

When the crafts are entering the space outside themselves

Johanna Zellmer

Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand

Email: Johanna.Zellmer@op.ac.nz

Using currency as a jewellery medium I have become fascinated with crafted objects as symbols within current socio-economic environments. My work comments on both the idea of nationhood, and the politics that regulate national borders. Through the simple jewellery interventions of cutting and forging minted state symbols, I question whether the hybrid identities of contemporary culture can be embodied in a single object. Likewise, my research considers the advance of technology in human genome counting and its implications for inclusion or exclusion. Collaboration has become an integral aspect of my work, allowing philosophy, craft and science to confer. Molly Nesbit once wrote “The arts are entering the space outside themselves, looking hard to the future”. In recent years craft practices have reacted to the so-called ‘social turn’ and developed strategies to re-define a sense of collectivity and aspects of participation. Jewellery objects fulfil this role in the everyday, creating a space to meet the Other and each other. Objects that respond to the immediate socio-economic environment and its people will become increasingly important to contemporary craft discourse. In view of that, the emergence of Identity Politics in contemporary art in the late 20th century and its impact on recent art history provides a relevant context for object makers.

Key words: Objects as symbols, jewellery, nation states, access, identity politics

Wenn das Kunsthandwerk Räume ausserhalb seiner selbst betritt

Die Faszination für handgefertigte Objekte als Symbole unseres sozioökonomischen Umfelds führt auf meinen Gebrauch von Währung als Schmuckmaterial zurück. Meine Arbeit befasst sich mit der Idee der nationalen Einheit, sowie mit einer Politik, die Landesgrenzen reguliert. Durch die einfachen Schmuck-Interventionen des Schneidens und Schmiedens von geprägten Staatssymbolen stelle ich in Frage, ob die hybriden Identitäten der zeitgenössischen Kultur in einem einzigen Objekt verkörpert werden können. Meine Forschung erwägt dabei den Fortschritt der Technologie in der menschlichen Genomzählung, insbesondere im Hinblick auf seine Bedeutung für Einbeziehung oder Ausschluss. Zusammenarbeit stellt mittlerweile einen wesentlicher Aspekt meiner Arbeit dar, sie ermöglicht eine Übertragung der Bereiche Philosophie, Kunsthandwerk und Wissenschaft. Molly Nesbit schrieb einst “Die Künste betreten einen Raum ausserhalb ihrer selbst, scharfsichtig in die Zukunft blickend”. In den letzten Jahren haben die Handwerkspraktiken auf die so genannte „soziale Wende“ reagiert und Strategien entwickelt, um ein Gefühl der Kollektivität zu erheben und um Aspekte der Partizipation neu zu definieren. Schmuckgegenstände erfüllen diese Rolle im Alltag und schaffen einen Raum, um Anderen und einander zu begegnen. Gegenstände, die auf das unmittelbare sozioökonomische Umfeld und seine Menschen reagieren, werden für den zeitgenössischen Handwerksdiskurs immer wichtiger. Angesichts dessen ist die Entstehung der Identitätspolitik in der zeitgenössischen Kunst im späten 20. Jahrhundert und ihre Auswirkungen auf die jüngste Kunstgeschichte ein relevanter Kontext für Objektgestalter.

Stichworte: Objekt als Symbol, Schmuck, Nationalstaat, Einbeziehung, Identitätspolitik

Using currency as a jewellery medium I have become fascinated with crafted objects as symbols within current socio-economic environments. Symbols in metal, when forged under the hammer, become suggestive of shadows and take on qualities of signs in a state of change, able to evoke a sense of hybridity. Being a German citizen with permanent residence in New Zealand I specifically explore national iconic symbols. My work comments on both the idea of nationhood, and the politics that regulate national borders. Yet, rather than remaining constrained to an anthropological reflection on jewellery and its relation to the body of the wearer, I consider contemporary jewellery to be able to function as an analytical tool or instrument of identity politics. The two projects discussed in this paper therefore introduce the possibility for jewellery to be used as a medium of socio-political knowledge.

