

Canvas Magazine, Spring 2014

PROFILE

B

ouchra Khalili is a careful listener and an intellectual. Her practice helps one understand the world we live in with its current complicated cultural, social and political questions about language, mother tongue, migration, minority/majority rule, ethnic separation, cultural identity and politics.

Why is she interested in migrant members of political minorities? Khalili begins first by describing them as “resistant people, who, most of the time, are looked upon as victims, but they struggle to make a better life for themselves and their families.” The Moroccan-born artist is concerned with how these migrants propose alternatives, how they produce their own discourses and what this says about contemporary society. “This is related to art in the sense that you

Transience defines the lives of many around the world. **Misal Adnan Yıldız** and **Myrna Ayad** speak with Moroccan-born Bouchra Khalili about her documentation of the lives of migrants in their own words.

have to invent visual forms, create images and sounds,” adds Khalili. “It’s about showing how much the word can be an image. All those layers intermingle and ultimately produce something, which does not aim to suggest a final image, but rather, allow the viewer to elaborate and think for themselves.”

RESEARCH MAP

Her 2008 video, *Anya: Straight Stories, Part 2*, is based on a true story of a woman who escaped from Iraq and ‘hid’ in Istanbul for 12 long years, waiting for a visa to Australia. As the viewer observes the Asian shores of Istanbul, Anya, who lives and works illegally in Istanbul, tells us how she becomes invisible in a city lo-

cated between Asia and Europe. The narrative structure of the video is juxtaposed against the filmic language and the artistic strategy, which is based on Anya’s absent presence – she does not appear in the video but her voice connects us to her reality. Anya’s voice is proof that she exists and has existed.

The first of the *Straight Stories* series was shot in the south of Spain and northern Morocco, a border that, like the Strait of Gibraltar, embodies a physical and imagined barrier. The four videos in the *Straight Stories* series tell the transient tales of, among others, Anya, Magdalena and Ahmed, who materialised, like all ‘voices’ in Khalili’s videos, largely due to happenstance. “I don’t look for a specific type of people and most of the time, they find me,” she explains. “Mine is a process

Is it a never-ending attempt to document unwritten history or is it about writing an undocumented past?



Opening spread:
Lost Boats, from the *Wet Feet* series. 2012. C-print.
100 x 80 cm.

This page:
Flag, from the *Wet Feet* series. 2012. C-print.
80 x 60 cm.

with a different type of knowledge and a method of building an approach combined with research. What matters is what happens." Khalili is often away on research trips for weeks on end in order to allow herself considerable time to settle in various places and become engrossed in new surroundings. What is it like approaching these people and explaining her process? "I just say the truth," she says. "I say that I'm an artist, I show them my work and we spend time talking."

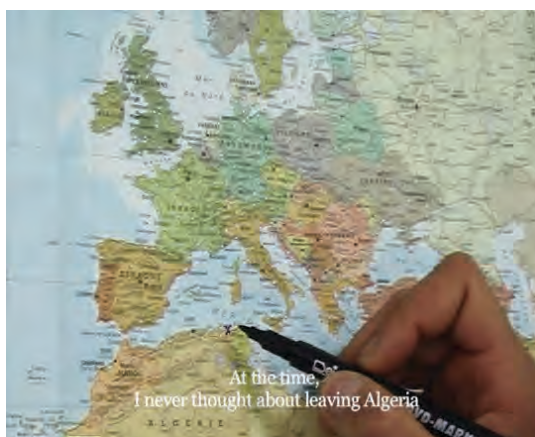
Born in Casablanca in 1975 and now based in Berlin, Khalili studied Cinema and Visual Arts in Paris and has worked with video for over a decade. Represented by Galerie Polaris, which will present *Constellations*, eight silkscreen prints from 2011 at this year's Art Dubai, the artist says that with this body of work, she has enjoyed being back in the studio after being in the field for long stretches of time. She is admittedly particular about details and *Constellations*, says Khalili, "is a paradigm of what I'm trying to do, which is approaching

absence as a form of presence. Somehow, these works are the essence of my practice." Art Dubai is also where she will present her latest work, developed with curator Nada Raza as part of the Abraaj Group Art Prize.

