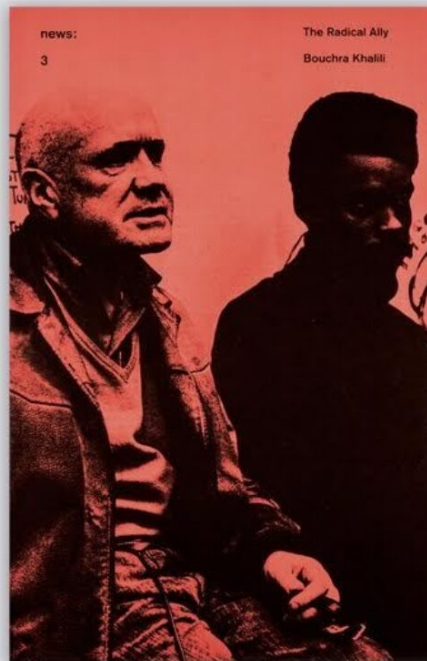


# *BOMB*

## Bouchra Khalili's *The Radical Ally* by Sophie Kovel

Part of the Editor's Choice series.



(Gato Negro Ediciones, 2020)

In February 1970, the Black Panther Party (BPP) sought political support from the French dissident writer Jean Genet, after his play *The Blacks*, which had recently traveled to New York, suggested he might be an ally.

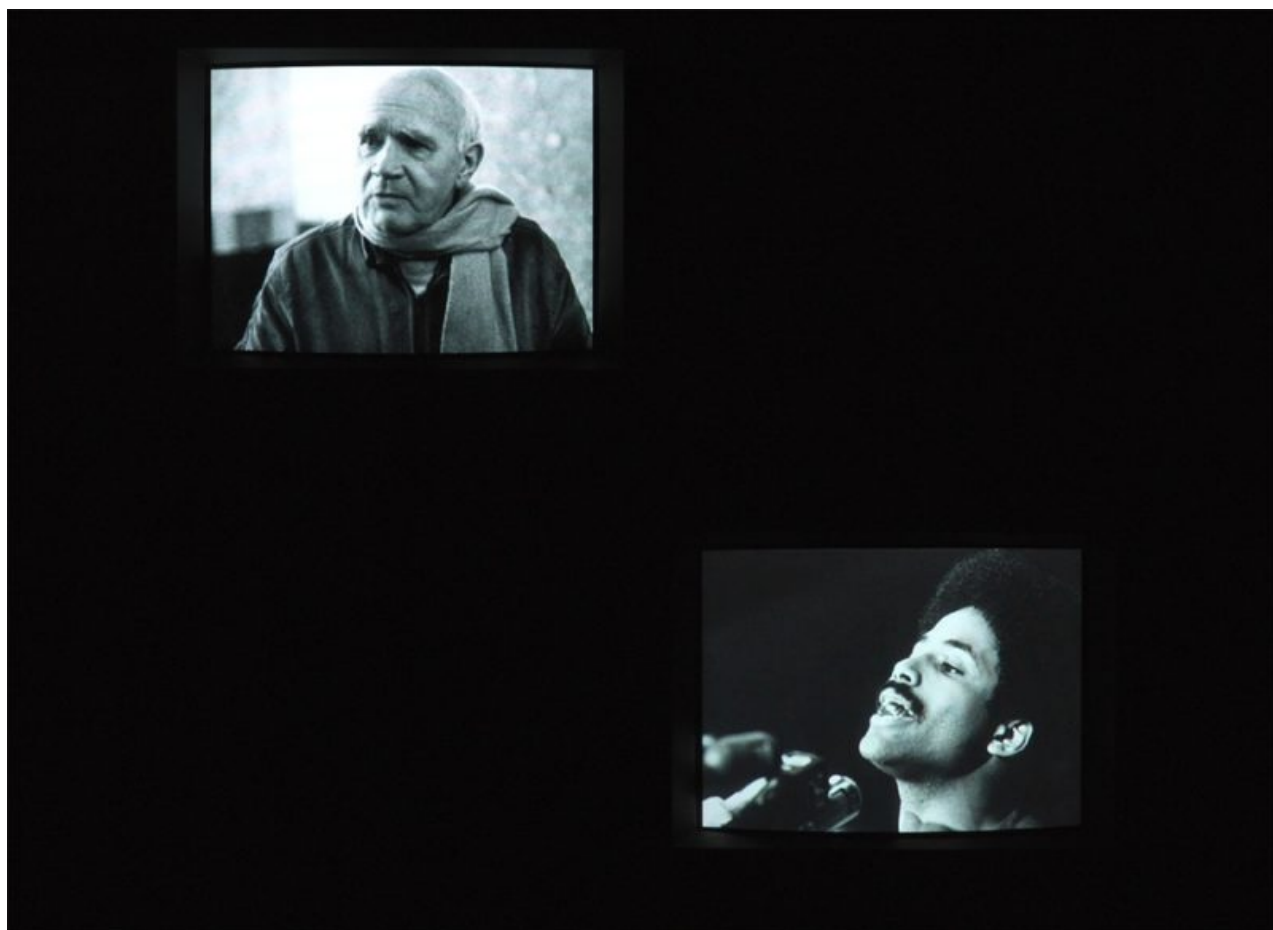
At the time, several Black Panthers were on trial, and Genet's books and film were widely banned throughout the United States for their candid homoeroticism. Genet traveled in secret from Paris to the US in March that year, and with the BPP he published anti-racist writings and lectured at universities in New York City, Chicago, Oakland, Berkeley, and Los Angeles. He also found, perhaps for the first time since being abandoned at a young age, a family: "The Panthers accepted me as I am," Genet recalled—a gay man, petty thief, nomad, and outcast. By April, he would return to Paris at the behest of the FBI.

