

JOHANNA ZELLMER: STATES OF CHANGE



Johanna Zellmer: States of CHANGE
1 - 30 May 2015

Currently sitting with parliament's justice and electoral committee is the New Zealand Flag Referendums Bill. This bill outlines two possible referendums on the New Zealand flag: the first to vote on a selection of alternative flag designs, and the second to determine if that chosen design is preferable to the current New Zealand flag. The ongoing issue of New Zealand's flag comes out of a consideration about how best to design a contemporary understanding of our national identity, one that has possibly outgrown its empire beginnings and needs to more fully reflect its self-proclaimed bi-cultural make-up.

Recent work by Dunedin-based jeweller Johanna Zellmer sits within this discussion of national representation. As a German citizen with New Zealand residency, the question of whether an object or design allows for identification with multiple cultural groups is especially pertinent. In investigating how ideas of nationhood are constructed and proliferated, Zellmer looks to coins; familiar objects that carry national emblems and whose value is dictated by a national economy system. Unlike a national flag, the quotidian nature of coins as currency has naturalised their role as carriers of national iconography.

Zellmer, however, is acutely conscious of how coins function. In this installation, coins are transformed from symbols of a single national allegiance to materials used for free expression. On the walls are a series of coins from countries that restrict dual citizenship (the Netherlands, India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, just to name a few) that Zellmer has cut and forged to create new objects, new emblems. There are coin rims, various eagle forms (the eagle is a German national symbol) and stretched, more ambiguous silhouettes. Notably, the process Zellmer uses to reconstitute these coins from currency into something 'other' embraces a certain duality between the precise nature of sawing and the unpredictable expansion of the forged material.⁽¹⁾ It's interesting to note too that Zellmer speaks of jewellery and metal-smithing as a second language. Here, it is the adopted language that is used to nullify both the monetary value and the national limits of an object in favour of its status as metal.

Zellmer's subversive act mimics a much less deliberate action that has the same affect: migration. Coins and notes often lose their status as recognised legal tender once they cross national borders. Subsequently, many international airports have a donation box at the departure gate, a place to off the coins and notes. One such box sits in the middle of this installation space. Inside it are unaltered coins from many of the same countries as the coins that have been cut and forged. Here, Zellmer points to the everyday relevance of the question of identity: how can objects accommodate for an ever-evolving self-definition as we move from one place to another? How far can the relevance of one object travel?

Ioana Gordon-Smith

Johanna Zellmer completed a master's degree at the Australian National University Canberra School of Art and a formal apprenticeship as a goldsmith in Germany. She currently holds a lecturing position in the School of Art at Otago Polytechnic School/The Kura Matatini ki Otago and engages with research on cross-cultural matters within contemporary Jewellery and Metalsmithing.

1. Johanna Zellmer, 'Moments beyond control', *Junctures* (8), June 2007, p. 105.