

The Shouting Valley: Interrogating the Borders Between Us

**Cushla Donaldson, Hoda Afshar, Jun Yang,
Lawrence Abu Hamdan, and Shahriar
Asdollah-Zadeh, curated by Lisa Beauchamp**

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The Shouting Valley: Interrogating the Borders Between Us

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Exhibition Runs: 29 January – 15 March 2020

Exhibition Preview: Tuesday 28 January, 5:30pm

The Shouting Valley: Interrogating the Borders Between Us features artists whose politically motivating and activating work asks us to engage in urgent discussions of injustice in order to effect change. The works in this exhibition highlight contemporary issues relating to borders and migration, questioning why freedom of movement often appears to be a Western privilege. As a country largely populated by migrants, the exhibition resonates with Aotearoa's diverse history and asks us to think about our own stories of journeying and settlement.

A place in the Golan Heights provides the name for the exhibition. Located between Syria and Israel the 'shouting valley' has a unique topography which enables an acoustic leak across the border. It is here that members of the Druze population meet on either side to hear each other's voices and wave to one another across the divide. This is the focus of a critical exploration into the politics of the voice and the border by 2019 Turner-prize winner Lawrence Abu Hamdan with his pivotal work *Language Gulf in the Shouting Valley* (2013).

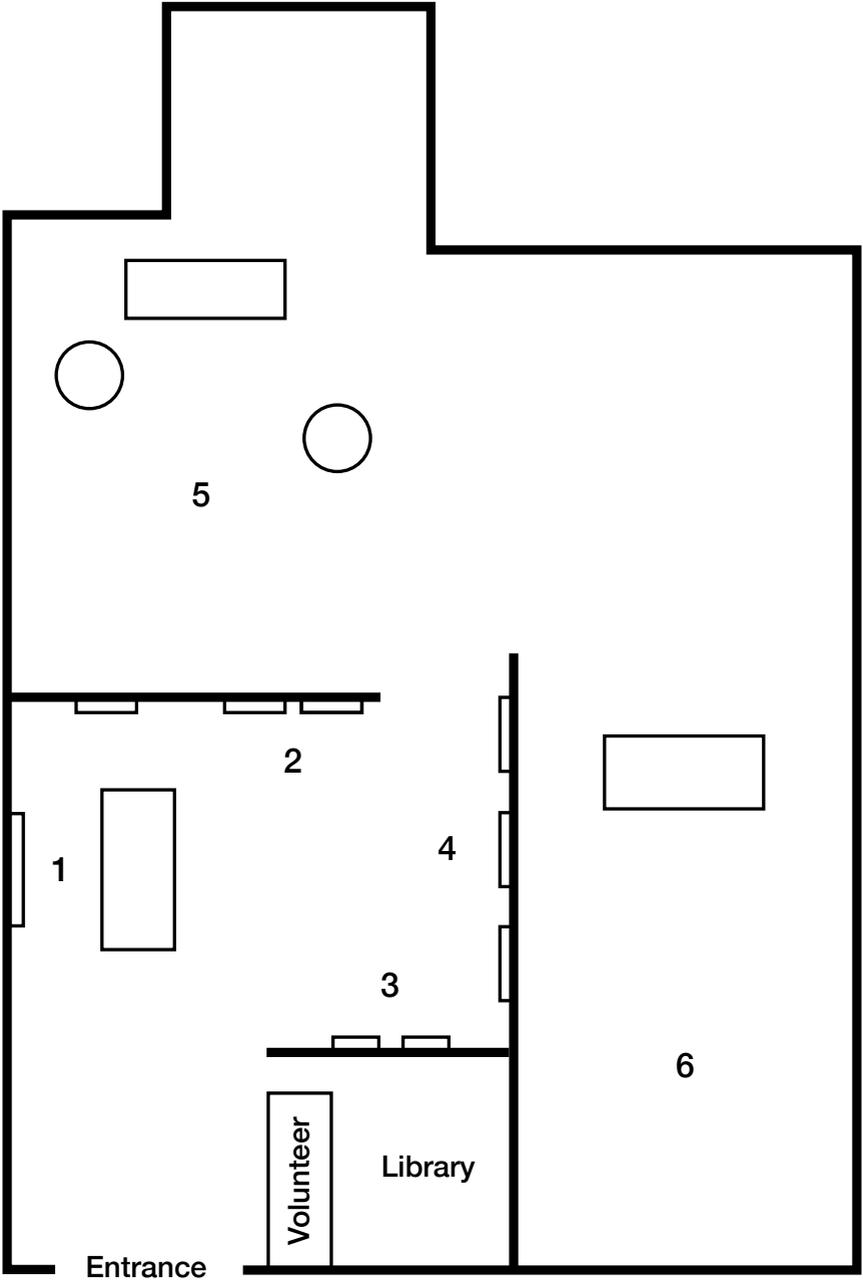
Cushla Donaldson's major video installation *501s V.02* (2019) foregrounds the voice and perspectives of current detainees. Named after the group of people being detained and deported in the recent wave of visa cancellations by the Australian Government, *501s V.02* uses new technology to allow current detainees, as well as those already deported from Australia under the Migration Act (1958) to text in and disrupt her moving image work on the instrumentalisation of glamour and soft power.