METHOD OF NARRATING

Khalili's long-term venture, *The Mapping Journey Project* (2008–11) video installation, broadens our perspectives on a larger scale. Rather than the outskirts of Istanbul, the panorama includes Marseilles, Ramallah, Bari, Rome and Barcelona. It is based on conversations from encounters with strangers that Khalili met on the streets. The artist displays their travel routes on world maps via the movements of their hands. Her subjects talk about their journeys – how they left their hometowns, how they irrationally, casually and coincidentally spent their time on the streets, stations or trains and even when they get lost. For instance, we hear the

“Filming in Italy was not only a way to address the situation of immigrants, but an attempt to reactivate the tradition of civil poetry as redefined by Pasolini.”



voice of a young man who discusses his dream of going to Italy. In parallel, haphazard zigzags form on the world map, from Dhaka to Delhi, Moscow to Skopje, Dubai to Mali, Niger to Libya and finally resting on Sicily. Khalili not only develops an archival presentation of a ‘random sampling’, which investigates how mobility, border security and human traffic operate in our global village, but generates an abstraction of hope and a painting of disappointments. Only their hands and voices transmit this ‘unreal’ reality. The work, which was shown at the 2011 Sharjah Biennial, can be described as an atlas of contemporary economy and a sad memory of undocumented and illegal citizens. These people map another form of reality in the Mediterranean by marking their experiences on the map. In reality, they mark it on our conscience.

In Khalili’s videos, language and body fuse to create a narrative that ends up being a linguistic experience. Why is Khalili interested in the connections between the politics of identity and the memory of languages? In an interview with *Mousse* magazine in 2013, she says: “If I am exploring these issues, perhaps it is because I was born and raised in Morocco and because I have two mother tongues, including one – Moroccan Arabic – that is an unwritten dialect, but with a long and powerful oral tradition.” So, is it a never-ending attempt to document unwritten history or is it about writing an undocumented past? Quoting her leading reference point, Pier Paolo Pasolini with his definition of cinema as the “written language of reality, which expresses reality through reality,” Khalili says that her interest in languages is because they are those of minorities reflecting their positions on social, political and territorial peripheries. She has dedicated the last two years of her practice to crystallising the conceptual relationships and contextual references between the politics of identity and the role of language in its social transformation.

WORDS AND VOICES

Khalili’s trilogy, *Speeches* (2012–13), comprises three main chapters, each of which features a thematic dimension: as native language and dialects (*Chapter 1: Mother Tongue*), integration and becoming a citizen (*Chapter 2: Words on Streets*) and working-class heroes and exploitation (*Chapter 3: Living Labour*). “The second chapter is important because it articulates the first and the third,” says Khalili of the work, which showed through Massimiliano Gioni’s *The Encyclopaedic Palace* at the 2013 Venice Biennale. *Chapter 1: Mother Tongue* is based on historical speeches by Malcolm X, Abdelkrim El-Khattabi, Édouard Glissant, Aimé Césaire and Mahmoud Darwish and are mostly concerned with human rights, freedom, resistance and



Why should we do the hardest work
for the lowest pay?

This page:
*Speeches – Chapter 1:
Mother Tongue*, 2012.
Digital film, 23 minutes.

Facing page:
Above: *The Mapping
Journey Project #1*, 2008.
Video, 8 single channels,
4'30 minutes. Image
courtesy the artist and
Marian Goodman
Gallery, Paris.
Below: *Speeches – Chapter
1: Mother Tongue*, 2012.
Digital film, 23 minutes.

