

Empowering Bare Lives

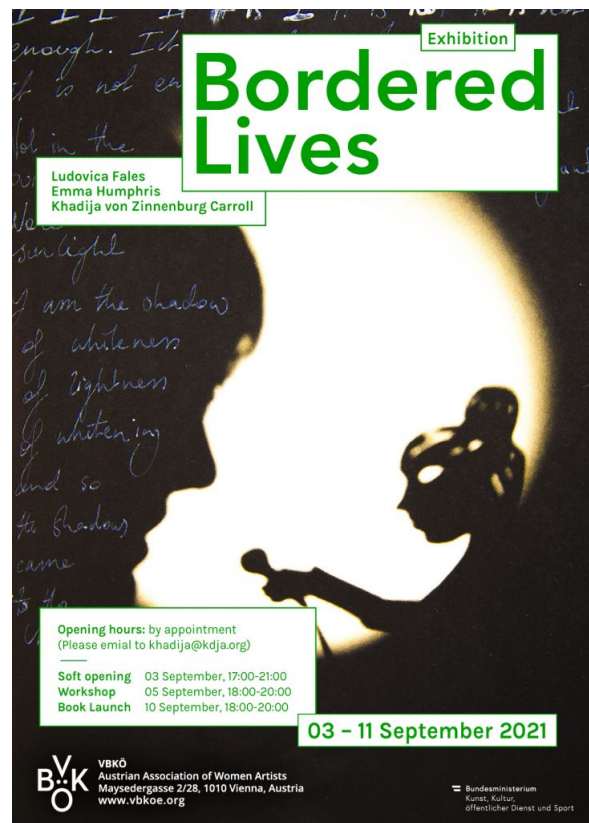
Maja Ćirić

'Bordered Lives', Austrian Association
of Women Artists (VBKÖ), Vienna,
3–11 September 2021

The Austrian Association of Women Artists (VBKÖ) was founded in 1910 as a feminist act, on the margins of what was strictly a male society around the Viennese Secession. In this space that is a symbol of constructive resistance, the 'Bordered Lives' exhibition, which took place in September 2021,¹ demonstrated another kind of social critique that included the work of Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, whose artistic intervention reveals the position of refugees and asylum seekers – a part of society whose integration is problematic. The exhibition consisted of the content of the publication *Bordered Lives*, published by Sternberg Press in 2020. *Bordered Lives* is a pre-pandemic project on display during the pandemic. It is not only the ongoing migrant crisis that makes it relevant; the conditions of isolation, discipline, essential needs, even surveillance, otherwise particular for the institutions keeping people in captivity, resonate much more widely in vaccine politics and re-emerging lockdowns in the current bio-political regimes.

Immigration Detention Archive

The exhibition was a placeholder for the narratives and positions assembled throughout the ten years of research that has resulted in the *Immigration Detention Archive*.² The archive includes a range of material cultures produced by and about detention. It is constantly growing and



¹ The exhibition followed a group residency that included Ludovica Fales, Emma Humphris and Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll. In the exhibition, Ludovica Fales had a separate space with her films, and Emma Humphris had turned *Bordered Lives* into a play in the theatre.

² See www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/immigration-detention-archive; and Mary Bosworth, Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll and Christoph Balzar, *Bordered Lives: Immigration Detention Archive*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2020. The archive was initiated by Mary Bosworth (Professor of Criminology, Faculty of Law, University of Oxford) in UK immigration removal centres, with Khadija von

currently holds several thousand pages of bureaucratic documents, thirty letters, three thousand photographs, four hundred drawings and over seventy artworks and other materials gathered during fieldwork and art workshops. Using the art room within detention centres as a space to talk to the residents and guards, in Harmondsworth (next to Colnbrook, and behind London's Heathrow Airport) and in other detention centres around the UK, has led to the collection of operational documents, facts and artistic interventions. All the various media, the sculpted and drawn material made in these spaces form the basis of the Immigration Detention Archive. Conversations during the process of drawing and making together often covered the family and immigration stories of the people detained. Case files and paperwork were exchanged, and help was provided in the form of explaining bureaucratic language. Those who are detained live in fear of being deported and their mental health can deteriorate over the time spent inside the centre. This form of state violence experienced by those in Harmondsworth has turned into self-harming and frequent suicide attempts. Responding to people shifted quickly from being an art workshop facilitator to being personally accountable. If it was not for this artistic collaborative and interdisciplinary approach, the fragility of these subjects and their narratives would otherwise remain invisible.

