

PLACE·MENT: PRECIOUS OBJECTS, GLOBAL EXCHANGE AND HUMAN ENCOUNTER¹

Johanna Zellmer

To most of you it won't come as a surprise that I am German. Nevertheless, my second statement might be slightly more unexpected: the fact that I have not become a New Zealand citizen yet.

I have been wondering about the reasons for this myself. Germany belongs to the many countries which don't allow dual citizenship; one can apply to be considered as an exemption to the rule.

I have been interested in national representation and national symbols for a while now and, as a jeweller, have found coins to be a natural material with which 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 identification made me question if the many hybrid identities of our contemporary culture can in fact be embodied in a single object?

Germany as a country does of course come with a very particular history, one which has stifled national pride for a long time. It shares the eagle with other countries as a national symbol, and I am of course not the first to explore this iconic animal from the viewpoint of German history and identity. The above is a painting, below forged coin eagles. The dimensions in this juxtaposition are of course not representational of the real objects.

I find myself frequently talking about my particular take on Germany, both here and back in Europe. Conversations with colleague jewellers about work and life led to the recognition of shared experiences and interests; the collaborative project *place·ment* began to take shape. Three women, three histories and three artistic signatures temporarily merge in this joint venture. Our practices all explore work that can be carried on or transported by the body, yet the



Figure 1. Eagles from coins - embodiments of hybrid identities.

objects themselves consciously traverse both fine and applied arts. Intersecting conversations pertain to topical issues of identity, cultural representation and personal narrative in contemporary jewellery.

Our collaborative project was launched in October at Alchimia, a school of contemporary jewellery and design in Italy. This institution is situated in an historical building in Oltrarno, the old artisan quarter of Florence. The placing of this collaborative work within such an environment serves to highlight the inseparability of past and present, a theme which is central to the work of all three artists. The aim of this collaboration is to generate a 'conversation' at the intersection of these 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. Let me briefly introduce the three participants.

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. Principles of copying, mentally or physically render our process of perception visible.

Playing with this notion, Beate scans analogue printing masters (metal clichés) and uses the digital data as the basis for generating a three-dimensional 're-materialisation' which is then used along with the original to create jewellery and 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 to be printed 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 the place of copyright.

Beate's practice repeatedly crosses and displaces boundaries between high-tech industrial printing, graphic design and contemporary jewellery. Using these technologies, Beate generates a three-dimensional transformation, a 're-materialisation' 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:

In my living room: 1) Several objects on a shelf. 2) Found piece of iron, which I titled *a girl's dreams*. 3) A small wearable reliquary altar, which I discovered in my grandad's old house. 4) Red figure with hat printed on foil. 5) A brooch I made and titled *house*. Two brooches by Jutta Klingebil, titled *cloud7*.

The longing for such objects becomes more prevalent in those moments of transition that denote 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.



Figure 2. Beate Eastmann, printed and scanned plant material.



Figure 3. Alessandra Pizzini, personal items which can function as talismans.

has come about as a direct outcome of my work with 10DM commemorative coins, during which the German eagle as heraldic sign emerged as 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.

Forms, materials and processes are chosen in an attempt to capture the affective tone of these transitional moments. Alessandra's methodology draws the audience into the experiences and emotions embedded in these objects without decoding their secrets completely. In doing so, she explores the way in which belongings can become spiritual, emotional and almost bodily habitats. By de-contextualising these 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.

As one of the three participants, I myself contribute an investigation of migrancy to the project, addressing experienced realities of identity and location. This contribution to the larger framework of *place·ment*

