



## Oral, Paradoxical; and Political

BY ADNAN YILDIZ

Bouchra Khalili explores a series of questions about the way reality is experienced by political minorities. As the artist explains to Adnan Yildiz, these ways vary, becoming complex and stratified. They may be based, for example, on a form of alienating portrait—in *Speeches*, five émigrés recite fragments from different authors, as though they were their own, selecting pieces that are close to their own ideas—or they may be based on hanging images, as in the film *Anyà*, in which the protagonist is narrated by a voice-over. Khalili's projects are thus extremely focused and yet, at the same time, they reveal an ambiguous gap between what is shown and what is concealed, hovering on the fringes of the visible, which are often inhabited by minorities.

*Lost Boats Fig. 2*, 2012. Courtesy: Galerie Polaris, Paris



Lost Boats Fig. 1, 2012. Courtesy: Galerie Polaris, Paris

*Adnan Yildiz:* I would like to start with a question that I ask often, recently: how can you describe your practice for people who are not from the art world?

*Bouchra Khalili:* Well... I can hardly describe it even to art practitioners or to myself. So if asked, I say that I'm an artist who works with video, installation, prints, photography, depending on the projects. And when I'm asked what my work is about, I say it is done to ask questions, first of all to myself: what are the margins of power? Where are they located? Who inhabits them? How to produce an image of what is situated at the margins of the visible, in terms of both politics and aesthetics? Not a simple answer. But I guess there is no simple answer.

*ay:* How has *Speeches* been conceptualized and produced? What can you say about the quotations and actors? Are they actors? Are they acting? Are they performing?

*bk:* I had the *Speeches* series in mind for a long time prior to filming it. The invitation to participate in "La Triennale" at Palais de Tokyo came at the right time, though minority languages and dialects have had a prominent role in my work from the very beginning. I would say that this is related to a question I've been exploring for years, which I can sum up as follows: "How to narrate the realities experienced by political minorities? What is the impact of language on the way those realities are told?" And, more specifically: "How do members of those communities produce their own discourse about their own individual lives, subjectively, in their own words and their own language?" If I am exploring those 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.

*ay:* So the resource is the text-based imaginary, and linguistic experience?

*bk:* I think it is also related to my long-term interest in Pier Paolo Pasolini's oeuvre, and his contribution to film semiotics. In his essays about cinema, Pasolini defined film language as the "written language of reality... which expresses reality through reality". In my work, this language of reality is one's mother tongue, one's language with all its peculiarities. The various languages and dialects you can hear in my videos are also those of minorities, the expression of their singularities and their positions on social, political and territorial peripheries.

For the *Speeches* series, I asked five exiled people living in Paris and its outskirts to choose, translate, memorize and recite fragments of essays and speeches by

writers, poets and activists, such as Malcolm X, Mahmoud Darwish and Edouard Glissant, among others. All the texts discuss and suggest methods of resistance. Not one of participants in the project is an actor. And the approach we have developed was also based on the idea of not acting or performing, but focusing on the text, oral speech, the power of the word, which was much more interesting because through the translation process and the memorizing, a form of "digestion" could happen. For the participants, those words literally became their own. This was also possible because they chose their own text, to reflect their own opinions and thoughts. So the process was mostly based on translation and memorization, with a sort of Brechtian distancing effect. This may seem like a paradox, since now I am using a concept inherited from avant-garde theatre, but it is important, because this distancing effect was a way to approach orality as part of the image, orality as an expression of the critical function of subjectivity and free speech, as well as an invitation made to the audience to exercise critical self-reflection. This distancing effect is also at stake in the embodiment process itself: the narrators are and are not the writers and activists portrayed. They literally embody multiple and complex identities.

*ay:* Considering the formal aspects of the presentation, the way you are focusing on gestures, hands and faces... do you see a relationship between this piece and the tradition of portraiture? How was your experience with its presentation and reception at the Triennale?

*bk:* Working with film and video, I try to develop a cinematic approach based on metonymy. For example, in *The Mapping Journey Project*, one sees maps, hands holding permanent markers, the drawing of illegal journeys. In *Speeches*, faces and hands embody words, as well as poetic and political statements, and complex identities that cannot be restricted to the term "immigrant". I'm mostly interested in details, the way they can be combined, what they hide and what they reveal. There is also a dialectical method involved, based on the articulations between what is shown and what is invisible, and from there an attempt to open up the image to an imaginary dimension. For the *Speeches* series things became more complex, because I included a process of "creolisation" and displacement, in terms of language, history, culture, time, space, identity and gender. I think this intensive process of "creolisation" leads to a practice of portraiture with multiple layers, and I tried to define it through the idea of the "distancing effect". For example, in the series we have women embodying male identities: Seynabou—a Senegalese woman—is Mahmoud Darwish, and Naïma—a Kabyl woman—is Edouard Glissant. Naïma and Seynabou speak in their mother tongues, but the words they say were written by two men, two of the most prominent poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose mother tongues were Arabic for Darwish, and French and Creole for Glissant.

ay: So you relate it to portraiture?

bk: I'd say that if *Speeches* is related to a certain tradition of portraiture, it is the one that was developed by a certain modern cinema, articulating different layers of representation, and exploring the status of cinematic presence, as for example in the films of Straub-Huillet or Duras, which I admire a lot. In this tradition, the portrait does not try to define an identity, it is considered an "opaque" presence.