Communicating the experiences of migrants on Australian off-shore detention centres is Hoda Afshar's portrait series *Remain* (2018), made in collaboration with men who remained on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, following the closure of the island's detention facility. Working closely with Kurdish Iranian journalist and refugee Behrouz Boochani, whose portrait is included, Afshar's works are a stark reminder of the injustices of migration laws, a topic rightfully at the centre of ongoing and current debates.

A newly commissioned artist-designed wallpaper complete with traditional Chinese ink paintings forms part of a large-scale installation called *Becoming European or How I Grew up with Wiener Schnitzel* (2015) by Jun Yang. Using Google's image repository to narrate his experience of migration with reference to the European Migrant Crisis of 2015, Yang's video is a prescient reminder of the pervasive stereotypes placed on people who choose to migrate. As asked in his video, "Isn't migration a human right or part of human nature?"

New painting by Shahriar Asdollah-Zadeh explores the fragility of borders as seen from afar. Titled *Pale Blue Dot* (2019), the paintings relate to the experience of seeing first-hand the Earth from outer space. As national boundaries vanish, the conflicts that divide people become less important reminding us of the need to see past these imposed divisions.

Developed by Gus Fisher Gallery in Auckland and toured to The Physics Room, the first iteration of this exhibition ran from 28 September – 14 December 2019.



The Shouting Valley: Interrogating the Borders Between Us

WORKS LIST

- 1 Jun Yang
Becoming European or How I Grew up with Wiener Schnitzel
2015
Video
- 2 Jun Yang
Āokelán
2019
Wallpaper with Chinese ink painting by Da Shen
- 3 Shahriar Asdollah-Zadeh
Pale Blue Dot
2019
Acrylic, pen, and ink on paper and printed handouts
- 4 Hoda Afshar
Portraits of Shamindan and Ramsiyar, Behrouz Boochani, and Edris (left to right), Manus Island, from the *Remain Portrait Series*
2018
Photographic prints
- 5 Cushla Donaldson
501s V.02
2019
3D rendered video image, the internet
- 6 Lawrence Abu Hamdan
Language Gulf in the Shouting Valley
2013
Video, colour, sound (English and Arabic), 15:48 mins

1 Jun Yang (born in mainland China, based in Vienna, Taipei and Yokohama), *Becoming European or How I Grew up with Wiener Schnitzel*, 2015, video

Jun Yang made this video in 2015, when refugees from many Syrian and Muslim-majority countries fled to Europe after heinous warfare in Syria. Referred to in the media as the European Migrant Crisis, around one million refugees entered Europe with most of them risking the treacherous crossing by sea, resulting in unbearable tragedy.

Becoming European or How I Grew up with Wiener Schnitzel recounts Yang's own narrative of migration as a Chinese-born Austrian immigrant. Along with his own personal story of migration, his video addresses the global context of the migrant at a time when migration is a vital route to safety for so many people.

Yang's work casts a critical eye over what it means to comprehend a new and unfamiliar culture. In the narrated video, Yang uses Google's image repository to search under key terms such as 'refugees', 'migration' or 'Chinese'. Questioning the labels and judgments placed on people who migrate, at one point in the video he asks "Isn't migration a human right or part of human nature?"

Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Martin Janda in Vienna, Vitamin Creative Space in Beijing, and ShugoArts in Tokyo.

2 Jun Yang, *Àokèlán*, 2019, wallpaper with Chinese ink painting by Da Shen

Jun Yang has created a wallpaper in direct response to Auckland's history of Chinese migration.

The stories on the wallpaper have all been gleaned from the internet and include information about Chinese migration, Chinese Restaurants and fun or interesting anecdotes, as selected by the artist. These texts, printed in both English and Chinese, are interspersed with images of Auckland landmarks painted by a traditional Chinese landscape ink painter who has never visited the city.

For Yang, the wallpaper is a metaphor for understanding a foreign culture. Neither Jun Yang nor the Chinese ink painter have visited New Zealand. Therefore, the wallpaper depicts an imagined reality built on internet searches and transferred knowledge. As the wallpaper design repeats, so do the same ideas and assumptions of a place and its people.

Wallpaper commissioned by Gus Fisher Gallery, 2019. With special thanks to Briana Woolliams, Cindy Huang and the Gus Fisher's volunteers for their research contributions to this project.

Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Martin Janda in Vienna, Vitamin Creative Space in Beijing, and ShugoArts in Tokyo.

3 Shahriar Asdollah-Zadeh (born in the Philippines, based in Tāmaki Makaurau), *Pale Blue Dot*, 2019, acrylic, pen, and ink on paper and printed handouts

Pale Blue Dot explores the fragility of borders as seen from afar. The paintings relate to the overview effect, a cognitive shift in awareness that has been reported by some astronauts during spaceflight while viewing the Earth from outer space. Perhaps seeing the Earth as a pale blue dot hanging in a void, prompts us to think of it as something that needs protecting.

