

Interview: André Dao and Behrouz Boochani*

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The following text is an edited transcript of a conversation, conducted in English, between André Dao and Behrouz Boochani, two of the artists who made *how are you today*: André from Melbourne, Australia, Behrouz during his incarceration on Manus island, Papua New Guinea. The conversation took place on 3 December in plenary at the 2019 meeting of the Law, Literature and Humanities Association of Australasia, on Yugambah land in the Gold Coast. Boochani had arrived in Aotearoa, New Zealand barely two weeks before, following more than six years of detention on Manus Island, having originally sought asylum in Australia.

André Dao

It's incredible to have you here, also incredible that you're in New Zealand. It was quite surreal to see those photos of you at the airport in New Zealand, and then to see the photos of you at *Eavesdropping* in Wellington. I will ask you a few questions about that exhibition in particular. But just to begin with, what has it been like for you to be in New Zealand, and to be free?

* This essay is one of six pieces in this special issue dedicated to the work of the Manus Recording Project Collective, which you may therefore like to read together. For a general introduction and the curatorial history of the work, start with Parker and Stern (2020). The collection also includes essays by André Dao, Poppy de Souza, Emma Russell and Andrew Brooks.

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Behrouz Boochani

Thank you very much. Actually, I'm mostly happy because of the internet. I think it's the first time I've had access to good internet so I can meet with people. As you know, I was at Gus Fisher Gallery, then in Wellington, at City Gallery. In both places they showed me these works. And actually, we didn't know that on that particular day, I would be in New Zealand. So it was quite exciting for the people there too, because they didn't know, and we couldn't tell them because of the media. On the day we arrived there, the most interesting thing for me was when I was sitting in the gallery. I was listening to these voices. It was the first time I was looking at Manus, from a different place. So, it was very interesting. I'm very excited. Now I'm here, thank you.

André Dao

So I was wondering, what was it like? You mentioned that it was the first time you were looking at and listening to Manus, from a different place. And that it is still so recent for you. Have you begun to think about what difference that has made for you, to listen to those recordings in New Zealand?

Behrouz Boochani

Yeah, when I arrived in New Zealand, people asked me about my feelings. And for the first time, I looked at the past. Because when I was in Manus, I did not have time to think about myself. Because the journey still continues, the struggle still continues. But when I arrived in New Zealand for the first time, I looked at the past. I was quite emotional. I am happy that I survived. Of course, when you look at Manus... you know, for me, it was part of history. I felt that these works are important, because we recorded part of the history, part of the life in Manus Island. I was glad that at least we had this material. Although, for people in Manus Island and Nauru, history is not important. People don't care about history. People don't care what history judges, and what the next generation thinks about this historical period. But for me, and for the people who have been working in this field for years, at least we can say that we recorded part of this history. And I should mention this: that all of us who worked, we started to

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work to create change, to change this policy. You know, we didn't just want to record these works, or create these materials for history. We wanted to make change, and to have an impact on Australia. We wanted to help people understand. That is my feeling and my understanding about these works. Unfortunately these works belong to history because we didn't change the policy. Of course, we achieved many things, and most people have already been released from Port Moresby, Manus Island, and Nauru. But still some people remain. Still, now in the Australian parliament, politicians are saying that 'we should not let these people through,' or have access to medical treatment. So still the struggle continues, unfortunately we should accept that in this current generation, we couldn't change. That is the reality.

André Dao

So if you think back to the end of 2018 when you were making these recordings; were you thinking of them in this way; that they were already something for history, but wouldn't be something that could change generations, as you say?

Behrouz Boochani

Well in the past two years, I myself became disappointed and I look at these works mostly for history, because we wanted to record this. So I was thinking about it, in this way. I think what's really important about this artwork, is that we help people feel the men in Manus Island. We take them into the camp to live with us. That's why I always criticize journalistic language, because it is not capable of doing that. Journalistic language is the kind of language that follows governmental language, and is the kind of language that power structures use to spread propaganda, to justify this barbaric policy. That's why I think we should look at these works in a different way. They are important because they are artistic works. I feel art is the most powerful language to share this story, to tell this tragedy, not journalism.

André Dao

It's so interesting to hear you talking about this distinction, between journalistic language and artistic language. I think elsewhere, you have talked about literary language too. But then thinking about

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the recording that we were all listening to as we walked into this auditorium: it was the second recording that you made for this project. It's you, sitting by the fence, listening to the sounds of the jungle. I've always been struck by that recording, because you talked about making these recordings for history, and to make people live with you in the camp. You chose to record the sounds of the jungle, rather than what other people might have thought you would've recorded, like something spectacular, or something violent. But instead, it was you, sitting there and listening. I wondered why you made that choice.

