

Unstable territories: *borders and identity in contemporary jewellery*

Johanna Zellmer

Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand

E-mail: Johanna.Zellmer@op.ac.nz

Three women, three histories and three cultural influences converged in an exhibition at Alchemia Contemporary Jewellery School in Florence, Italy, in 2013. This event – aptly titled *place·ment* – presented the outcome of a collaboration by three jewellery artists from three different countries; New Zealand, Germany and Italy. The artists were drawn to each other through their differing contributions to the field of contemporary jewellery: their work can be carried on or be transported by the body and furthermore pertain to topical issues of identity, cultural representation and personal narrative. This paper explores these artists' expressions of cultural identity through contemporary jewellery practices. It particularly draws on the territories inherent to the author's own practice, being the closely connected concepts of *the nation state, borders, migration, representation and embodiment of identity and governmentality*. Naturally only a few of these enormous territories can be considered within the contexts of this brief written reflection, which likewise observes the precarious nature of international collaboration in this context.

Key words: jewellery, passport, nation state, borders, migration, identity, collaboration

Instabile Territorien: Politische Grenzen und Identität in der Schmuckkunst

Im Jahre 2013 führte eine Ausstellung in Florenz an der Schule für Zeitgenössischen Schmuck und Design *Alchimia* drei Frauen von unterschiedlicher Herkunft und kultureller Prägung zusammen. Diese Veranstaltung mit dem angemessenen Titel *place·ment* war das Ergebnis ihrer Zusammenarbeit, einer Kollaboration dreier Schmuckkünstlerinnen aus drei verschiedenen Ländern: Deutschland, Italien und Neuseeland. Die Künstlerinnen hatten sich durch ihre unterschiedlichen Beiträge zur Schmuckkunst einander verbunden gefühlt – ihre Arbeiten sind tragbar oder transportabel und nehmen dabei auf aktuelle Fragen von Identität, kultureller Darstellung und persönlicher Herkunft Bezug. Dieser Text untersucht diese künstlerischen Interpretationen kultureller Identität durch zeitgenössischen Schmuck. Er geht dabei besonders auf diejenigen Bereiche ein, die der Arbeitsweise des Autors nahe stehen – die eng miteinander verbundenen Begriffe *Nationalstaat, Grenzen, Abwanderung, Identitätsdarstellung und -verkörperung* und *Gouvernementalität*. Selbstverständlich können nur ein paar solcher weitgreifenden Bereiche innerhalb dieser kurzen schriftlichen Abhandlung in Erwägung gezogen werden, die auch die prekäre Natur internationaler Zusammenarbeit in unserer globalisierten Welt in demselben Zusammenhang betrachtet.

Stichworte: Schmuck, Reisepass, Nationalstaat, Grenzen, Abwanderung, Identität, Kollaboration

Let me begin by asking you when you last took a good look at your passport other than admiring it and reminiscing about treasured travel memories captured in colourful foreign stamps; a visual pleasure which by the way, will of course soon be a rarity due to the digitalisation of our personal information. But have you ever taken a really good look? Ever considered reading the small print, for instance? Ever wondered if the information contained in it would differ from country to country? Ever wondered why you were still holding on to this document, while admitting to yourself that it in fact does no longer capture the vital information of your changed identity? Knowing, that despite the passport's apparently factual nature, it has instead been shaped by your choice to leave your country of origin and to reside in a different part of the world on a permanent basis? This is where my engagement with the collaborative project *place·ment* started; my newly found curiosity about passports led to a new body of work for the emerging collaboration. In his essay *Returning to the surface: an archaeological backdrop to Johanna Zellmer's project on jewellery and national identity*, Pravu Mazumdar (2013: 61) considers the passport as instrument:

The nature of the passport reveals both faces of modern power. On the one hand, it represents a system of surveillance typical of the Police State and functions as a tool for the continued observation of a population and the aversion of dangers issuing from ‘dangerous individuals’.¹ On the other hand, it contains relevant knowledge of individuals comprising a population, supplying thereby a cognitive basis for the unfolding of governmental power. At the beginning of modern governmentality in the sixteenth century, the unfolding of power depended on a knowledge based on a constant stocktaking of the people and things that went to comprise the wealth administered by the state. It is in this context that a new type of knowledge was constituted through the statistical observation of populations on the one hand, as well as a systematic gleaning of data from the surfaces of things and people on the other. The passport emerges in connection with this new type of power as an element of a concerted transfer of data from the surfaces of people to the archives of the state. The emergence of the nation-state and the mass mobility of populations in the wake of the Industrial Revolution made it all the more necessary to mark out individuals and channel their movements. One of the bureaucratic instruments applied to this end is the passport.

