Conversations from Jan van Eyck Academy

by Murdoch Stephens, Paoletta Holst, Raewyn Martyn

Published on 02.04.2017

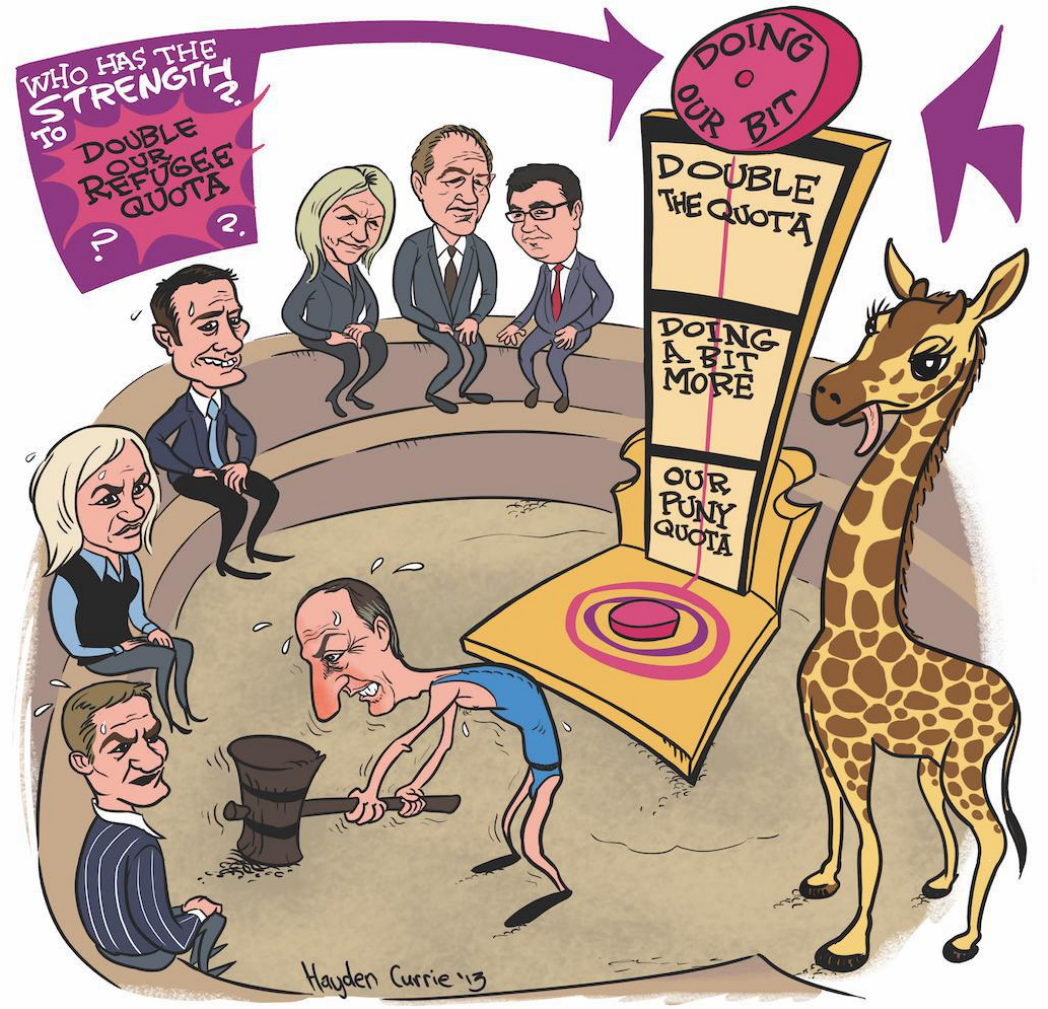


The European summer of 2017 will see swarms of art tourists make their way between the documenta platforms in Athens and Kassel, to Münster, and to the Venice Biennale. While this freedom of movement for some, influences the production and reception of art, artists at the Jan van Eyck residency in Maastricht, Netherlands, have been discussing the current far-right immigration policies and notions of cultural identity, nationalism and political borders limiting movement for others. Several van Eyck participants are from countries whose visas restrict their freedom of movement—one artist recently unable to attend their own opening in London—raising questions about who the global art world includes, and excludes. And, how cultural exclusions—even if accidental—contribute to the ongoing precarity of people who find themselves in transit, or recently arrived as refugees to their new homes.