Behrouz Boochani

Yeah, I think I should return to my movie, "Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time". It's about 90 minutes. And people asked, "Why didn't you show much violence? Why didn't you show more physical violence, created by the guards?" You know, I had many shots of that, but I only included two shots in the movie. Where the guards attacked a man, and another man's suicide attempt. The reason we decided to do that, is because that is the reality of life in Manus Island in the detention centre. And in this particular work, I just recorded the voice of the jungle. For people who look at Manus and try to understand this system through journalistic language, they just hear it from the news, the media. When something happens, like violence, they look at Manus, they forget about it later. It's true, that when we were in that place, everyday, every moment, we were struggling with systematic torture. But I think time is very important. I wanted to show time, and silence [by recording the jungle]. To help people imagine it properly. For years and years and years, you would just listen to the jungle. You just listen to the animals, you look at the wall. People think that every day, morning to night, we are engaged with physical violence on Manus, and the guards attack us. But the reality is, that it's not like this. You know, for most of the life lived in that place is people sitting, being tortured by time.

I know that for the audience, it is quite hard to just sit down and listen to the jungle for ten minutes. And I witnessed that, in Wellington, Dunedin and Auckland. Some people just couldn't stay, they left the

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gallery, and tried to listen to another voice. But that is the reality. We were in that prison, in those circumstances, for more than six years. People in the gallery couldn't listen, couldn't even make it ten minutes. So that's the main torture of being in this system: time, silence. People are losing their dreams. They are losing their life. That's why I decided to help the audience imagine how life is, inside the prison. In all of my words, in my book and all of my other writing, there is a desire... For people to just understand a different way, that moves away from journalistic language.

André Dao

You mentioned that you saw people sitting in the gallery. You finally got to see people responding to the work. As you watched people in the gallery listening, or not listening to the ten minutes, was it different to what you imagined back in 2018, when you were making the recordings? What do you think the people in the gallery involved were doing? Did you imagine them sitting through the ten minutes, did you imagine them living with you in the camp? And how was this different to what you saw in Wellington?

Behrouz Boochani

Six years ago, I said that if only one individual person read my work, I would write, and continue to write for that individual person. And that is my philosophy, in this work. For this recording, of course, there will be people who find it boring, and they won't want to listen. But there are many people here, who just sit down and try to understand. They close their eyes, just to imagine the people in Manus, and try to make a connection with the men, in Manus. And that's why I think this work is very interesting. Because it shows humanity. It shows feeling. It shows that these men are innocent, that they are the same as you. And it takes the audience inside the prison camp, just to live with them for a while. To witness their lives. Another thing really that is very important, is that this system treats us in a way where we do not exist. But we do exist. Sometimes we exist in Australia, through these artworks, you know. That part is very surreal: that these men exist on Manus, and the government denied them, denied that they

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existed. But now, they appear in galleries, and created a space so that the people of Australia could have a connection with them and listen to them. Someone told me that everywhere they go, they see my book in the back of the shop. So we exist. That is the important thing about this work. That it allows us to say: here we are.

André Dao

It is true that your book is everywhere. As I was on my way here, at the airport, I saw your face in the bookshop. It's quite incredible to think of how prominent and visible your book and your work has been, over the past couple of years. One of the strange things for me, listening to that recording with you sitting by the fence, and some of your other recordings where nothing much happens in some ways, is that there is some beauty in those recordings too. And I wanted to ask you about this beauty, and in particular, natural beauty. In the recordings, and in your work more generally. The book that we made with you and some of the other men on Manus, and detention centres elsewhere, we called it "They Cannot Take the Sky" after a line from you, about the importance of the sky. So I wanted to ask you about beauty and especially natural beauty in your work.

Behrouz Boochani

Yeah, I don't think it's only for me. I talk about myself, only as an example. Finding beauty and creating beauty is so important, in a system that is designed to humiliate you, take your dignity, take your identity, and your humanity. It's important for people on Manus to survive, through these kinds of creations. And when I say creation, I don't mean writing a book, or a novel. I mean creation, as a small thing. Sometimes, when men are sitting together, and when one of them makes a joke. It is a kind of performance, it can be a form of art, it is a theoretical work. Or if a man is taking care of the animals like in one of my recordings, where I had a conversation with 'duck man'. He was a man that loved ducks, he loved animals. There is a connection between people, animals, and nature, and finding beauty helps them [the people] survive. It helps them to resist, it keeps their dignity alive. Because the system is established to humiliate people and take their

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identity. Sometimes I imagine Manus prison in a different place, and I don't know if we could've survived, you know. We always rely on nature. Sometimes, nature is the sky. That's why we called the book, *They Cannot Take The Sky*. Sometimes it's the animals, sometimes it was the jungle, sometimes birds flew above the prison camp, and you could see them for a few seconds. This kind of beauty actually helped people to understand that life still continued, that life still continues. It is my understanding of life; that life is beauty, and understanding beauty, is understanding what's going on in this world. I try to show some of the beauty that exists in Manus. Even in the worst places in the world, you can find some beauty. And, you know, people tell me "you are an idealist". But I came from that place, you know, so I don't sit in my office and say "Oh, beauty". It is not a slogan. This is my understanding, on the meaning of life, and trying to find beauty in those circumstances [on Manus]. So that's why people create. Creations are sometimes a poem, sometimes a piece of art, sometimes a very small thing. Sometimes cooking, you know. So this creation of this beauty, is how people survive and exist.

