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Between Myth and Fright. The Mediterranean as Conflict

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At a time when the migration crisis in the Mediterranean is only getting worse, violence and attacks are multiplying and the rise in xenophobia in European countries is seriously threatening their social coexistence, projects such as the exhibition "Between Myth and Fright. The Mediterranean as Conflict" seek to help us reflect on and question the commonplaces through the instruments provided by works of art and cultural creation. Thus, by listening to all sides, deciphering everyday racism and excluding attitudes, we will be able to build new relations and create a new Mediterranean Sea, in which there is room for everyone by understanding differences and respecting dissidence.

"Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror"
Rainer Maria Rilke

The great importance attributed to the Mediterranean is a constant feature in all the cultures that have originated and developed around it; its presence is decisive in the creation of culture and it marks the life of the people who live near it.[1] Trade, economic development, social and cultural relations, exchanges and travelling for pleasure have conditioned the history of this geographical area since time immemorial. The situation in the last century has been no different: there are very many experiences that in one way or another have extensively documented and recreated this natural space that is so meaningful from every point of view.

The various shores of the Mediterranean are close enough to facilitate intense contact between them, but at the same time sufficiently far apart to allow the development of different societies. Thus they are societies that receive the influence of their own land from the interior and also the influence of the other shore of the sea. Similarly, the close contact between its coasts has always had a transforming effect on these societies; therefore, for thousands of years, the Mediterranean has been one of the geographical areas with most vigorous interaction between different peoples and it has played a fundamental part in the development of civilisation, which has

1. This article was published in the catalogue of the exhibition "Between Myth and Fright. The Mediterranean as Conflict", presented at IVAM from February to June 2016. On 16 June, the seminar under the same title also took place with the participation of the IEMed.

taken very different forms in different ages of history.

From the middle of the nineteenth century until well into the twentieth, what predominated in the Western world was a pleasant, light, agreeable view of an area understood as a region in which it was possible to give expression to a great number of dreams and desires, but in the middle of the last century the majority view changed significantly and there was a shift from a mythical place where (almost) everything was possible to one where what predominates is fear, incomprehension, death and fright. What was previously an area of free transit and encounter is now a boundary where the nearest neighbours are not welcome. The aim of this exhibition is to try to understand, through the work of artists on different sides of the Mediterranean, how this profound change has taken place. However, in view of what is happening now, perhaps the poet Rainer Maria Rilke was right when he said in Trieste that "Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror."

Myth

"My home shall be open for the sun and the wind and the voices of the sea – like a Greek temple – and light, light, light everywhere!"

Axel Munthe

One of the fundamental elements that sustained the European mythification of life in the Mediterranean for years was the journeys that artists, intellectuals and the wealthy elite undertook in search of the "lost paradise". Journeys to discover a different, unknown world, strange and mysterious, far from what had previously been their day-to-day experiences. Adventures that took the form of a flight that presented, on the one hand, the elimination of aims and a search for principles that they did not find in their own surroundings; and, on the other, the magic of the faraway and the exceptional transfigured into a region of desire, a desire that presented itself as incomplete and unrealisable, because it constantly referred to an unsatisfied otherness.

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In the eighteenth century there was the beginning of the cultural tradition known as the Grand Tour, according to which the education of a young aristocrat was not considered complete without a visit to the places of antiquity to contemplate, in situ, the beauty of the Greek and Roman heritage. It was believed that the Mediterranean was a source of goodness of two kinds: physical, because it healed the body, and mental, because its works of art brought about positive moral effects and improved people's minds. In the nineteenth century, therefore, when society in the north of Europe was undergoing profound social and economic changes, many artists and intellectuals looked towards the south in search of the lost Arcadia, for which the influence of Goethe's book *Italienische Reise* (Italian Journey, 1816) was fundamental. They sought a bucolic landscape, an idyllic place of eternal spring with a sun-soaked countryside dotted with classical ruins among which still dwelt simple people who continued to live in accordance with the laws decreed by nature. The journey was an initiatory one of regeneration in which each visitor had a different reason for travelling to the south, such as the contemplation of classical ruins, the beneficial effects of the sun or a search for forbidden love.

The economic development and industrialisation of the Western world were accompanied

by a substantial rural exodus and a very considerable increase in populations in the big cities, which created serious public health problems and caused a great spread of diseases such as tuberculosis and alcoholism. Great importance was attached to physical health in that period, and there was a spread of a view of health understood as a search for balance in terms of form (beauty) and organs (internal functionality), the aim of which was to try to regenerate, physically and mentally, a society that was suffering from the evils of the process of industrialisation. The concern for hygiene and physical development was much influenced (in the late nineteenth century) by Utopian Idealism movements, based on the promotion of hygiene and the prevention of illness. As a reaction to the most disastrous effects of the Industrial Revolution, those movements foresaw a return to nature and to what was "natural" (i.e., life in the open air, physical culture, nudity, vegetarian diet, etc.), which would lead to a restoration of the original harmony of mankind with the world of nature, as can be seen in Franz Roth's photograph *Untitled*, 1928. Since the middle of the nineteenth century the south of Europe had become an enormous sanatorium for travellers who came to be cured of lung diseases.

One of the most famous people who made that journey was the Prussian photographer Wilhelm von Gloeden (1856-1931), who in 1878, suffering from tuberculosis, came to Taormina, a Sicilian town of an almost feudal nature in a fierce natural setting, close to the volcano Etna and inhabited by rustic country folk. There Gloeden found a paradise to his taste, and there he tried to revive classical antiquity through his pictures. Thus rough and grubby young fishermen, muleteers or apprentices were transmuted by his camera into handsome shepherds, bucolic fauns or Homeric heroes with laurel leaves on their head; adolescents careless of their youth posed, idly triumphant, in an indolence set in patios surrounded by columns and jars or lying on leopard skins playing the flute, with the aim of expressing an erotic/aesthetic ideal (based on Winckelmann's theories) that referred to a remote heroic past, to a Greece that had never existed. Wilhelm von Gloeden triumphed in his aim of propagating a view of a Golden Age prior to our civilisation. His works are veritable *tableaux vivants*, reproductions of folk customs and stories in which he composed representations of an idealised archaic society without social disparities. In those youngsters Gloeden saw the descendants of the Greeks, a noble race rooted in nature. We might say that his pictures were a mixture of the Greek worship of vegetation, Roman statuary and the "ancient nude" practised in the Schools of Fine Arts, and ethnological studies or poetic evocations of antiquity. Pictoricist photography that demonstrated the pure beauty of an adolescent with an androgynous body in a perfect world (*Boy's Head*, 1890-1905, page 23).