Aotearoa New Zealand artist Raewyn Martyn met Dutch artist Paoletta Holst at the Jan van Eyck Academy, where creative researchers gather from many different nations each year. Holst's current project, Grand Tour Europa (2017) reflects on how European cultural identity and tourism compares to the experiences of refugees, whose migration routes roughly follows in reverse the 'Grand Tour' favoured by 19th century cultural elite. Martyn introduced Holst to writer and publisher Murdoch Stephens from the Doing Our Bit campaign in Aotearoa New Zealand, which aims to increase New

Zealand's refugee quota (750 per year in 2017, unchanged since 1987). Both Holst and Stephens use writing as a process to think through the ways in which cultural identities and borders are formed and assigned, and how these processes influence very real, life-and-death, refugee and immigration policies.

Contemporary HUM's new platform for writing about New Zealand artists interacting within the global context sparked an opportunity to explore those parallels through conversation. What follows is a discussion about integrating social topics: refugee quotas, resettlement systems, and media-produced myths, within creative practices that generate public discourse, makes stories visible, and can shape new perceptions on notions of national borders and identity.



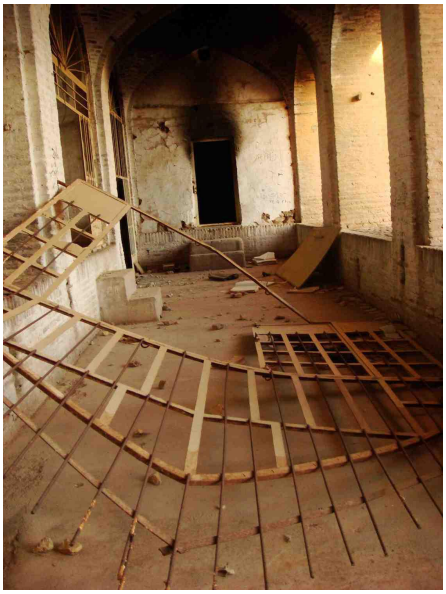
"Mr English might think that fudging the numbers on our tiny refugee quota will get him through this year's election. But the European countries dealing with their

> own refugee intakes have been very clear with him that pretending we're already doing our bit is not convincing."
>
> Murdoch Stephens 'NZ's refugee numbers an awkward topic in Europe' Radio NZ, 17 Jan 2017

RAEWYN MARTYN In researching the realities of refugee experiences, you've both travelled in places where people have travelled from, or through. How did your interest in this area begin?

PAOLETTA HOLST I've always been interested in our built environment and how we create it. I studied art, and then architectural history, focusing on city development. I was not designing, but reflecting, with a more socio-political approach—asking how we use space rather than asking what is built. I became interested in the political forces at play behind what is included in public spaces; it's highly political and contested and there are always conflicts of interest. I realised that it comes down to those who have power and those who don't. Those who don't have power can create spaces, but are always forced to circumnavigate official ways of using public space. My thesis was about architecture and migration with a focus on the French city of Marseille, and the ways in which migration shaped the city.

It's hard to go to these places without acting like a journalist, or disaster tourist. I've been in 'The Jungle'[01] at Calais, and I've seen first-hand that there's much more to it than the stories presented in the media. People are portrayed so that you have pity on them. That's a strategy; if we only see them in this way, we have to take care of them, and they cannot start to build something for themselves. The young people I encountered in the camps have a lot of energy, their positive story is that they're also on this big adventure, off to find something new. The sad story is that this energy fades away when people have to wait for months, without a clue of what will happen to them. This is what you never see in the media. Without going to these places I wouldn't have had this broader perspective.



Interior of Anjirak Afghan Prison, Yazd province, Iran, 2010. Photo courtesy Murdoch Stephens.



Refugees Welcome Vigil, September 2015, Parliament buildings Wellington. Photo courtesy Matt Grace.

MURDOCH STEPHENS The event that really did it for me was a trans-Asian trip from India, through Pakistan, to the Middle East, in 2009-10. I made that trip because I found a disjunction between the way that travel guide books depict the hospitality of the average Iranian and the image of Iranian or Muslim people portrayed in mainstream media.

While in Iran, a group of us stumbled upon an abandoned refugee detention center in the desert. It wasn't something I was seeking, and it's a long story, but, there were about 10,000 photographs of Afghan people, including about a thousand photos of families, who had been imprisoned there. These photos were abandoned in the dust and the broken glass in the middle of nowhere. I made the decision to take these family photos, which now comprise the Anjirak Afghan Archive.[02]

I became interested in questions of migration because I was following a modern version of The Hippie Trail—The Silk Road adventure—more or less in reverse.

PH I also did my Grand Tour trip in reverse. In the 18th and 19th century, most people undertaking the Grand Tour

travelled from England to Italy, and later, when the rail network was introduced (Orient Express) at the end of the 19th century, also to Athens and Istanbul. I started in Turkey, and travelled into Europe.

