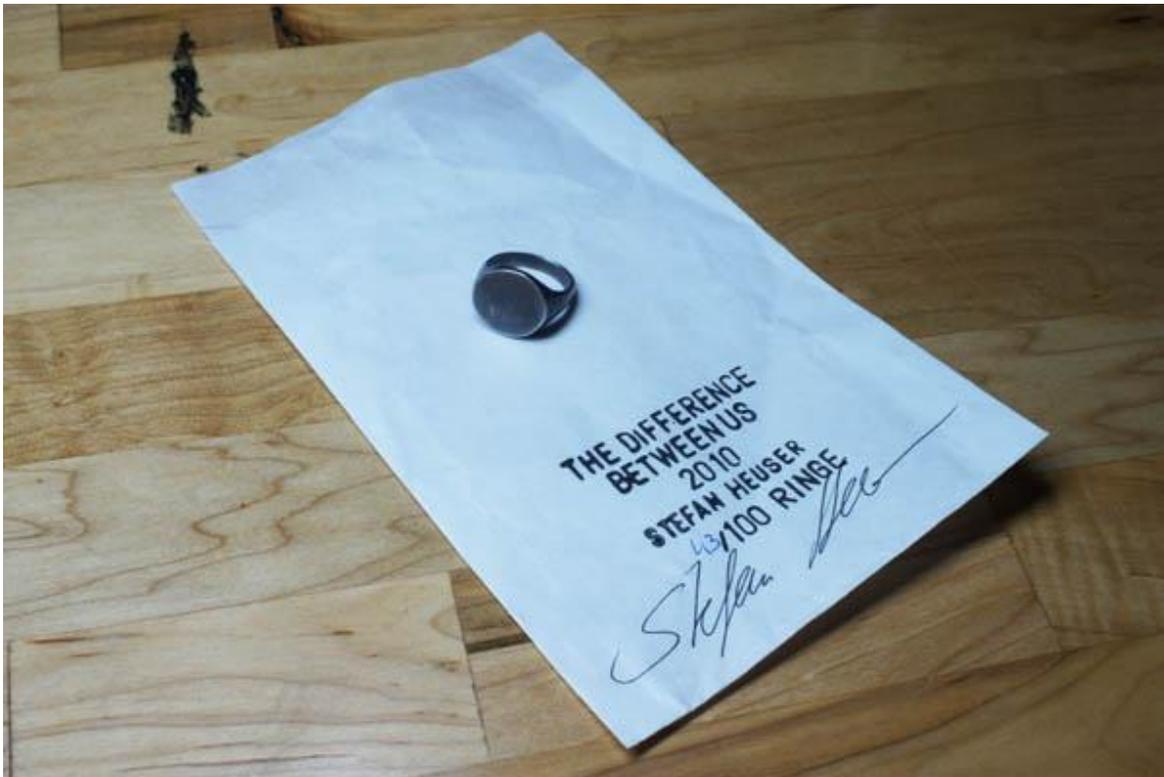
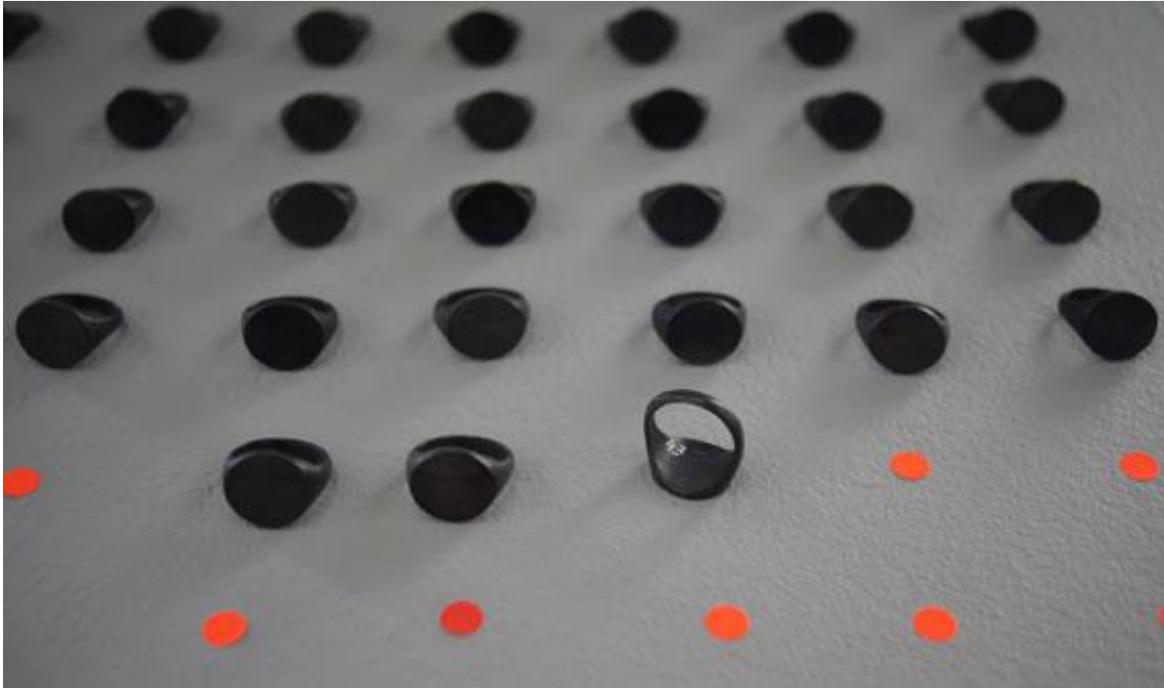
I kept thinking about the relationship between spontaneity and craft; are they mutually exclusive? Do we expect less from new and non-traditional materials and technology? I have my own instinctual answer that new technologies or materials shouldn't be held to a lower standard than those that are tried and traditional; experimentation isn't the end of the craft—it's the beginning of it. Honestly though, I'm still mulling that one over, and besides, towards the end of my trip and since returning home it was ultimately another question that's haunted me: **What is the cost of craft—and I don't mean a labor rate—when we want to expand the reach of our work.** What opportunities are allowed to pass and what potential business is neglected by choosing creative paths that emphasize handwork and lead to inherently higher pricing?

