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THE MARK OF IDENTITY

Badge *n.* **1** a distinctive emblem worn as a mark of office, membership achievement, licensed employment, etc. **2** any feature or sign which reveals a characteristic condition of quality. [ME: orig. unkn]

The Concise Oxford Dictionary

The Fisher Gallery's invitation to curate this exhibition gave me the opportunity to explore a number of concepts about jewellery that I have been interested in for some time. My background has caused me to question issues of identity and how individuals construct and define their identity. I am interested in jewellery as a signifier of identity and for this exhibition have focused on the badge as such an indicator.

In general terms the badge is an item associated with jewellery, usually constructed of metal, generally round, combines text and has images that function as symbols. A military medal, brownie or scout badge are examples, as they tend to be primarily metal, and function as signifiers of the wearer's affiliation to a particular institution.

There are seven artists involved in **Badge**, each has been asked to make two new works using the given definition



Stephanie Lambert, *Badge I*, *Badge II*

as a starting point. The participants were chosen specifically to approach the concept of "the badge" in a broad context, to look beyond the traditional and treat it as a visual art concern. In order to gain this wide perspective I have included artists from a variety of disciplines, primarily: jewellery, printmaking, sculpture and moving image.

Stephanie Lambert's approach to the badge comes from this broad base, she describes the badge as a "miniaturised personal billboard"¹. Lambert's badges focus on the maker rather than the wearer, are self reflective, "somewhere between a current artist's statement and a maker's mark"². The queens chain text (used in her work since 1991), discusses political issues around the public

ownership of beaches in New Zealand. The use of this text is one identification of Lambert as an artist. With print process, the source or plate of the image is usually retained by the artist. Here she sheds both the printing plate *Badge I* and the printed image, *Badge II* and offers both to the wearer.

The badge is also a symbol that can be seen as an isolated aspect of individual identity, available for public view and open to multiple readings depending on who the viewer is and in what context it is seen. It is an object that has a relationship to the body, usually worn, and is a signifier of our "physiological and political selves."³

"It is on the body itself that we look for the mark of identity, ... The bodily marking not only serves to recognise and identify, it also indicates the body's passage into the realm of the letter, into literature: the body mark is in some manner a "character", a hieroglyph, a sign that can eventually, at the right moment be read."⁴



Fran Allison, *Fridge Magnet*

The wedding ring is a well known sign, identifying the wearer as belonging to the institution of marriage. Fran Allison presents it as a badge of domesticity for women. She plays with the word W.I.F.E., mostly replaced now with the politically correct, partner. To call oneself a partner rather than wife alludes to a different status, but Allison feels the role has not changed significantly. Allison's *Fridge Magnets* are another indicator of domesticity, but

now adorn the body, literally making the body mark, "a letter, a character"²⁵. The reading of such a sign is ambiguous, the viewer may respond in a totally different way to the wearer, a single letter is open to a multitude of interpretations.

One's identity is also open to a multitude of readings, as it is a complex and multi layered concept. Our identity is drawn from many places and we show various aspects of it to different people at different times. Psychologist Helga Dittmar suggests that "one identifies oneself, as identified by others, by being located in a common world"²⁶. So it can be said that we establish and define our identity in society by reflecting that which surrounds us.

In relation to this Andrea Daly uses materials from the beauty industry, signifying the ritual of belonging, reaching the set standard of femininity as defined by the advertised image. This is sold and reinforced to females, who consume products and reconstruct themselves, by attempting to mirror that which is presented as feminine. The silicon breast is worn inside the body, highlighting the breast as a form of decoration. Daly presents it as a badge of femininity. Another such badge is the lack of hair on legs, bikini line and under arms. She has taken the discarded hair and turned it into a bow, a symbol of prettiness associated with young girls.

The choices we make about what we place on our body can signify identity of the moment. There is an element of the ephemeral in the choices we make, based on mood, or response to who is going to view us and make judgements. We may also mask elements of identity in the same way. The clothes we choose to wear can function as a badge. As in "he wears his suit like a badge", the suit today being identified with men of importance, involved in a business activity or a formal occasion. This social reading of the suit could be seen as the drive



Andrea Daly, Breast Implant

behind power dressing for women as they enter the otherwise male dominated arena of business.



Niki Hastings McFall,
Breastplate; Badge For Mixed Ethnicity

This reading of clothing is referred to in the following reply Niki Hastings McFall received from her uncle after sending him a lapel pin containing small shells,

"I think I should try it on my suit lapel at the club for Friday Lunch. People peer at each other's lapels to identify themselves as members of the R.S.A., Rotary or what have you. I shall let them ponder this new insignia, which celebrates the unorganised hoards who enjoy the beach, dogs included"

With McFall's *Beachcomber's Badge* one can add another component each containing a new found treasure, for those who can never leave the beach without a souvenir. Certainly the artist is

a member of that club. With *Breastplate; Badge For Mixed Ethnicity*, she draws attention to the multi layered issue of cultural identity. The breastplate is an item of body adornment from the Pacific Region, used to signify a specific status of the wearer. McFall has used a combination of materials and forms from both European and Pacific traditions.

