

# KARIN KORTENHORST – WEIRD ABOUT WIRE

'Weird about Wire' comprised two exhibitions of wire head-garments and jewellery by Dutch artist Karin Kortenhorst (b. 1961). The first of these was hosted by the University of Stellenbosch Art Gallery in October 2003. During the exhibition's opening week, Kortenhorst conducted a workshop which was attended both by students from University of Stellenbosch Jewellery Design Department and a number of local craftspeople who work primarily in wire. Some of the latter were working for 'Streetwires' in Cape Town and 'Hands' in Somerset West, organisations which manufacture and sell wire articles. Work produced in these workshops was exhibited alongside Kortenhorst's at the US Art Gallery and later at the second exhibition which took place, in November, at the Guga S'Thebe Arts, Culture and Heritage Centre in Langa, Cape Town. The project was structured in this way to foster inspiration and the exchange of ideas between students and craftspeople, many of whom hailed from vastly different backgrounds.

The Netherlands has a reputation for innovative and artistic jewellery, which is often surprising in form and use of materials. Kortenhorst combines this progressive approach with simple and inexpensive materials like wire to produce theatrical and surprising head garments and jewellery. After receiving a crafts-oriented education in jewellery design and manufacture, Kortenhorst went on to study at the Utrecht School of the Arts, which is known for its challenging arts curriculum. Kortenhorst has shown her work widely in the Netherlands, Germany, USA and Canada.

 **Dorian Maarse**  
*Project initiator and co-ordinator*





Bicycles, cars and windmills were once the most common wire objects to be found in South Africa, brought back from rural towns or art centres in the big cities. Rare were the knobkieries or isigweba covered in brightly-hued telephone wire, and, if you were lucky, small baskets made of the same. Sometime in the mid-eighties, however, there was an explosion in the craft. Soon, life-sized Harley-Davidsons vied for space on the pavement with saxophones, toothbrush holders and eggtrays, as informal traders and craftspeople plied their trade to an ever more receptive audience. Around this time artists like Andries Botha, Willie Bester and Walter Oltmann were exploring similar crafts and materials in large sculptures and installations. As South Africa sought an appropriate idiom for its emerging multicultural identity, the lines between art and craft blurred, and humble wirework found itself favourably re-evaluated.

Wire has long been a staple material of jewellers, and was in fact exclusively made in precious metals until fairly recently in its history. Always searching for fresh interpretations, jewellers have never been afraid of experimenting with cheaper and more readily available materials. This approach dovetails conveniently with the search for an appropriate contemporary practice in South Africa. Unlike fine artists, jewellers have never been as hung up on the difference between art and craft. This already provides fertile ground for Kortenhorst's project, which pays no heed to the artificially constructed boundaries between the traditions.

In South Africa, the affordability of materials is an issue that can't be ignored, given the yawning chasm between rich and poor. Through her precious treatment of cheap materials and her disregard for traditional jewellery design, Kortenhorst manages to span this divide.

Wire is sharp and doesn't yield easily – perhaps it reminds us more of fencing than cable-stitch and, as such doesn't present itself as an ideal medium from which to make clothing and other attire. Kortenhorst, however, turns that on its head. Maybe the way in which she flouts convention invites a breaching of rules. Certainly, it seems, the creative and conceptual freedom her work and teaching have engendered in her workshop participants, bears this out.

## ■ Paul Edmunds



The University of Stellenbosch Art Gallery caters for avant-garde and experimental work and in this way contributes to the current art discourse in South Africa, and at times abroad. Amongst other things, the gallery focuses on the educational potential of the exhibitions hosted there. This gallery, now part of the University's Corporate Affairs division, has a very active outreach programme that has also benefited from this project. Students from the Departments of Drama and Fine Arts, who are involved with the outreach programme, attended Kortenhorst's workshop as observers. Following this they ran a very successful and enjoyable workshop with younger learners from the Rietenbosch Primary School in Cloetesville, Stellenbosch.

'Weird about Wire' also explored the potential of collaborations between various role-players. An initial collaboration with Stellenbosch University's Department of Jewellery Design brought Kortenhorst's exhibition to Stellenbosch, which was followed by a three-day workshop with students and others. With the inter-cultural exchange of ideas it fostered, the fresh perspectives on individual's works it provided, and the general creative inspiration it nurtured, this venture proved invaluable. The exhibition's opening evening was host to yet another collaboration – involving this time, students from the University's Drama Department and four well-known Cape Town fashion designers. Each designer lent a 'little black number' that was worn by Drama students whose outfits were finished by Kortenhorst's wire head-garments.

This extraordinary project would not have been realised without the financial support and goodwill of everyone involved. Our sincere thanks go to the main sponsors – the Mondriaan Foundation in Amsterdam and the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Pretoria, who believed enough in both Kortenhorst and the vision of the US Art Gallery, to walk this road with us.

