A Question of Identity

by Grace Lai

Published on 08.11.2019

Every minute of every hour of every day; we are constantly making decisions. What are we going to wear? What are we going to eat? Who are we going to see? These daily questions operate on a micro level as processes of self-identification. However, we are not always in control of how we are defined by others. According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall, individuals have more than one identity: some are acquired through an active positioning and others are secured through shared culture.[01] Social identities are unstable, continuously evolving through a play of culture, history and power. Today, political developments, increased anti-immigration policies and Euroscepticism rhetoric are unfolding across the globe, particularly in the United States and Europe, where consolidating boundaries and distinctions force us to question who we are and where we belong. As such, the assertion of identity – of *national* identity – has gained a sense of undue urgency. Within this social backdrop, artistic practices that address identity strike a jolting chord, offering a timely challenge to established ideas and structures.

Johanna Zellmer is a craft practitioner whose work both interrogates symbols that represent nationhood and highlights the politics used to regulate national borders. Her most recent work grew out of a three-month residency in Gothenburg, Sweden at Konstepidemin, an artist-run art centre and studio space for over

130 local artists and a revolving number of international artists in residence (Fig. 1). *MELD* was a self-curated exhibition by Zellmer, which grew out of this residency. It was held between March and May 2019 and staged in one of the three spaces that make up the main gallery of Konstepidemin.

In many ways, *MELD* was intimate. Four white walls formed a narrow rectangular room, each wall featuring a group of works from Zellmer's previous exhibitions (Fig. 3), one of which included new work made during her time at the residency. The two bodies of work in *MELD*, Forged (2009-15) and *For Otto und Alfredo* (2017-19) , addressed questions of state, migration, borders and DNA. In the absence of an exhibition statement, and in some cases title labels, visitors were invited to investigate and question the objects that have gripped Zellmer's interest and are central to her practice. Some are familiar, like coins and passports, others a little more foreign, like Illumina flow cells (medical glass slides used to sequence DNA code). However, all are altered by Zellmer into multilayered works that function as decoders of the complex messages with which they are embedded. This review is an attempt to capture some of the questions and issues Zellmer explores in her practice. It has been compiled through conversations I had with the maker when I visited her during her residency in April this year as well as subsequent research.

(Fig. 1) Konstepidemin, Gotheburg, Sweden. April 2019. Photo by author.

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(Fig. 2) Main Gallery, Konstepidemin. April 2019. Photo by author.

(Fig. 3) *MELD*, April 2019. Photo by author.

As a German-born New Zealand resident, Zellmer is constantly questioning her identity; German? Pākehā? Other? Her early works titled *Moments Beyond Control* (2009) explore this idea of 'Other' through her reconfiguration of 43 ten Deutsche Mark coins from a complete commemorative set. Each coin is individually hand-cut. Using a handsaw, Zellmer precisely cuts out the eagle, an ever changing design with a revolving association as a national state symbol (Fig. 4). Once the eagle is freed from the confines of the circle, the 'negative' is then stretched out into a straight line, forming a 'coinscape'. The scenes are unpredictable, but the text embossed on the rim of the coin remains unimpaired, documenting significant milestones of German history relatively unknown to non-German 'Others'. For example, the commemorative coin bearing the phrase 'Mitbegründer Der Bakteriologie' celebrates the 150th birthday of Robert Koch, a Prussian physician considered one of the founders of microbiology who was awarded the Nobel Prize for medicine in 1905. The eagle and the 'coinscape' are set in custom-made solander display boxes, which, when open, function as a kind of miniature landscape: an eagle silhouette against the rising sun over an abstracted silvery landscape (Fig. 5). In *MELD*, the box sets are exhibited in a continuous row, reading as a timekeeper of the time-consuming process of their

construction and as a continuum of the growing questions that drive Zellmer's works.

Being an immigrant to New Zealand, Zellmer has a conflicting relationship with her passport. As a German citizen, she had been inhibited from obtaining dual citizenship outside of the European Union. Yet she calls Dunedin home, where she has permanently resided with her Australian husband since 1999. So why has she held on to her native passport? These questions have led the artist to ponder over this attachment.[02] First of all, can a government-issued document become a personal item? Secondly, is her attachment to her native passport a shared experience amongst other immigrants, particularly those prevented from obtaining dual citizenship?

