

## Maps, Speeches, Migrants

A photographic and video artist's peripatetic work

BY COLINE MILLIARD



Bouchra Khalili in September 2006, at the opening of "Among the Moderns," co-curated by Khalili, at the Photographers' Gallery, London.

FILMED THROUGH a door's glass panels, a young woman speaks in Arabic. "A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization," read the subtitles. "A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization. A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization." The woman appears to be musing on the world's current state of affairs; perhaps she's being filmed in Europe, or in North Africa.

The woman, Naoual, is actually reciting a text assembled from fragments of the 1950 essay "Discourse on Colonialism" by Aimé Césaire, a poet and politician from Martinique. Like the four other subjects in Bouchra Khalili's video installation *Speeches*, 2012, currently on view at Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Naoual was asked by the artist to pick a

reading from a selection ranging from a 1922 open letter to the European powers by Abdelkrim Al Khattabi, the Berber leader in the Rif War, to Édouard Glissant's 2007 essay "*Quand les murs tombent*." Together, Naoual and Khalili translated the chosen text into Naoual's native language, the vernacular Moroccan Arabic. She then learned the words by rote and regurgitated them for the camera—digested, and having acquired in the process an unsettling contemporary currency.

Like Naoual's native tongue, the other languages in Khalili's film, some of which exist only in oral form, are all spoken by immigrants living in and around Paris: Dari from Afghanistan, Kabyl from Algeria, Malinke from Mali, and Wolof from Senegal. "All these languages are first of all the languages of minorities represented in France," the artist tells me from her Berlin studio. "Not all of them have a tradition of literature, but they have in common a powerful oral tradition. My work deals with language issues, minorities' speeches, and discourses, so I wanted to approach this question not through minorities' own words, but by confronting their thoughts with famous political texts, essays, poems, and letters."

Watching *Speeches* can be a slightly uncomfortable experience. Because she asks her subjects to mouth words that might be completely remote from their experience, the artist could be accused of superimposing the prestige of celebrated thinkers onto the often grim reality of exile—of slapping an intellectual gloss on a fetishized foreignness—for effect. When I venture that interpretation, Khalili is quick to emphasize the collaborative nature of her project. The participants "immediately understood why those texts are relevant in regards to their own vision, their own thoughts, their own relationship to current history," she says. "Anzoumane Sissoko, for example, chose the Malcolm X text for a very specific reason: Sissoko works as a cleaner, but he's also a very dedicated activist, and he has been interested in the figure and legacy of Malcolm X for a long time."

As critic Elisabeth Lebovici pointed out

when discussing *Speeches*' first showing, at the Palais de Tokyo's Triennale last summer, what is primarily at play in this piece is a dynamic of empowerment. Yet Khalili's video installation doesn't just allow those mostly absent from public discourse to speak out (albeit in the protected field of art and through a recognized, authoritative text); it isn't a simple recontextualization of pieces of literature, a straightforward conflation of oral and written traditions, or a mere highlighting of the identity politics ingrained in the very question of language. Rather, it is an astute splicing of them all. "This is pure intuition," says Khalili, despite the work's erudite references. "I had this feeling that through a practice of intensive displacement, I could experiment with another type of relevance."

*Speeches* is a textbook example of a conceptual strand running through the artist's filmic and photographic work: the use of hyperspecific situations to evoke much broader, sometimes global, concerns. Metonymy is Khalili's signature device. Each of the stories she introduces arrives pregnant with other, untold narratives that the artist knowingly embraces. In her best-known series of video works, "The Mapping Journey Project," 2008–11, Khalili dissects the invisible fluxes of clandestine travel by asking eight illegal migrants to draw on a map the route they followed from their homeland to Marseille, Bari, Rome, Barcelona, Istanbul, and elsewhere. One subject's trip is shorter than the rest, but no less fraught with difficulty: A Palestinian man, filmed in Ramallah, who explains the convoluted path he has to follow to visit his fiancée in neighboring East Jerusalem. For each interview, the screen shows nothing but a hand tracing the journey with a marker pen.

Together these pieces sketch, to borrow the artist's term, a *counter-cartography* in which the chosen routes bear no relation to logic or distance, but instead to possibility, chance, and human drive. Unlike Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen's *Promised Land*, 2011 (a video installation shown at the last Folkestone Triennial that follows the daily life of illegal

immigrants in Calais hoping to reach the U.K.), the stark aesthetic of Khalili's series leaves no room for sentimental distraction. The artist doesn't ask her viewers to feel for her subjects' hardship, but rather to consider the magnitude of the problem, which is rendered all the more appreciable when the eight single-channel videos are displayed in the same room.

