

JOHANNA ZELLMER AND AARON JEFFS

ACCess mATTers – Trio



Figure 1. Johanna Zellmer, *Summer Olympics Athens*, 2017, San Marino commemorative sterling silver 10 Euro coin: 2004, forged, stamped and punched; various Illumina flow cells, cut and fused, 180 x 105 x 2mm. Photograph by the author.

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. The emergence of identity politics in contemporary art in the late twentieth century and its impact on recent art history provides a relevant context to my work as a craft practitioner. Twenty-five years ago, visitors to the highly controversial 1993 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art would encounter Daniel J. Martinez's 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 University 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.¹

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. 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.

I first encountered Aaron Jeff's 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



Figure 2. Johanna Zellmer, dyed and printed PET lanyards, 2017, illumina flow cells, cut, drilled, fused and glued. Photograph by Emily Davidson.



Figure 3. Johanna Zellmer, four hot-forged commemorative sterling silver Euro coins, 2017, Photograph by the author.

Gattaca (1997). My decision to participate in this cross-disciplinary project has set in motion an emerging new body of work titled “fused”. The three first pieces from this ongoing work were titled *ACCess mATTers – Trio*, for which a commemorative coin from each of the three Eurozone nation states was initially forged square.

These are then flattened to resemble a credit card or tag stamped with genetic code. The genetic code bears an acronym by philosopher Pravu Mazumdar, which run across the whole set of coins. Each coin card carries a heat-treated slither of a used genetic slide. Jeff’s knowledge and lab materials became instrumental in shaping this new work. In the exhibition catalogue he describes his work as follows:

Genetics is the study of heredity, and how the transmission of the genes encoded within our DNA from one generation to the next contributes to normal health and development. DNA stores biological information; knowing someone’s DNA sequence allows geneticists to identify the differences between individuals that make us who we are. Technology exists today that allows us to contemplate DNA sequencing entire populations. Sequencing hundreds of thousands of people can provide untold good for medicine by revealing what is normal variation, what isn’t normal, and what can be done to diagnose and treat disease. However, DNA sequence can also be used to trace ancestry and ethnicity, and personally identify an individual; information that can be used to exploit and alienate people for political, cultural, or religious reasons. At the University of Otago’s Genomics Facility we run DNA sequencing machines that service the research community. At the heart of our sequencers is something called a flow cell. The flow cell is a single-use item of precision engineering made from glass and plastic: digital images of the flow cell surface are converted to human-readable sequence data files, and the flow cell is discarded. It has been a privilege to donate our accumulated stash of used flow cells to Johanna, and see them repurposed as raw material for her to explore notions about identity and nationhood.²

I paired my metal cards with a fused glass card from cut and re-assembled flow cells, as well as a European lanyard in red. 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.

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*³ and developed strategies to redefine 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*.⁴ 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, each person’s portrait belongs to his immediate community and in this work is reduced to a small panel, represented by their shade of skin colour alone.



Figure 4. Johanna Zellmer, *Honoré II - Prince de Monaco*, 2017, commemorative sterling silver Euro coin, forged, rolled and stamped; self-adhesive printed film; illumina flow cell glass, fused and glued. Photograph by the author.



Figure 5. Johanna Zellmer, *Ioannes Paulus II - World Day of Peace*, 2017, dyed and printed PET lanyard, commemorative sterling silver Euro coin, Vatican City, forged, rolled and stamped, self-adhesive printed film, illumina flow cell glass, fused and glued. Photograph by Emily Davidson.

It is in this light that I am reflecting on the recent efforts by craft practices to redefine 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 physical human encounters, cross-disciplinary collaboration and community; allowing us, as Nesbit says, to look hard to the future.

Johanna Zellmer was born in 1968 and completed a formal apprenticeship as a goldsmith in Germany and a Master's degree at the Australian National University Canberra School of Art. Her research interests are the construction of national identities and cross-cultural matters. 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.

Aaron Jeffs received an MSc in Animal Physiology from the University of Canterbury, and PhD in Cancer Genetics from the University of Otago, Christchurch. He moved to the University of Otago to set up the Otago Genomics Facility in 2000 before undertaking post-doctoral research with Professor Michael Eccles in the Department of Pathology, Dunedin School of Medicine. From 2005, Aaron has worked as a Research Fellow in the Department of Pathology, mainly investigating the genetic and genomic basis of cancer and development, before re-joining the Otago Genomics & Bioinformatics Facility in 2012.

1. The Institute for Diversity in the Arts. 2013. *Free Your Mind! Improvising Post-Multicultural Art*. http://www.artpractical.com/feature/free_your_mind_improvising_post_multicultural_art/ (accessed 6 October 2017). Abridged excerpt from the panel discussion presented by the Institute for Diversity in the Arts (IDA) at Stanford University on 6 May, 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.
2. *Art and Genetics Exhibition Catalogue*, 2017, 46 https://issuu.com/dunedinschoolofart/docs/art_and_genetics_2017_catalogue (accessed 15 October, 2017).
3. Concepts such as social innovation, social media, social capital, social art and social design have become pervasive in the past years. Categories such as participatory art, relational aesthetics, community-based art, social design and 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.
4. Whitney Museum of American Art. 1999-2001. Byron Kim. *Synecdoche project*, 1991-present. <http://collection.whitney.org/object/12073> (accessed 6 October 2017).