■ **Dr. Lydia de Waal**  
*Director: University Museum*







‘When I first saw Karin Kortenhorst’s headpieces, I was attracted to their scale, volume and form. They appear large and heavy but are actually light, fragile and transparent’ said Errico Cassar, Head of the Jewellery Design Department at the University of Stellenbosch. Kortenhorst allows herself to be surprised by what the materials can offer and how this directs her thematic explorations, mostly dealing with the human body. Through her work, she investigates status, hierarchy, openness and vulnerability. In conversation, she refers to her work by mentioning the paradoxes that fascinate her. She talks about ‘hero and anti-hero’, ‘contact and distance’, about the ‘crown which gives power and protection, but at the same time creates distance’.

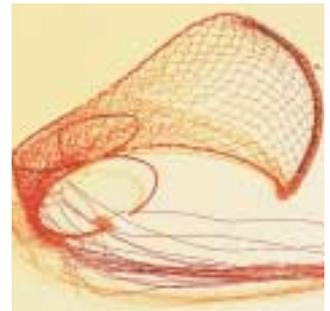
Kortenhorst’s drive is her passion for discovery, and discovering new materials is a celebration in itself. She recalls her discovery of coloured telephone wire – ‘I almost fell off my bike as I saw the beautiful colourful bundles of wire bursting out of the ground’. Around her, she adds, the rush hour continued. Nobody shared the beauty of her discovery. This fascination with these materials becomes a starting point for the objects she makes. Some simply grow out of experiments with materials – ‘Forms develop that never cease to amaze me’, she says.

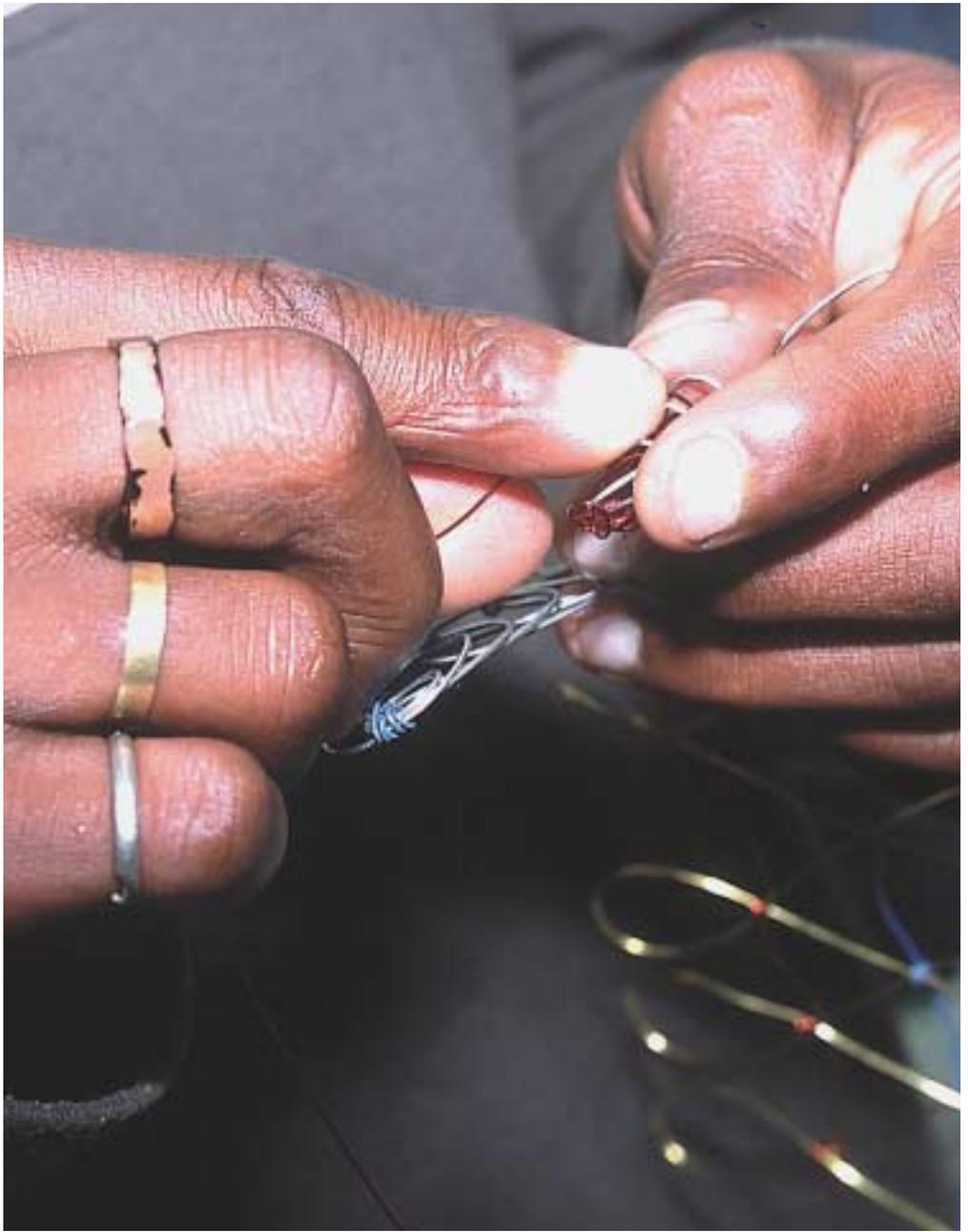
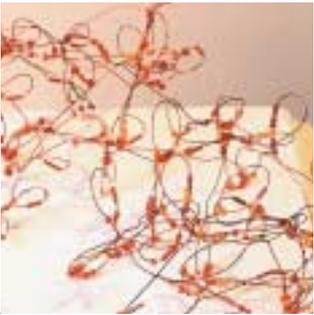
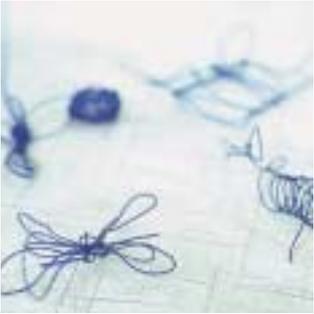
Complementing this enthusiasm is the avant-garde tradition of jewellery design out of which Kortenhorst has emerged. Dutch jewellery is notably experimental, even more so than German or British design, and this is clearly reflected in Kortenhorst’s work. Cassar adds that South Africans are not very familiar with Dutch design and Kortenhorst’s exhibition served well to expose us to this innovative tradition. Of the approach to jewellery design at the University of Stellenbosch, Cassar says that although it is traditional in terms of materials, ‘We do teach a progressive approach to design, but we apply this largely to precious metals and stones, where in the Netherlands designers work more in synthetic materials.’

