



# A PHILOSOPHY OF THE CAUTERIZED WOUND

TOBI HASLETT ON THE ART OF BOUCHRA KHALILI

Opposite page: Bouchra Khalili, *Mapping Journey #5*, 2010, video, color, sound, 11 minutes 3 seconds. From *The Mapping Journey Project*, 2008–11.

Right: Bouchra Khalili, *The Mapping Journey Project*, 2008–11, eight-channel video, color, sound. Installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2016. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar.



**MELANCHOLIA IS BORING.** No matter how violent the anguish or extravagant the sense of loss, to be melancholy is to be locked in a single, insistent, freezing feeling. The melancholic is obsessive; obsession stalls the self. Torpor, irritation, and relentless self-reproach are the only moves available to the gloom-addicted psyche. But that gloom is crossed with pleasure—a cynical relief. Walter Benjamin lambasted the poet Erich Kästner for his luxurious devastation, that air of “left-wing melancholy” that saps the political will. Catastrophe didn’t galvanize Kästner so much as feed his princely woe, so his futile, coiling, bourgeois verses were encrusted with cliché. “Now the hollow forms,” wrote Benjamin, “are absentmindedly caressed.”

The films and videos of the Moroccan-French artist Bouchra Khalili are transfixed by “hollow forms.” She’s riveted by the force of the nation-state and drawn to the radical past. Yearning, exile, failure, estrangement, and the shattered aspirations of anticolonial revolt—these are the lugubrious materials from which she assembles her sensibility. But her work is brisk and lucid; it’s scraped clean of wretched feeling. There’s no Kästneresque indulgence or flamboyant sense of doom. (Though the legacy of Western Marxism preoccupies

and consumes her.) She moves with glassy discipline across a field of ruthless crisis: the agony of austerity, the lives of stateless people, and the dilapidated hopes that drove third-world guerrilla wars. The themes are not identical but linked by parallels, ellipses.

Or fixed in *constellations* (to invoke Benjamin once more). “I’ve always wanted to go to Italy since I was a kid,” pronounces an offscreen voice in Khalili’s *The Mapping Journey Project*, 2008–11. “So I left Bangladesh in December 1999.” A brown hand grips a marker and draws a line across a map:

He told me I had to go first from Dhaka to Russia  
No, that’s wrong  
I went first from Dhaka to New Delhi  
Where I spent two days  
Then, I left from Moscow  
Which is here  
I arrived in Moscow  
After a week in Moscow  
The man told me we had to leave for Skopje  
In a country called Macedonia.

This is from *Mapping Journey #5*, 2010. The lines cut across nation-states and graze the Caspian Sea

before twisting across the Mediterranean and stopping, at last, in Rome. The man recites a malevolent litany: refusals and deportations, detentions and escapes:

When I arrived in Skopje  
They told me that my papers looked a little fake  
They told me “You cannot enter the country.”  
And they called the police  
And I was jailed for 8 months and 20 days, something like that  
Afterwards they sent me to Bangladesh . . . The man I paid to go to Italy said “Wait a few months, we’ll find another road.”

An appalling five-year gauntlet collapses into eleven minutes. But the man’s voice is wiped of affect; as one of the thousands of migrants who yearly attempt to enter the European Union, he carves a jagged, modernist form on the map’s abstracted plane. It’s a letter of an impossible alphabet, the stamp of a stateless person on what Benedict Anderson dubbed “the logoization of political space.” These political spaces include occupied Palestine, North Africa, and the vast Eurasian landmass. Lines jut from Morocco to Spain, from Algeria to France, from Somalia through

Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya, and Egypt. Some are harsh and ragged; others are valiant arcs. (In Khalili's silk-screen "The Constellations Series," 2011, they're sloping, dotted lines.) Imposed on the pompous squiggles that delineate nations, every kink or curve or angle marks the clash of self and state.