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It was the German art critic and historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), with his book *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (The History of Art in Antiquity, 1764), who constructed a solid discourse in which he defended the view that to achieve aesthetic perfection it was necessary to imitate the Greeks. Winckelmann understood that Greek painting and sculpture were the perfect representation of ideal beauty, and that they had attained such a level of mastery that it was insuperable, and therefore he considered that modern artists should not only appreciate their perfection and study it but also copy and imitate it. For him the classical sculptures were not only objects to be contemplated with

delight but also a subjectivity with which the viewer could identify, an ideal ego, a mythical image of perfectly integrated behaviour that could project the viewer outside his problematicised, inadequate self. The ideal male nude thus became a record full of power and desire; in fact, in his analyses the image of the male in ancient Greece was the true representation of the sovereignty of the subject, of his freedom. With him, the fascination of the image of a beautifully formed nude male body gave rise to a modern narcissistic vision in the broadest sense of the term. If we wish to know his ideal of beauty we have only to read the description he gives of the *Belvedere Torso*, in which he says: "The artist has presented in this Hercules a lofty ideal of a body elevated above nature, and a shape at the full development of manhood, such as it might be if exalted to the degree of divine sufficiency."

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One of the artists most extensively influenced by these ideas was the German photographer Herbert List (1903-1975, see page 15). Like various Central European artists and writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he too travelled to the south of Europe in search of his Arcadia, a tranquil, beautiful and sexually permissive Arcadia. Attracted by the ruins of Olympia and Delphos, he adopted Shelley's cry of "We are all Greeks", acknowledging spiritual indebtedness to the land of Greece. List was fascinated by the art of antiquity and wished to be able to create a synthesis of it with modernity. With this aim he made very varied photographs of heroes of antiquity which speak to us of the passing of time, of another age and civilisation, with evident nostalgia. We can see a clear expression of this in his attempts to endow his models with the characteristics of prototypes of timeless beauty (*In the Morning II*, Athens, 1936), as if they were modern gods, availing himself of all kinds of accessories for this purpose, such as columns, Attic masks or fanciful lighting.

In many of his photographs in which there are statues, or fragments of them, made of marble, the viewer may even confuse that material with human flesh and not be able to distinguish one from the other. List's ingenious treatment of light allows him to deploy a considerable range of contrasts between veiling and transparency of shadows, creating an atmosphere full of symbology in which light imbues and modulates buildings and sculptures in such a way as to bring about the appearance of a visionary, almost supernatural presence (*Cella and Portico of the Parthenon*, Athens, 1937). The boys in Herbert List's photographs find support in their classical ancestors to suggest to us that the ancient gods and heroes are gazing at us through these contemporary ephebes. He tended to present the male body as if it were an ancient sculpture and vice versa, "endowing with life" the marble sculptures he photographed in Greece, an oneiric view that converted his human models into myths of stony sculptural form. As the French writer and photographer Michel Tournier noted, Herbert List was a refined aesthete who enjoyed an aristocratic narcissism and who was enamoured of the archaeology of antiquity in a kind of joyous celebration of stones and landscapes and the naked bodies of young Greeks.

In parallel with this fascination with the south of Europe, for the travellers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Arab world (in this case, North Africa) was a genuine source of suggestions and discoveries. A world where it was possible to dream that one was in a marvellous land, a strange, foreign world that revealed itself as an object of fascination,

a sensual, unreal world tinged with fantasy and exoticism converted into a construction of the imagination (Nadar's *Sarah Bernhardt*, 1860). Between 1798 and 1914 North Africa was a region that exercised a significant attraction in European countries because of the belief that it could satisfy the urgent desire of Europeans for exotic experiences, exoticism understood as an artistic exploration of territories and eras in which the imagination could fly freely because, ranging far beyond the restrictive boundaries that marked European society at the time.

Initially, artists visited those countries for very specific reasons such as making topographic drawings or recording chronicles of military expeditions. However, as Western domination was gradually consolidated, routes and destinations were established that favoured the presence of substantial tourism. For this purpose, the countries of the Maghreb were in a special situation. Algeria was quickly converted into a French "province" and, as a result of its proximity to Spain and its cultural links with our country, Morocco was the object of many frequent visits. They were confined, at first, to Tangier, where a large population of Jewish origin offered a warm welcome to Western travellers, and later extended to the whole country. Despite these facilities, most of the Western travellers and tourists were not capable or desirous of participating in local life in those countries at any time; the language barrier and cultural and religious differences were solid obstacles that made the visits short in time and superficial in terms of knowledge.

We have to admit that among Westerners there was a fairly generalised hostile opinion which condemned many of the forms of life in those countries, considering them primitive and rather savage. The conception of North Africa as an exotic region constituted a powerful focus of attention in the fascination with which Westerners viewed women in those cultures. They were perceived as strange, enigmatic creatures who covered their bodies with veils and lived apart from the gaze of men in inaccessible places, such as harems or baths, which aroused the imagination and desires of Western travellers.

Wihelm von Gloeden, Tête de jeune garçon (Musée d'Orsay, Paris).

