

## **Bouchra Khalili, *Foreign Office*, 2015**

In the first part of 2015 [the Palais de Tokyo](#), the large museum of contemporary art in Paris, hosted various exhibitions of relevance for our ERC project “Bodies Across Borders”. Among them, the solo exhibition “Foreign Office” by [Bouchra Khalili](#) struck me most, not only for its intrinsic interest, but also for its reverberations on my lifestory and my work in the field of history and its contemporary resonances. When I entered the [exhibition](#), I felt I plunged into my own past during the 1960s. On the screen at the left, the images were sliding of people I had known and talked with: leaders like Amilcar Cabral of the PAIGC (Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde), assassinated six months before his country’s independence; Agostinho Neto of MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola), poet and first president of independent Angola; and Samora Machel, the military commander of Frelimo (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique) and president of independent Mozambique. I also recognized militants that I had not met personally, but knew by their fame, such as Kathleen and Eldridge Cleaver of the Black Panthers, Nelson Mandela (leader of the ANC, African National Congress), who was then in prison, where he remained for 27 years, or women like Peninsular Moon, who fought for women’s rights in Oman. And Miriam Makeba. The film by Bouchra Khalili (22’) is a moving montage of their images in a political and historical light. But not only: their figures alternate with those of two young Algerians, Ines and Fadi, who tell us the story of the decade 1962-1972 (the former in Algerian Arabic and the latter in Kabyl), when Algiers hosted the “foreign offices” of many liberation movements from various parts of the world. Their apparent immobility and the fixed camera (the film is a composition of static shots) create a provocative contrast with the vibrant words they speak, accusing the generation of their parents of putting the blame on them for the forgetfulness of that period. Yet, they say, these missing stories are all around us. Belonging to the generation of their grandparents, I feel an affinity with them, known to anthropologists as the attraction between alternate generations, versus the opposition between adjacent ones. In this case it is rather an agreement in historical and political terms. At the end of the 1960s, I had worked on and with some African liberation movements in their headquarters in Tanzania, Zambia and Egypt. I spent almost a year in Dar es Salaam and shorter periods in Lusaka and Cairo, to collect documentation on Frelimo, ANC, SWAPO (South West African People's Organisation, which brought Namibia to independence), Zapu (Zimbabwe African People's Union), and Zanu (Zimbabwe African National Union). I worked particularly with Frelimo, collecting their documents, included many poems by Mozambican militants, which I published in a 1970 book. Through *Foreign Office*, the whole scene of the liberation movements came vividly back to me. In the silkscreen “archipelago” created by Bouchra Khalili (a fascinating variation on the theme of the “constellation” present in her previous work), the floor plans of the headquarters of the liberation movements in Algiers float in a blue space representing the topography of the town. Among them, were the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) and many movements in Eritrea, Quebec, South Vietnam, the Somali coast, Canaries, as well as the African-American movements. The exhibit mixes media: the digital film (with many cinematic references to 1960s film-makers), a series of photographs, and a silkscreen print. Some of Khalili’s findings enlarge the temporal perspective, like the image of the run-down building – once the site of the Hotel Victoria - where Karl Marx stayed in February-May 1882. All the photographs taken by the artist in Algiers show the passage of time, revealing a geography of places as they have become of these days. Finally, another crucial medium is poetry. [Bouchra Khalili](#) has always insisted on the poetic dimension of resistance, be it political, cultural, migrational or all of them together. In her work there is a deep connection

between resistance and poetry, a feature that I hope to explore more deeply in the future. It is not by chance that Foreign Office includes images of the place where Kateb Yacine lived and of the flowers that the Berber poet, writer and activist used to give to women. The exhibition was possible thanks to the SAM Prize for Contemporary Art, Khalili being the fifth artist who received it. Visiting it left in me the strong impression that this work has great potentialities that could be explored and developed by both the artist and her receptors.