



Project Gallery: Bouchra Khalili
December 4, 2013–February 23, 2014

Bouchra Khalili

b. 1975, Casablanca; lives in Berlin

Speeches - Chapter 3: Living Labour, 2013

Digital color video, with sound, 25 min.

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Polaris, Paris

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1103 Biscayne Blvd.
Miami, FL 33132
305 375 3000
info@pamm.org
pamm.org

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Project Gallery

Bouchra Khalili

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English

Speeches - Chapter 3: Living Labour

In 2012, Bouchra Khalili embarked on a suite of three video works that would come to comprise *The Speeches Series: A video trilogy* (2012–13). Shot in Paris and its suburbs, Genoa, and New York, respectively, each video features speeches delivered by five subjects living abroad after being exiled from their homelands or emigrating in pursuit of a different life. The final video, *Speeches - Chapter 3: Living Labour* (2013), reflects the visual and linguistic motifs that appear throughout the series, and brings to the fore issues of migration, labor rights, and justice. Commissioned by Pérez Art Museum Miami and developed during a six-month fellowship with the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School in New York, the video constitutes a trenchant conclusion to the trilogy.

While living in New York in fall 2012, Khalili conducted formal and on-the-ground research into issues related to immigration, immigrant communities, and labor in the city and returned in spring 2013 to shoot her new work. *Living Labour* first focuses on Kanté, a middle-aged man from Mali. The video opens with a still shot of the cityscape: the sidewalk under a highway overpass. Kanté speaks in gravelly French, outlining within the video's first moments the questions and critiques, political and personal, that are at its center: "America is a prison for its immigrants. The bars of this prison are injustice, racism, lack of moral values, and loneliness." Kanté's speech is by turns the most poetic and forceful of the five vignettes. He eloquently describes the nature of this "prison" and the only means of escape: to fight for equality. He speaks of racism in the United States as insidious and "well camouflaged, like an early cancer."

The camera cuts to black, the long blink of an "ellipses," a device that Khalili uses pointedly throughout *The Speeches Series* and other works.¹ We now see Kanté sitting in an apartment windowsill. Here his speech shifts from the polemic to the personal as he narrates his experience of coming to New York, the travails of his job—Kanté holds a degree in accounting from Mali and now works in a supermarket—and the omnipresent threats of dismissal, exploitation, and recrimination. Like the other participants, his repeated verbal structures and pointed litanies give shape to his experience; his words have the force of a political speech and the intimacy of poetry. His description of the circumstances at the supermarket, in which he and his colleagues are simply "extras of the system, interchangeable and invisible," is at once deeply specific and legible as a larger meditation on the state and the status of working immigrants.

Kanté's vignette resonates with a scene in *Mother Tongue* (2012), the first chapter of *The Speeches Series*, in which Anzoumane, a Malian man, sits in an empty market hall in Paris and recites fragments of a 1964 speech given by Malcolm X at



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the founding rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity. In one shot, the camera focuses on the man's hands as he quotes Malcolm X in Malinke: "Why should we do the hardest work for the lowest pay?" Malcolm X's rhetoric is twice heard in the present moment—a contemporary expression of fundamental questions of injustice still haunting the working man throughout the world. *Mother Tongue* presents five individuals who have selected, interpreted, translated, and memorized texts by seminal political thinkers and poets of the 20th century. These individuals recite the speeches in their mother tongues, which include Senegalese Wolof, Moroccan Arabic, and Algerian Kabyle, among others. Translated into other dialects, these texts—which advocate for the rights of minorities within their social contexts—allow the participants to appropriate their critical rhetoric, declaring themselves within a broader, still urgent, history.²

The particular strength of these companion works, achieved through the artist's lean style of filmmaking, interrogation of language, and process, ensures the singular identities of each subject and adroitly avoids the pitfalls of representation. In the first chapter of *The Speeches Series*, the texts are authored by the subjects through their own translation, memorization, and delivery of the existing texts; in the second and third chapter, they are literally authored by the participants who deliver them. Everything that comprises the "speeches" themselves hinges on the participants' interpretation, experience, and language. But it is Khalili's particular visual lexicon that shapes the videos, a lexicon that she traces back to an avant-garde European cinema history that includes Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet (with particular attention to their style and emphasis on the voice), and perhaps

¹ In the artist's words, these "black screens...refer both to temporal ellipses and to the ellipses produced by the editing process of the texts." "Bouchra Khalili: Oral, Paradoxical; and Political," by Adnan Yildiz, *Mousse* 36 (December 2012): 232.