In this regard it is interesting to see the photographs taken by the Hungarian photographer Nicolás Müller (1913-2000, see page 17), who lived in the city of Tangier for nine years when it was part of the Spanish protectorate. His series on Morocco in the 1940s brings out some of the aspects indicated here, an unknown world in which the whole environment is bathed in an excess of sunlight which conditions the way of seeing and the composition of his photographs, deliberately seeking the contrast and intensity of chiaroscuro. The whitewashed Arab houses, the women in their "haiks" with their face covered, the souk, the moneychangers sitting in the middle of the street, the kasbah with its

narrow, winding streets and the intense heat made up an enigmatic Tangier full of out-of-the-way places for a photographer from a cold country in the north of Europe to discover. In his pictures of groups (*La charla* [The Chat], 1943) and of crowds (*Espectadores* [Spectators], Tangier, 1942) he focuses on this more typical view of an ancient country, stuck in time and remote from modernity. Djellabas, veils and slippers are the garments worn by the figures clustered in tiny streets or in souks (*Mercados de esteras* [Mat Markets], 1944) in which the shapes of the women merge with the bundles of goods that are exhibited. Müller lived in that city for several years, at an extraordinarily convulsive time for Europe, yet he never took a real interest in it or established relationships with its inhabitants.

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The fascination with the Arab world was also shown in the work of various Valencian artists, for example, in José Benlliure's painting *Escena de Tánger (Recitando el Corán)* (Scene in Tangier [Reciting the Koran]), 1897, and also in several canvases by Antonio Muñoz Degraín (1840-1924) resulting from the journey that he made along the part of the Mediterranean that includes Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. One of the most outstanding of those paintings is *El Líbano desde el mar* (Lebanon from the Sea), 1909, a vibrantly coloured painting with an intense range of different hues (contrasting yellows, blues and oranges) in which we see a rough natural setting formed by two parallel lines of mountains and a range of higher, snowy mountains in the background. In the foreground, two strange boats with prows adorned with fantastical animals are advancing by means of sails and oars in the middle of a calm, pleasant sea full of other small boats with colourful sails unfurled. That Mediterranean Sea, with its facets of fantasy and mystery on the one hand and of pleasantness and peacefulness on the other, became a central object of attention for many artists in the mid nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they eagerly discovered it and represented it in a vibrant, lively way.

Those painters showed pleasant, relaxed, idealised bucolic scenes in which nature was the central subject, represented in such a way that it won favour with viewers and became one of the favourite genres of the public in those years. The interest in landscape as a pure, fundamental element ran parallel to the development of genre painting, pictures in which what predominated was a harmonious, tranquil, pleasant view of a place and in which there was a focus on the beauty of the surroundings, with a lyrical tone in which there was no room for any kind of stridency. The landscapes are generally ordinary scenes in which we perceive an almost idyllic tranquillity in a clear, balanced natural setting. As the scenes were aimed mainly at the viewer's senses, the artists chose a nervous, changing, light, gestural style in which the important thing was to capture the many nuances produced by the sound of the water, the hues acquired by the natural setting and the voluptuousness brought about by the natural light. An aestheticist view in a sensual landscape.

In this context we can understand the presence in the exhibition of works such as *Anochecer en la escollera III* (Dusk on the Breakwater III), 1898-1900, by Ignacio Pinazo (1849-1916), which gives a rather Romantic view of a few people sitting on some rocks and gazing, entranced, at an infinite horizon made up of sea and sky, a horizontal composition in

a refined, synthetic setting in which there is no place for superfluous or anecdotal elements. Figures seated with their backs to the viewer, perhaps fishing, chatting, looking at the sea or just calmly letting the hours slip by. But at that moment of dusk when the sun is setting and there seems to be a glimpse of a boat on the horizon, the artist succeeds in transmitting a solid sensation of peace and a profound feeling of wellbeing (also accompanied by a certain anxiety) produced by the immensity of the sea. Similarly, in his painting *Ráfaga de viento* (Gust of Wind), 1904, Joaquín Sorolla (1863-1923) is able to create a volatile atmosphere in which the predominant sensation is the lightness, speed and dynamism produced by the wind (thrusting against the huge sail), and this becomes the central feature of the painting. In this work, with its strong contrasts of light, Sorolla recreates an everyday work scene in which the fishermen strive to perform their hard, strenuous tasks in perfect harmony with the boat and the water, as if they were engaged in a tranquil adventure in a boat on a bright, peaceful sea.

Some decades later, another Valencian painter, Francisco Lozano (1912-2000), approached the scenery of the Mediterranean beaches with serene, almost ascetic views in which the most insignificant detail of nature takes on great importance in the picture. In his paintings the beaches consist of a strip of sand with some very old boats (*Marina*, 1956) and with a boundless sea forming the horizon. We perceive a clean, sober scene reduced to essentials, in which Lozano shuns the more facile scenic aspects and opts for a representation of nature whose strength and power lies in its sobriety, a calm and somewhat timeless scene based on a world of poetic sensations. In the same period, the 1950s and 1960s, there were two other artists who were very successful in capturing that melancholy, poetic idea of a society closely linked to the sea, in black and white photographs that now remain as genuine social testimony of a very characteristic way of living and working. Both Gabriel Cualladó (1925-2003) and José Miguel de Miguel (1916-1988, see page 28) were privileged witnesses of a society that was beginning to change radically. The pictures that Cualladó took on the Malvarrosa beach in the late 1950s are very beautiful representations of the vestiges (*Sillas en la playa* [Chairs on the Beach], 1956, or *Heladero* [Ice Cream Seller], 1957) of an age that was finished but that was no less mythicised for all that. In the same period Miguel de Miguel captured some very different scenes of the ports of Cartagena, Valencia and Ibiza, in which nets, equipment and barges (*Joven pescador* [Young Fisherman], 1964) become objects with solid poetic cadences.

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In the exhibition there were also works by other artists (such as Bernard Plossu, Javier Campano, Diana Blok, Carlos Cánovas and Manuel Sonseca) who focus on a somewhat melancholy and quite mythicised view of what living on the shores of the Mediterranean meant. They are representations in which the presence of various boats entering or leaving a port in a limpid, majestic dusk, the recreation of pieces of fishing tackle placed on a wall as if they were strange sculptures or the representation of lines of the horizon in which the blue of the sea mingles and merges into the sky simply strengthen the belief that there is an ideal geographical region in which beauty and poetry are the central features of a placid existence in which there is an absence of any kind of social, political or economic conflict.

