

## LONDON

### Bouchra Khalili

LISSON GALLERY

Against the background of the refugee crisis in Europe, Bouchra Khalili's works tracing illegal border crossings around the Mediterranean take on renewed urgency. By empowering those who undertook the perilous passages to tell their own stories, the eight videos of *The Mapping Journey Project*, 2008–11—each a fixed frame showing only a paper map on which a hand can be seen drawing with permanent marker a zigzag route, narrated by the migrant who took it, so that the viewer must imagine for herself the arduous experience—present a critical alternative to the media's coverage of the crisis.

But to reduce *The Mapping Journey Project* to this sadly timely subject matter would be to miss its broader scope. This range was already suggested by the inclusion of a map of the West Bank and a young man's account of circumventing checkpoints on his way from Ramallah to East Jerusalem to meet his fiancée. The video redirects the suite's overall focus from the refugee crisis to acts of individual resistance to state power. Rather than objective representations of geography that provide simply a sense of orientation and scale, the maps in *The Mapping Journey Project* appear as political constructs and means of control, which Khalili's protagonists subvert with traces of individual movement across borders. National borders disappear entirely in "The Constellations Series," 2011, a related group of eight silk-screen prints, where the zigzag routes are each reproduced in white on a dark-blue ground, like a pattern of stars in the sky, evoking celestial navigation and translating the illegal crossings into poetic visions of a limitless world.

Khalili's wider concerns with resistance to state power became even more evident when the cartographic works were seen alongside a more recent multipart installation, *Foreign Office*, 2015, which includes a video showing two young Algerians reconstructing the forgotten history of post-independence Algiers as a center for international liberation groups, such as the Black Panther Party, by marking a map of the city and assembling photographs of political activists while recounting pieces of knowledge about the past. Going back and forth between

various languages, including Algerian Arabic, Kabyle, English, and French, the two narrators explicitly and implicitly raise questions not only about identity, but also about language and oral tradition—how they are shaped by history and shape its transmission in turn. The former locations of foreign offices marked on a map in the video provided the pattern for *The Archipelago*, 2015, a pale-blue silk-screen print of a chain of "islands of resistance" that was also a metaphor for solidarity, while some nostalgic-looking photographs of empty buildings that once housed the liberation movements were actually more ambiguous, as the buildings were examples of colonial architecture. With these photographs dispersed across the gallery, including in the room where *The Mapping Journey Project* was installed, far-reaching questions emerged in the space between the two bodies of work: Given the continuing injustices of the postcolonial period and the absence of political utopias, has individual border crossing replaced political organization as a means for radical change, and is migration a new form of revolution?

Khalili uses geographical maps and oral narrations to render visible subjectivities that have been marginalized by nation-states in the aftermath of empire. And yet counter-mapping as artistic strategy is not without problems. In contrast to the enigmatic abstractions in the silk-screen prints, the lines running across territorial boundaries in *The Mapping Journey Project* could seem to be too straightforward a way of mapping against hegemonic structures, if it were not for the complex dynamic between image and audio, screen and offscreen space, and visibility and invisibility. As a powerful statement of resistance to the current order and a defense of individual realities thwarted by nation-states' borders and dominant histories, Khalili's exhibition in London resonated far and near.

—Elisa Schaar