In considering my own situation, I am a German, residing in New Zealand. Permanently. Nevertheless, to date I have not become a New Zealand citizen yet. Germany belongs to the many countries which don’t allow Dual Citizenship; although one can apply to be considered as an exemption to the rule. I had been interested in national representation and national symbols for a while and as a jeweller have found coins to be a natural material to explore questions of national representation and identity. For some time now I have been working with German eagles that I physically cut out of Deutsche Mark coins. My more recent interest in passports as an instrument of identification made me question whether the many hybrid identities in our contemporary world can in fact be embodied in a single object.



Figure 1
Zellmer, J. (2011). Hole-punched passport and saw-pierced 10DM silver commemorative coin (150th anniversary of the order Pour le Mérite, minted 9 December 1992) 105 x 135 x 5mm (photograph by the author).

I find myself frequently talking about my particular view on Germany both here and back in Europe. Conversations with other jewellers about work and life led to the recognition of shared

experiences and interests. Three women, three histories and three artistic signatures temporarily merged in a joint venture, settling on the project title place·ment. Our practices all explore work that can be carried on or transported by the body. The objects themselves consciously traverse both the fine and applied arts. Intersecting conversations pertain to topical issues of identity, cultural representation and personal narrative in the contemporary jewellery context.

Our collaborative project was launched in October 2013 at Alchimia, School of Contemporary Jewellery and Design in Italy. This institution is situated in an historical building in Oltrarno, the old artisan quarters of Florence. The placing of this collaborative work within such an environment served to highlight the inseparability of past and present which is central to the work of all three artists. The project's aim was to generate a 'conversation' at the intersection of our individual but related perspectives. Our countries of residence and origin – Germany, Italy and New Zealand – continue to shape our individual practices and identities as contemporary makers. I briefly introduce the three positions below.

Beate Eismann was born in East Germany and exhibits internationally. Her work investigates the potential of reproduction and its relationship to the object of origin. The traditional processes of printmaking have always fascinated her because they represent a very simple way to repeat an image. Playing with this discerning notion of copying, Beate scans analogue printing masters (metal clichés) and uses the ensuing digital data as the basis for generating a three dimensional "re-materialisation" which is then used along with the original to create jewellery and to form objects. Clichés are printed on plant material, which is then scanned to be re-interpreted through digital technology. When printed in 3D, the motif leaves the second dimension and reaches into the third; it creates space. The light weight of the material allows large scale jewellery pieces to be comfortably transported by the body when worn. Coloured and hand painted they raise complex questions concerning the status of original and copy, original form and reproduction, and even of the place of copyright.



Figure 2

B. Eismann, 2011, print on paper and two neck pieces from the series "printed matter". Synthetic material, dyed, painted, blackened silver. Each pendant 200mm long (photograph by Neil Pendergast).

Beate's practice repeatedly crosses and displaces boundaries between high-tech industrial printing, graphic design and contemporary jewellery. Using these modes, Beate generates a three dimensional transformation, a 're-materialization of the original cliché; she then reworks and

finishes the pieces by hand. Their final shapes not only reflect multiple print technologies but also carry an embedded reference to the long history of printmaking. By blurring the boundaries between the hand- and machine-made (or mass-produced), and by replacing and juxtaposing the original with a copy, this work unsettles the hierarchies that privilege the one over the other and embraces the creative possibilities of contemporary hybridity.

Alessandra Pizzini was born in northern Italy and works as a freelance designer and jewellery artist in Germany and abroad. She investigates the significance of intimate objects determined by their 'place-ment' in our lives. These include souvenirs, found objects, photos, heirlooms and, in particular, jewellery. In order to reflect on the specific circumstances that tie us to such items, Pizzini bases her work on evocative sets of objects gathered in her own home. The longing for such objects becomes more prevalent in those moments of transition that accompany significant changes in our lives, moments frequently marked by ritual, celebration and, of course, by the object itself. With their unique symbolic and fetishistic character, such objects seem to have accompanied our human evolution as an anthropological constant.²



Figure 3
Ancient necklace shell beads. Cro-Magnon, France
(source: Chip Clark / Smithsonian Institution image, retrieved from <http://newsdesk.si.edu/photos/cromagnon-beads>).