Asdollah-Zadeh's polygonal paintings take inspiration from the eleventh to sixteenth century patterns found in the Topkapi Scroll. These patterns are the basis of dome tile designs found in the architecture of mosques from that period. The scroll's repeated patterns are generated by three types of grid systems: squared, triangulated and composite radial (polygonal). In the *Pale Blue Dot* series, these blurred and overlapping geometric patterns symbolise the borders and boundaries that separate people on Earth.

By addressing the subject of migration from the perspective of a much greater distance, Asdollah-Zadeh's paintings ask whether this physical and conceptual distance may help us to understand human issues and actions in a more holistic way.

Courtesy of the artist.

4 **Hoda Afshar (born in Iran, based in Melbourne), *Remain Portrait Series, 2018, photographic prints***

Hoda Afshar created this series of portraits in collaboration with men who remained on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, following the closure of the Australian immigration offshore detention facility on 31 October 2017 they had been held in.

Afshar's process for producing these stylised portraits was collaborative, and many conversations took place with the men featured before the photographs were created. For the portraits, Afshar asked the men to choose something natural that would help them express their emotions. Through her portraits, Afshar wants to remind people of their social obligation to one another; "so that when you stand face to face with those images, all you're seeing is another individual who has the same intelligence, the same desire, the same passion for life as you."

Kurdish Iranian journalist and refugee Behrouz Boochani was Afshar's main point of contact on Manus Island. To uphold his identity whilst in detention, Boochani imagines himself as "a novelist in a remote prison." Boochani's writing has become a crucial window into the reality of what he and other detainees face on Manus Island. He has won two major Australian prizes for literature for his book *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (2018) which he wrote via thousands of text messages on a smuggled phone inside his detention centre. Despite his literary achievements, he remains in Australia's off-shore detention centres. In his portrait, Boochani is shown with fire ablaze behind him. He agrees with Afshar that this portrait symbolises his resistance and passion, but also admits that he doesn't recognise himself in this image. He says: "I only see a refugee, someone whose identity has been taken from him. A bare life, standing there beyond the borders of Australia, waiting and staring ... This portrait scares me."

Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery in Brisbane.

5 **Cushla Donaldson (lives and works in Tāmaki Makaurau), *501s V.02*, 2019, 3D rendered video image, the internet**

This work displays messages received in real time from people currently in detention and those deported under section 501 of the Australian Migration Act 1958 (amendment 2014). It may also display messages from the families, friends and communities affected. The messages are not vetted or viewed before they are displayed.

501s is the name people detained under this act call themselves. In recent years the Australian Government has implemented a wave of visa cancellations which looks set to increase with a proposed extension of this legislation. The majority of the people who have had their visas cancelled hold New Zealand citizenship although may have spent little or no time in New Zealand. It is estimated that sixty percent of those detained and deported are of Māori and Pasific descent but, remarkably, this number has also included people of Aboriginal descent.

Section 501 of the Australian immigration act is an amendment that allows for detention and deportation of migrants to proceed from a deeply classed and racialised ethos euphemised as “good character”. Those deemed lacking in good character according arbitrary bureaucratic state calculus are subsequently incarcerated indefinitely alongside asylum seekers in the quasi-legal, quasi-territorial and privately run detention centres.

This work uses newly developed technology so that 501 detainees can interrupt or “hack” the “official” work, allowing for their expression of doubly fugitive messages to escape from the detention centre and into a life outside from which they have been excluded.

501s V.02 also foregrounds the historical instrumentalisation of glamour and soft power by fusing imagery of a lavish

Venetian event with the messages. The video content features a large glass slipper that fills with champagne. This act of exorbitance refers to a legendary event at the Carnival of Venice in the 1600s where a giant glass slipper was put in a public square and filled with champagne. By disrupting the obscenely spinning crystal shoe, the messages and their senders speak back to present and prevailing power structures.

Throughout the development of the work, Donaldson has worked with 501s advocates Filipa Payne and Erina Morunga at Iwi n Aus. Dr. David Hall also worked on this project as research advisor.

Many thanks to The Physics Room, Jamie Hanton, The Jan Warburton Charitable Trust, Dr. Simon Barber, Erica Wilson, Ayesha Green, Jerome Ngan-Kee, and all those who participate with their messages.

6 Lawrence Abu Hamdan (born in Lebanon, lives and works in Beirut), *Language Gulf in the Shouting Valley*, 2013, video, 15:48 mins

Language Gulf in the Shouting Valley is an audio essay and audio-visual installation about the politics of language and the conditions of the voice faced by the Druze community living between Palestine/Israel and Syria.

Recordings of the Druze Soldiers working as interpreters in the Israeli Military Court system in the West Bank and Gaza are contrasted with recordings from the Shouting Valley, Golan Heights, where the Druze population gather on both sides of the Israeli/Syrian border and shout across the jurisdictions to family and friends on the other side. By inhabiting the border between Syria, Israel and Palestine the Druze complicate this solid divide.

If we listen closely to the oral border produced by this transnational community, in one voice we can simultaneously hear the collaborator and the traitor; the translator and the transgressor.

Lawrence Abu Hamdan was a joint winner of the Turner Prize in 2019.

Courtesy of Maureen Paley, London.