MS Going from India to Turkey, by the time I hit Istanbul, I thought, I am in Europe, this is so European. Whereas, if you start in Turkey, it must feel really Oriental or Middle Eastern and then progressively more and more Middle Eastern until you're in Pakistan and South East Asia. Did you get that feeling?

PH Doing the Grand Tour backwards I was also doing the Balkan route that many refugees take. You arrive from Turkey in Greece, which is the European Union, but then as you talk to people there, they say no, no, this isn't Europe. They project it further, to Germany. Going into the Balkan, you're in a totally different world. The European Union has pumped money into the visual and material things, like heritage renovation. You see the European flag everywhere, which creates this European feeling. This is gone the minute you arrive in the Balkan, where EU money hasn't been introduced. It must be weird for people arriving in Europe to leave it again, in order to get to the 'real' Europe.



Fortress Europa, 2016. Photo collage by Paoletta Holst.



Paoletta Holst, *Europe Starts Here*, 2017. Reading performance at Jan van Eyck Open Studio's. 20 flags and a wooden structure that follows the measurements of the *Better Shelter*, a refugee tent developed in 2010 by the IKEA Foundation in collaboration with the UNHCR Refugee Agency.

RM Murdoch, you had to figure out what these photos were, as artifacts, how to see them through different lenses: personal, cultural, documentary, evidential, all of those things.

MS Initially, I didn't realise it was an archive I'd pieced together, and getting back to New Zealand, I thought of these photographs as documentation of the war and terror that had rained down on Afghanistan from the Soviets through to the civil war, through the Taliban and the US invasion. Back in New Zealand, I started thinking about New Zealand's relationship to refugees, whether we do enough, and how to do justice to these photographs. In 2013, some of these portrait photos were included in an exhibition called *Refugee*, at Pataka, in the Wellington region. Together with the curatorial art team, we thought of how to show these pictures so that they would not come across as weak or vulnerable. Nonetheless, I started to feel weird about showing them to an audience who had no relation to them.

As Ramzy Baroud says "*a photo, on its own, no matter how artistic, compelling, captivating, even incensing, is not enough. It must be combined or followed by solid actions and a clear strategy to ensure that someday no such tragic contexts exist for photographers to freeze them in time and place.*"[03]

The artist Allan Sekula makes a quasi-Foucauldian distinction between early forms of photography.[04] Some early photography was honorific and democratised portraiture by allowing people to take photos of beloved family members; other photos documented criminality and were tied up with all sorts of things including trying to analyse race. This is how I started to conceptualise what I was trying to do. I wanted to bring photographs taken in repressive conditions by the state of Iran—to document the asylum seekers as criminals—into an honorific frame. But can the people documented in the photographs really be viewed horrifically outside of their familial or tribal context, where people actually know them? I've manage to include digital versions of these photos as part of the permanent archive at the Afghan Center at Kabul University. It's the closest I've got so far to a form of honour, but there's still categorisation. This is where the arts, and an its interest into archives, can play an important role.

PH Yes, trying to bridge the art world with other disciplines, because it's important to think about these things within the art world, but also beyond. And, asking how history and fiction can play a role in reality, everyday life.

When traveling alone, you really open up as a person towards others, and others open to you. Perhaps you feel similarly with this archive—through the photographs, you open up to the history of others and by talking about it, others can relate to it as well.



RM How do these topics manifest in contemporary art practices?

PH Art has a strange position in all this. Artists are either looking into, or looking away from difficult topics. I believe that art should always play an active part in society. A great example is the project Renzo Martens is currently working on: the Institute for Human Activity in the Congo. He's building an art institution, the White Cube, on the former plantation of the Lever brothers, who are now the megabrand UniLever. The idea is to attract both the capital and the visibility needed for plantations

workers to buy back land and develop a new economic and ecological model on-site: the post-plantation.

RM His work has been critiqued in terms of its complicity and perpetuation of capitalist or colonising systems. There is fear amongst artists today of falling into this.

PH Rather than depictions of these situations, I'm more interested in how artists find methods to question power structures. What Renzo Martens and Sven Augustijnen do is to unravel and reveal colonial structures that we still perpetuate without acknowledging it. They bring us face to face with deeply rooted things that we're unaware of, and question how art is involved. Whether the art they eventually create is good or bad in formal terms, is to me a less important question. It's the discomfort that counts. Those who criticise it don't want to hear what they're saying.

