

THE MAGHREB CONNECTION

Introduction by Ursula Biemann and Brian Holmes

THE MAGHREB CONNECTION examines the systems and modalities of migratory movements in the Maghreb and Mediterranean region. Positionality is fundamental to this project. Seen from its conception site in Cairo, once a decisive place of Arabic high culture, the Maghreb is where the sun sets: the west, meaning the Muslim Mediterranean countries of North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya). Anything west of Egypt is Maghreb, anything east of it is Machrek (Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria), so that Cairo assumes an oddly similar position to Greenwich, nominated by another empire as the point from which to divide and measure the world. However, we can no longer perceive the world from a singular location of power, and it's doubtful that anyone ever could. In this project, we apprehend the region as a field of dynamic relations, a geography traversed and transformed by life in motion.

The issues at stake, the structure of the book and the perspectives from which the different essays and projects have been conceived are diverse and multi-directional: Maghrebi scholars who research in France, Spanish activists who live in Morocco or take action across the Strait of Gibraltar, European artists doing fieldwork in the Maghreb and Sahel, Cairene artists working on immigration from China or emigration to Italy. Positionality can be conceived as the place from which one speaks, the forms of address to the interlocutor, as well as the means at one's disposal. Speaking, in this sense, involves a range of expressions: analytic, narrative, filmic, photographic, etc. But it also includes the more-or-less spontaneous kind of linguistic or gestural performance that takes place on the other end of the camera, the questionnaire or the simple conversation, without which none of the work presented here would even be conceivable. Projects like this are effectively produced by the dynamic of relations, whose dialogical traces overflow even the most tightly authored constructions. We have not sought any universal space of connectivity in the Mediterranean: every encounter is particular, every perspective specific.

The Maghreb has been in the news a lot in the last few years, mostly about one issue: sub-Saharan transit migration, some of which is directed to Europe. While the Maghreb countries have a long-standing history of migration to Europe, the West African migration flow towards the North is a more recent phenomenon, coinciding with the consolidation of the European Union. Since the fortification of the European outer rim and the worldwide measures taken against terrorism, the relations between Muslim North Africa and Europe have undergone major transformations; we have entered a new postcolonial phase. Migration has been drastically restricted and much logistical effort and technological investment has flowed into shielding off the South-North transfer of people. Media images suggesting a constant and undesirable invasion of Europe's southern borders are feeding the notion that even greater reinforcements will be necessary in the near future. Much could be said about the polarizing politics of containment which dominate the discussions, at least in Europe. Or about the economic push factors that more sympathetic commentators elaborate on, in their honest attempt to explain the roots of the situation.

This book is not a direct contribution to solving any of the above problems, but an attempt to

open up a field of connections among theoretical, aesthetic and activist concerns with regards to multi-directional migration flows across North Africa. Highly adjustable, these movements have generated prolific operational networks, systems of information and social organization among fellow migrants as well as interaction with local populations. They frequently intersect with other forms of organized mobility such as tourism, martial formations of official military and rebel groups, the punctual appearance of humanitarian personnel and, not least, writers, journalists and image-makers like ourselves, who strive to make sense of it all. The conjunction of these movements generates synergies, conflicts and sometimes surprising alliances, which will become visible in these pages.

Irregular migratory movements are giving rise to a variety of architectural forms, from informal self-organized forest camps to urban slums and mobile architectures for desert crossings; while on further shores, migrant laborers toil in a plastic sea of greenhouses in Spain's Almería region. In the topsy-turvy logic of this transnational phenomenon, it is not surprising that informal state-like underground camps emerge side-by-side with gigantic transnational development projects like the construction of the Tanger-Med port near Tangier, or that tourist flows on the island of Lampedusa are channeled through control areas shared by asylum management facilities. The attempts at monitoring and managing large-scale migratory movements call supranational structures like IOM and the UN Refugee Agency into action, which then assume amazing power in deciding on the status and destination of a constantly growing number of people whose uncertain citizenship seems to leave humanitarian officials strangely unsure about their human rights. Transnationalism occurs from the ground up as much as from the top down, eroding national concepts from both ends.

Reflecting the subject of research, we made transnationalism the prime mode of operation for our project. The processes of collaboration, the cross-references in the common reading, the traveling exhibition and the circulation of videos and a bilingual publication are all intended to contribute to the emergence of a transnational consciousness and in this way to help empower political participation, which is the only means that might be able to compete with the restrictive system of mobility control that has itself already gone transnational. Rather than just deconstructing repressive European border regimes, the primary aim of THE MAGREB CONNECTION is to develop a visual and discursive counter-geography of the forms of migratory self-determination and organization. Underlying this is the great need we see to expand and diversify the public discourse on human circulation, and the visual worlds we create around it. Counter-geography is where the subversive, informal and irregular practices of space take place, the ones that happen despite state forces and supranational regulations. If we understand geography not as a geophysical science but as a signifying system that allows us to grasp the relations between subject, movement and space, we begin to recognize its great potential for developing an aesthetic practice on the subject of migration. This is why our project focuses on the gates and specific zones of transit migration, such as Agadez in Niger, Sicily, Lampedusa off the Tunisian coast, Oujda and Tangier in Morocco, Laayoune in the Western Sahara and Cairo as a destination for migrants coming through the Suez canal. Tracking and videographing the trajectories, relays and nodes of these repetitive movements, engaging with local researchers and activists, tapping into the local network of those invaluable persons who have a profound knowledge of the terrain and can act as translators and mediators in projects like ours, is a form of writing territorial relations, it

is geographic practice.