Alessandra chooses forms, materials and processes in an attempt to capture the affective tone of transitional moments. Her methodology draws the audience into the experiences and emotions embedded in her objects without completely decoding their secrets. In doing so, she explores the way in which belongings can become spiritual, emotional and almost bodily habitats. By de-contextualizing the objects and 're-placing' them within the exhibition space, she invites the formation of new relationships and alternative interpretations, simultaneously affirming and subverting their semantic power.



Figure 4

A. Pizzini 2013, Found and fabricated objects, mixed media, with varying dimensions
(photograph by Neil Pendergast).

As one of the three participants I contributed an investigation of migrancy to the project, addressing experienced realities of identity and location. This contribution to the larger framework of *place-ment* emerged as a direct outcome of my previous work with 10DM commemorative coins, during which the German eagle as heraldic sign turned out to be the key player. In the process of working with these coins, I became very interested in the question of national representation. Responses from New Zealand and German audiences to this work led me to question how individuals identify with the iconographic symbols of their nations. New Zealand, as a former colony with Treaty of Waitangi³ obligations, is highly attentive to the particular issues of a bi-cultural nation; a fact that confronts newly arrived immigrants with some interesting questions. As a German citizen with permanent residence in New Zealand, I am regularly confronted with the complexities of my own cultural “place-ment”.

With my work I wish to address the idea of nationhood and the relationship one has with one’s country of origin, as well as the politics that regulate citizenship and national borders. Immigrants to New Zealand who are unable to obtain dual citizenship were interviewed and photographed. Jewellery “aids” materialized from cut and forged coin emblems, fitted with hearing aid material. They emerged as a response to the interviewee’s situation and were specifically made for each participant, to whom they will ultimately be returned. The pieces are contextualized by portraits of the immigrants and “passport” booklets presenting their transcribed interviews. Selected drawings from participants form part of the imagery for the passports I constructed to make the transcribed interviews available to viewers. The physical use of currency, passport imagery and hearing aid parts provided a direct link to relationships between national identity, capitalist economies and the sense of impairment experienced when engaging with an unfamiliar culture. By altering the metal coin and thus subverting its monetary value, I retained its status as a familiar ‘precious’ object in our everyday lives.

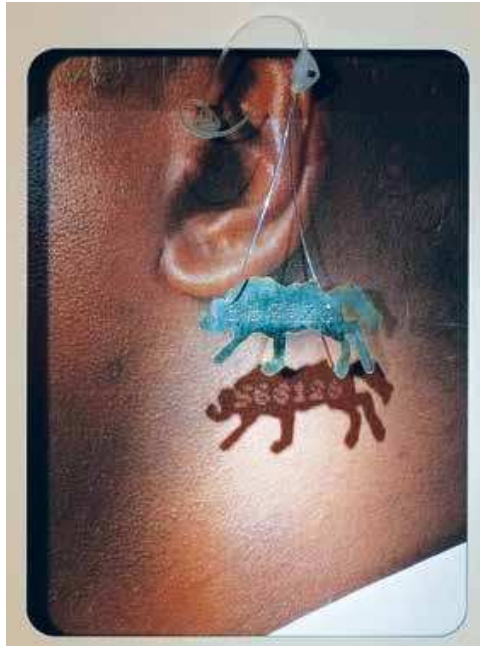


Figure 5
J. Zellmer 2013, Giclée Print with jewellery aid. Archival satin fine art paper, copper alloy and plastic tubing. Aluminium box frame 520 x 390 x 45mm (photograph by Neil Pendergast).

Immigrants represent an often marginalized position but add to the cultural richness of any nation. They come from a wide range of cultural and ethnic communities. The engagement with my project not only provided them with a voice in the arts and active participation on this level, but also examined connectivity and hybridity across-the-board. My project has its roots in shared dialogue, which is at the core of cultural diversity in contemporary society. Within the conception of the project my contribution moved from object maker towards that of mediator, helping to give voice to an audience was imperative in shaping the work. This removed the controllable safety of the studio environment and shifted the making away from the bench and into the community.



Figure 6
J. Zellmer 2012, during interview (photograph by Chris Reid).