*The logoization of political space:* I'm piqued by Anderson's phrase, with its trivial little jingle. Yes, the border is a logo—an aesthetic confection and repetitive ploy. But how to depict the flight of *invisible* people, all the threats and elaborate prompts that send them slicing through hostile territories? What place is left for desire in a world devoured by capital? *I've always wanted to go to Italy*, says the migrant—and that want is met with borders, bureaucrats, and armed police, a rigid, glinting matrix of malicious calculation. This, then, is "the migrant crisis": The

bullied, roving poor try to slip into the fortress only to reveal the vicious difference, in the terms of Étienne Balibar, between those who circulate capital and those circulated *by* it. The latter peddle their devalued labor until they're hunted and expelled. So *The Mapping Journey Project* presents a motif that dominates much of Khalili's recent work. She displays a surface—a map, an iPhone screen, a table covered in photographs—that is then acted on by a disembodied hand. That hand is often brown. Pitched against its background, it becomes a symbol, a fleshly glyph. It writes, but has also been written on; it makes messages, gestures, traces, and signs, but is already tattooed by the "sign" of race—thrust into a dialectic of vulnerability and will.

That will is brusque, insurgent. Shining over Khalili's work are the examples of Chris Marker and



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Jean-Luc Godard, as she takes the shape of the former's essay films—with their loops and rippling logic—and studs it with the agitprop of the latter's Maoist period. (Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's *Tout va bien* [1972] opens with a hand that signs production checks—a bit of Brechtian insolence that seems to deface the cinema screen.) The result is an abstract radicalism and an intriguing reflexivity, as the global struggles of the 1960s and '70s are one of Khalili's subjects. Why *also* lift the syntax of the Left Bank and Nouvelle Vague? Or, to put it another way: What relation is she forcing between history, style, and crisis?

Pulped economies, uneven development, the expulsions and displacements caused by war, disaster, debt—crises obsess Khalili. But the films themselves glide forth with a startling tonal calm. She makes limpid, meticulous works of stately pacing and simplicity,

qualities that stretch, membrane-like, over massive, throbbing tensions. (The influence of the communist directorial duo Straub-Huillet is clear.) The films cleave to contemporary conflicts—but are absorbed by the blasted past. Her works are attached to political suffering—but retreat from sentimentalism. They are mournful, glacial, drifting, affecting—but have abolished left-wing melancholy.

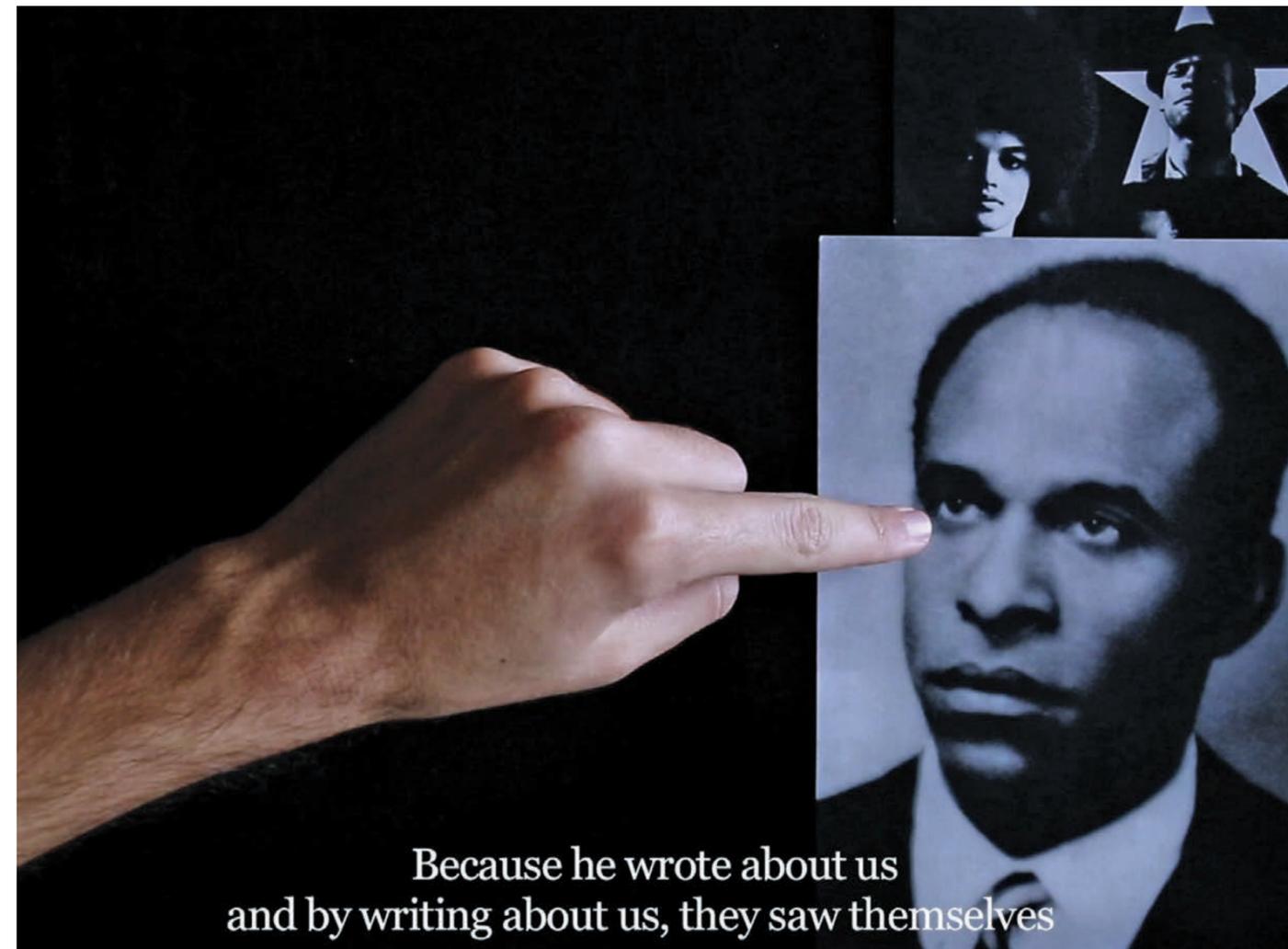
The melancholic drowns in a sumptuous delirium. But Khalili sets out to parse discrepant scales of space and time. The state dreams of *mastering* those scales, of imposing breaks and continuities—between past and present, between subject and collective, and between ethereal principles and the rugged stuff of life. So the state flashes through her art and compels her delicate attention, manifesting as fantasy, as metaphor, and as implacable machine. In her work, lives pass through