With the publication of *The Radical Ally*, the artist, historian of national revolution, and proponent of public storytelling Bouchra Khalili assembles this history, expanding on her 2018 film on the same subject, *Twenty-Two Hours*. Reading *The Radical Ally* is like opening an annotated box pulled from an archive. There's a timeline of Genet's tour with the BPP; an interview between Khalili and the poet, scholar, and prison abolitionist Jackie Wang; essays by curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung and legal scholar Patricia J. Williams; and reproduced newspaper articles, confidential memos, protest posters, and manuscript pages. The compendium is printed in a pink duotone, a nod to Genet's condemnation of American journalism as "criminal because it is presented in a rosy hue or not presented at all."

At a rally at Yale University for the release of the incarcerated Black Panther leader Bobby Seale, Genet gave his famous May Day Speech. He denounced the press, the church, universities, advertising, and, with particular force, anti-black violence, police brutality, and the apathy of white liberals. "What people call American civilization [...] is already dead, because it is founded on contempt, the contempt of the rich for the poor, the contempt of whites for blacks..."

Filmed just steps away from the site of the 1970 New Haven rally, and taking the form of an oral history, Khalili's *Twenty-Two Hours* documents the experience of former BPP chapter leader Douglas Miranda. He coolly recounts the crowds, the threats, and his own speech. The film is mediated by how these events can be retold. Miranda is a direct witness—one of the few who can recount these organizing efforts firsthand—whereas Genet was a witness to a struggle that was not his own. In the film we see images from the past displayed on an iPhone, and the

narrators swipe through them to reconstitute the stories behind them. These histories can (and should) be carried with you. *The Radical Ally*, part of the NEWS series by the collaborative platform Instituto de Investigaciones Independientes, is similarly mobile, mirroring the BPP's iconic newspaper, *The Black Panther*.



Bouchra Khalili, still from *Twenty-Two Hours*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Mor Charpentier, Paris.



This is not the first time the BPP or Genet, if indirectly, appear in Khalili's work. Her 2015 film *Foreign Office* maps the poets, politicians, and musicians who attended the Pan-African Cultural Festival in post-independence Algiers, among them the International Chapter of the BPP. Genet was no stranger to this history, having condemned French colonial rule in the country through his writing and enlisted the support of French

intellectuals in anti-racist efforts. The film's narrator paraphrases Angolan poet-politician Mário Coelho Pinto de Andrade: Write with a gun; fight with a pen. Genet would write his memoir *Prisoner of Love* up until his death in 1986, fearing that "the end of the book might coincide with the end of resistance." Writing was a way of sustaining the fight. By preserving these moments of protest, Khalili offers a similar opportunity, and reminds us to keep watch.

*Sophie Kovel is an artist, writer, and BOMB's editorial assistant.*

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Originally published in

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