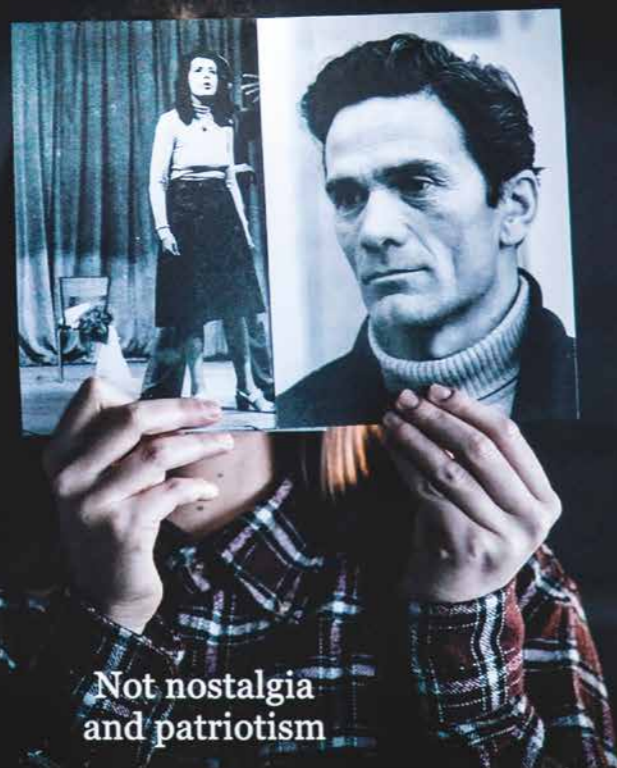


Because he wrote about us
and by writing about us, they saw themselves



Not nostalgia
and patriotism

Bouchra Khalili's film installations move between cinema and performance in the ways that notions of embodiment, language, and history are staged, always using non-actors whose bodies and histories are embedded in the narrative. The work centers on discourses of resistance and solidarity, rooted in decisive political moments in the postwar history of North Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. Her most recent film, *Twenty-Two Hours*, narrates Jean Genet's famous 1970 visit to the United States at the invitation of the Black Panther Party.



TWENTY-TWO HOURS

BOUCHRA KHALILI
AND
HENDRIK FOLKERTS
IN
CONVERSATION

HENDRIK FOLKERTS

A key figure in *Twenty-Two Hours* is Jean Genet, the French writer, playwright, and political activist, who came to the United States in the spring of 1970 at the invitation of the Black Panther Party (BPP). Genet's speech at the May Day rally in New Haven, Connecticut, firmly aligns his own activism with the politics of the BPP. Although Genet had already published his play *The Blacks* as early as 1958, which was featured on a New York theater stage, his alliance as a white queer male with the militant black civil rights organization may have seemed unconventional, if not radical, and speaks in many ways to the notion of solidarity. How did Genet come to play a role in your work? What does that moment of political alliance between the BPP and Genet signify for you, particularly in relation to your new film?

BOUCHRA KHALILI

As a Moroccan, Genet belongs to my intellectual imagination. He's buried in Larache, in northern Morocco, where his last companion—Mohammed Al Katrani—lived. In Larache, Genet bought the only house he ever owned, although the house was for Mohammed, his son, and their relatives. Genet also spent a lot of time in Rabat, where his long-term friend Leila Shahid was then living with her husband, the Moroccan writer Mohammed Berrada. Not to mention his frequent stays in Tangier, which Mohamed Choukri recounted in one of his books, *Jean Genet in Tangier* (1974). Morocco is where Genet had his only home, if one can say he ever had a home, and it is his final resting place. Fifty years before his death, he served in Morocco as a soldier in the French colonial army, where he witnessed the violence of colonialism, its inherent racism and dehumanization. Of course, he eventually deserted.

My long-term commitment to Genet, beyond his strong connection to Morocco, lies in both the extraordinary beauty of his writing and his radical solidarity with oppressed people and minorities, for instance colonized and postcolonial populations, North African immigrants in France, the Black Panthers in America, Palestinians, and LGBT people. Nevertheless, I would not dare define him a "political writer," because he was not. To him, there was no contradiction between beauty, poetry, and the politics of collective liberation, and I guess that's what attracted him to the most outcast and repressed groups. For many years I've been meditating on a passage from Genet's introduction to the first edition of *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970), illuminating the essential connection between poetry and revolution:

If we accept this idea, that the revolutionary enterprise of a man or of a people originates in their poetic genius, or, more precisely, that this enterprise is the inevitable conclusion of poetic genius, we must reject nothing of what makes poetic exaltation possible... because poetry contains both the possibility of a revolutionary morality and what appears to contradict it.