André Dao

Well, my next question was going to be about Mansour, the 'duck man', and more generally about the recordings you made of other people. They're obviously very different to the recordings, where you were sitting next to the jungle. And you answered a bit of this question just then, when you were talking about the small acts of creation, that helped men survive on the island. So I was wondering, when you spoke to Mansour, is that what you were trying to record? How other people survived.

Behrouz Boochani

Yeah. His name is Mansour Shoushtari. I would like to ask everyone to read the article, the story that I wrote about Mansour. It was published in *The Guardian*. The title of the story is "Duck Man". I knew Mansour, and he accepted to share his story. Later, when Michael Green contacted me [to make the recordings], I thought it would be good to take the audience to Manus, to sit with me and Mansour, and

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listen to him directly. What's interesting about Mansour, is that he always has a small child in himself, you know. Even in such extreme circumstances. Mansour is about 45 years old, but he has looked like a child many times. That's why I wanted to record his story in a different way, because before, I just wrote about him. Later, I wanted people to listen to him directly. That is: the way that he loved ducks. He loved the ducks more than any other animal. But he also loved the dogs. He loved birds. Even the other animals that people didn't care about, like crabs, and snakes. He has a deep connection with the land and with nature. And what I want to say is that people, such as Mansour, are not creating this beauty just for themselves. They are not just helping themselves, or resisting the system. In fact, they are creating beauty for others too, you know. So when you are in circumstances like Manus, there are people such as Mansour around you. We can use that beauty. Sometimes when you have a small, short conversation with a person like Mansour, it makes you happy. It creates life, it creates some meaning. I describe a similar character in the book, who I called Maysam the whore, who is constantly playing the system. For months, he dances, he sings, he makes fun. He is a symbol for these kinds of people. Mansour is one of them.

André Dao

In the final recording for *how are you today*, you record a conversation with the photographer Hoda Afshar. You talked with her about new documentary or artistic languages, one in which the subject actively collaborates in the creation of the artwork. Listening to the recording again, you're asking the audience to essentially eavesdrop on what is otherwise a private conversation between two artists. I wondered why you chose to record that conversation for this project?

Behrouz Boochani

Firstly, it was my daily life in Manus. When I spoke with Michael about this project, he explained to me, "We are recording your daily lives". Almost every day, I had an event, or I had to participate in an event. I'd have to have conversations with people, with the artists. I was working, so that's the way I recorded it. The second thing is that

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I think it's very important, this language of photography. For years, I have been working with photo journalists, and I've always criticized them. They use the camera as a weapon. They use the camera in a way where the subject is completely passive. The subject is completely powerless. They use the camera like a weapon, and they take a shot. I describe that in the book, when they took me from Christmas Island to Port Moresby, the photographers were taking shots of us, without getting permission. And they took those shots in a situation where we were completely powerless, we couldn't even talk to them. So in this kind of photographic language, you reduce people, and you take their identities. For us, on Manus, identity was a key concept, because the system was designed to take our identities, they reduced us to numbers. So that's why I liked Hoda and the portrait she did. The subjects weren't passive. The subjects were part of the creation process. For example, for my portrait, we made a fire behind me. Other men made fire and smoke behind me. I set it up as an example of my style, and the way I was standing in front of the camera, made me feel as if I wasn't powerless in front of the lens. The portrait represented my identity. I really like to have that conversation, and to share that with the people involved in this project. People look at us, think about the language of journalism, and then compare that to the language of art.

André Dao

You mentioned it was part of your daily life on Manus to be an artist, to write, to think. Now that you're in New Zealand, how do you think that will change your role as an artist and thinker? You're no longer detained, but in some ways you're in exile. How will your perception change?

Behrouz Boochani

Yeah, I think it will. As a writer, as a poet. For me, art and literature is life itself, and that is why I prefer to write poems where, for example, I am walking down Queen St in Auckland, and I'll describe the sky: you know, my feelings, rather than writing poetry 'about Manus'. Because I'm not in Manus, I'm in Auckland. That's why life is important for me. From now, I'm not going to write about Manus, in literature or in

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artistic language. But what I'm doing about Manus and this policy, is to work, and continue to work with researchers and universities, on Manus and Nauru. To transfer this experience to the younger generations, through the education system. I know I'm working with researchers and academics in this way. Right now, as I'm speaking with you, I know at least seven or eight students who are studying PhDs, with various case studies on Manus. I know many people studying masters, doing case studies on Manus. So I am helping them, I'm working on the future. As an archiving mentality, I will work with researchers on this issue for the rest of my life, because it's very complicated. It's very important in a political, philosophical and historical way. I will work on it in this way. But as an artist and writer, Manus is finished for me.