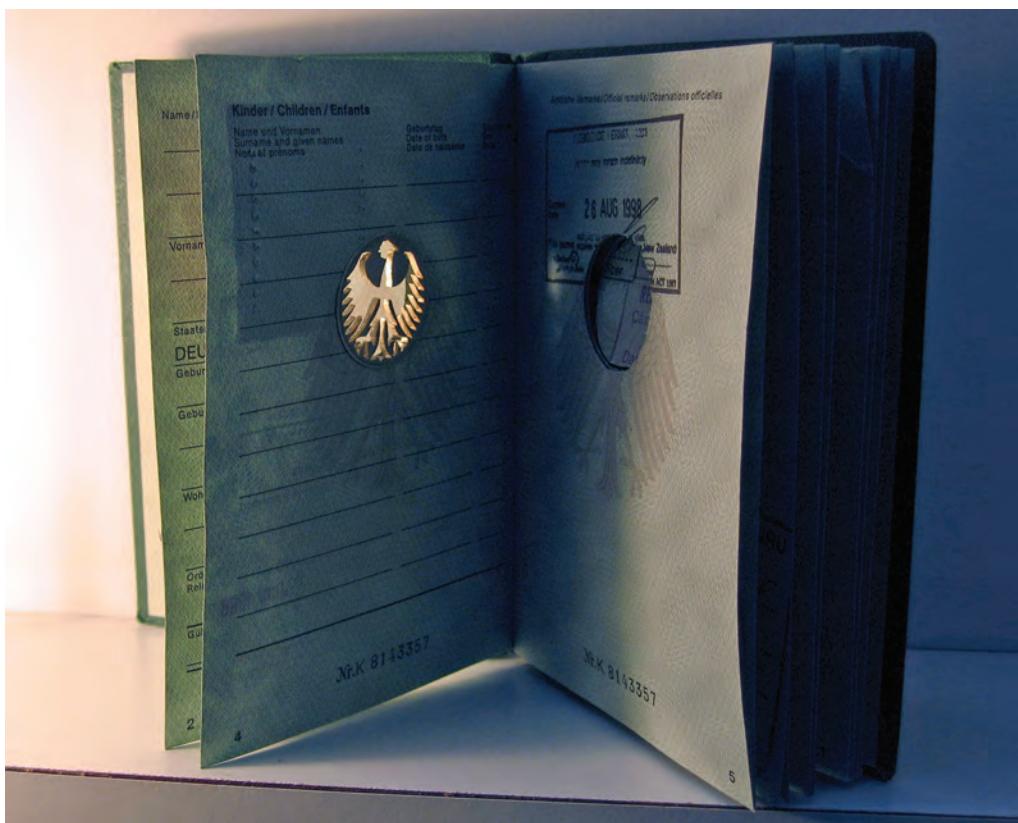


Figure 4. Eagles from coins - embodiments of hybrid identities.



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New Zealand, as a former colony with obligations under the Treaty of Waitangi, is very attentive to the particular issues of a bicultural 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, are interviewed and photographed as part of my project. Jewellery 'aids' materialized from cut and forged coin emblems, are fitted with hearing aid material. They emerged as a response to the interviewee's situation and are specifically made for



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each participant, to whom they will be returned. The pieces are contextualized by portraits of the immigrants and 'passport' booklets presenting their transcribed interviews. Selected drawings from participants will form part of the imagery for the passports I am constructing to make the transcribed interviews available.

The physical use of currency, passport imagery and hearing aid parts provides 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 am retaining its status as a familiar 'precious' object of our everyday experience.

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



Figure 5. Johanna Zellmer; a selection of portraits from a jeweller's point of view.

By de-contextualising, re-working and re-placing existing materials, all three of us have used our work to challenge traditional readings of place, significance and value. Our work raises questions about the idea of origin and, at the same time, explores issues of cultural and personal identity in today's increasingly complex world. The associated publication, which includes academic essays by Dr Petra Hölscher, Dr Pravu Mazumdar and Mònica Gaspar, is intended to further extend the parameters of the conversation to include philosophical and art historical enquiries alongside contemporary studio practice.

All interpretations of our work have evolved through ongoing dialogue, both in person and online, so that the conceptual framework of the project is appropriately hybrid in both its origins and outcomes. This year's conference theme (see endnote 1) was chosen to reflect the changing focus of contemporary practice, from sole practitioner to collective participation and crossing boundaries. My practice has moved from object-maker towards mediator and the nature of international collaboration has moved the controllable safety of the studio environment away from the bench and into the process of participation and exchange. While this process is not uncomplicated, nor product-driven, it is however highly productive, as it results in an original outcome that surpasses its inevitable compromises; it opens up the opportunity for a sum total which is greater than its individual parts.

The intercontinental communication and exchange marathon that the three of us undertook over the past couple of years is now nearing completion. In conclusion, I am wondering about the specific nature of participation that our globally networked, virtual and speeded-up environment enables. For some years contemporary jewellery practitioners have been returning to objects that provide a haptic experience and involve a physical sensation, not necessarily visibly detectable. This mutual return to the tangible object might indeed reflect current social tendencies to seek out smaller and more tangible communities to set against our globalised and widely shared collectives; matters of 'location' – in terms of place – and lived circumstance appear to have become increasingly relevant.

Particular experiences mediate reality; and with this in mind Sheridan Kennedy writes: "The history of jewellery is inextricably a social history, but at the same time is oriented towards one body."² Specifically relevant contributions to the immediate social environment and its inhabitants – by this I mean the return to and revaluing of the 'local' – will become more and more important. It is therefore surely the physical human encounter and the experienced understanding of a specific place, its cultural characteristics and community, which most importantly ought to shape our individual practices and identities in this globally networked world.

Johanna Zellmer completed a Masters degree at the Australian National University's Canberra School of Art and a formal apprenticeship as a goldsmith in Germany. As senior lecturer in jewellery and metalsmithing, she also coordinates the artist-in-residence programme at the Dunedin School of Art. Her research interests are the construction of national identities and cross-cultural themes within contemporary jewellery and metalsmithing. She calls a small farm in Dunedin 'home.' Her most recent research project has been included in the TV1 series *Neighbourhood*, on North Dunedin.

1 A paper delivered as part of Participation + Exchange, the 15th Biennial Jewellers and Metalsmiths Group of Australia Conference, 2013 held in Brisbane.

2 Sheridan Kennedy, "Mapping the field of experience," a paper delivered as part of On Location, Making Stories: Siting, Citing, Sighting, the 12th Biennial Jewellers and Metalsmiths Group of Australia Conference, 2007, 80. See also Juliet Steyn, "The Cultural Politics of Friendship," *Third Text*, 21:2 (March 2007), 189-98; Zanini and Sicuro, *Senza Confini* (Udine: VV.AA., 2008); Sacha McMeking, "Māori Intellectual Property," talk at Dunedin School of Art Research Seminar series, Thursday 29 April 2010; Nikos Papastergiadis, "Everything that Surrounds" – Theories of the Everyday, Art and Politics," *Third Text*, 57 (Winter 2001-02); Kamal Boullata, ed., *Belonging and Globalisation: Critical Essays in Contemporary Art and Culture* (London: Saqi, 2008).