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.

BOUCHRA KHALILI

As a Moroccan, Genet belongs to my intellectual imagination. He’s buried in Larache, in northern Morocco, where his last companion—Mohammed Ali 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 oppressed groups. For many years I’ve been meditating on a passage from Genet’s introduction to the first edition of Solidad Bacaer: 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 existentialism possible…because poetry contains both the possibility of a revolutionary morality and what appears to contradict it.”

Because he wrote about us and by writing about us, they saw themselves.
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 “creo- lization.” 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 the real character when he himself starts to ‘make fiction,’ when he enters into ‘the phantasm of making up legends’ and so contributes to the invention of his own story.

For instance, the former BPP member who seems to “testify” for a documentary is actually excusing from memory his own statement, written for the film—similar to how speech is developed in other works of mine such as Spashee 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 co-presence of the past, the present, and a potential future, literally reflecting the Paulolian 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, giving 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—cüm-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 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 heteroglossy, hoping that montage as a practice of the “interval,” of the missing image, is the site from where a repre- sentation of his/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.

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?

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 or- ganize 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 conclusion 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 be- comes 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 em- phasized 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 eyeglasses 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 discursive 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-reflexive “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 chronologi- cally, 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 Vanner 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.

The ways in which language is developed and spoken in Twenty- Two Hours, as well as how the main characters ventriloquize or per- form (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 lan- guage, and how its politics manifest in your work?
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 repressive 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: Friulian, 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 Friulian was a gesture of resistance against a nationalist conception of normative and centralized culture, at the expense of the disappearance of local cultures.

More provocatively, 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 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, cerelized.

**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 and 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 Shatila* (1983) and *Prisoner of Love* (1986), are two 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 fedayee 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 16th Sharjah Biennal (2011). She has had solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Pea Art Museum Miami (PAMM); the Musée d’Art Contemporain de Barcelona (MACBA); and Palais de Tokyo, Paris, among others. This spring, the Whitney Museum of American Art’s “Bouchra Khalili: The Tempest Society (still)” was on view in New York. Khalili is shortlisted for the 2019 Hugo Boss Prize and the Ahsan 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 Director 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).*