By de-contextualising, re-working and re-placing existing materials, we three artists collectively used our work to challenge traditional readings of place, significance and value. The exhibition raised questions about the idea of origin and, at the same time, explored issues of cultural and personal identity in today's increasingly complex world. The associated publication included academic essays by Petra Hölscher, Pravu Mazumdar and Mônica Gaspar which extended the parameters of this conversation by including philosophical and art historical enquiries. It was for this publication that Pravu Mazumdar wrote his aforementioned essay in response to my work. He surmised (2013: 55):

A basic question in twentieth century thought is: "What is appearance?" As the philosophical endeavours of Husserl and Heidegger have shown, understanding appearance requires that we step back and focus on the process of appearing. However, there are two sides to the coin. On the one hand, the world appears to me in a process that has been discussed at length through decades of phenomenological research. But, on the other hand, I appear to the world in an entirely different type of process, in which my life is invested as a series of phenomenotechnical interventions involving algorithms of becoming visible and a correlative production of effects conducive to my needs.⁴ Such techniques often continue to function almost mechanically even in the absence of an observer or a mirror. For they have become inseparable elements of what we have grown to be in the course of our lives. We have been memorizing and internalizing them since infancy, starting with rudimentary gestures like smiling, gurgling, screaming, and incorporating them successively into our communicative tool-kit, after they have stood the test of time and produced their desired socio-biological effects.



Figure 7
J. Zellmer 2013, Author at placement exhibition, 2013
(photograph by Beate Eismann).

The jewellers' interpretations of the project was hybrid in both its origins and outcomes. As much as my contribution had moved my practice from object maker towards mediator, the

nature of international collaborative practices equally moves the controllable safety of the studio environment away from the bench into the process of participation and exchange. This process is not uncomplicated, but can be highly productive, as it enables outcomes surpassing its invariable compromises; it creates the opportunity for a sum total which is greater than its individual parts.

Nonetheless, there were some considerable and glaringly obvious drifts not only between the various elements presented in the exhibition, but also between the practices of the collaborators. The project's aim had been to generate a 'conversation' at the intersection of their individual but related perspectives. Yet, the communication struggles during the countless hours spent on e-mail dialogues, phone conversations and written summaries throughout the two-and-a-half years of collaborative efforts had solidified into three distinct sets of craft objects, which were unable to establish any useful conversations to bridge the separating borders of their differing practices and identities. The failings within the project had of course become noticeable during the process, yet the collaborators were unable to consolidate their joint efforts across the globe, presumably due to the sheer distance, both culturally and physically. This disconcerting experience had me question the gains and losses of such internationally networked projects – was such endeavor in fact valuable?

One of the notional subjects of this article is the precarious nature of international collaboration in the face of borders and migration, while being concerned with the representation and embodiment of identity. When leaving New Zealand for Europe in July 2013, in anticipation of the project nearing completion in October, I first headed across the Tasman Sea to deliver a paper about *place·ment* at the 15th Biennial Jewellers and Metalsmiths Group of Australia Conference, themed *Participation + Exchange*. As part of my presentation, I was reviewing the particular nature of participation that our globally networked, virtual and accelerated environment makes possible. For some years now contemporary jewellery practitioners have been returning to crafting material objects that respond to a haptic experience and involve physical sensation rather than detached spectacle. I reflected on this return to the tangible object as possibly mirroring current social tendencies seeking tangible communities, quite in contrast to our many globalized and widely shared collectives. It occurred to me that matters of 'location' – in terms of place – and lived experience are becoming increasingly relevant. Specifically, contributions to the immediate social environment and its people – signaling a return to and revaluing of the 'local' – seem more and more important. It is the physical human encounter and the experience of a specific place, its cultural characteristics and community life which most shape our individual practices and identities in this globally networked world. The seminar begged the question whether the sharing of such lived experiences across vast distances and cultural borders through craft objects was indeed useful. Particular experiences mediate reality and I concluded my presentation with a quote from Sheridan Kennedy (2007: 80), who wrote: "The history of jewellery is inextricably a social history, but at the same time is oriented towards one body."

Upon arrival in Florence for the culmination of our collaborative project, I was amazed at my good fortune to be able to visit the concurrent exhibition *Territori instabili (Unstable Territory: Borders and Identity in Contemporary Art)* at La Strozzi, the former wine cellars underneath the courtyard of Palazzo Strozzi. In his introductory text *Shifting our Ground*, director James Bradburne (2013: 11) wrote in the accompanying exhibition publication: "Emigration, perhaps more than mere travel, shaped the early modern world and continues to shape contemporary life [...] What happens when we shift our ground, willingly or unwillingly? [...] Whatever choice is made the experience invariably transforms both the visitor and the host."