In this quick look at a group of paintings and photographs that helped to establish a very

distinctive way of seeing and understanding existence in the geographical region of the Mediterranean in the last century, we must not fail to mention the example of one of the great Spanish artists deeply rooted in the constituent elements that are understood to be characteristic of this area. I am referring to Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), and in the exhibition here, leaving aside his well-known landscapes and figures, we are showing two works that speak to us of significant aspects, such as courage, boldness, sacrifice and the fight against death (*Corrida de toros* [Bullfight], 1934) or friendship, affection and companionship between men (*Les lutteurs* [The Wrestlers], 1921), in order to understand the idiosyncrasies of the "Mediterranean" life that is so envied and desired.

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However, in contrast to those pleasant views that are scarcely critical of the events that make up daily life in the Mediterranean, in recent years the artist Rogelio López Cuenca (1959) has worked intensely on questioning the ideological representation of the social and political conflicts that the Mediterranean signifies as an area of encounter and difference. An oeuvre that focuses on many of the "forgotten" or marginalised issues related to what is signified by a relationship, or the sharing of life, with other cultures and other people who are different from us. In his work he questions the representation of "others" (in this particular case, Arabs) in order to think about the ways in which each moment and circumstance allow us to name, perceive or understand their visibility and enunciation. One of the central aims of his work is to try to destabilise normative representations and question any "truth" based on a belief in opinions or facts of a unitary, universal nature that undervalue the historical and social circumstances that made them possible.

For example, in the installation *Bazar o la Alhambra sobrevivió* (Bazaar or the Alhambra Survived), 1995-2001, López Cuenca works with objects and words (souvenirs, trinkets, T-shirts and so on) connected with the Alhambra and constructed by the hegemonic ideas. The purpose of all this is to destabilise the given signifier and suggest many other very different possibilities, attempting to dismantle any idea of normalisation of representations. Similarly, as the artist himself explained, the two videos that were shown in the exhibition of the project *El Paraíso de los Extraños* (The Paradise of the Strangers), 2000, "are intended to be read as a visual essay about the distribution of the visible – what is seen, what is shown, what is exhibited – or, to put it another way, who speaks, who has the right to speak… who looks and who is looked at: how the gaze depicts bodies, their place in the world." In *Haram* (Forbidden), there is a non-linear survey of the representation of women in Arab countries. Woman is seen as an object of desire and fear, signifying an image of a taboo, of a strange, unknown being who can only be concealing something suspicious or accursed. The other video, *Voyage en Orient* (Journey to the Orient), concentrates on an ironic, critical reading of the many stereotypes (customs and landscapes) that have fed the more biased views of the countries of North Africa. In the three iconographic representations López Cuenca shows – and deconstructs – the more clichéd aspects of a mythicised genre view (which still prevails today) so that we may question the partial, superficial nature of what we are seeing.

Fright

"I am not exotic I am exhausted"

Yto Barrada

The relatively small size of the Mediterranean and the number of towns turned towards it would lead one to suppose that it is an easy sea to cross, a fluid area of cultural and economic encounter, coexistence and exchange. However, its history (especially its most recent history) tells us of a difficult and complicated relationship between its various shores. The Mediterranean Sea has now become an arid boundary, a difficult barrier for thousands and thousands of migrants (from Sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb or the Middle East) who are desperately fleeing from their countries because of their grave economic problems and the unbearable conflicts, wars or political, religious and/or sexual persecutions perpetrated by the fanatical ideas, movements and regimes that are razing those territories and that are creating nothing but destruction and death.

In response to this dramatic situation the countries on the north coasts of the Mediterranean have preferred to look further north, turning their backs to the sea to which they belong culturally and historically, and instead of establishing solid links with North Africa and the Middle East they have bound their political and economic future to the European Union. This is causing a dramatic humanitarian situation which reaches terrible limits every day, and at the same time it is converting the Mediterranean into a militarised border ruled by constant surveillance, in which methodical violence is turned against those who dare to cross it even at the risk of their own lives. In fact, the number of people who die in the attempt is constantly growing in a way that is utterly unbearable.

We are speaking of a diaspora of desperate people that dare to set out on what is known as "the journey of hope", which was described as follows (in the newspaper of the German Pavilion at the *Biennale di Venezia* in 2015) by an Eritrean woman who dared to make the journey: "You flee from a country where you cannot always go to school. You run from a country where you cannot work as you wish. You escape from a country that does not allow you to be who you are. You run, despite knowing that this journey of hope could hold in store death, hunger, thirst, and harassment. But you run just the same, because it is better to die rather than accept all this, better to die trying to change your life rather than accept all that without doing anything."

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In this second part of the exhibition (called "fright") we are showing the work of a group of artists influenced by that "journey": men and women from very different countries (Algeria, Palestine, France, Lebanon, Switzerland, Morocco, Spain and Albania) who have in common the fact that they show the perceptible personal world of their culture related to their own experiences while at the same time making a deep reflection on aspects of deep social, cultural and political importance. They are all contemporary artists who in their individuality seek the best way to express their relationship with the environment, i.e., they exchange ideas and expound their experiences using various artistic languages connected with their identity, not with a restrictive or chauvinistic identity but with a somewhat plural and confused "identity" that articulates their personal and

Miguel de Miguel Ruiz, Achicando (IVAM).

social, local and global history, linked to their view of the relationship between Europe and North Africa or the Middle East.

It is in this sense that we must understand the quotation that begins the second part of this essay and that comes from one of the posters of Yto Barrada's series *A Modest Proposal*, 2012, which may give us an idea of the sensation of weariness felt by many of those artists when constant reference is made in their work to issues such as ethnicity or colonial history, often based on prejudices and distorted views, when the reality of those countries and of those artists' works is much more varied and complex than what people tend to suggest. Perhaps many of them are closer to the words of the writer Faïza Guène, of Algerian origin, when she writes "Like Rimbaud said, we will carry in us 'the sobs of the Infamous … the clamor of the Damned'," in order to give an account of their own personal experiences.

