

The Mapping Journey Project, by Bouchra Khalili

MoMA, 9 April – 10 October 2016, New York

Between 2008 and 2011, the French Moroccan artist Bouchra Khalili took a trip through European cities that are considered the most important migrants' 'transit' centers. There, she meets the protagonists of *The Mapping Journey Project*, a cartographic work in which the routes individuated by the panoptical system for monitoring and militarizing the borders are counterposed to the human routes, which are impossible to determine by means of loxodromics and grids.

Exhibited at the MoMA as part of *Citizens and Border*, a series of discrete projects at the museum that are related to works in the collection, Khalili's work offers a critical perspective on histories of migration, territory and displacement.

Bouchra Khalili's installation consists of eight videos, shown in the display room on eight different screens. Each video starts by showing a map on which, a few seconds later, appears a hand that begins drawing the route of the illegal trip to Europe. The voiceover of the protagonist explains his/ her itinerary. Lines, arrows, dots: the route is a sequence of stops and way backs, rejections, detentions and mistreatments. It reminds the spectator of a global game of goose, where every step back means starting all over again. Months or years of vicissitudes before reaching one of those 'crossing' cities where Khalili meets and films the protagonists of her stories. Those cities are places turned by the migration flow's containment and regulation policies into a *limbo* where there's no chance to leave, and where nobody wants to stay. The eight migrants speak English, French, Arabic, Italian, and they talk about the violence suffered, someone even mentions friends who lost their lives during these journeys. Khalili chooses to keep their identity secret: the most recognizable trait of each person, which would be the face, is counterposed to the refugees' non-visibility in Khalili's work. We see no suffering bodies, nor iconographies of pain that are so often shared through mainstream media. The map is the central element of the project, whose deep reason is undermined by the creation of alternative mapping forms.

The spatial organization, and its scientific dissection by means of cartographic system, allowed an increasingly precise, geometric reproduction of the nations' boundaries. The demarcation of the nations' geographic profile through increasingly defined borders leads to a huge puzzle effect, where each nation is a tile, and part of a bigger picture — in this case, the entire surface of the earth. The mapping of the national territory has as its consequence, what Benedict

Anderson defines as ‘logo-map’: referring to the use of the map for identifying the colonies, and specifically to the practice of painting each colony according to its imperial identity. Anderson highlights how this peculiar representation had as its effect the identification of the national territory, and therefore citizens’ feeling of belonging.¹ Although Anderson refers above all to the importance that the logo-map gave to the rise of anti-colonial nationalism, it is a fact that the nations’ defined and colorful shape continues molding the collective consciousness (the *Italian boot*, for example). The map, like a patchwork and symbolic shape of the hegemonic global order, is still an elemental learning tool used for geographical recognition, and is used as such by Khalili in her work. The map becomes the nation’s symbolic transposition, representing a geography determined in turn by other *documents*: the borders become a distinction mark between the inside and the outside, a binary logic which generates a feeling of community and belonging. The idea of foreigner is produced by the juridical and *documental* regime.

Protagonists’ crossing into different territories shows how the idea of borders loses its references. If, on the one hand, we assist at the militarization and fortification of national borders to guarantee their *governmentality* — as it happened in Hungary, Serbia and in France, where in Calais they built a wall to prevent the passage to the United Kingdom. Then, on the other hand, we can see how the border moves beyond the national and continental limit. Borders are not institutional places anymore, but they are something moving, constantly reshaped by military strategies: the Italian border, for example, does not correspond with the Sicilian coasts, but with the military patrol of the Canal of Sicily. Boundaries are embodied by the soldiers placed at the Israeli checkpoints, in the red zones, or special security zones, for monitoring the occupied territories,² as video #3 shows: a Palestinian man draws on the map the route he took to reach his girlfriend who was in the Israeli territory.

Bouchra Khalili’s work represents a *counter-map* tracing migrants’ resistance against control and containment policies which deny them any chance of free movement. The invention of new roads, that do not exist on any maps, generates an alternative geography: the one of human experiences and clandestine existence. However, the closing of the borders, as well as their proliferation, involves a continuous re-definition of the migrant routes, which become increasingly dangerous. Migrants are repeatedly exposed to many risks: prison, torture, death. To face one of the biggest humanitarian emergency of our time, the tragedy of immigration, Khalili’s work suggests that the closure of the borders is not a safe choice, at least not for the migrants. To guarantee the safe crossing, it is necessary to open up humanitarian corridors. This is the only solution to avoid the death of thousands of migrants during their journeys to a better life.

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¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

² See Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007).