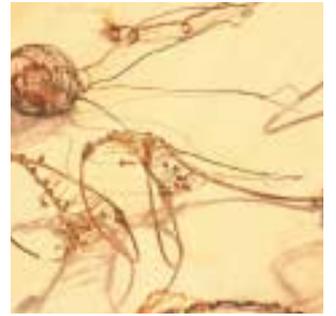
Of the success and value of Kortenhorst's workshop with third year Jewellery Design students and wireworkers, Cassar says, 'She displayed a fresh experimental approach to teaching, and provided participants with a new perspective on design. The students learned what can be done with simple materials and what can be achieved with the simplest of forms. In her own work, Kortenhorst is able to communicate ideas with the lightest possible touch. It seems that she only needs to repeat simple lines and techniques in order to create strong forms'.

Kortenhorst loves to play and, with her enthusiasm, she inspired and challenged the participants in her workshop to let go of preconceived ideas and to allow their fascination with the material and their own 'handwriting' lead them. Everyone alike joined in this play and they loved the experience of 'total freedom'. It was fruitful for the groups from vastly different backgrounds to communicate and work together, sharing their different approaches.

**Dorian Maarse**  
*Project Co-ordinator*



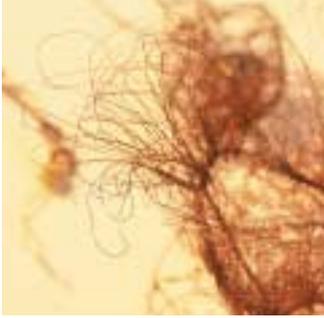




It was an honour for the Royal Netherlands Embassy to support the exhibition and workshop held by Karin Kortenhorst. Young jewellery designers and crafters were given an opportunity to enhance their skills and to exchange trade secrets while being introduced to new ideas and techniques. Being an inexpensive material, wire will always remain especially useful to younger designers and crafters. The education and development of the South African public had already begun before the workshops – with the posters, publicity and fashion show at the exhibition opening. There, the combination of designer’s jewellery and attire was revealed as yet another facet of the project’s careful and complex structure.

Furthermore, this project brought together diverse modes of cultural expression, and the outcome included an understanding of individual differences in artistic ideas between the various participants. The embassy received a lot of positive feedback from those involved in the project on the various challenges it posed and the ample rewards it offered. For all the partners in this project, it remains imperative to proceed in this spirit of creativity and co-operation, to pursue further ventures between Dutch and South African artists.

 **Mercia van Wyk**  
*Royal Netherlands Embassy, Pretoria*



**October 16 – November 6, 2003**, University of Stellenbosch Art Gallery, Stellenbosch

**November 15 – December 5, 2003**, Guga S'Thebe Arts, Culture and Heritage Centre,  
Langa, Cape Town

The workshop presented by Karin Kortenhorst to students and craftspeople took place at the University of Stellenbosch Fine Arts Department, October 13 – 15, 2003

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Ambassade van het  
Koninkrijk der Nederlanden



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