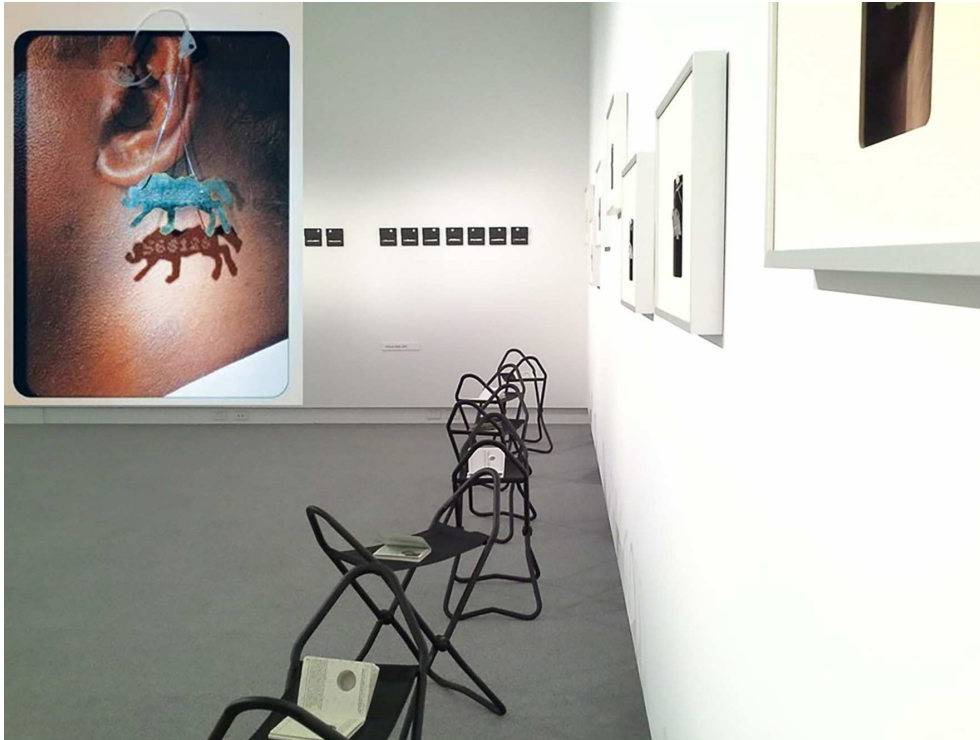


Figure 1
 Zellmer, J. (2015). Touring exhibition forged. Installation at the
 Ashburton Art Gallery, Canterbury, New Zealand
 (Photograph by the author)

Forged

Through the simple jewellery interventions of cutting and forging minted state symbols, I initially questioned whether the hybrid identities of contemporary culture can be embodied in a single object. This project developed into an investigation of migrancy, addressing experienced realities of identity and location. Immigrants to New Zealand, who were 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 are being returned. The pieces are contextualized by portraits of the immigrants and ‘passport’ booklets presenting their transcribed interviews. 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.

The emergence of Identity Politics in contemporary art in the late 20th century and its impact on recent art history provides a relevant context to my work as a craft practitioner. 25 years ago, visitors to the highly controversial 1993 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art would encounter “Daniel J. Martinez’ work *Museum Tags: Second Movement (overture)* or *Overture con claque—Overture with Hired Audience Members*” as the first piece of art upon entering the exhibition. Martinez had broken up the sentence “I can’t imagine ever wanting to be white” into five sections and printed them on the little metal museum tags worn to show that admission had been paid; normally stating **WMAA**. In a panel discussion at the Institute for Diversity in the Arts (IDA) at Stanford University¹ Martinez explained:

It’s structurally based on Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory about the organization of language and how you can change meaning in language by changing the organization of language. It is an organization

of an idea that is passive-aggressive. Visitors to the museum became part of the work because they had to wear one portion of the phrase. Identity is a construction, right? The same way gender is a construction or sexuality is a construction. So here, identity is in motion; it's constantly shifting and moving based on that particular set of words and based on the individual. Everyone who visited the museum got to perform in this construction that was changing depending on who they were with or what phrase they were wearing. But the phrase does test the limits of a civil society. [Many] didn't like the fact that I was changing the mechanism of the gaze or identity and race.

I believe that objects which respond to the immediate socio-economic environment and its people will become increasingly important to contemporary craft discourse. In recent years, collaboration has become an integral aspect of my research, allowing craft, philosophy and science to confer. The work I am about to discuss is a direct outcome of two of these collaborative efforts. There are various reasons why one might consider a collaboration and I have come to realise just how much the initial intent impacts on the final outcomes. In one instance individuals may meet, enjoy each other's company and decide to do something together. Clearly this undertaking is extremely open ended and can result in a struggle to bring to a worthwhile outcome. Alternatively, people might choose to participate in a framework specifically calling for collaboration; such as a commission work or a call for cross-disciplinary collaboration. Both of these latter scenarios provide a clear framework for collaborators, who tend to get involved based on shared interest, rather than allure, which in turn allows for a valid exchange and outcome. Then again, a group of people may be attracted by shared subject matter and decide to explore mutual themes through individual contributions towards a collective outcome. Not unlike the first example, this circumstance is also self-governed, but can be highly effective when combining existing research efforts from differing practices to present a shared subject matter across disciplines.