Figure 8
T. Kawamata 2013, *Tree Huts*, site specific installation at Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, Italy. (photograph by Neil Pendergast).

I found myself taking a seat in front of one of the exhibits in a semi-lit room, being immersed in the video work *The Right of Passage* by collaborators Zanny Begg from Australia and Oliver Ressler, an Austrian. The documentary style film questions the role of citizenship; it embeds animated drawings moving in and out of leafed-through passport pages. Similarly to my own work, it questions the power structures of Nation-States and their relationship with individual identities in a capitalist society. Seeing *The Right of Passage* was enriching and put my previous skepticisms about the invariably occurring compromises of collaborations into perspective; the joint video work represented a sum total which is greater than its individual parts. Nonetheless I would argue that the nature of global participation in this networked, virtual and accelerated world of ours is indeed precarious: It comes with the uncompromising need to harness existing boundaries in order to create meaningful and tangible human encounter. James Bradburne (2013: 11) infers:

Boundaries are still essential in a world in which globalization is increasingly a synonym for Westernization – digital cultural imperialism. Rather than submerging or erasing differences, boundaries create the possibility to identify and celebrate them. Boundaries and borders are not negative, any more than the horizon is a fixed cliff, over which we tumble when we sail beyond it. Carla Rinaldi of Reggio Children says: “Boundaries are the places of encounter” – they are where we meet the Other and each other, to discover values more resilient than the contingent facts of our birthplace and native language.

Jewellery does signify by demarcation, accentuating distinct parts of a body. It functions as an interstitial practice, appearing in the very space of constant negotiation that is also subject to personal identity. In recent years craft practices in particular have reacted to the so-called ‘social turn’ and developed strategies to re-define a sense of collectivity and aspects of participation. In the same vein the author’s own practice has moved to some degree from object maker towards mediator, giving voice to an audience that is imperative in shaping the work. Capturing discourses and manifestations of personal identity and social encounter have emerged as an essential part

of craft practices, creating a space to meet the Other and each other. Jewellery objects fulfil this specific role in everyday social encounters, enabling practitioners to place their work at the heart of contemporary discourses of identity and participation.



Figure 9

J. Zellmer 2013, passport interview booklet with currency device, on top of *place-ment* exhibition catalogue, 625 silver 10DM coin, paper, card and book cloth, saw pierced, glued, stitched and embossed. 105 x 135mm (photograph by Beate Eismann).

Notes

- 1 12 as cited in P. Mazumdar's essay (2013: 65): See Rehm 1901: 42.
- 2 Shell beads unearthed from sites in Algeria, Morocco, Israel and South Africa date back as far as 110,000 years ago. These finds confirm that early humans were wearing and trading shells as the oldest form of personal ornaments, indicating a shared tradition passed along through cultures over thousands of years.
- 3 The Treaty of Waitangi is New Zealand's founding document. It is a declaration of British sovereignty over New Zealand, signed by representatives of the Crown and Maori chiefs in 1840. The two language versions, the English original and the Maori translation, are inconsistent and resulted in different interpretations. Furthermore, the treaty's promised protection of Māori land rights was ignored by successive governments. Since the 1970's New Zealand has attempted to address the challenge of honouring the treaty with strategies that highlight the reality of living in a nation of two peoples.
- 4 Footnote 1 as cited in Mazumdar's essay (2013: 65): Gaston Bachelard used the term *phénoménotechnique* to determine experimental physics as a technology for the production of physical phenomena such as the tracks generated in a mass spectrometer to enable the separation of isotopes. See Bachelard, 1949: 3).

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Johanna Zellmer was born in 1968 and completed a formal apprenticeship as a goldsmith in Germany and a masters degree at the Australian National University Canberra School of Art. Her research interests are the construction of national identities and cross-cultural matters. Dr. Pravu Mazumdar discussed her projects in his keynote for *Schmuck* 2013 at The International Design Museum Munich; this text is published online. Her work has been exhibited in Australia, Korea, Germany, The Netherlands, Italy and New Zealand and is held in public collections internationally. She calls a small farm in Dunedin 'home' and works as lecturer and Artists-in-Residence Coordinator at the Dunedin School of Art.