These questions were the catalyst for Zellmer's second series of works under the title *Forged*, which she began in 2011. Within this body of work, over a two-year period, the artist interviewed immigrants in New Zealand who were unable to obtain dual citizenship and chose to retain a hybrid identity between their 'old' nationality and 'new' place of residence. Following each of the interviews selected, Zellmer made jewellery for the left ear, which she termed *jewellery aids*. These ear pieces were forged from the state symbols cut and flattened from coins of the participant's home country, and they were then stamped with the interviewee's passport number. The focus on the ear is deliberate: ears were a distinctive element of the German passport during Zellmer's childhood, as photos were always taken showing the left ear, a remnant of Nazi belief that ear shape could determine the likelihood of criminality.

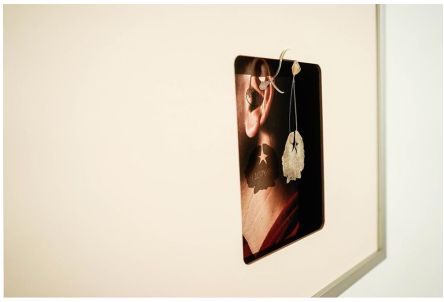
(Fig. 4) Hand-cut coins.

(Fig. 5) Commemorative Coins, April 2019. Photo by author.

In *MELD*, the three pieces shown from this series are displayed similarly to earlier iterations such as their national tour in 2015-16, in venues such as Millennium Public Art Gallery and Ashburton Art Gallery. Each *jewellery aid* is hung from a photograph of the participant's ear so that they cast a shadow on the body, creating an eerie visualisation of how we are branded by our passport (Fig. 6). The ear-traits are also accompanied by the participant's 'passport', which Zellmer had recreated, embedding each cover with the respective participant's drawing of a state symbol. The pages within contain a transcription of the interview, detailing the participant's responses to questions, their reasons for leaving their country, sketches done from memory of the state symbols used to represent their country and how they identified – as New Zealander, Asian, Pacific Islander, European, Pākehā, or other (Fig. 7). The passports are displayed on chairs below the corresponding photographs and *jewellery aid* works, inviting us as viewers to sit and read their stories, contemplating perhaps our own relationship with our passport, our birth country (or place of residence if it differs), and whether this shapes a part of our identity (Fig. 8).

This journey of questioning one's identity also shaped the collaboration between Zellmer and genetic scientist Aaron Jeffs, which resulted in Zellmer's next body of work, *ACCess mATTers - Trio*. The two met in 2015, when Jeffs presented his research on human DNA sequencing technology at Art & Light, a collaboration project between Otago University scientists and artists. This prompted Zellmer to think about the advances in genetic technology and its impact on the inclusion or exclusion of migrants.[03] Although the DNA sequencing of an entire population can reveal normal variations in genetic codes, which aids in the diagnosis and cure of diseases, this can also be used to trace ancestry and ethnicity. According to Jeffs, gathering of personal data on this cellular level can thenceforth be exploited to alienate people for political or religious reasons.[04] Jeffs' work at the University of Otago's Genomic Facility involves the running of DNA sequencing machines, which utilises aforementioned flow cells. Flow cells are single-use slides made from glass containing small fluidic channels (Fig. 9). They work by immobilising DNA strains inside the channels, which can be sequenced en masse

through an imaging system.[05] However, once the flow cells are converted into human-readable sequence data files, the flow cells are discarded. Jeffs donated these single-use flow cells to Zellmer, who then repurposed the cells as raw material in her *ACCess mATTers - Trio* works, continuing her questioning of identity and nationhood. Zellmer acknowledges that Jeffs' expertise of genetic sequencing and lab equipment were instrumental to the shaping of these new works.



(Fig. 6) *Forged*, April 2019. Photo by author.

(Fig. 7) *Forged passports*, April 2019. Photo by author.

(Fig. 8) *Forged Chairs*. Photo by author.

(Fig. 9) *Art and Genetics*, Otago Museum. 2017.

Using silver commemorative coins from three Eurozone nations – Monaco, San Marino and the Vatican – Zellmer forged each coin into a square, then flattened it to resemble a card (Fig. 10 & 11). A slither of heat-treated flow cell (cut and re-assembled before being imprinted with a pair of eyes taken from a passport photo) was then attached to the flattened coin. It was then paired with a red lanyard featuring the starry symbol of the European Union, allowing the metal piece to be worn around the neck. *ACCess mATTers - Trio* has been exhibited in *Art and Genetics* at the Otago Museum in Dunedin, New Zealand, in 2017.

ACCess mATTers - Trio comprises the first three pieces of a new body of work, which, according to the artist, is still a work in

progress, as she is still adding to it and working on refining each piece.[06] Within *MELD*, these pieces, unlike Zellmer's other works, are not neatly contained within a presentation box, frame or book, and nor do they have a uniformed display. Instead, objects are presented individually, floating along narrow aluminum shelves of varying heights, alongside a body of work titled *For Otto und Alfredo* (Fig. 12).