Above all I have come to understand that collaborating beyond art and craft disciplines provides new ways of seeing one's own practice and propels ideas into new territories; it is precisely for this reason that I want to unfold my work for the exhibition *forged* through Dr. Pravu Mazumdar's eyes. In a letter towards working together Dr. Pravu Mazumar wrote: "As a writer on topics connected with postmodern philosophy and political theory, I have been dealing with what I call "dispositives of identity" since several years. These dispositives, which compel us to assume an identity in order to be able to participate in the elementary algorithms of modern everyday life, include the passport, the coin, and, in a general mode, collective rituals like football, all of which function to give us the stamp of a national identity."



Figure 2
Zellmer, J. (2010). Scan of the author's passport
(Photograph by the author)

In 2015 Andy Lim from Darling Publications in Cologne published the limited edition book *forged* containing all interviews and a leading essay by Pravu, in which he describes what he observes (2015: 48)

Johanna Zellmer’s project involves symbols like the eagle, sawed out from coins, which are essentially related to national economies, and transformed into ‘ornaments’ suspended from the ears by means of the plastic tubing used in hearing aids. The metal symbols are perforated with the passport numbers of participants, who are to be seen in a series of photographs only as a left ear and a neck in profile.” [...] “In bright daylight, the perforation causes a projection of the passport number onto the neck, letting it come to view as digits of light in the shadow of the suspended metal. [...] Thus the passport number, symbolising all the information gleaned from an individual and channelled into the archives of governmental power, is ‘returned’ symbolically to the surface of the individual. The passport itself is emptied of its conventional data and filled instead with transcriptions of the participant interviews. [...] The project functions as a ‘flow back’ of non-standardised biographical data in the mode of documented interviews with participants, based on a set of common questions and focussing on their personal destinies with respect to the issues of national and cultural identity. [...] Such a process inverts and neutralises the algorithms of reduction/identification at work in the techniques of filtering, isolating, measuring personal data so typical of surveillance practice, and returns the features extracted and separated from people back to their complex biographical surfaces. [...] The national symbol on the passport has been removed, leaving behind a hole, inlaid with the rims of the coins which in their turn have been emptied of their symbolic content to yield the ear ornaments. [...] A significant aspect of the project concerns the people participating in it, many of whom have chosen to retain a hybrid identity between their ‘old’ nationality and the residence permit for their ‘new’ habitats stamped into the still valid passports of their ‘home’ countries, where they grew up and with which they still identify to a certain extent. In a sense, people, [...] in whose biographies the global dispositives of national identity can be said to have become dysfunctional [...].



Figure 3
Zellmer, J. (2013). Passport booklets and currency from the exhibition forged
(Photograph by the author)



Figure 4
Zellmer, J. (2012). During interviews
(Photographs by Chris Reid)

For the purposes of this essay the following four excerpts (2015: 122) from the transcribed interviews are selected to give an insight into the nature of the research findings.

What were your reasons for leaving your country?

[...]Our son was born in 1984 and that was all good and then Chernobyl happened, the big explosion of the nuclear plant and we're quite disheartened really by the reaction of even the Greens in Munich who tried to sort of minimize the damage there and then. The minister sitting in front of the television and sort of ate the milk powder and you know, completely radioactive 10,000 tons of milk powder and he just used a spoon and water and said "Look, nothing happened." And the rain was coming down was radioactive; [...] in the meantime we organised information evenings and also got our garden measured for radioactivity. And it was quite amazing; it was like you wouldn't be allowed to move in the garden without protective gear.

Do you know which symbol is used in your passport to represent its country?

The eagle. I just remember some time - must be years ago - when I read that the eagle, the symbol in the parliament, it gets the better the times there was more food around, the eagle got fatter and bigger; the symbol in the parliament, they have a big eagle there and in the Weimar Republic they had one which was very skinny and in the sixties and seventies they had one which got bigger and bigger, it's quite interesting.....probably wouldn't be able to fly.

If you obtained another new citizenship, what were your considerations?