All the works shown here avoid facile discourses close to propaganda or to Manichean moral judgements, setting out from the material of everyday life, i.e., from all that is related to different ways of living, patterns of personal behaviour, memories of places, dreamed-of exiles, voluntary or forced migrations, war and

constant violence; which leads them to be more attentive to the social phenomena and problems of their original communities, thus revealing the (complex and contradictory) cultural discursive particularities without disdaining the aesthetic forms that express them.

One of the most significant examples of what we wish to say can be found in the projects that Ursula Biemann (Switzerland, 1955) is presenting in the exhibition. In them she analyses the Maghreb as an area of migration in transit in which she seeks to visualise the strategies of survival that people devise to get to Europe. The three videos by her that are featured here tell us about how the borders and the constant mobility between the two shores are understood as real geographies, or rather (according to Biemann herself and in agreement with Saskia Sassen) as *counter-geographies*, a visual way of tracing territorial and human relationships. "For me," she says, "*counter-geography* is the unauthorised, subversive practices that, for example, get round the regulation of the state and its borders. I am infinitely more interested in representing those irregular practices than the official geographies of power and control." Her interest is especially focused on counter-movements, on those unstable, precarious and often improvised practices, because for Ursula Biemann space is not to be understood as a fixed or immovable entity but as something relational and dynamic that affects not only spatial aspects but also matters connected with family and work.

We can find these ideas in the videos by her projected in *Between Myth and Fright*. In *Europlex*, 2003, she focuses on the border between Morocco and Spain and on the obscure paths created by the "domestics" (Moroccan women who dress up in various layers of clothing to pass objects from one country to the other), a series of trajectories on the territorial borders that originate a new economic, vital and cultural space parallel to the established one. In *X-Mission*, 2008, set in Palestine refugee camps in the Middle East, the refugee camp is understood (following Giorgio Agamben) as a space of exception that develops in a regime of extraterritoriality in a geographical area, such as the Middle East, which is totally perforated by extraterritorial spaces. And in *Sahara Chronicle*, 2006-09, which focuses on the trans-Saharan migratory systems that start at four geographical points (Agadez, Nouadhibou, Oujda and Laayoune), she offers a much broader view than usual about the motivation and social organisation of the migrants (the term "immigration" refers to a temporary individual movement, and the term "migration" to a large displacement of population), decriminalising their activities and divesting the images of urgency or drama. The three videos are extensive anthologies that show *counter-geographies* based on an accumulation of experiences of various social practices.

These extraterritorial areas exist at the borders, they are areas that have a doubly ambiguous nature because, on the one hand, in them there is the maximum institutional control of bodies and movements, but, on the other, they have another, much more unknown aspect in which there are a great many actions and experiences that are outside that control

These extraterritorial areas (which I mentioned earlier) exist at the borders, they are areas that have a doubly ambiguous nature because, on the one hand, in them there is the maximum institutional control of bodies and movements, but, on the other, they have another, much more unknown aspect in which there are a great many actions and experiences that are outside that control. We can find something of all this in the works of three artists in the exhibition. Xavier Arenós (Spain, 1968) is exhibiting his "map" *Schengen: El Castillo*

(Schengen: The Castle), 2007, in which, with clear references to Kafka, he speaks to us about the difference between being *intra muros* and being *extra muros*, inside or outside a system that is attempting to raise the highest walls to protect itself from the "barbarians"; but Arenós also calls our attention to what happens on the boundaries, at the borders, in those blank spaces, stretches of no-man's-land, which may provide cover for all that is most abject and undesirable, most sombre and violent (and therefore also most illegal and uncontrolled) on each shore. At the same time, the Algerian artist Zineddine Bessai (1985) is showing her cartographic "guide" *H-OUT*, 2010, a guide (more conceptual than geographical) that could be used by those who are trying to reach Europe by boat from North Africa. A "political" map in which everything has an ironic tone, with wordplay in the names given to the various countries and with the Mediterranean Sea converted into "The Mediterranean Death". The title is also a play on words, because *hout* means fish in Algerian and "out" in English means outside, beyond the borders; and so the *harragas* (the people who "burn" the borders, and also their papers and their past) say "I would prefer being devoured by fished rather than by worms," which means that it is better to die in the sea in the attempt to get out than to die on land. And with regard to that need to travel, to seek new paths in that "journey of hope," Bouchra Khalili (Morocco, 1975) has also created some wonderful subjective maps called *The Constellations*, 2011. In her maps she succeeds in making the viewer reflect on contemporary migrations, their geography, their history and the images that they construct. Eight maps that tell us about eight journeys made by migrants between South and North, crossing the Mediterranean, making their way to another country and beginning their exile. We see the names of towns in various continents set against an intense blue background and joined up by lines of dots that draw strange geometric figures, reminding us of the constellations that guide our journeys and our dreams.

This subtle, poetic way is also selected in her work by Yto Barrada (Morocco, 1971) to consider the question of "passage", passing from one shore to another, from one culture to another. "What I want to show," she says, "is the inscription of this stubborn urge for departure which marks a people"

This subtle, poetic way is also selected in her work by Yto Barrada (Morocco, 1971) to consider the question of "passage", passing from one shore to another, from one culture to another. "What I want to show," she says, "is the inscription of this stubborn urge for departure which marks a people" – this desire to make their way to the West, to the Eden of their dreams, which drives thousands of desperate people to try to cross the Mediterranean. For this reason, the photographs that make up her series *El Estrecho: Un viaje lleno de agujeros* (The Strait: A Journey Full of Holes), 1997-2004, are polarised around the waiting of the candidates for migration who are faced with the inflexible problems of the borders (the Strait of Gibraltar as an obligatory point of passage), images that emphasise the suspension of time, the dead calm that precedes the diaspora and, often, shipwreck. In the photograph *Corniche*, 1999, we see a boy wearing "Western clothes" (in the bottom part of the picture) who is holding a large model sailing boat, a symbol of the desire to travel to some destination; opposite him (in the upper part), a group of women wearing traditional clothes is preparing to cross the space that separates them from the boy. The viewpoint of the picture intensifies the distance between them and emphasises the asphalt space that mediates between them as a metaphor for

the sea and its dangers, something seen as being close but at the same time inaccessible.