Here's an interesting question, as a writer or artist, should you also be an activist? And if so, how? What should you do? Or what could be of interest?

MS Everything, right? As an artist you're a person as well. Maybe that's the way: not switching directly from artist to activist but developing by way of being a person. You know... art is one segmentation of your life, it's not absolutely everything all the time.

RM Political interactions inform art-making, too. I like Donna Haraway's expression "thinking with things."[05] My painting thinks with a lot of things, to do with being in this world right now. My political experiences and interactions, in the US and Europe have influenced my thinking. The far-right rhetoric of Dutch Politician Geert Wilders is difficult to catch up to. Paoletta used a Dutch idiom, 'walking behind the facts' to explain this feeling. My work wants to walk beyond verbal language. It doesn't refuse it, but gets ahead or outside of it for a moment. It isn't

strictly representational or abstract and it's not defined by a singular context. But if you're willing to approach painterly language from multiple contexts, you might connect the boundary-less qualities of the methylcellulose medium I use,[06] to the politics of borders, or freedom of movement.



Raewyn Martyn, *Graft, Medium Reconfigured* (detail), 2016. Methylcellulose and pigment on floor, wall, and ceiling. Presented as part of Jan van Eyck Academy Open Studios, March 2017.



Raewyn Martyn, *Graft, Medium Reconfigured* (detail), 2016. Methylcellulose and pigment on floor, wall, and ceiling. Presented as part of Jan van Eyck Academy Open Studios, March 2017.



Raewyn Martyn, *Medium Reconfigured* (detail), 2017. Methylcellulose and pigment on floor, wall, and ceiling. Presented as part of Jan van Eyck Academy Open Studios, March 2017.

MS In New Zealand, I was kind of shocked at the lack of response from the arts and the literary communities to the global refugee crisis. The people who had a voice in the media from what we might call an arts background and who chose to speak up were mostly comedians, musicians, and actors.

However, the response has been stronger in relation to the detention of asylum seekers by Australia. In 2013, Melissa Laing's *The Western Shore* responded to the boats of refugees arriving in Manus Island, and the 2013 'mass arrivals' Immigration Amendment Act passed in New Zealand. She documented the collaborative process of making a boat and made a brilliant video work of herself on the foreshore, fighting with the waves and struggling to come out of the water—a really beautiful statement about the physicality of crossing borders in these liminal spaces.

RM And this year, at Sculpture on the Gulf, Tiffany Singh's work used boats as sound-shells for audio recordings in *A Journey of a Million Miles Begins with One Step*, made in collaboration with the Auckland Resettled Community Coalition. The second stage of the project, *The Journey of a Million Miles –*

Following Steps, is on show at the New Zealand Maritime Museum until September 2017. "The dialogue was largely to counter the language and to really reposition the narrative around these people as New Zealanders," Singh said.[07]

MS I also worked with Shannon Te Ao on his response to the boycott of the Sydney Biennale[08] in 2014. The key funder of the festival was Transfield, a company that runs the Australian detention centres where refugees were held offshore and who were profiting from the detention of asylum seekers. Luca Belgiorno-Nettis, the director of Transfield was also the chair of the Sydney Biennale and so there was this crazy integration of private security forces, intense profits, and the art world. In 2012 there was an initial, small boycott of the Biennale, and then in 2014 it was really well organised and there were staggered numbers of artists dropping off. There was this really interesting moment when the Biennale was saying: well you guys are artists, just use your voice, make art about it, don't boycott things, that's not what artists do. An interesting position for artists to be in! So Shannon was doing a number of different things at once whilst watching it play out. He signed the open letter asking Transfield to close down the detention centre, and what ultimately happened is Transfield didn't sponsor the event and the chair stood down from the Biennale.



RM And what are other visible manifestations of refugee resettlement processes?

MS We're in that strange place, the middle of the South Pacific, probably the most isolated place that has a refugee quota and because we're inaccessible, resettlement processes are institutionalised and often invisible. There are six locations in New Zealand where refugees are resettled, and half of New Zealanders live in a region where no refugees are resettled. So absence—rather than manifestation—is strong, and that absence allows other things to take root.

PH In Belgrade, there's massive visibility of the refugee crisis because the borders between Serbia and Hungary are sealed off to people from certain countries. Many Afghans are basically stuck in Serbia. Mostly young men, teenagers, living on the streets and around train and bus stations. It was very confronting to realise that between Serbia and Hungary, a spatial barrier was erected. That's why people gather in Belgrade. It's also symbolic of how the EU works. The visibility is there where borders undermine the movement of people.