My quandary was set into motion by two pieces of jewelry in Munich, the first two pieces of jewelry I ever bought. I bought both for three reasons: I liked them aesthetically, the intention resonated with me, and most importantly—I could afford them. The first piece was a ring from Stefan Heuser's *The Difference Between Us*. (Pictured below—orange dots placed for sold rings)



*The Difference Between Us* consists of 100 cast sterling rings nearly identical save for an edition number. There's something else that no two have a like—price. To ascertain the price of each ring, multiply the edition number times one euro: #1 = €1, #100 = €100. As you can see the majority of the rings sold were on the lower end, except notably, #100. So, although the difference between us can be many things it's most likely one of two things: how much money we have available to spend or how

much we are willing to spend. Ring #100 was the back-left corner as pictured above, with numbers descending across then down. (I should disclose that I too bought the cheapest available ring at the time, #43, upturned).



What fascinates me is the idea that the lowest-cost rings are, in effect, subsidized by those priced higher. With the right timing, anyone could walk in off the street and have a piece of contemporary jewelry for €1, regardless of knowledge, appreciation, or experience with it.

I wonder if we are alienating proto-collectors with generally prohibitive prices before they are educated enough about the field to appreciate what we do. The common question of “*where are the new/young collectors*” comes to mind, and part of the answer is: *They’re broke*.

The second piece of jewelry I took home was a production piece designed by Herman Hermsen (*below*). I came across the piece in a small bin near the cashier at the Kunst + Handwerk Gallery of the Bayerischer KunstgewerbeVerein (Bavarian Arts and Crafts Association). Of course, Hermsen is known not only as a jeweler but also as a product designer. The small sea of brooches were made in varying colors of plastic vacuum-formed over gemmy clusters, each with what I believe is a simple stud earring with a clutch back which is inserted through a hole to affix the brooch. I’ve been searching for my receipt—I know it’s here somewhere—but it was either €28 or €38. Now yes, I genuinely like it, it has an aesthetic I relate to, but what was really the draw was that it was a piece of jewelry by a jeweler whose work I appreciate and I could afford it.



I certainly didn’t go to Munich expecting to buy jewelry of any sort, but without seeking it out, I came across jewelry within my means—and it made a collector out of me. These two pieces, and my ability to purchase them, has had an impact on the way I think about my work and the range of people I want to share it with. If I can sell a brooch that represents me for \$50 and make a profit, why aren’t I, and if designing work that makes use of industrial processes and modern technology in lieu of skilled labor allows me to reach more people—by selling at a lower price—should I?

Shouldn't we be competing with cheap—in a good way—mass produced products? If 20-something year olds can only afford to buy commercial jewelry, it sets the trend and taste for their future spending when their income increases. I too wonder who will be *collecting the future*. Let's face it, as a younger jeweler I'll be depending on those people everyone has labeled *no-shows*, but what if they're all there waiting and we've been doing it wrong? We've got our store set up with the door locked and the curtains drawn.

Well known contemporary jeweler [Ted Noten](#), who had work in Schmuck 2011 from his ongoing series "Haunted by 36 Women", has been utilizing CAD/CAM technology to expand the reach of his work. Noten begins by creating a "real" object, or an assemblage of real objects, and captures their form with the use of a 3d scanner. Once digitized, the pieces can be scaled to jewelry-appropriate size and most importantly, recreated in a variety of materials. A single work can be created—and sold—as the original object, rescaled as colorful glass-filled nylon jewelry, and made in a range of metals including gold. This allows Noten to sell and interact with a variety of buyers: those that want a unique one-off, those who want a precious object, and those that want it separate from value and rarity—or can't afford it any other way. We must consider, though, that to design, produce, and sell work in such a wide range may take the time, experience, and skill of more than one person; it is Atelier Ted Noten after all.