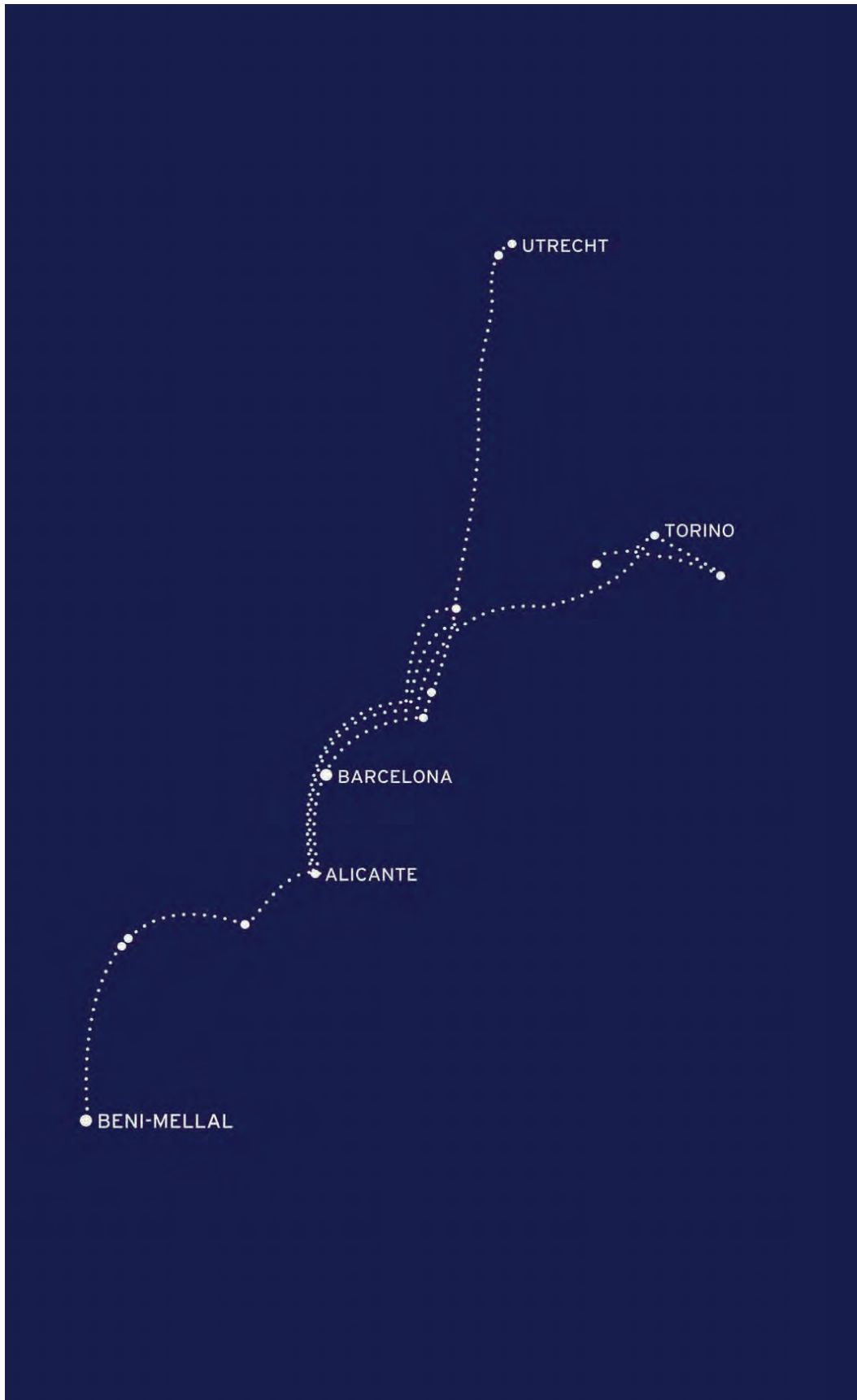
colonisation. Khalili collaborated with five volunteers based in and around Paris, who translated, memorised and recited these texts. The volunteers were invited to choose their own texts, which were reconstructed in their respective mother tongues including Moroccan Arabic, Dari (Afghanistan), Malinke (Mali), Kabyl (Algeria) and Wolof (Senegal) and were staged in their own personal environments. It is hard for one to forget the camera focusing on the hands of Anzoumane Sissiko when he asks: "Why should we do the hardest work for the lowest pay?" quoting Malcolm X's speech at the Founding Rally of the Organisation of Afro-American Unity in 1964. Equally profound is Naoual, who, in Moroccan Arabic recites sentences from Césaire's 1950 essay, *Discourse on Colonialism*.

Sharing similar artistic strategies and methodical concerns for the second and the third chapters, Khalili develops original writings through the contextual development of the

text as an autobiographical survey in collaboration with her volunteers. They become the authors and write their own histories. *Chapter 2: Words On Streets* is produced with five members of active migrant communities from Genoa, Italy, whereas *Chapter 3: Living Labour* brings together five different stories about the American Dream. *Chapter 2: Words On Streets* connects its subjects via the social construction of public space and migration politics, questioning how integration operates in each personal story. Malu, Jorge, Alice, Simohamed and Djilly all try to speak Italian and want to become Italian citizens, but will they become 'real' Italians one day? Or will they always be a 'Chinese girl' or a 'Moroccan boy'? Simohamed answers this: "In Morocco, I was a kid. In Italy, I became a Moroccan."