Non-normative detainees

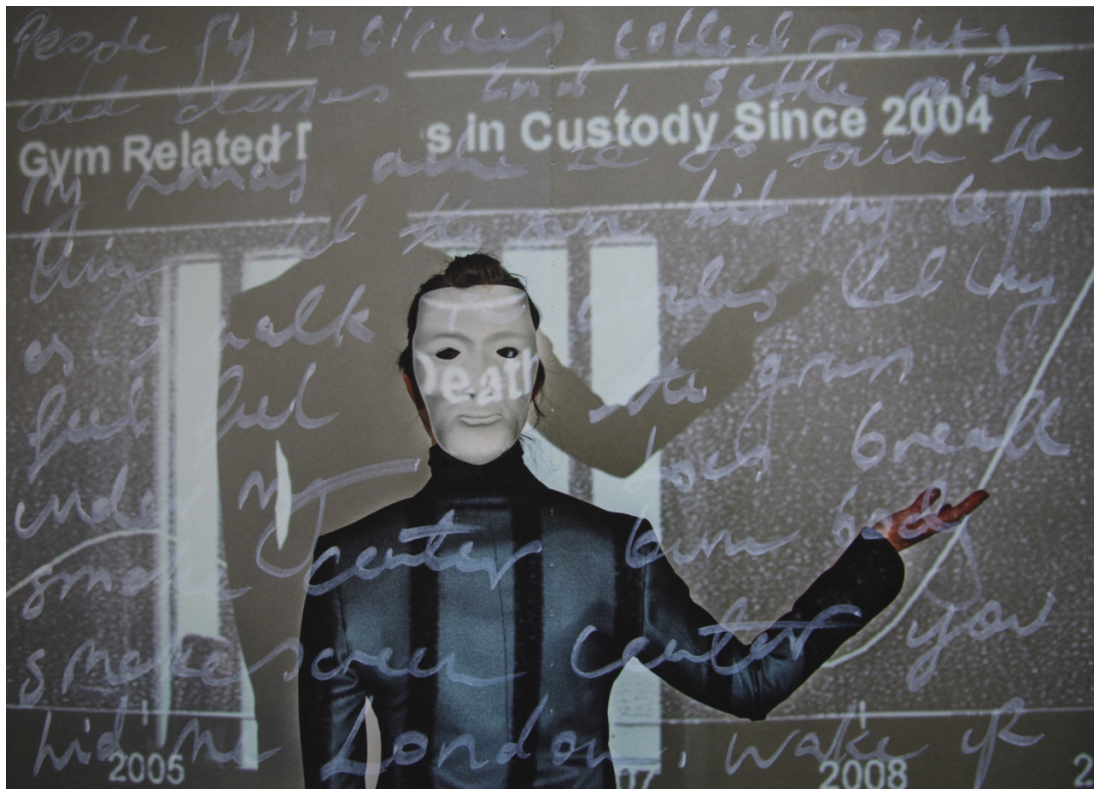
Predominantly male, the migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and non-citizens in UK immigration detention centres, having no citizenship, or having been deprived of citizenship, live in limited and controlled physical spaces that are deeply racialised institutions.³ While most are detained for not obeying the law, some are incarcerated because their case, as an exception, falls out of the normativity of the law and has to be adjusted to it. As non-normative subjects – such as, for example, specific cases of *sans-papiers* – these detainees are, like Agamben's *homo sacer*,⁴ reduced to the conditions of bare life. By being detained, they are (symbolically) killed without a chance to live their aspirations and their 'higher purpose', which in Agamben's terms would be a sacrifice to the (proverbial) gods. Conscious of its limitations, Zinnenburg Carroll's intervention reverses that process. She does this by inducing an empathic art practice in what would otherwise be pure legal data generated by the miserable condition of the detainees. Although she is not able to improve the detainees' condition, Zinnenburg Carroll alters their representation and gives them visibility by writing in poetry and prose, performing and embodying on stage and with immersive settings, while

