

Moments beyond Control

I am German.



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On second thoughts, am I? In New Zealand, my current country of residence, I must declare if I am:

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | New Zealander. | <i>This makes me rather</i> |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | New Zealand European | <i>as well as</i> |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Pakeha | <i>or I might elect to choose</i> |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Other. | |



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③

This is not the first time I have been Other. When I was small, I looked different enough to feel and experience this notion; my hair was too dark to be German, my skin too olive. It was something I was teased about; children can be cruel...



④

It is interesting for me, as a German, to tick the box *Other*. Germans have, since the Second World War, been thought of as those who took otherness to an extreme. As a result, Germans have felt it tremendously important to educate young people about their nation having done wrong. We learned about the Second World War inside-out through history, sociology, political studies and geography classes; in fact, we learned nothing else.

We knew (nothing?) about ourselves.

Nearly sixty years after the conclusion of the Second World War, it is standard practice in the Gymnasium, the German equivalent of high school, for students to be taught about the rise of Nazism, the horrors it unleashed, and its consequences for postwar Europe. The genocide of European Jews is a central chapter in this instruction. Every year, thousands of teenagers visit former concentration camps like Dachau or Buchenwald, watch films of Hitler's adoring crowds and of cities in flames, participate in intense group discussions about moral responsibility, and come face to face with the historical burdens of their grandfathers. The process is disturbing for most, and unflinching influences their political outlook. The majority of young Germans accept the necessity of remembrance.¹

⑤



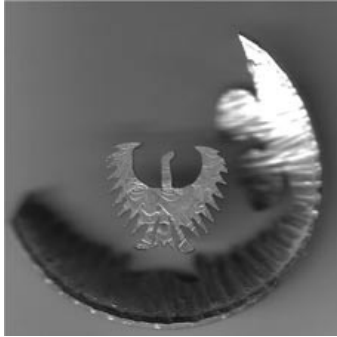
In this context, it felt good to look *Other*. It provided a sense of freedom from the necessity to carry a historical burden that didn't feel like mine. I was grateful for not being blond and blue-eyed, without ever associating myself with the possibility of being Jewish either. I just looked 'normal', able to fit in anywhere like others who did not appear to be branded.

Since leaving my home country, I still am just that: *Other*. However, living and studying in colonised countries and being immersed in visual arts practices bring new awareness. It became, for example, very popular in the arts towards the end of the 20th century to address colonisation, immigration and identity issues in one's work.

At this point, I may need to elaborate: I am German (at least on paper), but my second language is *Jewellery & Metalsmithing*, unusual perhaps, but a language nonetheless.

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⑦

I'll explain in a moment, but would like to talk about the peculiarity of fluency first.

Choosing to learn a second language always brings about the relentless challenge of fluency. Yet, fluency is indeed not something one can achieve purely by studying more and more extensively.

Naturally, good comprehension, good technical skills and good communication skills are achieved only through great commitment, immersion and a significant measure of *control*.

But fluency is as much about letting go as it is about immersion and commitment; it needs a kind of juxtaposing between extremes of control and freedom.



© a

In the use of language – visual, spoken or written – fluency appears at unguarded moments; moments outside of control, when one is at ease.

These can be unexpected simple moments; such as when

- catching oneself stringing words together which don't exist in order to make sense or
- choosing to employ the most basic skills within a discipline that becomes too easily subsumed in technicality.



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The language of Jewellery & Metalsmithing is capable of reflecting both the need for control and the need for uncontrolled fluency. Only with both at play will a quality or essence already inherent in the source material become comprehensible. My 'coinscapes' emerge with the simple use of existing texts, a piercing saw and a cross peen hammer. I create them from annually minted coins commemorating events and iconic personalities. The ever-changing design of the eagle, its associations (being the emblem for Germany) and the momentous inscriptions on the coins intrigue my eye and mind.



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The processes that these coins undergo create a constant dialogue between control – via precise sawing – and very entertaining unpredictability, as the material unfolds into a stretch. Like in the use of language, control and freedom are juxtaposed. But, employing such 'de-constructive' and liberating processes was only possible through my immersion into Otherness, away from my country of origin and its long-standing craft traditions. Distance revealed the coin's potential as a means for freedom of expression.

The embossed text on the coin's rim alone remains untouched.
It reappears in and on the open solander box:



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Inevitably I find myself using both my second language(s) – Jewellery & Metalsmithing and English as well as my Otherness to try and make sense; sense of my country of origin, and of my living abroad here in New Zealand; sense also of my use of these second languages.



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All the while and alongside others, I remain in search of moments beyond control.

- 1 Jan Otakar Fischer, "Invoking the Past in Recent German Exhibition Design", ON DESIGN, *Harvard Design Magazine*, Number 19, Fall 2003/Winter 2004.

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- ① Commemorative Coin: *10 Years of German Unity* (BRD 10DM Gedenkmünze *10 Jahre Deutsche Einheit*, WIR SIND DAS VOLK-WIR SIND EIN VOLK; 28 Sept. 2000) showing reverse.
- ② Commemorative Coin: *800 Years of the German Brotherhood* (BRD 10DM Gedenkmünze *"800 Jahre Deutscher Orden"*, ES BLEIB IN GEDÄCHTNIS SO LANG GOTT WILL; 4. Sept. 1991) eagle removed.
- ③ Commemorative Coin: *800 Years of The German Brotherhood* (BRD 10DM Gedenkmünze *"800 Jahre Deutscher Orden"*, ES BLEIB IN GEDÄCHTNIS SO LANG GOTT WILL; 4. Sept. 1991) view with power pole from Mount Cargill Road towards Otago Peninsula, Dunedin, New Zealand.
- ④ The artist at work in her studio, January 2007: checking the level of a coinscape.
- ⑤ Commemorative Coins: *15 Eagles* (BRD 10DM Gedenkmünzen, showing reverse (the back of the eagle image) or respectively averse (the remains of the readable front of the coin)).
- ⑥ Commemorative Coin: *Olympics – Intertwined Arms* (BRD 10DM Gedenkmünze *"Olympiade – Verschlungene Arme"*, ALTIUS – FORTIUS – CITIUS; 20 July 1971) first forged sample with coin stretch broken in half.
- ⑦ Commemorative Coin: *Arthur Schopenhauer* (BRD 10DM Gedenkmünze *"Arthur Schopenhauer"*, DIE WELT ALS WILLE UND VORSTELLUNG; 21 Sept. 1988) work in progress; forged coin stretch starting to unfold.
- ⑧ Twelve Commemorative Coinscapes (out of a total of 43; BRD 10DM Gedenkmünzen minted from 1972-2001).
- ⑨ Commemorative Coin: *800 Years Port and Hamburg* (BRD 10DM Gedenkmünze *"800 Jahre Hafen und Hamburg"*, HAMBURG TOR ZUR WELT; 8 Nov. 1989) in magnetic solander box, held semi-open.
- ⑩ Commemorative Coin: *800 Years Port and Hamburg* (BRD 10DM Gedenkmünze *"800 Jahre Hafen und Hamburg"*, HAMBURG TOR ZUR WELT; 8 Nov. 1989) in magnetic solander box on wall.

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.