

Bouchra Khalili

by Omayra Issa



Bouchra Khalili, *Speeches—Chapter 1: Mother Tongue*, 2012, digital film, 23:00. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Polaris, Paris.

Omayra Issa: Your work uses storytelling as a powerful device for engagement. You present subjects as full living portraits as the individuals state their stories of displacement. How do you position yourself vis-à-vis subject (re)presentation?

Bouchra Khalili: This is a very complex question. First, as a Maghrebi, I grew up with orality and listening to epic stories from storytellers on the street corner was very common. Storytelling is a means for revelation.

In fact, I am interested in exploring the ways in which singularities and specificities resonate with universality through language. Paradoxically, the more an experience is singular the more it is universal.

In the case of immigrants, we are talking about political minorities whose voices remain most often not heard. From that perspective, *Proletarian Nights*, (Verso, 2012), by Jacques Rancière was very inspiring for my practice. In that book, Rancière explores the everyday life of workers who were poets during the night, and for some of them, members of political avant-garde groups in 19th century Paris.

Those workers were absolutely aware of belonging to a political minority, and willing to produce poetry that reflected their social and political conditions. I would say that I'm interested in the moment when a discourse of resistance arises because it articulates a collective voice from a minority perspective, told with one's words and language.

Based on this, how do you think about audience and reception?

For me, the audience as an abstraction does not factor at the beginning of my creative process. Nonetheless, one of the questions that inform my work is to ask about how an art space can be one of dialogue with oneself and with others. Such space is conducive both to meditation and articulation, like an editing room, where an economy of words and silences are significant and necessary. My pieces are an invitation to the audience for an experience of listening, which allows a conversation, and ultimately an active participation in the reception of the piece.

In *Speeches—Chapter 1: Mother Tongue*, 2012, you bring words from writers as diverse as Aimé Césaire, Mahmoud Darwish, and Malcolm X. Yet they remain figures united by a profound interest in freedom as related to decolonization in their specific historicities. How does poetry inform your exploration on possibilities of resistance?

The Speeches Series was conceived from the beginning as a trilogy, investigating the specific questions of language, citizenship, and labour. *Speeches—Chapter 1: Mother Tongue* was developed as a “discourse on method,” to introduce the two following chapters: *Words on Streets*, 2013, and *Living Labour*, 2013. For the first chapter, the texts were chosen by the participants to the project among a large selection of essays and poems, while the two following chapters were based on texts authored by the participants. In the first piece, all of the participants are native speakers of an unwritten language such as Malinke from Mali or Kabyle from Algeria. Each of them also chose their own text from writers who resonate with their own opinions, thoughts, and sensibilities. So, I can't say that issues around decolonization were necessarily a concern. It was more about exploring and delivering methodologies or discourses of resistance that are displaced in time, in context, and in language, but still relevant. To make that possible we worked on a very defined methodology based on translation, memorization, and recitation.

Neither of the participants in the project was an actor. The approach we have developed was also based on the idea of avoiding acting or performing, in favour of a Brechtian distancing effect, which paradoxically allows to approach orality as an expression of the

critical function of subjectivity, as well as an invitation made to the audience to exercise critical self-reflection. This is how the poems and essays literally became the participants' words. This was also possible because the project involved an Edouard Glissant type *créolisation*. More specifically, I also approached the *Speeches Series* as a gesture of civil poetry—of “*poesia civile*.” As seen by Pasolini, civil poetry is the right taken by a citizen to address the social body through her own language and words. His *The Ashes of Gramsci*, 1957, was an attempt to redefine this tradition, insisting on singularity and subjectivity. *The Speeches Series* at large is inspired by this tradition as redefined by Pasolini both as a poetical and empowering gesture.

I would like to further this discussion around poetics and ask you about the ways in which you interpose diverse languages all at once around issues of anonymity and atomization as characteristics of the urban experience in large metropolises?

I have two mother tongues—French and Moroccan Arabic—which is a sort of Creole, happily mixing Arabic, Berber, and French. Until today, it is not recognized as a “language,” because it is considered a “dialect,” a vernacular language. As a native speaker of Moroccan Arabic I do identify myself as a “Creole,” as the language also reflects the complexity of Moroccan identity: African, Arab, Mediterranean, Berber. Then, I had to learn classical Arabic at school, and later on, other languages because I lived or worked in different countries.

I can say that I am obsessed with various manifestations of language, including dialects and accents because of the richness and the complexity that language reveal when dealing with specific realities. Meeting Pasolini's oeuvre was also a revelation, particularly because of his definition of film language as the written language of the language of reality, which expresses the reality by reality.

The various languages and dialects that one can hear in my videos are also those of minorities, and the expression of their singularities and positions in social, political, and territorial peripheries.