I've been trying to examine what this form of poetry is that arises from collective liberation—that generates unconditional solidarity with the oppressed, and vice versa. What interests me in Genet's position is how he embodies a metaphor of the artist. He does not speak for the people he stands in solidarity with, but rather bears witness to those whose words remain unheard or are silenced. And that's where Pier Paolo Pasolini (another of my heroes) and Genet meet: the position of the civic poet. I've often referred to Pasolini's civic poet, and his "cinema of poetry," as a major inspiration. Pasolini's cinema of poetry and its corollary, "free indirect speech," suggest that voices are never alone. He who speaks, speaks for himself, for the author, for those who are absent, for those who cannot speak or can no longer speak.

My new film *Twenty-Two Hours* was already on my mind for a few years. I started to work on it in 2014, and the invitation to do a fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University became the opportunity to finally produce it. The film suggests a meditation on the position of the witness as a "civic poet," examining a simple question: Who is the witness?

There are many witnesses in *Twenty-Two Hours* that manifest in different guises. First, we see two young African American women (documentary witnesses, if you will) narrating Genet's visit to the United States, in part responding to photographs and film footage displayed on TV monitors next to them. Then there is the former BPP member and his account of Genet's alliance with the Party. He is first shown on the TV monitor as part of the historical footage, and then appears in person to have a conversation with the two young women. I am fascinated by that transition—a shift between different materialities of the document, from the archival object to living, breathing memory. What does this passage mark for you, in terms of the act of bearing witness? How does the complex visual and cinematic apparatus of *Twenty-Two Hours* speak to the transmission of histories, and within that, the position of the witness?

BK Displacement in time, geography, and language is a key aspect of my practice. To borrow from the French Caribbean poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant, I would call it a process of “creolization.” What I aim to produce with this shift in the film is the framework—or, I should say, the platform that allows the rising of a collective voice articulated from a single and specific body. I often think of Gilles Deleuze and his powerful words on Jean Rouch and Pierre Perrault in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1985), deconstructing the simplistic conception of documentary practices: “What cinema must grasp is not the identify of a character, whether real or fictional, through his objective and subjective aspects. It is the becoming of the real character when he himself starts to ‘make fiction,’ when he enters into ‘the flagrant offence of making up legends’ and so contributes to the invention of his people.”

For instance, the former BPP member who seems to “testify” for a documentary is actually reciting from memory his own statement, written for the film—similar to how speech is developed in other works of mine such as the *Speeches* series (2012-2013). His language operates as a first-person account that progressively develops into a public speech. Through his presence, parallel to the display of photographs of him taken almost fifty years prior, the gap of time is abolished in favor of a copresence of the past, the present, and a potential future, literally reflecting the Pasolinian proposal for a free indirect speech in film: “The whole cinema becomes a free, indirect discourse operating in reality... bringing together the before and the after in a becoming, instead of separating them.”

That’s why the visual apparatus of the film couldn’t be that of a documentary. First, the former BPP member appears several times on the TV monitor as a kind of meta-representation, given the distancing effect of a monitor among monitors and other visual material. His presence is “mediated.” In addition, what may seem documentary is actually a staged performance, an enactment before the camera lens. Now in his early seventies, that man is very much aware of his duty to share his experience. He was a revolutionary, and now he knows he’s a witness.

Similarly, the two women, Quiana and Vanessa, are witnesses because they handle the duty of telling the story. They bear witness for the absentees, among them Genet himself, whose words they resuscitate through their bodies. As editors-cum-storytellers, they share images with each other, and relate and link the images to one another, which in turn gives rise to other images and other words. Quiana and Vanessa are here as much witnesses as storytellers, film editors, and I would even say filmmakers. They literally respond to Genet’s statement when he was asked why he came to the United States to support the BPP. He said he came “to bear witness to the injustices being suffered by the Black Panther Party and the racism suffered by Afro-Americans.”