I did actually and this happened last year on 3rd December; hmm listen, New Zealand puts a roof over my head, New Zealand puts a plate of food on my table; I feel that this is where I want to live and die. [...] When people ask me “Are you a Kiwi?” - I often say the only time I will feel Kiwi is if I have a Kiwi passport. I think my Kiwi-ness is not determined by any other thing, you know, people will say “Oh yeah, you’ll never be a Kiwi, because you weren’t born in New Zealand”. To me, I think that is a whole lot of rubbish, I define my Kiwi-ness by virtue of my passport, which is why it is really important for me to get that passport.

Do you identify with being New Zealander, Asian, Pacific Islander, European, Pakeha or Other?

At this point in life I would probably say New Zealander, yes; if you’re asking me how I identify myself, then yes, I am a New Zealander, but if you’re asking me about what race I think I belong to than it would be Asian. And when I go overseas for study purposes, people ask where I am from; I do say I’m from New Zealand. Yes, it’s very interesting how - even though one’s personality, I mean nationality hasn’t changed - but one’s view of oneself has certainly changed. The thing is - I suppose part of that change is - also when you go back to your country of origin, people don’t see you as you know the person you used to be any more.



Figure 5

Zellmer, J. (2017). Dyed and printed PET Lanyards. Illumina flow cells; cut, drilled, fused and glued (Photograph by Emily Davidson)

ACCess mATTers – Trio

Over the previous four years the Dunedin School of Art and the University of Otago have organised annual Science Series Art Projects, for which artists work with scientists from the University of Otago, individually or in small groups, to develop artworks relating in some way to the sciences involved. I first encountered Aaron Jeffs work in 2015 when he presented his

research for a potential Art & Light project collaboration. It was through this initial encounter that I started to consider the advance of technology in human genome counting and its implications for the inclusion or exclusion of migrants in our capitalist societies, nowadays so closely related to the American sci-fi movie *Gattaca* (1997). *The 2017 project* was offering a collaboration with Genetic scientists and deemed “Genetics” to be interpreted in a broad context, from epigenetics to the Pacific concept of whakapa. My decision to participate in this cross-disciplinary project has set in motion an emerging new body of work titled ‘fused’. Three pieces from this ongoing work have been exhibited in the Otago Museum in Dunedin, New Zealand as part of the public exhibition *Art and Genetics*, which showcased the culmination of the many diverse collaborative projects after a period of six months. My work with Aaron Jeff’s was titled *ACCess mATTers – Trio*, for which a commemorative coin from each of the three Eurozone nation states – Monaco, San Marino and the Vatican – was initially forged square and then flattened to resemble a credit card or tag stamped with genetic code.



Figure 6
Zellmer, J. (2017). Four hot forged Commemorative Sterling Silver Euro coins
(Photograph by the author)

Jeff’s knowledge and lab materials became instrumental in shaping this new work. The genetic code bears an acronym by Pravu Mazumdar, which run across the whole set of coins. Each coin card carries a heat treated slither of a used genetic slide. These metal cards are further paired with a fused glass card from cut and re-assembled flow cells, as well as a red lanyard with the starry symbol of the European Union. Fusing the flattened currency with the glass of genetic flow cells - now filled with a pair of eyes from a passport photo - offered an unexpected new alliance for the overarching concepts of nation states, access, objects as symbols and identity politics. The eyes are those of migrants, whose data will be captured on the small paper certificates that arrive with the coins, tucked inside their precious, now emptied satin boxes. Consequently these sets of encoded objects question the role of ‘jewellery’ in future political climates.