In this series, Yto Barrada reflects on the state of anxious waiting that fills the air in the city of Tangier and that has gradually dominated the whole realm of personal and social relationships there. These pictures can be read as fragments of the language of the paralysis, pain and fragile resistance of people to a city and a country in which they have lost all interest. As she herself says, when you spend all your time on the edge, wanting to jump to the other side, you turn your back on what is happening around you. That is why the people in Yto Barrada's photographs are not looking at the viewer – an attempt to show a clear distancing from us, from themselves and from the political history of their own country (page 92). One has the sensation that they are posing for a theatre choreography in which the artist has clearly arranged the various elements, in which the scanty interaction between them shifts the focus entirely onto the city. Yto Barrada rejects any kind of dramatic atmosphere and concentrates on everyday situations in which seated figures watch and wait as dumb witnesses of a monotonous event (*Salle de billard* [Billiard Hall], n.d.), and she shows abandoned and impoverished areas and places in the city (*Terrain vague* [Waste Land] or *Quartier Saddam*, n.d.) which contrast seriously with the thrust and presence of tourism (another kind of mobility), which is only interested in "genuine ethnicity." Barrada's pictures reflect static situations that demand our attention and make us reflect about a reality that has nothing to do with the exoticism that imbues most of the views of those countries.

The city that appears in her photographs is Tangier (her parents' city), which has changed from being an international ghetto where many different cultures mingled (in the 1950s and later, writers such as Paul and Jane Bowles, Tennessee Williams, Jack Kerouac and Truman Capote converted this city into a melancholy, mythical place in which to seek refuge) and it has become a strange space in which all the dreams of abandoning the country are concentrated, a city in which thousands of hopes and illusions run aground and where mobility has acquired a unilateral meaning (only from North to South), creating a strange situation in which thousands of people wish to leave the city but cannot and therefore have to stay in it against their will, producing a strong feeling of absence, of not belonging to it or to any other place.

Zineb Sedira began making a series of works in which she explores the Algerian landscape in a very warm, personal way, but also, in these works, she does not avoid relating her personal experiences to historical or political aspects, concentrating especially on questions connected with the desire for mobility

We can also see that feeling – a mixture of melancholy and of being stranded, of being at the middle of a crossroads and having no way out – in the work of the artist Zineb Sedira (1962). Born in France to Algerian parents, she lives in London (which gives her a fairly intercultural view), and it was not until 2003, after the civil war had ended, that she travelled to Algeria to visit her parents. She then began making a series of works in which she explores the Algerian landscape in a very warm, personal way, but also, in these works, she does not avoid relating her personal experiences to historical or political aspects, concentrating especially on questions connected with the desire for mobility, the desire of many of the country's citizens to leave, as can be seen in the photographs that appear in the exhibition. In the diptych *Transitional Landscape*, 2006 (see cover), a man sitting with his back to us is looking calmly and silently at the sea that separates

him from the other shore and perhaps, too, from his dreams and desires – a calm sea that invites one to cross it; and in *The Lovers I*, 2008 (page 57), there are two old, rusty, useless ships which have been run aground near the beach and which are leaning against each other so as not to fall apart. These photographs help us to understand travelling not so much as a physical journey but as a mental (cultural, ideological) transit that goes much further than the kilometres that separate two countries or the distance that there may be between two shores. A rather melancholy idea that interweaves the urgent need to leave with the desire to remain, which often produces a very profound feeling of personal rootlessness, wherever you may be.

Adrian Paci reflects on the things that happen to Albanian migrants who make their way to Italy (or other countries) in search of social improvement. But their existences are always threatened by the uncertainty of survival and they often want to go back soon to their own town

A double feeling of belonging and of being a stranger which we can also find in the work of the artist Adrian Paci (Albania, 1969), when he reflects on the things that happen to Albanian migrants who make their way to Italy (or other countries) in search of social improvement. But their existences are always threatened by the uncertainty of survival and they often want to go back soon to their own town, so we might say that they are lives in transit, on return trips. For example, in his well-known video *Centro di Permanenza Temporanea* (Temporary Residence Centre), 2007 (page 18), the title of which refers to the Italian detention camps for illegal immigrants, Paci shows a large group of dark-skinned individuals (as he takes good care to show us in close-ups) wearing work clothes and walking in single file (some of the shots recall files of prisoners walking one behind the other), and they climb a metal staircase of the kind that is used for boarding planes. We see this group of workers (they are almost all men) waiting in full sunlight, with very serious attitudes and very attentive, anxious faces, on a runway where we can hear the sound of various aeroplanes. When the staircase is full and the workers stop moving, the viewer expects them to start entering the plane, which we suppose is out of camera shot. However, the surprise comes when we see in the next shot that there is no plane to board, that the workers are not going anywhere, they are just paralysed, because the staircase leads nowhere. They don't board and they don't go down again, they remain in limbo, while we see that other planes do land and take off, because life goes on around them.

In parallel, in the series of photographs entitled *Back Home*, 2001 (page 71), Paci focuses on his desire to delve into personal memory and emphasise the rootlessness of people who change their country, home and way of life but who continue to be profoundly linked to their history and their memories. Unlike what is done by many immigrants, who have themselves photographed in front of the most outstanding monuments in their new cities or beside the car that they have just bought, Adrian Paci turns the tables: he asked various Albanian families living in Milan for permission to photograph their homes in Albania, which he then used as background images in the photographs that he later took of the whole family in his studio, all together in front of a painted reproduction of their home in their native country. The contrast between the colour picture of the people in front of a painting (in grey or beige colours) that reproduces their home in their country of origin becomes a clear recollection of a past in which families used to have their photo taken in front of imagined or dreamed-of landscapes. It is a way of freezing time with austere images

Akram Zaatari, from "Nature Morte-Landscape" series (Galerie Sfeir Semler, Hamburg/Beirut).

that become metaphors of an existence that is in constant movement but that often does not lead us anywhere.