When working with language, one can't avoid issues related to urbanism, territory, subjectivity and anonymity, because the power of language is also a power of description, reflection and critic.

As an artist, working with language also allows me to rethink the relationship between sound and image, to approach sound as an image, and to consider the image as a surface of projection for the invisible image that sound constitutes. That invisible space produced by the articulation of sound and image is paradoxically the precise site from where a reflection can be developed.



Above: *Speeches—Chapter 3: Living Labour*, 2013, digital film, 25:00. “Bouchra Khalili: solo project” installation view, PAMM, Miami, 2013. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Polaris.
Facing page: *Speeches—Chapter 1: Mother Tongue*, 2012, digital film, 23:00. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Polaris, Paris.



Your work insists, among other things, on movement beyond geographical borders in a constant nomadic search for space. With *The Mapping Journey Project*, are you offering a view into the strategic tactics that make migration(s) possible, the checks and balances of uprootedness as a state of being?

My concern has to do with details, the way they can be combined, what they hide, and what they reveal.

This attention to specific details was essential to develop *The Mapping Journey Project* (Video installation, eight-single channels, 2008-2013). As an artist, I try to develop an approach based on the articulation of metonymy and metaphor. In *The Mapping Journey Project*, eight individuals with permanent markers at hand draw and map the trajectory of their own illegal journey from the Maghreb to Europe. The accounts are delivered in their own words and language with details and precision.

It was important for me to help reveal the counter-geography made of those invisible maps drawn by individuals forced on clandestine journeys throughout Africa, the Middle East, and Asia to reach Europe.

Tactics are essential for the survival of political minorities to ensure dignity as they translate acts of resistance. It is those invisible maps and accounts that ultimately embody certain geography of resistance, drawn against the arbitrary nature of the power.

Melancholy and loss often transpire in your work, without affect, as does mourning of the Origin, without sentimentality. Could you tell me more about this?

It's inevitable that your place or country of origin continues to live and even grow inside you, even after you have left it. It's also evident that solitude as part of the reality of most of the participants in my projects. However, I think one could also look at solitude as a place of meditation and reflection. It's about living a life of one's own—and most of the time a hard life—as a singular life trajectory, symbolically and in actuality. With keeping and developing at the same time a spirit of resistance.

***Speeches—Chapter 3: Living Labour* is particularly political in examining questions around wages, workers' organization in a market economy. This is done against a backdrop of highway traffic. What links do you draw between contemporary political economy and subjectivity?**

Speeches—Chapter 3: Living Labour was developed as a synthesis of the whole trilogy, articulating issues of language and orality, reflection on identity as a political citizenship, through the lens of labour as experienced by immigrants. As in *Speeches—Chapter 2: Words on Streets*, the texts are authored by the participants, and are the result of long conversations where my role consists in creating conditions that allow them to empower themselves both through orality and writing.

As for *Speeches—Chapter 1: Mother Tongue*, and *Speeches—Chapter 2: Words on Streets*, the sites where those "civil poems" are delivered required to be contextualized. The two first chapters were shot in Europe, respectively in Paris and its suburb, and in Genoa in



Speeches—Chapter 2: Words on Streets, 2013, digital film, 18:00. "The Encyclopedic Palace, 55th Venice Biennale" installation view, 2013. Photo by Francesco Galli. Courtesy of the artist and la Biennale di Venezia.

Italy. *Speeches—Chapter 3: Living Labour*, was filmed in New York, a major metropolis and financial capital, where the working class is generally a relic of a bygone era. Therefore, it was very important to map the city from the perspective of its immigrant working-class: each sequence is introduced by shots documenting the neighborhood where each participant lives or works: Queens, Long Island City, Harlem.

Those meditative but still documentary-like shots also describe the meaningless flux of goods and people as existing in a post-capitalist society. This emptiness was also developed as a sort of echo chamber, allowing the words to resonate with the outside, and even to haunt it.

But those few shots of highways, for example, amongst other urban sites, are only a part of the piece. They introduce a practice of portraiture developed within the piece, and the trilogy at large.

For example, when developing *The Speeches Series*, I kept in mind an extraordinary short film by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet entitled *Toute révolution est un coup de dés* (*Every Revolution is a Throw of the Dice*, 1977). The device is extremely minimalist: nine people, at Père-Lachaise cemetery in Paris, sitting on the grass, and reciting one after the other, verses of a poem by Mallarmé: *Jamais un coup de dés n'abolira le hasard*.

The film pays homage to the Paris "Commune," and the victims of the repression in 1870.

It was filmed near the wall where the last communards were executed, and in the cemetery where they are buried. The site participates in this portraiture practice both in terms of metonymy and metaphor.

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, and how it interacts with a specific environment.

It is ultimately a practice of articulation, combining different layers, from the most descriptive to the most metaphorical.

Omayra Issa is a nomad who moves through continents and languages.