So who is the witness? Is it the two young African American women recounting the story of Genet’s support of the BPP? Is it the former member of the BPP who played a prominent role in organizing Genet’s tour on the East Coast? Or is it Genet himself, present through audiovisual material? Who speaks for whom? Who bears witness for whom? The approach I developed, also found in some of my previous works, is to combine performance, examination of existing material, and montage in the literal sense—based on a combination of visual materials, as if in an editing suite. It is both an archaeology of storytelling and a discourse on a method of storytelling. It is not by chance that Jean-Luc Godard and Dziga Vertov are both quoted in the film. Both dreamed of a pedagogy of heterogeneity, hoping that montage as a practice of the “interval,” of the missing image, is the site from where a representation of hi/story can take shape. Similar to how Quiana and Vanessa are “working” only with fragmentary material—it is the missing images that, paradoxically, form the structure of their narrative.

HF Let’s talk more about montage as a practice of the “interval.” What, in *Twenty-Two Hours*, is the missing image? How do Quiana and Vanessa manifest in the work as “film editors,” as you call them? And how does this practice of montage inform your own practice of actually editing the film in postproduction?

BK The starting point of this practice is that we know the whole story is lost, that only fragments remain and can still be combined. There’s a missing image, and it is from the site of that lack that the work is constructed. So the question is not how to find the missing image, or how to substitute for it with another image, but how to organize the material *from* the missing image. That site is the interval itself—the empty space, the gap. In my film *Foreign Office* (2015), the missing image is the historiography of a people: the Algerian people’s perspective on Algiers, mecca of the revolutionaries. In my work *The Tempest Society* (2017), the empty space is the material documenting the revolutionary street theater and performance collective Al-Assifa’s work in Paris in the mid-1970s. As is said openly in the film: “They left only a few photos and a book at the eve of their separation.” Knowing that traces have disappeared, how can we still tell the story and reflect on it? In *Twenty-Two Hours*, the missing image is the witness: Who can bear witness to that story and the radical solidarity offered by Genet?

