

Bouchra Khalili: Mapping Without Borders

Take a journey through oral history and the revolutionary past

"We are all Creole,"¹ says the artist of Moroccan-French heritage, who has recently based herself between Paris, Oslo and Berlin. Bouchra Khalili is a quiet but forcefully spoken artist, whose powerful messages belie a subtle and complex delivery, through film, photography and language. Her best known piece—dealing, as much of her work does, with forced migration and the often unseen itineraries of people—is *The Mapping Journey Project* (2008-11), which has itself been on a world tour since it was shown at the 10th Sharjah Biennial in 2011, most recently being seen at MoMA in New York in 2016 and at the Lisson Gallery in London, in 2017.

The eight-screen installation deals with eight individual trips that take in diverse locations all over Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, often spanning periods of many years. One man tells of his torturous and stalled attempts to find work and refuge—in Alicante, Girona, Bologna, Milan, Breda and Utrecht—before returning circuitously through many of these places, only to end up back in his hometown of Beni-Mellal in Morocco, where he had begun his journey with just 7 euros in his pocket. "The basis of our relationship was our conversations. The fact that Moroccan Arabic is my mother tongue—and that it is quite similar to Tunisian or Algerian or Middle Eastern dialects—made it easier, but it was mostly about patience and listening for

¹ All quotes taken from a conversation between Bouchra Khalili and Emma Gifford-Mead at Lisson Gallery, 28th, January, 2017.

long periods of time. Progressively, they became narrators of their own stories. It was also a process of empowerment."

Another film describes the near impossibility of a man in Ramallah travelling to see his lover in Jerusalem: 'He is not a refugee,' says Khalili, 'but someone who can't visit his girlfriend 14 kilometres away.' As he talks off camera, his hand scrawls movements across a map of the West Bank—one that Khalili could not source from a bookshop like the others, but that she finally procured from 'a group of Palestinian cartographers I got to know, who were collaborating with the United Nations to update a map of Gaza. This one is from August 2009 and of course it has changed since then.'

As in this episode (*Mapping Journey #3*), there are further layers of romance and human storytelling to complicate the seeming insanity of such forced, protracted and often illegal journeys, depicted in an accompanying suite of prints, entitled *The Constellations Series* (2011). These deep blue fields transform each *Mapping Journey* into an abstract night sky with stopping-off points as stars, stripping away geographical borders rather than reinforcing them. "The work is not about migration, but rather about the consequences of restrictive conceptions of nation states and colonial history."

A newer, but no less expansive body of work, *Foreign Office* (2015) includes photographs of abandoned Algerian interiors with important

political pasts, all being home at one time to an international independence or resistance movement. One hotel hosted a Black Panther Party delegation in 1969—Eldridge Cleaver himself came to Algiers after being exiled from the US. Other shots show the headquarters of the Portuguese National Liberation Front or other emancipatory groups from South Africa, Mozambique, Eritrea, Angola, Palestine, and even the Canary Islands (each had its own acronym: the ANC, the FLSC, the PAIGC and so on). 'Every image is like a pastiche of an architectural photographic style: very objective, very distant, but each is a complete paradox—they are colonial buildings built under French occupation with Orientalist carpets and frescos, as well as Chinese-inspired furniture. All the photos show entrances, again to articulate an in-between time and place in history and also a sort of ghost story.'

Khalili's forthcoming work for *Documenta* in Athens and Kassel may see her tread a similar path, but it is only ever a reflection of the immemorial movement of people and ideologies, rather than a reaction to events in the news. "Many of these projects existed before I was an artist and result from my own experience of being a teenager in Casablanca. It started very clearly in 1991 with the Shengen Agreement, when Europeans could finally travel almost without any document or passport—it became almost a no-borders area for them—but for us it was the opposite. We knew that people were crossing the Straits of Gibraltar illegally. These are stories I have known forever."

clockwise: Headquarters of the representa (2015) C-Print 60 x 75 cm, Headquarters of the MPLA deleg (2015) C-Print 75 x 100 cm
 Headquarters of ANC representa (2015) C-Print 75 x 60 cm, Headquarters of the FPLN representa (2015) C-Print 80 x 100 cm
 Grand Hotel Victoria, Algiers (2015) C-Print 80 x 60 cm



The way the photographs are laid out relates loosely to the geographical positioning of the locations within the city of Algiers. Some small adjustments have been made for the gallery space, but that is the intention. The work that is hung on its own is the only organisation that is still active in Algiers, and so it is singled out slightly.

clockwise: Cinema El Hillal, Ex-Triomphe (2015) C-Print 80 x 100 cm, Hôtel El Djazair (2015) C-Print 80 x 100 cm

Aéro-Habitat, Telemly (2015) C-Print 80 x 100 cm, Cinema El Hillal, Ex-Triomphe (2015) C-Print 60 x 80 cm

Hôtel El Safir (2015) C-Print 100 x 125 cm, Hôtel El Safir (2015) C-Print 80 x 100 cm

Headquarters of the DFLP deleg (2015) C-Print 80 x 100 cm