Dittmar argues "the meanings of material possessions with respect to the owner's identity must be socially shared in order to function as symbols."¹⁹ So for an item on the body to act as a symbol that can be read, there needs to be an audience for whom that symbol will have the same reading, a "relevant social reference group"²⁰.

Judy Darragh's patches draw on iconography from a number of social groups, ranging from fringe culture; bikers' patches or tattoos, to the more mainstream culture of the "baby on board" arena. They show the human need for communication, to indicate who we are. Darragh's work has a cloning origin, she uses the patch as a badge, drawing on the generic popularist T-shirt imagery. She presents these forms as a brand, a mark used to set the wearer outside of society while still remaining part of a group.

In discussing the role of jewellery Julie Ewington reveals that branding is a loaded political statement;



Judy Darragh, Patch /

sexuality (or his), thus the body is the site as well as the agent of the most solemn social and political obligations."⁹

Placing a mark on the body to show political and social affiliations may also be a show of non acceptance, a mark of resistance, may be worn specifically to disrupt or disturb the viewer.

The wearing of a badge can be a burden, carry with it the weight of responsibility.

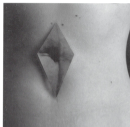
The "wearer must be prepared to accept the membership and follow the rules".¹¹ Carole Shepherd's badges are large and possibly uncomfortable but still able to be worn. With these works she wishes to reveal the weight of responsibility for both men and women during the passing down of family treasures and histories through generations.¹²



Carole Shepherd, *Last Will and Testament*

Lisa Reihana's badges also allude to this burden. The scar is a body mark that has history, a sign of a past physically painful

event. Unlike a tattoo the owner of a scar does not usually initiate this event. Depending on the owner, the scar may be treated as disfigurement to be hidden and ashamed of, or a badge of honour to be proudly displayed.



Lisa Reihana, Dimple

Reihana has framed the scar, we can stick it on the skin and wear this badge of honour without going through the initiation of pain. We can also remove it again without pain or being in the right socio-economic bracket to be able to afford cosmetic surgery.

The badges presented by the seven artists in this exhibition have covered a broad spectrum from the metal object pinned on a lapel to objects surgically inserted in the body. Each of the artists have dealt with the badge in a different way, developing beyond traditional definitions, offering affiliations to imagery or social institutions or to explore the effect of institutions on the body. What becomes clear is the body and the things we put on it act as a signifier of who we are, who we think we are and how others perceive us.

Mary Curtis October 1996.

¹ Lambert Stephanie, letter to Mary Curtis 2 October 1996

² Ibid

³ Dittmar Helga, *The Social Psychology of Material Possessions - To Have is To Be*, 1992 St Martins Press N.Y.

⁴ Brooks, Peter. *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1993

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Dittmar Helga, *The Social Psychology of Material Possessions - To Have is To Be*, pp72

⁷ Hastings McFall Niki, Excerpt from letter to her received from her Uncle Ian 12/09/95

⁸ Dittmar Helga, *The Social Psychology of Material Possessions - To Have is To Be*, pp.79

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Evington Julie, *Owners Manual*, Starform, Devonport Auckland, 1995

¹¹ Shepard Carole, Artist statement to Curator of Badge, Mary Curtis 11/ 1996

¹² Ibid

WORKS

Stephanie Lambert

1. **Badge I** : Plate copper, stainless steel
2. **Badge II** : Print fine silver, stainless steel

Fran Allison

3. **W.I.F.E.** 18ct gold
4. **Fridge Magnets** sterling silver, stainless steel

Andrea Daly

5. **Breast Implant** surgical breast implant, Latrasel
6. **Hair Bow** beauticians wax, hair, fibre glass , gold leaf

Niki Hastings-McFall

7. **Breastplate: Badge for Mixed Ethnicity** fine silver, gold leaf, 18ct gold plated brass, 18ct gold, coconut fibre cord, coconut shell, mother of pearl, beef bone
8. **Beachcombers Badge** titanium, copper, brass, fine silver, sterling silver, perspex, kina from Stanmore Bay, bird bone from Te Hunga, fan shell from Whangaparua Peninsula beaches

Judy Darragh

9. **Patch I** latex, fabric, stitching
10. **Patch II** fabric, vinyl, embodied emblem, wood

Carole Shepherd

11. **Last Will and Testament: He got the farm, she got the pearls.** copper, brass, rose stalks, wood and thorns
12. **Last Will and Testament: She got the pearls, he got the farm.** composition marble, pearls, silk tassel, china cup, gold leaf, paint

Lisa Reihana

13. **Dimple** colour laser copy, laminate, plastic
14. **Vestige** photograph, laminate, plastic

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