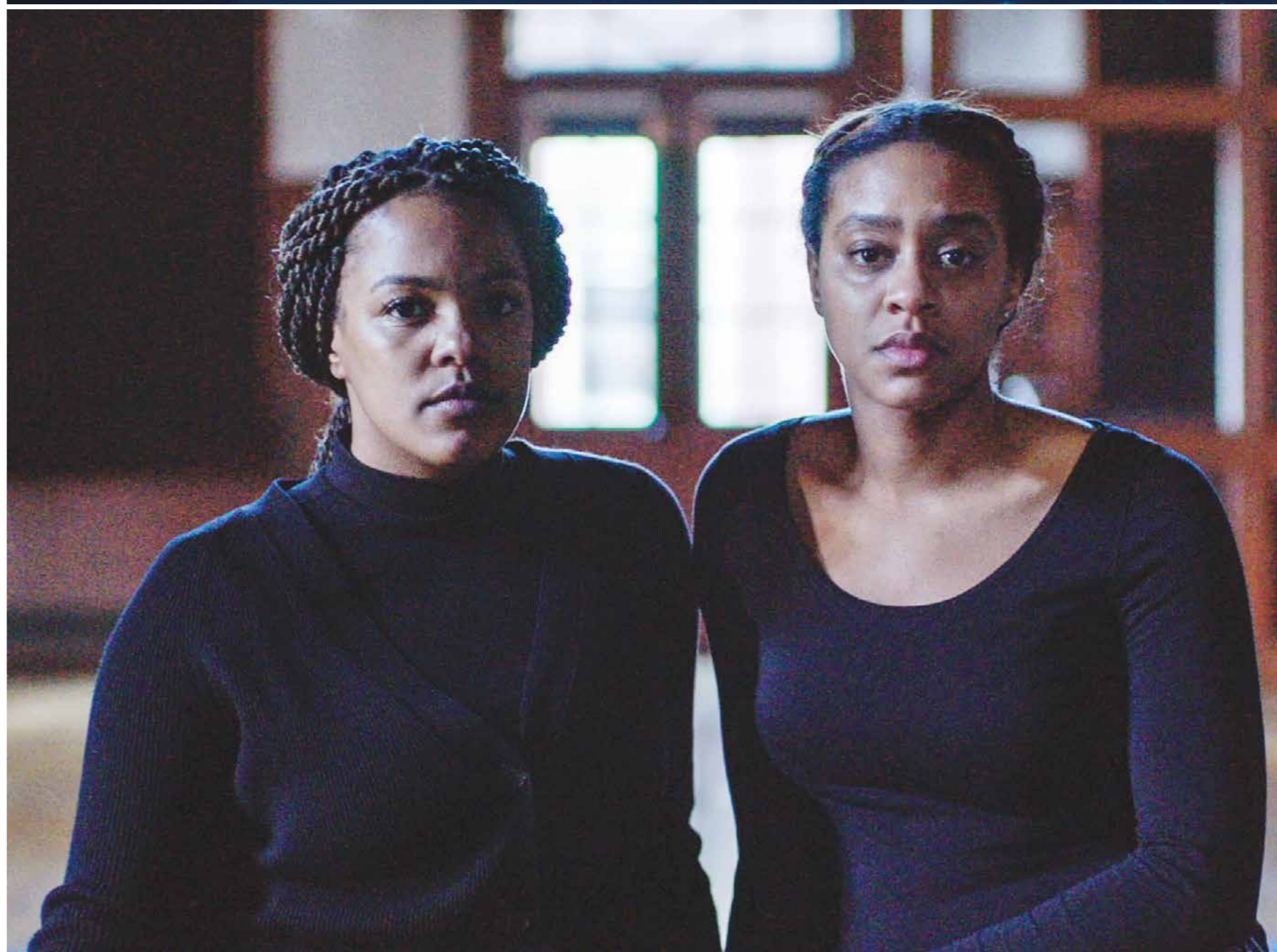
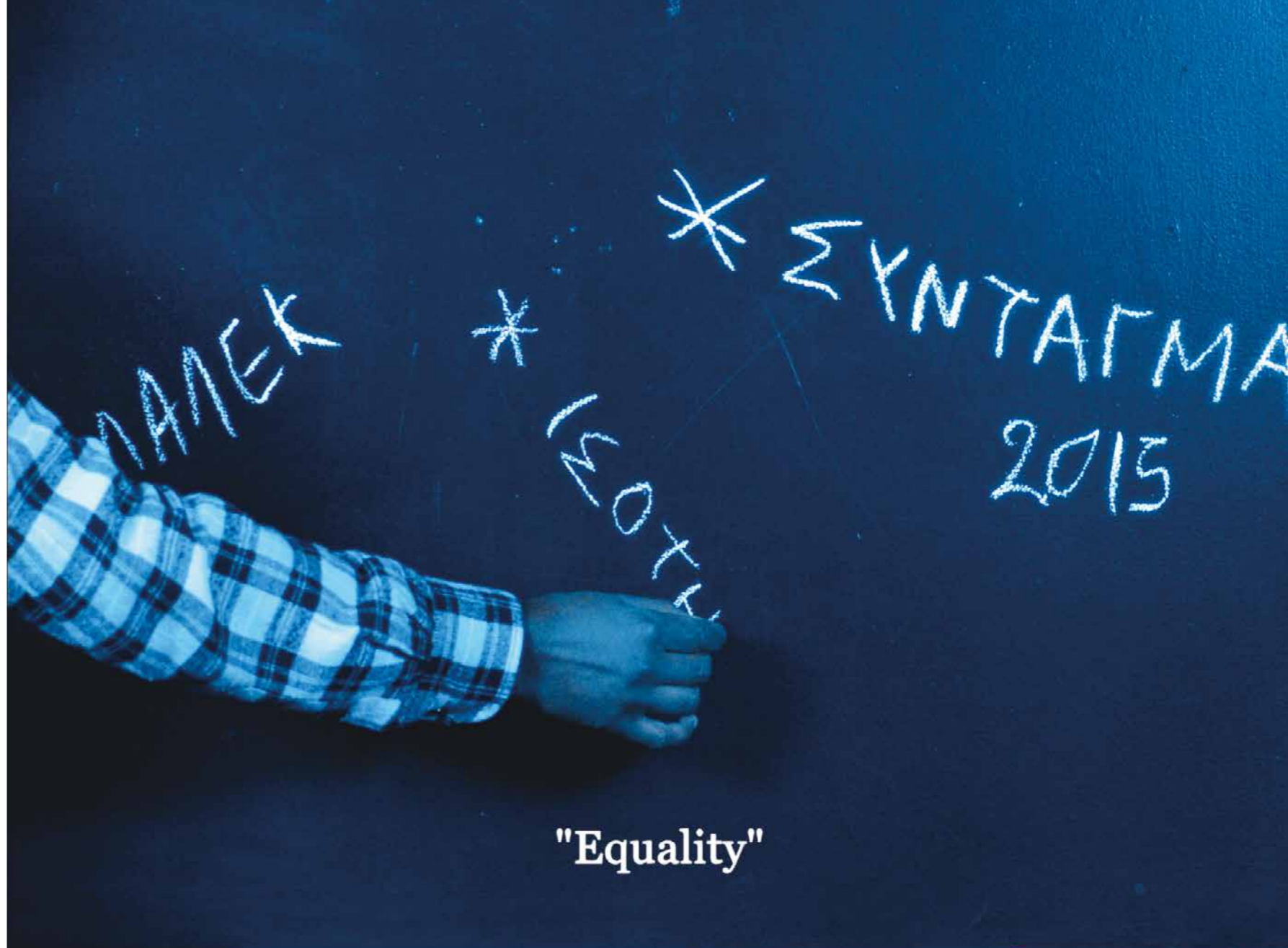
Editing a film from the perspective of the interval suggests that the point is no longer the completion of the image, but rather to engage with a combination of fragments that can circulate among those who are in need of the missing image. Montage then also becomes a tool for investigation and examination of such fragments. That’s why seemingly archival materials should not be considered as such, but rather as one of many articulations—along with words, quotes, readings, performances—of a larger process of montage. In many of my films, “archival materials” are nothing else than images. They are subjects of discussions, as well as manipulations, movements, and assemblages by the “performers.” They are not treated as archives but as the many fragments progressively forming the narrative of the film. On a visual level, this is also explicitly emphasized in many of my works: one can see hands writing, drawing, moving pictures around, touching screens. It becomes the metaphor of montage as part of the narrative.