Zinnenburg Carroll (artist, and Professor of History at the Central European University Vienna and Honorary Professor and Chair of Global Art at the University of Birmingham).

³ See Hindpal Singh Bhul, 'The place of "race" in understanding immigration control and the detention of foreign nationals', *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, Volume 16, No 3, 2016, pp 267–285; Mary Bosworth and Blerina Kellezi, 'Citizenship and Belonging in a Women's Immigration Detention Centre', in C Philips and C Webster, eds, *New Directions in Race and Ethnicity*, Criminal Justice, Borders and Citizenship Research Paper No 2448450, Routledge, Abingdon, 2014, pp 80–96

⁴ See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Daniel Heller-Roazen, trans, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1998

creating characteristically complex works of storytelling that subtly anonymise where necessary. In the film *Artists in Residence*, the montage of archival material and testimonies was first played out, later to be turned into characters for *Shadows Talk*, which was included in the 'Bordered Lives' exhibition together with *Men in Waiting*. While these complex live performances originally include installations and collaborators, live sound and polyphonous voices for her scripts, it was their traces and references that were included in the Viennese exhibition.



Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, *Related Deaths from Shadows Talk*, performance still with drawing, 2021

Shadows Talk

Zinnenburg Carroll scripted and performed a puppet play to show the shadow world of the detainees, consciously avoiding spectacularism and the aestheticisation and instrumentalisation of the topic. It is the obscurity of the system that gives her a reason to represent artistically these *Bordered Lives*. Zinnenburg Carroll's puppetry, with which she abstracts vulnerable subjectivities, is influenced by the uncanny puppets of Joan Jonas and Naoko Takana. Primarily, though, she was trained by the Indonesian Wayang Kulit shadow puppet masters, whose philosophy articulates the idea that the shadows are more us than we are ourselves. Transfiguration is achieved with hybrid puppets, like the one with many faces representing the multitude of detainees, or the one representing the dichotomy of dreams and nightmares. Zinnenburg Carroll's artistic interventions evidence the power of bureaucracy as embodied in a puppet that has the shape of a building. This central prop of the play has a

specific time-space continuum, opening and closing the mouth to swallow people whole. Puppets are capable of speaking about sensitive subjects, but they are also a way to visualise the lives of the detainees in a less documentary manner while simultaneously avoiding the impasses of institutional censorship.



Installation view of printed posters in the 'Bordered Lives' exhibition; the poster on the left features detainee Fang Chung Ye's painting of Queen Elizabeth II, photo courtesy of Inge Wurzer

Entitlement for a Good Cause

The question here is why 'art' is used by Zinnenburg Carroll to empathise with non-normative subjects. For example, one of the detainees, Fang Chung Ye, a Chinese painter, made a portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, a symbol of a sovereign body that becomes visible to the audiences as a result of Zinnenburg Carroll's mediation. Contrary to what might be initially presumed, not even the Queen, as a sovereign body, can interfere legally in the immigration removal centres' agenda. Art, however, allows for imaginary salvation of the non-normative subject that might be (symbolically) killed by the legal system, blind to the terrible conditions outside of it. Artistic action allows us to reflect on the necessity of real action within the impasses of the system. Moving between the imaginary futures and the work of transforming carceral institutions is difficult, but possible. As a result of this artistic research practice, the harm to the body of a non-normative, disciplined and incarcerated subject does not happen unnoticed. While Zinnenburg Carroll might not reveal pressure from the inside of the institution, she provides moments of visibility to this location that is otherwise blacked-out on Google GPS. Besides their bodies being disciplined in surveilled and controlled spaces, the detainees' time is also heavily regulated, and the coping mechanisms of each are stressed. The slide projection *Going in Circles* documents indefinite detention as a man walks the perimeter of the courtyard outside the gym, smoking a cigarette. Unfortunately, this footage, which resulted from the process of collaboration with the detainees in a filmmaking workshop