POLITICS OF LABOUR

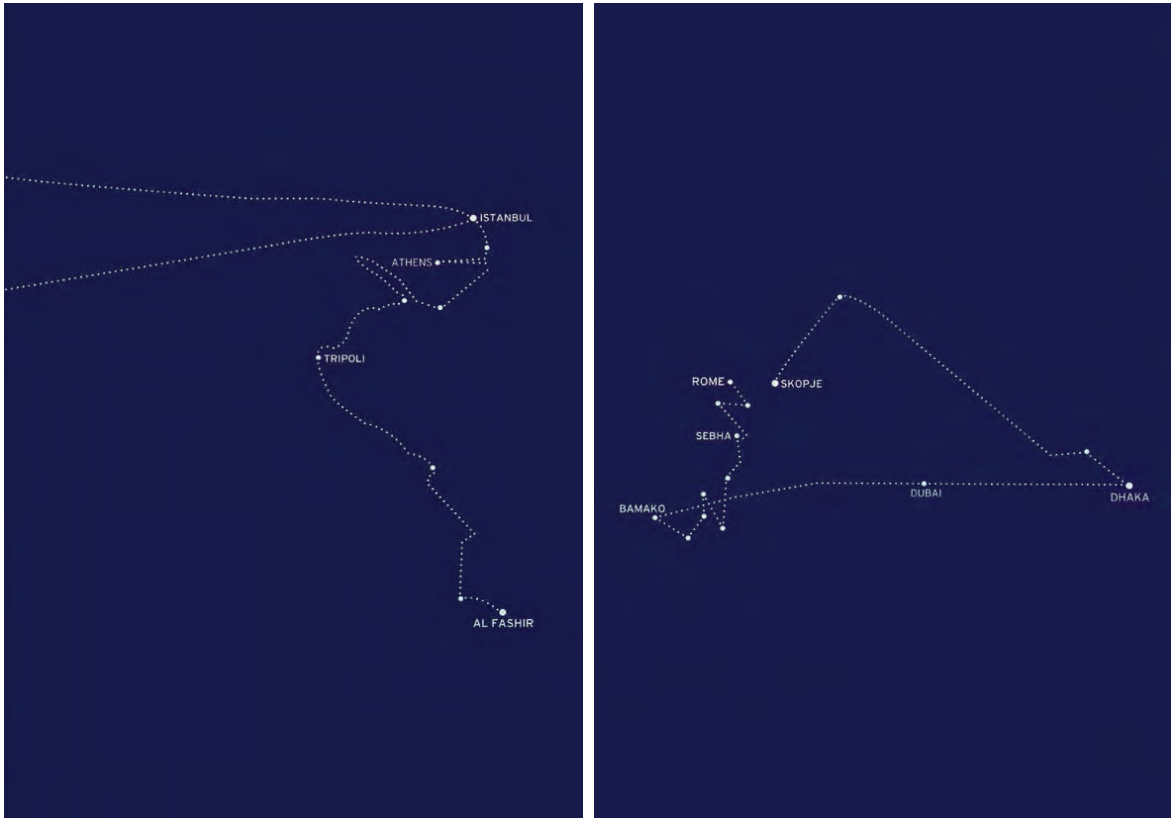
On 3 October 2013, *The New York Times* ran a



This page:
Constellation, Figure 7.
2011. Silkscreen. 60 x 40
cm. Edition five of five.

Facing page:
Left: *Constellation, Figure 5.* 2011. Silkscreen. 60 x 40
cm. Edition five of five.
Right: *Constellation, Figure 5.* 2011. Silkscreen. 60 x 40
cm. Edition five of five.

*All images courtesy the artist
and Galerie Polaris, Paris,
unless otherwise specified.*



story with the headline *Migrants Die As Burning Boat Capsizes Off Italy*. A boat carrying 500 migrants sank half a mile from Lampedusa on the Sicilian coast; 111 were reported dead. It was not the first time that Khalili had heard about Lampedusa; in fact, the island is mentioned in *The Mapping Journey Project #4* and *#5*, both of which were filmed in 2010 in Bari and Rome, respectively. "I don't understand why the public and journalists are only now interested in Lampedusa, whose [migrant] situation has been there for at least a decade," says Khalili. "But the reality of immigration is not only concerned with Lampedusa, as immigration in Italy is not a recent phenomenon anymore. Alice, who is 19 years old, was born in Italy, but she's still looked at as 'the Chinese girl', to quote her own words." Though she made *Chapter 2: Words On Streets* in Genoa, the piece extends the Ital-

ian context. "Filming in Italy was not only a way to address the situation of immigrants, but an attempt to reactivate the tradition of civil poetry as redefined by Pasolini: the right taken by an individual to address the social body from a singular perspective in order to articulate a collective voice," she asserts.

Khalili was in New York in 2013 working on *Chapter 3: Living Labour*, commissioned for the Pérez Art Museum Miami – the title of the video connotes transience. She had been reading Jacques Rancière's *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in 19th Century France* while working on the last chapter of her *Speeches* trilogy. "For these workers, emancipation meant breaking the partition that determined the day as the time workers work and the night as the time that they rest," explains Khalili quoting Rancière. "The beginning of this emancipation was

the decision to make something more of their night: to write, read, think and discuss instead of sleeping."

One of the motifs that continuously emerges through the videos is the sense of precariousness, which is mostly defined as an insecure and unpredictable condition that embodies physical and psychological aspects. Each subject tries to analyse the American system and its social hierarchy. Ironically, the trilogy ends with the statement: "I want more!" It is an old story. "A spectre haunts the world and it is the spectre of migration," wrote Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire*. So true. 🇺🇸

For more information visit www.galeriepolaris.com and www.galerieofmarseilles.com