Right, above: Bouchra Khalili, *The Constellations*, Fig. 7, 2011, silk-screen natural pigment ink on paper, 24 3/8 x 16 1/2". From "The Constellations Series," 2011.

Right, and opposite page: Two stills from Bouchra Khalili's *Foreign Office*, 2015, HD video, color, sound, 22 minutes.



And he too, visited us



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



The state may be a smashing, merciless fist. But for certain exploited peoples, statehood was and is a dream.



the state apparatus like light shot through a prism, fanning into an array of revealing ideologies. *The Mapping Journey Project* relies on the techniques enforced by states: seriality, regimentation, and the clipped, official account. But by withholding the migrants' faces, Khalili banishes the kind of image that could incriminate or expose. We're left with absent, moving witness; a severed, scrawling hand; and the abstract trace on paper of the roaming *sans-papiers*.

But an irony rolls through Khalili's oeuvre. The state may be a smashing, merciless fist and an ingenious aesthetic logic; it may bristle with punitive technologies and spring from the will to dominate. But for certain exploited peoples, statehood was and is a dream. The anticolonial rebels who pass through Khalili's films, such as *Foreign Office*, 2015, and "The Speeches Series," 2012–13, lunged at the utopia of a postcolonial sovereignty. So the brown hands in *Foreign Office* blot little points on a map of Algiers, the so-called capital of the Third World, which in the '60s and '70s played host to the headquarters of leftist groups and governments in exile. As in *The Mapping Journey Project*, an offscreen voice recites a list—this time, of revolutionary organizations. Each name proclaims a hope:

- PAIGC: African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde
- FRELIMO: Mozambique Liberation Front
- ANC: African National Congress
- MPLA: People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola
- MPAIAC: Movement for the Independence and Self-Determination of the Canaries Archipelago
- African-American Information Center
- FPLN: Portuguese National Liberation Front
- Fatah: Palestinian National Liberation Movement
- FPLP: Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
- DFLP: Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine