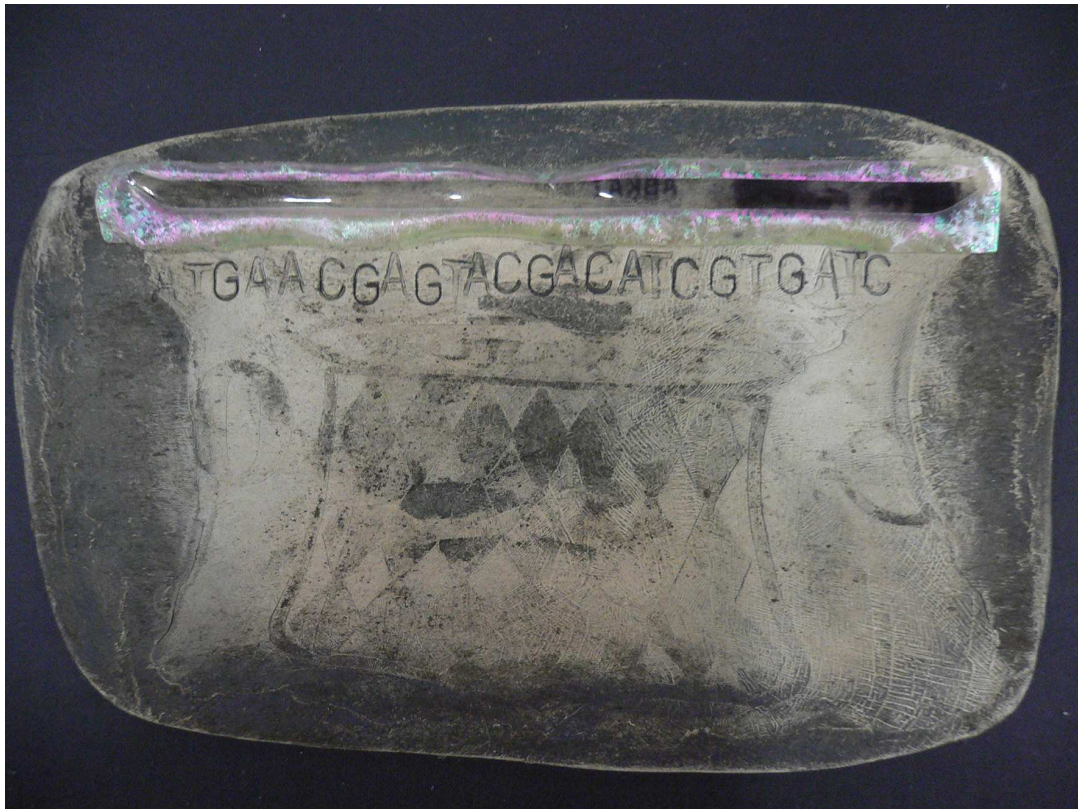


Figure 7

Zellmer, J. (2017). Commemorative Sterling Silver Euro coin Honoré II - Prince de Monaco; forged, rolled and stamped; self-adhesive printed film; Illumina flow cell glass, fused and glued (Photograph by the author)

Conclusion

Molly Nesbit, the award-winning emerging artist at the 2009 Venice Biennale, with reference to issues of sustainability in our times, once wrote “The arts are entering the space outside themselves, looking hard to the future”. In recent years craft practices have reacted to the so-called *social turn*² and developed strategies to re-define a sense of collectivity and aspects of participation. Capturing discourses and manifestations of 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 role in the everyday, enabling practitioners to place their work at the heart of contemporary discourses of participation. With this in mind I would like to return to the 1993 Whitney Biennial, in which Byron Kim showed his ongoing work *Synecdoche*. The work is comprised of a multitude of small panel paintings in beige, brown and pink hues, arranged in a grid pattern. While appearing as an abstract work of art, every panel represents a portrait of an individual’s skin color. In fact, the portraits refer to persons belonging to Kim’s immediate community, who are reduced in this work to small panels matching their shades of skin colour.

It is in this light that I am reflecting on the recent efforts by craft practices to re-define a sense of collectivity and aspects of participation; I am viewing these as being central for valid contributions to our socio-economic environment. In conclusion then surely, what ought to shape our craft processes in times to come are the physical human encounter and the experienced understanding of a specific place, its cultural and political characteristics and its community; allowing us, as Nesbit says, to look hard to the future.



Figure 8

Zellmer, J. (2017). Dyed and printed PET Lanyard. Commemorative Sterling Silver Euro coin Vatican City *Ioannes Paulus II - World Day of Peace*; forged, rolled and stamped. Self-adhesive printed film. Illumina flow cell glass, fused and glued
(Photograph by Emily Davidson)

Notes

The following is an abridged excerpt from the panel discussion presented by the Institute for Diversity in the Arts (IDA) at Stanford University on May 6, 2013. The panel included the artists Kori Newkirk and Daniel Joseph Martinez and the curators Elisabeth Sussman and Connie Wolf. Jeff Chang, the executive director of the IDA, gave the introduction and moderated the panel, which frames the notion of post-identity through the lens of the speakers' experiences of the 1993 Whitney Biennial and its cultural impact.

Concepts such as social innovation, social media, social capital, social art or social design have become pervasive in the past years. Categories such as participatory art, relational aesthetics, community-based art, social design or craft as social practice have emerged. Craft artists and designers share strategies in order to critically investigate the making of and living with things, which means constantly reshaping forms of (post)human co-existence.

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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.