For example, when working on *Speeches*, I often watched and thought about an extraordinary short film by Straub-Huillet entitled *Toute révolution est un coup de dés* (*Every Revolution is a Throw of the Dice*, 1977). The device is extremely minimalist: 9 people, at Père-Lachaise cemetery, sitting on the grass and reciting, one by one, verses of a poem by Mallarmé: *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*.

The film is a tribute to the Paris "Commune", and the victims of the repression in 1870, filmed near the wall where the last communards were executed, and in the cemetery where they are buried. But what I looked at attentively was precisely how Straub and Huillet articulated the power of language, the act of speech, the power of the human face, along with a specific environment. That's



why all the *Speeches* were filmed in locations belonging to the narrators' everyday lives—home or work—to intensify this process of "stratification". Where the reception of the piece at the Triennale is concerned, I can't say much, since I had to leave Paris the day after the opening. But I have had the chance to show *Speeches* in London and Berlin as well, and I have been very impressed by the reactions of the audience, and the accurate questions I was asked.

ay: As someone with an Istanbul background, I am challenged by the story of Anya, and how she talks about her experience of the city. When the camera is moving on the seaside of Istanbul, it strengthens the part that she hides away from the police... How did you develop the narration and the filmic language in such a poetic relationship. Which one appeared first?

bk: I've been fascinated by Istanbul for years. The first time I went there it was in the winter, and it was snowing. I spent days walking around, exploring various neighbourhoods. Near Aksaray train station I could hear people speaking various Arabic dialects going out from the station and walking on a street covered with snow. I was extremely touched by this image, which embodied the very specific paradox of Istanbul, torn between two continents—Asia and Europe—situated at a complex intersection between the Balkans, Western Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Precisely for this reason, for more

than twenty years now the city has also been a major hub on routes of migration, mainly from Asia and the Middle East, but also from Africa. That's how I approached *Anya*, when I decided to make this digital film. The question I asked myself was how to show Anya's trajectory from Iraq to Istanbul, where she had already been waiting for 12 years for a visa to go to Australia. And how to portray Istanbul itself, with its ambiguous, floating topography. That's why the video is based on one long tracking shot, literally reproducing a journey between the Asian shore of Istanbul and the European one, while Anya narrates her own journey, her long wait and an everyday life marked by latency. Therefore I could not avoid visually exploring the gap between what is shown and what is hidden, between visible and invisible. In Istanbul the border between all the worlds that meet there is invisible, just like Anya herself, living at the margins of the visible, where she is forced back into clandestinity. I then try to produce images that are not made only of what is seen, but form a kind of "latent image". In this "unseen image" sound plays a major role, precisely because I do think of sound as an image. Anya's face is not shown, but she's there, her voice haunts the space, she's behind every single image, and through the combination of sound and image a kind of third image emerges, which is projected throughout the whole video. In *Speeches*, one can see that the same



process of articulation between what is hidden and what is revealed is also at stake. For example, in between the shots, I used intervals—black screens—that refer both to temporal ellipses and to the ellipses produced by the editing process of the texts. When one watches the videos, there's an impression that each text is all one piece, but in reality they were literally edited, as the videos are edited. I guess this articulation between what is shown and what is pictured by viewers somehow forms the core of my work: it is in this "in-between" that the "image" is located, in this ambiguous interval.

ay: There is a close link between *Anya* and *The Mapping Journey Project*, no?

bk: In *The Mapping Journey Project*, the map plays this same role of a surface for projection. The maps of the Mediterranean that I used are a clear representation of political control and oppression. Through the voice, the narrative, the drawings and gestures, they become a page, a surface from which a counter-cartography, a counter-map, a geography of resistance emerge. But I think it goes beyond that. All my projects share this attempt to approach transitory spaces, waiting and latency, but also processes of empowerment, formulation of gestures and discourses of resistance elaborated and told by members of political minorities themselves.

ay: But a political minority changes from one context to another; so isn't it also about a potential discussion of power and social change?

bk: That's why all my projects are located in very specific locations, focusing on very specific trajectories. Precisely because I'm interested in how the most particular experience can be universal, how it cannot be restrained by pre-established categories. So, it's not only the context that changes, because there's no desire to make examples out of any of the experiences and lives narrated in my videos. I would rather say that they are all different and absolutely singular. But that's precisely why each of them challenges power. All of them are an expression of resistance, a very peculiar form of resistance.



Above - Mapping Journey #7, 2011. Courtesy: Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris. Photo: Marc Damage

Right - Constellation Fig. #8, 2011. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Polaris, Paris

Below - Anya: Straight Stories-Part 2, 2008. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Marc Damage

Opposite, left - Constellation Fig. #4, 2011. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Polaris, Paris

Opposite, right - "The Mapping Journey Project", 2008-11, installation view at the 10th Sharjah Biennale, 2011. Courtesy: Sharjah Art Foundation