For Otto und Alfredo is the newest work and was made in response to feedback from esteemed jewellery artist Otto Künzli, who conducted a series of New Zealand workshops in the form of formal critiques in early 2018. It was made similarly to *aCCess mATTers* and was first exhibited in the streetside vitrines of the Buchhandlung Bingernagel, an award-winning bookshop in Friedberg, Germany. It then found its next iteration in *Allotropic*, a jewellery and photography group show, which conversed around migration, capitalism, genome technology and identity, and which Zellmer co-curated with Laura Alvarado as part of Munich Jewellery Week between 11 and 17 March 2019. *For Otto und Alfredo* ultimately questions whether "personal data collected via our advancing genome technologies will eventually replace the need for passports in current socio-economic environments."[07]

(Fig. 10) Johanna Zellmer, *For Otto und Alfredo*. Image courtesy the artist.

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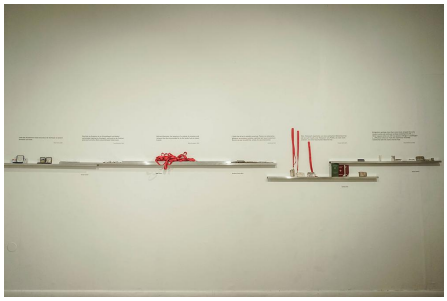
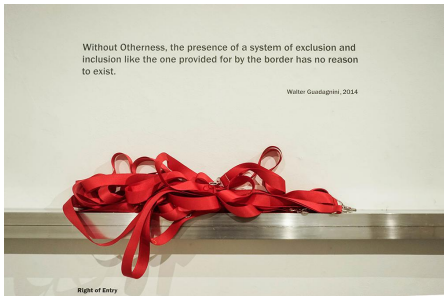


(Fig. 12) *Forged, MELD*, April 2019. Photo by author.

In the exhibition, *For Otto und Alfredo* is presented as an installation with the varying components that formed it: half-forged coins, cardless lanyards and empty coin cases (Fig. 12). It is also the only work displayed along text, which includes a quote from Walter Guadagnini: "Without Otherness, the presence of a system of exclusion and inclusion like the one provided for by the

border has no reason to exist." The quote seemingly works as a manifestation of the questions Zellmer has been pondering herself. Figuratively, as objects with embedded data, the presentation as a whole speaks to Zellmer's questioning of the role that jewellery can play in future political climates. In this cabinet of curiosity type set-up, there was space for additional objects to be added, an opportunity Zellmer readily took by including ideas she had begun exploring as part of her residency at the art centre.

Zellmer's time at the residency in Gothenburg paralleled the rise of heated debate regarding Sweden's role in Europe's refugee crisis.[08] Having accepted more refugees per capita than any other country in 2015, far-right and anti-immigrant attitudes in Sweden had reached a fervour since the 2018 elections.[09] It was (and still is) a time of uncertainty for many. Meanwhile, as part of the research undertaken during her residency, Zellmer also read that Sweden was aiming to become the world's first cashless society. Ahead of her travel, Zellmer had purchased commemorative Swedish coins which she went on to use as part of the third iteration of *For Otto und Alfredo*, this time using local currency to respond to a national statement.[10] She forged the coins into square billets and flattened them into credit-card like forms, the idea being that they could be used in a version of a future when passports are redundant. They can be worn around the neck and scanned at borders to enable entry from one country to another. Zellmer is pushing her practice by transforming a coin, an object that would be useless in a cashless society where coins would be obsolete. Her use of genetic flow cells as a new material enables her to take this investigation further, suggesting that information, like bank cards, can be embedded into the body (it's also relevant to note that the fourteen buildings making up Konstepidemin were originally used as the city's Epidemical Hospital).



(Fig. 12) *Right of Entry, MELD*, April 2019. Photo by author.

(Fig. 14) New exploration with flow cells, in Zellmer's studio. Photo by author.

By way of a collaboration with Eva Zethreaus, a ceramicist who works from one of the studios onsite at Konstepidemin, and who gave Zellmer access to a kiln, Zellmer further pushed her explorations of genetic flow cells.[11] She experimented with the effects that different temperatures could have on these. This was a turning point for her newest set of experimentations (Fig. 14). Depending on the temperature, the genetic flow cell would change in volume, shape and texture, while still retaining some information pertaining to its genome sequence. In some cases, the flat glass slides printed with black genetic barcodes formed a translucent bubble, with skin-like textures that capture some of the data as carbon flakes that float internally. This reformation appears symbolically akin to Zellmer's *Forged* series, where she explored the possibility of embedding our passport details as a sequence of data to be extracted like a transaction at borders. The currently untitled work with genetic slides returns Zellmer to her interrogation around the possibility of a single object embodying hybrid identities as a way to address experiences of immigration.