² Khalili has described this process as one of "digestion": "Through the translation process and the memorizing, a form of 'digestion' could happen. For the participants, those words literally became their own. This was also possible because they chose their own text, to reflect their own opinions and thoughts." Yildiz, "Bouchra Khalili: Oral, Paradoxical; and Political," 231.



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most importantly, the filmmaker, intellectual, and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini. Khalili's portrayal of her subjects, which is unsentimental and reserved, creating ennobling, austere portraits without aggrandizing the participants, relates to the ways in which these filmmakers sought to "film a discourse on reality."³ Each segment of *The Speeches Series* begins with a voiceover and shots of a cityscape or interior, allowing the speaker's voice to take over and inhabit the scene. Khalili's camera is slow and sympathetic. Contrary to the power dynamic implicit in the relationship between subject and viewer, the subjects seem in control, allowing for a determined self-presentation and an unobtrusive intimacy between us and them, with only a rare exchange of gazes. Through this collaboration, Khalili's work moves beyond the idea of simply providing a platform from which to speak; instead, the project functions as a space for both the development and articulation of political consciousness.

In *Living Labour* we encounter four other participants after Kanté. Each analyzes his or her circumstance through the

lens of the working class, posing a self-conscious analysis of larger systems and questions relating to economy, place, and citizenship. The subjects, from Mexico and West Africa, undertake interrogations of the "new" working class in the United States. Working in the service economy of the largest city in the nation, they are often unseen and forced into clandestine lives. Their uncertain and precarious status shapes their consciousness in profound ways.

Language is vital to this work, as the speakers have chosen to speak either in their native tongue or in English. This choice can be understood as emerging from and reinforcing a particular political position. The subjects speak of exploitation and uncertainty in their workplaces, the racism they encounter, the loneliness that comes of being so far from their families, and the struggle inherent to daily their lives. This struggle is not just one of basic survival, but is also tied to movements against systems of capitalist oppression and the pursuit of dignity and human rights. Their affecting speeches are intimate and candid expressions, a powerful form of resistance through the assertion of self.

³ Bouchra Khalili, e-mail message to author, November 13, 2013.



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Aliouné, a young man, is filmed in his apartment; his speech deftly navigates the realities of daily life—"work all day long, ten to twelve hours, seven days a week"—and larger examinations—"America, America, America; America is a dream of America." His exacting presentation upends the notion that daily struggles deaden the intellect, the ability to dream, or the desire for change. The participants' delivery collapses their subjective experience into larger political spheres, shaping and constructing the world around them through language. The speech act, enunciation, and the performance of language are here reified as agents against injustice. Khalili takes on and suggests the power of speech and of thoughtful consideration and articulation as an act of political consciousness—one that pulses with nascent revolution. "I know I have to fight. I feel stuck, but I don't accept it. I want more," says Alejandra, a Mexican woman living in New York and working as a housekeeper, in the final scene. Her simple, clear, and direct speech acknowledges her place in the world and quietly demands that everything change.

Diana Nawi
Associate Curator

Biography

Bouchra Khalili was born in Casablanca and lives and works in Berlin. She studied at the Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris, and the École Nationale Supérieure d'Arts de Paris Cergy. Recent solo presentations of her work have appeared at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto; DAAD Galerie, Berlin; Freedman Gallery Project Space, Albright College, Reading, Pennsylvania; and the Tarragona Art Center, Spain. Recent group shows include the 55th Venice Biennale, where *Speeches - Chapter 2: Words on Streets* premiered; *Intense Proximity*, La Triennale, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, where *Speeches - Chapter 1: Mother Tongue* premiered; the 18th Biennale of Sydney; and the film series *Mapping Subjectivity* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Cover, 3-4 Bouchra Khalili. *Speeches - Chapter 3: Living Labour*, 2013. Five-channel digital color video installation, with sound. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Polaris, Paris

2 Bouchra Khalili. *Speeches - Chapter 1: Mother Tongue*, 2012. Five-channel digital color video installation, with sound. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Polaris, Paris