

ArtReview ArtReview Asia

Artes Mundi 8: Bouchra Khalili

We speak to the shortlisted artists of the £40,000 art prize



Bouchra Khalili is nominated for Artes Mundi 8 alongside Anna Boghiguan, Otobong Nkanga, Trevor Paglen and Apichatpong Weerasethakul. The biannual prize is awarded to international 'artists who directly engage with everyday life through their practice and who explore contemporary social issues across the globe', with the shortlist selected from over 450 nominations spanning 86 countries. An exhibition of the shortlist is now open at National Museum Cardiff and the winner will be announced 24 January.

ArtReview: What are you planning to show in Cardiff? How did you decide on this particular work?

Bouchra Khalili: I am showing my last film, 'Twenty-Two Hours', as it is typical of my work's long-term meditation on radical equality and transnational solidarity. It is 45 minutes long and was produced this year during my fellowship at Harvard's Radcliffe Institute. As for all my works, it was developed over a long period of time. I started researching and collecting material almost five years ago. It takes as a starting point the secret visit of Jean Genet to the U.S in 1970. At the invitation of the Black Panther Party, the poet toured the country, calling for the American public's unconditional support of the party and its leadership, who were, at that time, being arbitrarily detained. Genet's first public speech was held in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in early March 1970. Nearly 50 years after, two young African-American women examine Genet's commitment to the Party as a revolutionary movement in the very same place where Genet delivered his first public speech. As much storytellers as film editors, the young women combine fragments of images, sounds, stories and film footage, to speak of Genet's commitment to the BPP.

Simultaneously, Doug Miranda, a former prominent member of the Black Panther Party who was involved in organising Genet's tour on the East Coast narrates his meetings with Genet and his own commitment to the Party. The film thus suggests a reflection on the position of the witness, or I should rather say of the "civic poet" as a witness to history. Who is the witness? Is it Genet who stated that he came to the U.S to bear witness to the repression suffered by the Party? Is it the young storytellers/film editors, reactivating this story? Or is it the former Black Panther, who knows that his duty is to now bear witness to the struggle for liberation to which he dedicated himself?

Artes Mundi is specifically interested in 'everyday life', what role do you see art playing in vernacular culture?

The vernacular has always been at the core of my practice. My mother tongue is a vernacular language as is most of the languages that one can hear in my videoworks. Similarly, my works can also be seen as vernacular objects, aiming to transcend the boundaries of format and media: neither fiction or documentary, but rather hypothesis based on various forms of storytelling. I must acknowledge here the influence that Al Halqa, a disappearing tradition of performing arts in Morocco, played on me. When I first encountered Pier Paolo Pasolini's figure of the civic poet, and his idea of cinema of poetry as a "stylistic magma", formed by heterogeneous material, Al Halqa came to mind immediately. Al Halqa refers to the "public storyteller," and the name in Arabic means "the circle". So the storytelling is defined by the position of the audience rather than the performer. The performer within the Al Halqa tradition can be seen as a living archive, 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, creolised.

From that perspective, I want to be more a storyteller than anything else, a storyteller whose stories are told by multiple voices. And that's maybe one role that art can play in vernacular culture: a space for creolisation and encounters.

What strategies should an artist take to escape the insularity of the gallery?

Speaking of the insularity of the gallery implies that it cannot be challenged, subverted or transformed. At a time when the public space as a more inclusive platform is often opposed to the gallery, it is urgent to rethink the vocation of art spaces. In the last years, I have often stated that art spaces can be civic spaces, and that's what I aim to approach with my exhibitions: making the art space a site for radical encounters.

Given its remit, the artists nominated for Artes Mundi often deal with politics. In these intemperate times, should art seek to foster unity or to provoke opposition?

Unity as much as opposition has its own dynamics that can be strategised. So to me the question is with whom are we building unity in order to fight the nationalists and the radicalised neo-liberal politicians and opinion-makers who are dividing us? From that perspective, I indeed believe that art can be a space in which unity can be reflected and thought - I'm not saying achieved, but at least, where it can be pictured collectively.

What does being nominated for a prize mean to you? Do you find it problematic, or useful? Do you approach a prize exhibition differently to how you would any other show?

Although I've been producing artworks for 15 years now, I never saw my work as a career, but as the life I've chosen. Being nominated for Artes Mundi is a great honour. The prize has demonstrated throughout the years a strong commitment to artworks suggesting a reflection on the social and political responsibility of art and its impact on society. However, I don't see this prize as a competition between artists. Artes Mundi is above all an art exhibition that brings artists and their artworks together on an equal basis. There's then a dialogue that is engaged. Above all, I'm thrilled to show my work with wonderful artists whose I've been admiring for a long time.