

7 November 2020 /
13 February 2021

Shireen Taweel

Switching Codes



Devices for Listening, 2020, engraved and pierced copper. Image by Document Photography.

Artist Statement

Language resembles an electric current; alive with centuries of cultural experiences such as learning, trade, identity, community and ancestral knowledge.

Switching Codes unpacks the ongoing influence of Arabic, English and French language based cultural practices in Lebanon and its outcomes on the shared Lebanese cultural identity in Australia, Lebanon, and France. Lebanese official government services, education, and even exhibition statements in museums are presented in these three distinct languages, however the social and daily use of language within the community has evolved into a hybridity of the three languages through the act of code switching.

Code-switching has become a significant tool used to unify the varied and constantly shifting cultural interests bound within generations of the French, English and Arabic languages and the influence of the associated cultural and political histories. The fluidity of language and its fundamental nature of being ever evolving are clearly demonstrated within Lebanon. Experienced through the copper sculptures, sound compositions saturate space with drones of subtle tonal variations, the composed ambience is a hybrid of the three languages Arabic, French and English.

Sound is projected from deep within the forms, directing and diffusing harmonious tones that have swallowed the whole words of three languages although retained the underlying act of code-switching. By removing tri-language based text and speech and replacing it with pure tones, the inclination is towards an eventual outcome of a hybrid language. The hybrid language being the current which carries the new configurations of cultural practices.

A series of engraved copper tablets present a symbolic return to the earliest known texts, however also refer to communication today with the tablet being a premise for so many technological devices. The tablets are now charged by an electric current, one which also carries all facets of contemporary culture forward, contributing to the stimulation, need and desire for language to evolve.

The works invite discourse around multilingual practice today, by exploring the fluidity of language and its relativity to place and time. Future possibilities for the renewal of a broadly spoken universal language are perceived, the notion of collaborative cultural interconnectedness and socially engaged movement shifts the power of the colonising narrative to one of unity.

/ Shireen Taweel, September 2020



All images by Silversalt Photography.

Familiar yet Strange

Code-switching can be defined as the practice of alternating between two or more languages in conversation. Historically, code-switching was born out of cultural resilience and adaptation to changing times. Today, the reasons why code-switching may be embraced are vast and circumstantial. Code-switching can also be used to adjust dialogue, in ways that will optimise the comfort of others during interracial interactions — here, it's often used to avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes of certain cultural groups. More importantly, code-switching can be used to celebrate one's identity, especially for those from migratory backgrounds. The dynamics of code-switching are always evolving.

Switching Codes by Shireen Taweel embraces this nuanced view of language. While living and working in Lebanon two years ago, Taweel was struck by how fluid language was in her parents' homeland: all around her, switching between Arabic, English and French was standard practice in a way far more prevalent than in Australia, where often the cultural norm is to see languages siloed. This exhibition brings together a selection of works inspired by the socially fluid and progressive nature of code-switching and the interchangeable way this multilingual artist communicates with her own family today.

Despite growing up in a mixed-race household, I was not raised multilingual; and this experience is not as uncommon as you may think.

'Your mother and I speak to each other in English - why would we speak to our children in separate languages?'

What Taweel's exhibition so powerfully evokes is the peculiar tension of being in the orbit of familial languages you do not comprehend. A moment when the familiar and the strange coincide - where codes are recognised and honed in on, but exist beyond your ability to respond. With this tension lives a longing for more: wonderings about other ways of communicating with family and culture(s) that aren't situated in just one language.

Switching Codes explores this tension and alternative modes of communication via a selection of sculptural works embodying the fluidity and hybridity of code-switching. A series of conversations are engraved into copper tablets, reflecting upon the various dialogue the artist has had while working between Lebanon and Australia. These flowing texts have been transcribed in Arabic, English and French, each alphabetical letter familiar yet strange as they are layered upon one another, inviting us to consider what conversations are really unfolding.

Three directional sound sculptures present an ambient future conversation, tones and possible syllables swirling in the embryonic stages of a hybrid language. Tension builds as you listen to the fluid nature of these soundscapes, snippets are recognisable but you struggle to discern the full message.



Switching Codes (work in progress), 2020, engraved copper. Image by Silversalt Photography.

The inclusion of two listening devices completes the exhibition. These conical forms are meticulously constructed from engraved and pierced copper. As a material, copper is also used in communication devices, its tensile strength making it a very satisfactory conductor of electrical currents. Taweel often refers to language as an electrical current, one that provides an exchange of cultural experiences, identity, trade, community, learning and ancestral knowledge.

Switching Codes initiates discourse and intrigue around multilingual practices today and asks us to really consider the future possibilities of code-switching. For those of us who are eager to find new ways to connect with our culture, this exhibition encourages us to contemplate different forms of communication and think more deeply about how language can be shared and exchanged in ways that feel more universal.

/ By Nanette Orly, September 2020
Curator and writer based on
Wiradjuri country



Devices for Listening, 2020, engraved and pierced copper. Image by Document Photography.



Shireen Taweel in her studio, Sydney, 2020. Image by Silversalt Photography.

Artist Bio

Shireen Taweel is a multimedia installation artist whose work broaches issues of the construction of cultural heritage, knowledge and identity through language and the constantly shifting public space of the social and political axiom.

Her artistic practice draws from the personal experiences of being Lebanese Australian living between cultures, and how the physical spaces within her community reflect a complex cultural landscape of transformation expressed through hybridity and plurality. The project development of Shireen's works are often site-specific, weaving local narratives and research with a focus on experimentation in material and sound through site.

Shireen's constant acquisition of traditional coppersmith artisan skills is a research vessel for community focused conceptual development. Through a progressive application of the collected artisan techniques and a manipulation of the acts of making her works lead to possibilities of cross-cultural discourse, opening dialogues of shared histories and fluid community identities.

Shireen Taweel graduated from a bachelor of Fine Arts in 2015 at the School For Creative Arts Hobart, and completed a Graduate Diploma of Fine Arts in Sculpture in 2016 at The National Art School, Sydney. She is currently working in residence from Creative Live/Work tenancy supported by the City of Sydney Council. Her works have been widely exhibited in notable institutions throughout Australia and recently Lebanon.

Over the years she has fostered relationships with various high schools across Western Sydney by running drawing, sculpture and technical copper engraving workshops with young adults from her studio awarding her with The Arts and Culture Medal from Multicultural NSW (2018), and recently a highly commended award for Arts and Cultural Australia Day Awards (2020).

Fairfield City Museum & Gallery

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Cover image: *Switching Codes* (work in progress), 2020,
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