Zellmer's works are entangled with personal enquiries, but also increasingly pertinent issues relating to nationhood and national identity. The increasing mobility that people now have – whether by choice or a lack of – reveals the underlying powers and politics that regulates citizenship and borders. *MELD* is effectively an exhibition that frames current political developments. Further, with the exhibition produced as part of her residency, and the physical proximity of her studio to the gallery, there was room for Zellmer to continuously add and edit her exhibition. Zellmer treated the gallery space as an extension of her studio, inviting artists, those with studios at Konstepidemin and those without, to

come together and discuss her work, both completed and in progress. Effectively, though perhaps unintentionally, *MELD* formulates a retrospective of Zellmer's works. It also functioned, in part, as a sort of self-review for Zellmer to analyse her own work and progress. *MELD*, with its multifaceted purpose, as an exhibition, work in progress and self-review, can also be read as performance that is enacted through time and conversation, paralleling the questions that have driven and plagued Zellmer's works, and I dare say many of us: who are we and where do we belong?

Footnotes

01. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* edited by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222-237.

02. Bruno Munro, "Forging Identity," *Otago Daily Times* (7 September 2015) www.odt.co.nz/lifestyle/magazine/forging-identity

03. Johanna Zellmer and Aaron Jeff, "ACCess mATTers," in *Junctures* 18, December 2017.

04. Aaron Jeff, "Aaron Jeff," in *Arts and Genetics* (Otago: Otago Museum, 2017)

05. Icahn School of Medicine, *"Illumina Sequencing Platform"* www.icahn.mssm.edu/research/genomics/core-facility/next-generation/illumina

06. Private conversation between author and Zellmer, 26 April 2019, Gothenburg, Sweden.

07. Munich Jewellery Week, *"#88 Allotropic"* www.munichjewelleryweek.com/event/allotropic/

08. Ministry of Justice, "Sweden's Migration and Asylum Policy," June 2019. www.government.se/49f0b2/contentassets/183ca2f36f1c49f3b7d1b5724a5753ce/swedens-migration-and-asylum-policy--fact-sheet-2019.pdf

09. Jo Becker, "The Global Machine Behind the Rise of Far-Right Nationalism," in *The New York Times* (10 August 2019) www.nytimes.com/2019/08/10/world/europe/sweden-immigration-nationalism.html Elisabeth Åsbrink, "The Swedish Dream Was Always Too Good To Be True. And Now the Far Right is Back." *The Guardian* (14 May 2019) www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/14/sweden-far-right-wartime-past CBS News, *"(Un)Welcome: Sweden's Rise of the Right"* (13 April 2019) www.cbsnews.com/video/unwelcome-swedens-rise-of-the-right/

10. Private conversation between author and Zellmer, 26 April 2019, Gothenburg, Sweden.

11. Private conversation between author and Zellmer, 26 April 2019, Gothenburg, Sweden.

Biographies

Johanna Zellmer was born in 1968 in Germany, where she completed a formal apprenticeship as a goldsmith. She also holds a Master's Degree from the Australian National University Canberra School of Art. Her work explores contemporary discourses of capitalism and identity by testing the potential of jewellery to be used as a medium of socio-political knowledge. It is held in public collections internationally. Her research projects are frequently discussed by Munich-based, Indian philosopher Dr Pravu Mazumdar. Johanna co-founded CLINKProjects with Shane Hartdegen in 2014, a collaborative engagement in experimental and traditional making, writing and exhibition practice in the field of contemporary jewellery. As Principal Lecturer she coordinates the Jewellery & Metalsmithing Studio and the Artist-in-Residence Programme at the Dunedin School of Art, New Zealand. Zellmer spent three months in residency at Konstepidemin in Gothenburg upon invitation by Iaspis, the Swedish Arts Grants Committee's International Programme.

Grace Lai is an art historian, curator and writer currently based in Auckland, New Zealand. Following her graduate studies at the University of Auckland, she attended SOAS, University of London as an Alphawood Scholar, where she developed her interest in visual and material culture studies. Broadly, her research interrogates the history and social structures inherited by the objects, as a drive to build alternative narratives of art that have been forgotten as a result of an inequality of knowledge. She has lead exhibitions in Auckland, London, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Since 2017, Grace has held the position of Curator of Applied Arts and Design at Auckland Museum.

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