

## Critical Geographies

By Martin Grennberger

*The Opposite of Voice-Over*

Bouchra Khalili

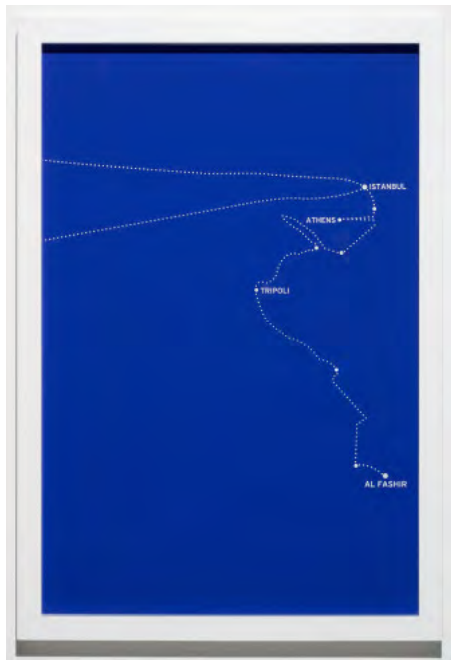
Färgfabriken, Stockholm  
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Bouchra Khalili, *Speeches Chapter1: Mother Tongue* (still), från *The Speeches Series*, 2012–2013.

In her videos, photographic works and installations, Moroccan-born artist Bouchra Khalili addresses people who are categorized as minoritarian, undocumented or migrant. Her handling of documentary material offers a complex image of the political mechanisms of self-representation and oral testimony; they should not be regarded as acts of witnessing, but as “experiences that become narratives/stories”.

Although Khalili is professor at Oslo National Academy of the Arts, the exhibition at Färgfabriken in Stockholm is her first solo exhibition in the Nordic countries. Curated by Jonatan Habib Engqvist, it consists of three series of works produced between 2008 and 2013, all of which “situate minorities’ voices, often unheard, and provide alternative conceptions of belonging and civic community”. This is reflected by the title: *The Opposite of Voice-Over*. In Khalili’s work there is no didactic commentary, and no montage intervening with a regulative interpretation. Rather, the works present a reading of the undocumented migrant as a subject with political agency, where the participants’ power to act is an important aspect.



Bouchra Khalili, from *The Constellation Series*, 2016.

Installed as a screen landscape in the middle of Färgfabriken’s spacious exhibition hall is the complete version of Khalili’s *The Mapping Journey Project* (2008–11), a video series recounting the stories of eight individuals from North Africa and the Middle East travelling illegally across the Mediterranean or bordering territories. In the films, we hear their voices describing the travel and difficulties encountered along the way, while the image shows a hand holding a pencil tracing the journey’s path on a map. The result is a process of empowerment, in which the speakers become the authors of their own narratives. The works have mostly been filmed in single takes, and Khalili never interrupts the speaker. The material is presented uncut, which contributes to the raw facticity of the films.

When the map’s normativity encounters the singular experiences of travel, the force of Khalili’s method is most tangible and effective. The situations of the participants consequently appear as all the more critical. By inventing alternative routes or nomadic patterns of behaviour, they in several cases succeed in resisting the “secret” life to which they have been referred. The films develop what might be called a counter-cartography. It is important to Khalili that her work has an “opacity” – a movement between visible and invisible, presence and absence – “that prevents it from being limited to the restrictive identities often defined from the perspective of power”. Obscuring designations like migrant, refugee and undocumented becomes part of the works’ resistance.

Three videos from *The Speeches Series* (2012–13) are projected onto different corners of the exhibition space. *Words on Streets* was recorded outdoors in 2013, and shown for the first time at that year’s Venice Biennial. The film consists of frontal shots of five migrants’ reflections in Italian. Khalili’s interest in oral narration has an outspoken affinity to Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose thoughts about film as “the written language of reality” are recurrently referenced in her work. Similar to the Italian poet and director, she strives to “express reality through reality”, and to dissolve the distinction between lived-time and the time of film. In *Words on Streets*, she addresses Genoa’s large population of migrants as a geopolitical case study. The last speaker, Djilly from Senegal, refers to racism among the city’s working class, and explains that Italy’s first self-organized multi-ethnic group of immigrants was formed in precisely Genoa.



Bouchra Khalili, *Mapping Journey # 3*, from *The Mapping Journey Project*, 2008–2011.

*Mother Tongue* is also part of *The Speeches Series*, and was made for Okwui Enwezor’s Paris Triennial in 2012. The work consists of five voices, all recorded indoors. A woman reads from Aime Césaire’s programmatic text *Discourse on Colonialism* in Moroccan Arabic, identifying Europe’s inability to solve “the two major problems to which its existence has given rise: the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem”. All participants read their chosen texts from memory, in their original language or accent. Reading becomes an associative recitation, where the readers tell their own story as well. As when Seynabou, a young woman from Senegal, recites a text by Mahmoud Darwish: “I am my own language”.

More than other works in the exhibition, *Mother Tongue* effectively gives form to what Édouard Glissant called “creolization”: the constant process whereby people, languages and cultures blend, and which Glissant understood as a form of relational production of difference. The work’s movement from canonized text to oral recitation, illustrates how agency is often expressed in Khalili’s works.



Bouchra Khalili, *Speeches – Chapter 1: Mother Tongue*, from *The Speeches Series*, 2012–2013.

*Living Labour* (2013), the third film of *The Speeches Series*, is shot in New York. It is dominated thematically by lives conditioned by extreme precarity. One man says, “America is a prison for immigrants”, another “I am a citizen because this is where my conscience grew up”. Each conversation is prefaced by establishing shots of New York. One woman speaks about being a housekeeper, others with low-income jobs about the will to organize and to demand equal rights. All is consistently shot with a stringent aesthetic consisting of close-ups, frontal views, bodies and faces.

Furthest into the exhibition, I find the most beautiful expression of Khalili’s method – *The Constellations* (2011), a series of eight silkscreen prints that compose the concluding chapter of *The Mapping Journey Project*. The gestural, astronomical cartography of the drawings is rendered in white on a blue background to form a dynamic space that refers to both the sky and the sea – so devastating to many refugees. Cross-reading heaven and sea, maps and counter-maps, the potentially universal imprint of

singular experience is materialized in the images' constellations. In this way Khalili's exhibition – and she manages to do this with striking consistency – makes a forceful argument for sheltering and telling one's own story.



Bouchra Khalili, *The Opposite of Voice-Over* (installation view), 2016. With *The Mapping Journey Project* (center) and *The Speeches Series* and *The Constellation Series* (background). Photo: Jean-Baptiste Béranger