Born in Casablanca in 1975, Khalili now lives in Berlin and Paris. She studied film theory at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, in Paris, before switching to video upon entering the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Arts de Paris Cergy in 2000. During our conversation, I ask the artist if her personal trajectory has influenced the topics she tackles in her work. Khalili brushes off my assumption, but I'm not fully convinced. Yet her attitude is absolutely in keeping with her artistic process: She is a serial interviewer whose voice is never heard. Does she have a trick to make people confide in her so freely? "Listening, just listening, very attentively. Asking few but precise questions," Khalili answers with matter-of-fact modesty. How does she meet the people she ends up taping? "It's difficult to answer because it's the same thing for all my projects: It simply happens," she says. "For *The Seaman*, of course, I went to places where I knew I could meet seamen, but when I saw Eric, at first glance I knew that we would work together."

Khalili is referring to a Filipino sailor featured in the 2012 piece, which is included in a group show, "*Ici, Ailleurs*," currently at Marseille's La Friche. *The Seaman* showcases the balletic movement of containers being loaded and unloaded in the port of Hamburg. In voice-over, Eric, the aforementioned sailor, describes the shipping business and his everyday life on a freighter. He talks about the "millions of dollars'" worth of cargo he's responsible for, the isolation and mistreatment of workers at sea, the necessity of throttling one's emotions to get by. "The seamen's community is a permanently exiled one," Khalili says. "They live a life of nomadism—even if it's directly related to globalization and the transportation



*Lost Boats*,  
Fig. 2, 2012,  
from the "Wet  
Feel" series,  
C-print,  
27½ x 26½ in.

**INTRODUCING** // BOUCHRA KHALILI

of goods—but they also experience a very specific type of disorientation.”

“We have to kill our heart not to be a bad man,” declares Eric on the sound track, “but it’s also for our safety.” The dehumanizing aspect of the trade is made manifest by the machinery on-screen, completely at odds with the warm accents in the sailor’s voice. As in “The Mapping Journey Project,” there’s a chasm between the information delivered by the sound and the image, each accentuating the other by virtue of contrast. Khalili talks about her recent works as “small manuals of resistance.” As she remarks, Eric hasn’t actually killed his heart. He’s created a fiction to survive and lead a somewhat contented existence on the ship.

This methodology of resistance also underlines 2012’s “Wet Feet,” a series of photographs shot last year around the Port of Miami, a notorious knot in the arteries of trade, smuggling, and illegal immigration linking the U.S. to the Bahamas, the Caribbean, and South America. The title refers to a peculiar piece of American legislation known as the “wet feet/dry feet policy,” which states that Cuban illegal immigrants caught at sea will be sent back to Havana, but if they’re arrested after reaching dry land, they can get papers after a year. With an eye for detail reminiscent of Zineb Sedira’s recent photography, Khalili captures images of rusty shipping containers and frail canoes abandoned among lush tropical leaves. They subtly hint at the deadly risks taken by those desperate to start a better life. Those who might have used the boats or illegally entered containers, however, are nowhere to be seen.

Once again, Khalili uses metonymy to maximum effect. “Wet Feet” is set in Florida, but if it weren’t for the American flag painted on one of the hulls, it could be any hotbed of fugitive activity. Like most of her production other than *Speeches*, the series is devoid of human figures, yet it poignantly suggests very human narratives of hopes, dreams, and disenchantment. Khalili’s film theory background has no doubt granted her an acute awareness of the trappings of the image. Acknowledging pictures’ inability to fully convey a story and its wider context, she prefers to construct space to be filled by the beholder’s imagination. “It has to do with this idea of an active or an attentive viewer,” she says. “You can participate in the construction of the image itself. It’s not an image which is seen; it’s an image that needs to be produced collectively.” MP



From top:  
Still from  
*Speeches*:  
Mahmoud  
Darwish,  
2012. Digital  
video, 4 min.

Installation  
view of the  
10th Sharjah  
Biennale of  
*The Mapping  
Journey  
Project*,  
2008–11.

Still from *The  
Seaman*, 2012.  
Digital video,  
10 min.

JUSTIN LANE