I often mention a quote by Godard, which says that if he had to choose, he would rather lose his eyesight than the use of his hands, because films are made less with the eyes than with the fingers. I think it’s absolutely true, concerning both filming and editing. A shot as a deictic gesture is essentially an invitation to look, to listen, and to reflect. When editing, it is the hand that thinks. Ultimately, it’s about self-reflective “manual” labor. So if I perceive of Quiana and Vanessa as “film editors,” it is because they are storytellers whose words, hands, and voices articulate and generate images and give shape to the narrative. They literally generate it!

Now, on a more “technical level,” I shoot for editing. I don’t shoot extra material and I don’t use multiple angles for the same shot. What was filmed is in the final cut. I also shoot chronologically, which I consider a very important aspect of the collaboration with the “performers,” because they are not professionals. I make a point of clearly explaining every single shot to them as well as how they are positioned within the narrative structure as a whole. So when we film a scene, they know what comes before and what will come after. It reminds me of a film by Godard called *Scénario du film Passion* (1982), a film essay on scripting *Passion*, a film he shot the year before: meaning that now that the film is done, he could script it. So when I say that I shoot for editing, it’s somehow the same idea: now that I know how to edit the film, I can film it.

HF The ways in which language is developed and spoken in *Twenty-Two Hours*, as well as how the main characters ventriloquize or perform (if you will) historical material and documentation, already appears in some of your previous films, such as *The Speeches Series* (2012-2013), *Foreign Office*, and *The Tempest Society*—works that I consider directly aligned with the new film, both thematically and methodologically. Can you speak about your relationship to language, and how its politics manifest in your work?

BK I think this is even true for my film installation *The Mapping Journey Project* (2008-2011), a series of videos that chronicles and quite literally maps the stories of eight individuals who were forcibly displaced from North Africa and the Middle East due to political and economic circumstances in the region. Each video stages the speech act of a singular voice, articulating and giving voice to