As with the other contemporary artists in *Between Myth and Fright*, the works of Taysir Batniji (Palestine, 1966) also draw inspiration from the geopolitical context that surrounds them, and from the everyday events and the many aspects of ordinary life that make up the artist's own existence. Thus, without being strictly autobiographical works, her pictures are closely linked to her experiences in occupied Palestine, constantly enveloped in an atmosphere of war or violence, and to the consequences derived from that situation: displacement, exile and being uprooted from her own culture. "Since my arrival in France at the end of 1994," she writes, "each trip back to Gaza raised a feeling of sadness and anguish in me, especially during the first days, as I noticed how much the situation had deteriorated during my absence. I felt frustrated and torn apart between my desire to stay and the wish to go away."

An anguish that she for now she has resolved by creating a disquieting work that evokes the conflicts that besiege her country. The series *Watchtowers*, 2008, comprises twenty-six black and white pictures that show twenty-six watchtowers that the Israeli army has built in the West Bank to monitor the Palestinian population. Strongly influenced by the work

that Bernd and Hilla Becher did from the 1950s onwards to document the post-industrial heritage of Europe, Batniji has created this series to establish a typology of the "observation points" that are restructuring the Palestinian landscape, creating a territory that is watched and occupied. In fact, because of the particularly dangerous conditions in those places and the fact that Batniji is not authorised to enter the West Bank, she delegated the taking of the pictures to a local photographer. So what we see is a series of not very well finished photographs (not very well framed, imperfectly lit, etc.), which distances them from the aesthetics of the Bechers (always impeccable in their work). On this occasion, as Batniji says, "No aestheticisation is possible. There is no way of understanding these military constructions as sculptural or even as heritage." Obviously, very similar architectural structures may have very different functions, depending on the sociopolitical contexts in which they are placed.

Taysir Batniji shows a feeling shared with many other artists who divide their life between their country of origin and their country of adoption. Perhaps that is why very many of their works refer to the impossibility of moving peacefully between borders, to the eternal waits at the constant checkpoints

Taysir Batniji shows a feeling shared with many other artists who divide their life between their country of origin and their country of adoption. Perhaps that is why very many of their works refer to the impossibility of moving peacefully between borders, to the eternal waits at the constant checkpoints, to the rootlessness of forced displacement, to the complex situation of always finding oneself between two cultures and two identities, to the reflection of a shadow that gradually becomes blurred as a metaphor of the disappearance resulting from not feeling at ease in any place. This is certainly a feeling shared with Mohamed Bourouissa (1978), an Algerian artist who lives in Paris. In his series *Périphérique* (Peripheral), 2007-08 (pages 69 and 96), he gives a very lucid dissection of life in the *banlieue* of Paris, taking as the subjects of his pictures people who have been set aside by the established power and who feel utterly excluded. Bourouissa shows us the power relationships established every day in the most impoverished districts on the outskirts of Paris, the daily drama of the suburbs where he himself grew up, and the completely peripheral status of its inhabitants (economically and socially on the edge, and physically on the other side of the Boulevard Périphérique that surrounds the city of Paris).

For example, in some of the pictures in the series, such as *La rencontre* (The Encounter) or *Le téléphone* (The Telephone), we can clearly see the constant powerful tension that exists between the various communities of migrants. With just a few glances (which is all he needs) we understand the conflicts between, on the one hand, youngsters from the Maghreb and, on the other, young blacks or young people from Eastern Europe. Each gesture or look or positioning of the body in the urban space is studied, composed in a premeditated way to obtain the desired result, for each picture needs the complicity of the models who are participating to compose this kind of contemporary *tableau vivant* in which the artist himself takes part as the director of the scene and at the same time as an onlooker. The entire series is first-class testimony, a delicate analysis that, without making any concessions to stereotypes or any kind of sensationalist violence, enables us to understand (going beyond the self-interested views of the media) the profound social and economic differences, the cultural values and the sensations of inclusion and exclusion that are experienced every day in the suburbs of the big European cities.

Mathieu Pernot (France, 1970) is another artist who is very concerned with themes such as exile, memory, identity and the cultural rootlessness of "invisible" people, those whom society has no time even to look at. His work keeps well away from sentimentality but shows the dull pain of incomprehension, absence and privation in daily experience degraded to unimagined limits. We can see this in his series of photographs *Les Migrants*, 2009, which shows a series of objects or shapes of various sizes which turn out be the bodies of Afghan migrants wrapped up in sheets, lying on the ground in the Jardin Villemin in Paris. No part of their bodies can be seen; they are so covered up, so isolated from the outside world, that at first we do not know whether they are dead bodies wrapped in shrouds or people sleeping covered in sheets. Their isolation from the world around them focuses on the evident presence of people who would like not to be seen, who would like to disappear, to avoid police harassment and the inquisitive gaze of the inhabitants of the area. They are ghostly presences, objects, shapes (rarely people), who appear late at night and disappear in the early morning, and whom nobody wishes to see or know. Their alienation is total and their invisibility (which Pernot tries to reverse) is absolute.

There is something similar in another of his most recent series, *Le feu* (Fire), 2013 (page 58). Nine of the pictures show the members of a gypsy family (some of whom had been photographed by the artist on another occasion) around a fire at night. Their faces, lit up by the reflection of the flames, are serious, concerned, or even somewhat distant or absent. We do not know what they are thinking about, where their mind is or in what worlds they are moving. Perhaps the other three photographs in the series, which show a caravan (which belonged to them) being destroyed by the flames of another, larger fire, give us some kind of clue. Especially if we remember the violent acts that took place in various towns in the south of France, in which all the belongings of various gypsy communities living on the outskirts of the towns were burned. Mathieu Pernot had already explored the margination and exile that gypsy people have suffered in the course of history in their own countries, and whereas people might argue, to conceal their contempt, that the Afghans come from a rather distant country, the gypsies are an integral part of European society, which should feel proud of the richness represented by its multiplicity of races, religions and customs.