In places like the Jungle in Calais, it's visible because the state doesn't want to do anything about it. Because regulating or giving help also means acknowledging the existence of informal camps and that state policies are wrong. In Calais, they didn't want to acknowledge it until the moment they finally decided to evict the campers. They built double fences around the Eurostar train tunnel and the roads leading to the Port though, to prevent people from crossing to England. There's a crazy infrastructure in and around Calais. It's fascinating that they literally build around things, build around the problem, build around the things that matter.

MS We're talking about presence, but another absence is deportation. In New Zealand about 300 people apply for asylum each year, either they fly in with false documents, or they're here as students, and then they apply. People tend to think it's a soft

touch because you don't see anyone deported. 80,000 in Germany, last year, were sent home.[09] There's no visibility of this. And I wonder how it could contribute to people understanding the strictness of the criteria for asylum eligibility.

PH In an asylum center in Brussels, Iraqi people received a letter from the State saying the area they came from was now safe, and that they must go back. In response, refugees and activists looked on the travel advisory website for Belgian people abroad and it was obviously not safe. People who are asylum seekers or refugees are deported back every week, to unsafe places. Nobody here knows or cares. The system is totally rationalised.

MS And individualised. It's never brought up as a systemic way in which representatives of the State protect a border. Rather, the border becomes controlled through non-state administration. Check-in counters at international airports enforce the law well before passport control. It reminds me of a remarkable poem by Alison Phipps, a Scottish refugee campaigner and UNESCO Professor of Languages and Intercultural Studies, that I want to leave you with:

And they will say of me
that despite it all, I was a border guard.
That I assigned my signature to the papers
which monitored and revealed the whereabouts
of students from other lands, whose learning
was in my care.

And they will have evidence,
when they look again, once again,
at the only question we can ever have
of history,
“How did this happen?
How can human beings
do this?”

They will say it of me and of my friends
and also of those who comply easily
and don't question, as I do, as I do daily.

Footnotes

01. The original 'Jungle' was established in the woods around the Port of Calais, Northern France, after Sangatte, an overcrowded Red Cross reception centre, was closed in November 2002. Since then, various camps moved to new locations before being closed down by the French authorities. The principal 'jungle' camp came into existence in April 2015 occupying a former landfill site, five kilometers from the centre of Calais. By the time it was evicted in October 2016, up to 6,000 refugees were living there.

02. While the physical Anjirak Afghan Archive has not been transferred due to security challenges, a digital archive is held at The Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University (ACKU) www.acku.edu.af

03. "Photographing Tragedy: What Victims Actually Want" www.pmc.aut.ac.nz

04. Allan Sekula 'The Boyd and the Archive,' *October*, 1986, Vol. 39 (Winter).

05. Donna Haraway uses these terms regularly and it is the title of the book Thinking With Things: Toward a New Vision of Art by Esther Pasztory, 2005.

06. Cellulose is a plant-derived polymer that can carry pigment, and holds or releases form during phases of hydration, dehydration, and rehydration. When dried to a paint-like film it can be peeled from non-porous surfaces, then re-moistened to become adhesive, or completely rehydrated to become fluid again. In this way, the film can graft back into surface or cast a molded skin or volume of a three-dimensional object or surface.

07. www.stuff.co.nz

08. Te Ao and Stephens, Unwelcome Guests, 2014, www.academia.edu

09. 'Germany aims to deport record number of rejected asylum seekers in 2017' www.reuters.com

Biographies



Raewyn Martyn grew up in the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. She completed a BFA Hons at Massey University School of Fine Arts in Wellington, NZ, and an MFA in Painting and Printmaking at VCU Arts in Richmond, Virginia, USA. She was visiting assistant professor of visual art at Antioch College, OH from 2013-2016, and is currently a research participant at the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht, NL. (walkerfalls.wordpress.com)



Murdoch Stephens is the spokesperson and principal researcher for Doing Our Bit – a campaign that seeks to double New Zealand's refugee quota from 750 to 1500. He is also editor at Lawrence and Gibson publishing, is lecturing and working on a PhD at Massey University in Wellington, and co-manages the 17 Tory St community space.



Paoletta Holst is an artist, architectural researcher and writer based in Brussels. Her practice operates at the intersection of different disciplines to investigate the spatial and political dimension of art, architecture and the urban environment. In her work she is interested in the influence of formal spatial/political power structures on our living environment, and in the informal counter-strategies people create to deal with them. As a Jan van Eyck 2017 participant, Paoletta developed Grand Tour Europa, an artistic research project regarding the spatial understanding of tourism and migration in the context of the politics of cultural identity in the European Union. (www.paolettaholst.info)

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