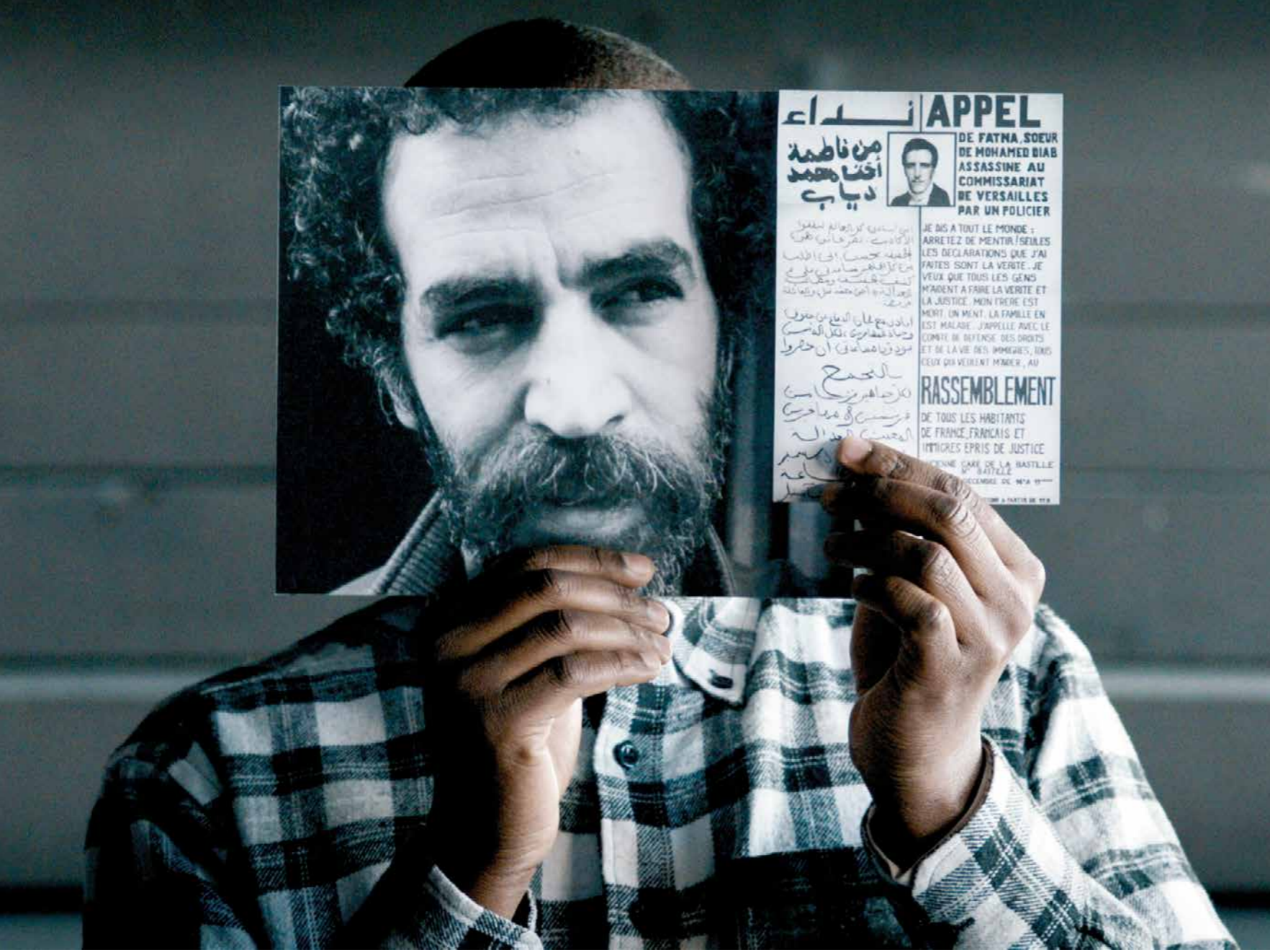


**MAY DAY
SPEECH**



JEAN GENET





Listen to the people's will

those who are absent, and challenging power as it represents itself via what seems a most factual image: a map. That “cold image” is nevertheless the documentation—the evidence—of the power of the nation-state and its restrictive and discriminatory conception of citizenship. The drawings that each of the eight individuals make on the map, a signifier of their journey, become a performance of resilience and persistence.

I would like to reflect on how language operates as a civic gesture. What fascinates me is the power of speech, the power of storytelling, and eventually speech as a form of resistance, in all its dialectal forms. That’s how many different languages and dialects often manifest in my work, sometimes spoken all together. As I mentioned, Pasolini’s work in poetry and filmmaking is close to my heart. He always stated that he became a poet when he decided to learn his mother tongue: Friulan, spoken in northeastern Italy, at the border with Slovenia and Austria. Pasolini belongs to a generation for whom the unification of Italy in 1871 was not that remote in time, and for whom the birth of Italy as a nation-state meant a common language—Italian—imposed on populations that were used to speaking their own languages. Writing in Friulan was a gesture of resistance against a nationalist conception of normative and centralized culture, at the expense of the disappearance of local cultures.