led by the artist, was censored by the UK Home Office. Zinnenberg Carroll was only allowed to show stills from her own time spent inside during the research, so she cut the video up into stills and made them into slides to fill a carousel. The motion of the man smoking and the unfolding images mirror each other and go round and round endlessly. Scratching and writing onto the slides also draws another layer onto this bleak and hopeless scene.



Installation view of the 'Bordered Lives' exhibition, with the *Going in Circles* slide projection and a timetable from Colnbrook Immigration Removal Centre on the wall

Sampling the Beyond Border

If the detention centres are the last point in the long journey of the migrants and refugees, then the harshness of the rest of their journey can only be imagined. *Bordered Lives* is a sample of what is beyond, an index of what more can be found across the border of the legally justified system. As much as it is important to witness the situation within the immigration removal centres, the *Bordered Lives* project indirectly points to the same condition, magnified and multiplied, beyond the borders where entire populations of the underprivileged are condemned to bare life and stranded therein. The project not only seeks to question the use and legitimacy of the custodial centres, but it also sheds light on the character of the detainees' lives through a comparative analysis. On one side is the migrant life – undertaking a terrifying journey from its natural habitus; on the other, at the end of the road, is the status of that body within the UK system. *Bordered Lives* not only documents but also unpretentiously intervenes in the reality of bare lives within the borders and also beyond. Aware that the complex situation cannot be resolved, Zinnenburg Carroll is invested in a process that continually requires new

hacks and subversions of anti-immigration campaigns, such as the Australian Government's Zero Chance Sri Lanka 'short film competition' and death 'games' website:⁵ Such cheap propaganda offers a drone as prize for a film that:

MUST be based on the theme 'Illegal Migration to Australia' showcasing the futility of making such a journey and the impact it has by touching upon one or a few of the below mentioned points:

Getting caught by people smugglers
Risking your life in the rough seas
The effect on the lives of families / loved ones
Issues faced after being sent back to Sri Lanka

State arts funding budgets are justified and spent on coercive advertising such as this, thinly veiled as film and video game design. It is the domain of visual representation and digital arts that is instrumentalised for political ends and must therefore be reclaimed, Zinnenburg Carroll argues. Art in tandem with criminology gives *Bordered Lives* the potential to impact both the legal and the governmental, and the visual strategies used to represent these. How to take the regulations of state legislature as productive limitations – ones that can give rise to open and complex possibilities for survival and abolition, rather than banal forms of evidence and persuasion such as the Zero Chance Sri Lanka campaign? Even when all forms of documentation are censored, how can artists use the techniques of digital arts and analogue forms as simple as light and shadow to tell migrants' stories? With the *danse macabre* performed by Zinnenburg Carroll (in *Shadows Talk*), the cul-de-sac of the law has found a temporary hypothetical exit.

Maja Ćirić is an independent curator and art critic. After the digital turn in 2020, she became more involved in phygital (physical + digital) projects, conferences and exhibitions in the hybrid field of art + science + tech and the metaverse. Maja is the curator of the 20th Biennale in Pančevo, Serbia (2022). She was the curator of the Mediterranea 18 Young Artists Biennale in Tirana in 2017, and has been both the curator (2007) and the commissioner (2013) of the Serbian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Maja has a PhD in art theory from the University of Arts, Belgrade. She has contributed to *Flash Art*, *Obieg*, *Artforum*, *Artmargins Online*, *Arts of the Working Class* and *springerin*.

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⁵ <https://zerochance.lk/competition/short-film-competition/>