A glass-filled nylon ring goes for € 75 (~\$110) and can be purchased directly from the Atelier Ted Noten webshop. Much of the available work is only available online, which I imagine aids in offering the lowest possible price by avoiding the wholesale/retail pricing structure.

[Miss Piggy in pink](#)

Atelier Ted Noten

Another price-conscious solution is the Icon earring series, simple silhouettes in silver of some of his more well-known pieces.

For example:

[Ted Noten Icon Earring "Bag" \(left\)](#)

Atelier Ted Noten

Superbitch Bag 2000 (right)

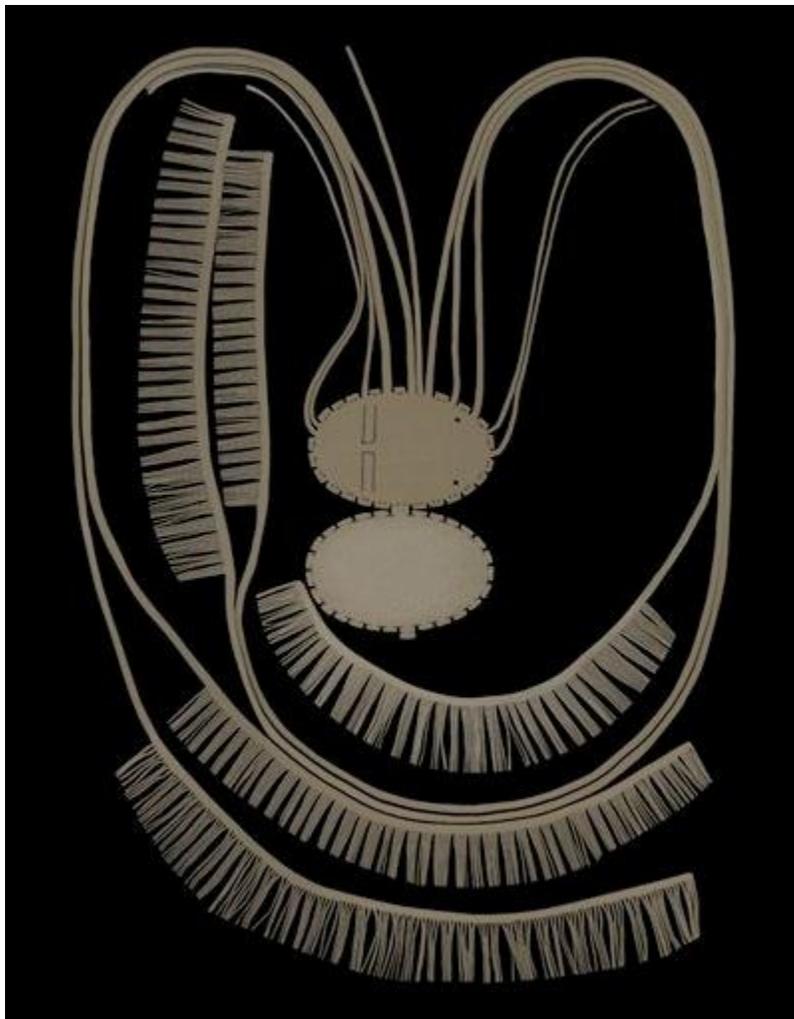
Ted Noten



For the record, I consider the castings of multiples from a master model the same as a 3d print from a file obtained from a 3d scan—one's just a much more recent technology. I feel differently about 3d prints from a file created completely from scratch, in that they are not reproductions of an actual object, but instances of a virtual object (which is not meant to be derogatory in anyway, it's just a distinction I think is important).

There are other ways to consider reaching out at lower price points. We can consider publication of artist's work as a stepping stone to collecting, but there's quite a gap (*chasm?*) between a wearable object made by a jeweler and the documentation of it. Certainly though, enticing and engaging books like those from Darling Publications and Arnoldsche Art Publishers are capable of satiating some of the desire to *own* while maintaining a hunger for jewelry.

Since last September, [Mirjam Hiller](#) has also sold digital pigment prints (which have greater permanence over dye-based prints) of the blueprints of her pieces. The beautiful prints, reminiscent of cyanotypes, don't simply document the work as an image of its final state but let the owner in on the secret of its two-dimensional origins. The prints themselves are created in editions, so although they are not unique they are still rare and very worthy of ownership.



Mirjam Hiller - *Mavalis* (1/5), 2010

There is an undeniable benefit to creating multiples; splitting the cost of designing, creating, and presenting the work among a greater number of pieces lowers the price. On the other end of the spectrum we have the importance of a unique object, unapologetic in its need of skilled attention and deserving of its high cost.

If more contemporary jewelers offered work in wide range of prices could we fertilize the barren soil? Could the seeds planted by low-price (let's say sub \$100) creative design be cultivated to produce a new crop of collectors, collecting higher and higher priced work as their appreciation—and income— increase?

I think it's half of the solution; the other half will have to wait for another day.

-Timothy