More prosaically, my interest in vernacular languages and languages of minorities also has to do with the fact that I am a native speaker of Moroccan Arabic, born and raised into a strong context of diglossia (which was also still the case in Italy when Pasolini was born). Entering into Morocco’s linguistic context and “creolity” would be too lengthy for this conversation. However, it is also in Morocco that I’ve experienced the power of speech and its social and political functions, including oral hi/storytelling as embodied by the disappearing tradition of Al Halqa.

When I first encountered Pasolini’s figure of the civic poet, Al Halqa came to mind immediately. Al Halqa refers to the “public storyteller,” but the audience is key here. In Arabic, Al Halqa means “the circle,” and the storytelling is defined by the position of the audience rather than the narrator. The performer within the Al Halqa tradition can be seen as a montage, mixing up popular tales delivered in dialect as well as sacred texts and ancient poems performed in classical Arabic. Somehow, my work approaches language similarly: literature, poetry, and oral history meet, the same way that various languages and dialects are brought together, creolized.

HF Your observations on the notion of the witness, as well as how language is developed and performed in your films, brings me back to the first part of Genet’s 1970 May Day speech: “I must be very careful when I speak in the name of the Black Panthers.” Genet was aware of his position and privilege in relation to the BPP, and knew that he could not *embody* their struggle or politics. This also invokes contemporary discussions about appropriation—who can speak for whom or who has the right to speak on whose behalf. What does solidarity mean to you? How do you address this notion of solidarity in the film and your work at large, particularly at a time when solidarity and appropriation need to be so carefully balanced?

BK Genet, the poet, when standing in solidarity with the oppressed, defines himself as a witness. He does not speak for them, nor does he talk on their behalf. He speaks as a witness. His very last works, *Four Hours in Shaaila* (1983) and *Prisoner of Love* (1986), are both meditations on the position of the witness. When developing *Twenty-Two Hours*, the title came first, as often when I work on a project. Twenty-two hours is the length of time that Genet spent with Hamza, the young Palestinian *fedaye* who inspired him to write *Prisoner of Love* and was instrumental in Genet’s commitment to the Palestinian revolution. I chose that title to ask a simple question: Are twenty-two hours enough to dedicate oneself to the struggle of other people? Twenty-two hours thus becomes a definition for an ethic of solidarity. At a moment when issues of alliance and solidarity are widely discussed, it is good to remember Genet’s example. He did not impose himself, but responded to the call for solidarity that the BPP extended to him, and supported them in the way *they* considered would be most efficient for the cause.

Bouchra Khalili is a Berlin-based Moroccan French artist. Her work in film, installation, photography, and printmaking has been included in many international exhibitions, including documenta 14 (2017), the 55th Venice Biennale (2013), the 18th Biennale of Sydney (2012), and the 10th Sharjah Biennial (2011). She has had solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM); the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA); and Palais de Tokyo, Paris, among others. This spring, the Vienna Secession and Jeu de Paume in Paris are both dedicating solo shows to her work. Khalili is shortlisted for the 2018 Hugo Boss Prize and the Artes Mundi prize.

Hendrik Folkerts is an art historian (MA, University of Amsterdam) and writer. He recently joined the team of the Art Institute of Chicago as the Dittmer Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art. Prior to this he was a curator for documenta 14 (2014-2017) and curator of performance, film, and discursive programs at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2010-2015).

p. 240, top - *Foreign Office* (still), 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Polaris, Paris

p. 240, bottom - *The Tempest Society*, 2017, installation view at documenta 14, Athens School of Fine Art, Athens, 2017. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Stathis Mamalakis

p. 241 - *Foreign Office* (still), 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Polaris, Paris

p. 243, top - *The Tempest Society* (still), 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Polaris, Paris

p. 243, bottom - *Twenty-Two Hours* (still), 2018. Courtesy: the artist

pp. 204-205 - *Twenty-Two Hours* (still), 2018. Courtesy: the artist

p. 246, top - *The Tempest Society* (still), 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Polaris, Paris

p. 246, bottom - *Foreign Office* (still), 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Polaris, Paris