The exhibition has a role in this practice, which is not only to function as a relay of the research, but to create an environment of possible experience. To do so, we compose an affective, imaginary and symbolic cartography which has the effect of momentarily shifting one's habitual references. Rather than merely reading a disembodied map, it is as though you were walking under different stars, or moving to a different rhythm. This subjective shift can be deepened and intensified by the presence of complex information, particularly when it conveys different value systems and interpretative codes from those to which we are accustomed. When such effects of emotional, imaginary and symbolic displacement occur in an exhibition setting, one is conscious of them as at least partially artificial, willed and worked out in advance by specific individuals. These junctures between the physical landscape, built space, cultural tradition and the singular acts of living people—acts which could be as dramatic as the choice of transnational migration, or as subtle as the mobility of a visitor's gaze—are what the exhibition seeks to make palpable, as signposts pointing toward the nature of experience in the social world. What shines through in this way is the question of how geography is made, and more broadly, of how the perception of human space is shaped— for and by its perceivers. These, perhaps, are the specifically artistic questions that can be debated at the exhibition and during the associated symposium.

The publication, with its greater facility for nomadism, seeks to prolong the chances of such debate in space and time, but also across the borders of language. It is an intercultural production in its own right. At the moment of assembling the English and Arabic texts and laying them out graphically for readers who will open and read the book at either end, the importance of positionality comes back at full force. With the elimination of a single beginning or end, the book itself takes on a multidirectional quality. Through its composition, its mix of narrative, documentary, imaginary and analytic elements, its design, its linguistic characteristics, the publication becomes a second, more portable territory of questioning and experimentation. It exists in a different temporality, not only because it lasts for years or even beyond a single lifetime, but also because it ties into scholarly debate with its timeless demand for the precise definition of concepts and for objective, quantified observation, all offered up to the test of political polemic. Yet in this case, not only do the artistic contributions continue to destabilize the conceptual and factual levels of the scholarly disciplines, but even more, the book has been made to bear traces of its process of production, through narratives that recount the fabrication of the works and the genesis of the project as a whole. Here again, what is at stake is the formation of perception, in every sense of the word. Indeed, the project emerges in part from a pedagogical practice, a non-traditional one in which students at once learn and occupy a place of potential equality, as artists, analysts and producers; and part of the book's intention is to serve as a basis for continuing theaters of learning and questioning, as well as continuing processes of production, in the expanded field of art reconceived as visual geography.

All of this has, of course, an urgency: the characteristic urgency of the present. The political issues of sub-Saharan transit migration tend to be framed in terms of the militarization of Europe's southern borders, the pressure that EU officials exert on North African states to act as a kind of advance frontier or barrier, the techniques and technologies of repression and

expulsion, and the upheavals that these migration processes bring to the Maghreb societies, which have become lands of both transit and settlement. To these important issues we can add three others, which deserve perhaps the most attention, and paradoxically are given the least.

The first is situated at the geopolitical level. What are the military, economic and ecological factors that contribute to the instability, or indeed, the unviability of African countrysides and cities, leaving increasing numbers of their residents little choice but to seek new lives elsewhere? These are often transnational issues, which can only be treated by interstate policy. The reality of a deeply and extensively connected world-system makes it imperative to ask first about shared solutions to shared problems, rather than believing that any one space can be defended against the ills that it helps to produce in another. Yet the mistaken belief that military and security measures can replace every kind of solidarity marks the new world order that has emerged from the events of September 11.

The second question has to do with matters of intercontinental political economy. Why is migration—and African migration in particular—so demonstrably stigmatized, when the profitability of entire sectors of the European economy depends on black labor, in the double sense of the phrase? The short-term electoral benefits to be gained from the increasingly blatant racism of certain European politicians is already extracting its inevitable toll in the forms of hypocrisy and social unconsciousness, conjoined in a stubborn inability or refusal to see the interdependencies of Europe and Africa. Yet those dependencies are destined to take on increasing importance as Europe's working population grows inexorably older. And the Maghreb, too, would have much to lose from policies that encourage a societal closure, rather than building on a great tradition of hospitality.

Finally, the third question, and the one on which we have laid the greatest emphasis in this book. What do the migrants themselves have to say about their own mobility, and how can their voices become part of a solution to what so many others have constructed as a problem? We are certain that, like any human being, those who have made the long, dangerous and supremely adventurous journey across the Sahara can only appear as fully autonomous subjects, as political subjects, when they are allowed to speak in their own right, on the basis of their own experience and in the context of their own struggles, rather than being treated as hordes of invaders, pitiful victims, anonymous statistics or political footballs to be tossed around before the crowd. What is less certain is whether the societies of Europe and the Maghreb will have ears to hear them. Both the exhibition and this book are dedicated to cultivating that very particular faculty of perception.

Ursula Biemann and Brian Holmes, 2006