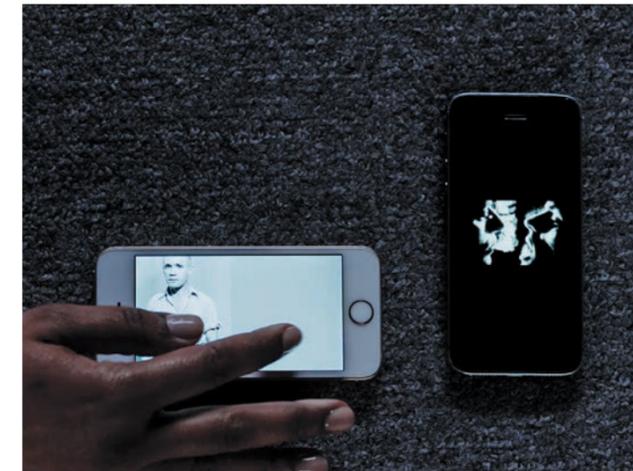
*National, Independence, Liberation, Front, Movement*: The words are braided through this litany of bygone revolt, and would arrive at a kind of incantatory rhythm were it not for Khalili's style. The tone is taut, declamatory, constructing a brittle parataxis. A link emerges between the lines of *The Mapping Journey Project* and the blotted, plotted points—namely, that the latter's stateless people march through the debris of crumbled revolutions. The implosion of postcolonial economies, the scourge of civil war, the sclerosis and reaction of erstwhile leftist states: This is not the future dreamed of by Amílcar Cabral or Frantz Fanon.

But it's exactly what they feared. "After independence," Fanon warns at the close of *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), "the party sinks into an extraordinary lethargy." But how to resist lethargy, drive out gloom, banish nostalgia, and advance the fight? How

Opposite page, top: Bouchra Khalili, *The Tempest Society*, 2017, 2K video, color, sound, 60 minutes.

Opposite page, bottom: Bouchra Khalili, *Foreign Office*, 2015, HD video, color, sound, 22 minutes.

Right: Four stills from Bouchra Khalili's *Twenty-Two Hours*, 2018, 4K video, color, sound, 45 minutes.



to draw lessons from past revolutions without lapsing into misery or the pleasures of the backward glance? (Wendy Brown's 1999 essay "Resisting Left Melancholy" is strapped to this question.) "We have inherited only disenchantment," a woman says to a man in *Foreign Office*, her voice distant and impassive. *The Tempest Society*, 2017, takes the '70s theater group Al Assifa (Arabic for "The Tempest") as its subject and militates against disenchantment. Al Assifa sought to establish a cultural wing of the struggle of migrant Arab workers in France, who were then allied with anarchist insurgents and the Mao-Spontex party Gauche Prolétarienne. The troupe cast workers in their productions, part of a radical vogue that reached its apex in Marker's film collective Medvedkin Group. So photographs of Pier Paolo Pasolini and Antonio Gramsci—the former a "civic poet," the latter an "organic intellectual"—fill Khalili's screen as she takes them as precursors for the occupation of Athens's Syntagma Square. This is a

fight against austerity, itself an imperial echo. Aerial footage of Syntagma—maplike and abstract—plays as a man recalls the referendum protests of 2015:

That night and the next two following, we said *No*  
We said *no*  
To those who want a Europe without politics,  
Without popular will,  
Without *demos*,  
Without democracy.

This is a refusal of refusals—and the key to Khalili's ethos. In the place of political melancholy, she deploys the art of the double negative. She defeats left-wing defeatism and resolves to forfeit loss. So the rigor of her films—their disciplined geometry—strikes me as both a nod to an older didacticism and a kind of philosophy of the cauterized wound. Born into an era of evacuated aspirations, she displays clipped, clenched, determined reserve. Her latest video, *Twenty-Two Hours*, 2018 (which will be on view in Khalili's exhi-

bition opening this month at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), is narrated by two black American women who stare at the camera, locked in a statuesque posture that is frontal, immovable. They recount the history of the Black Panther Party in a tone that is crisp, attentive—and shorn of fluttering romance: "What remains of the story is sometimes images / Sometimes sounds / Sometimes memories / Sometimes witnesses / But always words." Between past and present there are no reassuring continuities—only abrupt alignments, shocking symmetries, striking echoes, rhyming forms. Against an enveloping melancholia, Khalili pits the fact of dispersion and caesurae and startling gaps. Hers is a world slung between map and constellation, plan and promise—that vital impossibility that we once knew as utopia. □

"Bouchra Khalili: Poets and Witnesses" is on view March 21–August 25 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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