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It is evident that there are many kinds of boundaries (social, economic and cultural). The ones that are easiest to see are those that are physically ostentatious (walls, fences, etc.). However, there are other, less showy barriers which are represented in a variety of ways, although they all have the same aim: the margination and criminalisation of those sectors that are thought to present a possible threat to the established status quo. In this context, it is interesting to see that two Spanish artists have worked on those other, equally aggressive "walls". One of them is Sergio Belinchón (1971), who, in his video *Avalancha* (Avalanche), 2008, shows us, ironically and with a touch of black humour, what might be an assault on a fence in the heart of Europe by the "real" Europeans, blond and white. It is curious, because the individuals are very different physically, but the attitudes, the sensations of fear, the expressions of pain and the grimaces

of anguish are very similar to those that we have seen in other "avalanches", such as the ones that took place not long ago in the cities of Ceuta and Melilla. For many people this video may be like a bad nightmare, like an experience that they would not wish to have even in their worst dreams; yet it does not matter much to them that this is a frequent experience for other people (admittedly, of another colour or language). A beautiful, pleasant landscape, completely green and covered with dense foliage, is suddenly invaded by some people who emerge from somewhere or other and use clumsy tools and equipment to make ladders to climb over the obstacle of a fence that blocks their advance. Young people and others not so young hurry to get over, there is no time to lose, they must not fail, it is more than their life is worth. The three screens that Belinchón uses in his video show us that the idyllic peace that presided over the landscape has been broken and the tranquillity has been upset by the dozens or hundreds of people emerging from the woodland. At the end of the three and a half minutes that the video lasts it seems that they have achieved their aim, although we cannot be sure, because they have got over the barrier but they enter another wood, very similar to the one from which they came, and we do not know what awaits them. For the time being, the ladders remain resting against the fence as dumb witnesses of the shame of a society (any society) capable of creating these boundaries.

The other Spanish artist who has worked on this theme is Montserrat Soto (1961), who made the series *Invernaderos* (Greenhouses), 2002-03, consisting of striking photographs that show ghostly places made of plastic in which thousands of workers, basically from North Africa, toil in the worst working conditions. They are huge cities erected on the boundaries, on the edge, outside the places where the locals live, constructions that keep multiplying periodically but never become part of their environment. Enormous artificial ghettos in which very high temperatures are reached, all for the sake of mass production. Soto's pictures are spectacular because of the profound solitude and extreme fragility that they show, metaphors of daily existence on the verge of collapse. A few small abandoned objects can be seen, scanty traces of human presence. It might have seemed that after they had got over the fences and the external walls the lives of the forced migrants would acquire more pleasant characteristics. But that is not what happens, as we see in Montserrat Soto's photographs; rootlessness, margination and exile continue to form part of their daily existence. All this also shapes and constructs their story, a story that seemingly is not worth telling or recording as such in any place, document or medium of communication.

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For this reason it is necessary to capture, archive, analyse and document the stories and memories of the forgotten and invisible individuals of each period and place; it is fundamental to have the ability to read the many images that are produced and be capable of discerning what is true in them in order to know the stories and memories of the different peoples and countries that would allow us to rebuild the future. In this regard it is fundamental to know the work of two artists of the same generation and from the same country, Lebanon, ravaged by two devastating civil wars, in 1975 and 1990. The first of them, Walid Raad (1967), created (in collaboration with other artists and architects) a project called The Atlas Group, which has been performing outstanding work of research and investigation on these issues since the early 1990s. This

aim is pursued by means of the deliberate appropriation of many sources, such as news reports, photographs, films, archives and so on, and using fragments from them in numerous projects that seek to analyse Beirut's political past (using the city itself as subject, setting, character and plot) and to try to understand the historical mechanisms that have given rise to the different social constructions, and the role of contemporary art in challenging and subverting them.

We can see this series of mingled aspects in his work *My Neck Is Thinner than a Hair*, 1996-2001, consisting of a hundred black and white photographs, apparently obtained from the collection of a certain Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, who turned out to be a fictitious Lebanese historian. This series of documents that tells us about the deluge of car bombs that exploded in Lebanon between 1975 and 1991 shows us pictures of the engines of the cars (the only part that remained intact), which had been thrown hundreds of metres from the place of the detonation, and it tells us how journalists strove and competed with each other to be the first to find and photograph them.

The Atlas Group set out from the idea of considering history as a fluid stream that is constantly being formed, rather than as something fixed or static. The group works on the narrow line between "real" facts or events and fiction, replacing a compact, unitary view of events with one understood as a fragmented assemblage. With this aim, they do not hesitate to recover and archive information and documents about apparently ordinary everyday situations that nevertheless constitute the basis of the memory of a city or a country. One example is the series *Missing Lebanese Wars*, 1996-2002, consisting of twenty-one photographs that show the results of bets on Sunday horse races. However, what we see is not the names of the winners of the races but the margin of error of the photo-finish of the races printed in the newspapers the following day. This work focuses on the professional activity of historians and the decisive role of the media in the manipulation of photographic images. The Atlas Group is very interested in the mechanisms of transformation of news reports in historical narrative, in reflecting on how, on numerous occasions, what is called history is a narrative fabricated for the interests of certain sectors that do not hesitate to falsify many written or visual documents or to make others disappear, empowering oblivion or collective amnesia about certain events.

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The artist Akram Zaatari (1966) also explores documentary practices in order to see how they show their reliability in the field of history and memory. However, unlike other contemporary Lebanese artists such as Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige or Walid Raad in the Atlas Group, Zaatari does not invent fictitious characters for his projects; on the contrary, his works are products of a long process of documentation and conversation with real witnesses of various events, who offer solid personal testimony. Without ever showing direct pictures of the war but instead the accounts of those who experienced it, Zaatari becomes an eloquent narrator who challenges the notions of representation and memory in order to review the contemporary history of Lebanon and express both personal and collective memory, providing alternative readings or experiences different from the common ones, by means of subjective views of the people involved together

with more objective facts. Thus, in his video *Letter to Samir*, 2008, he shows us the communication that was established between various Palestinian political prisoners imprisoned in Israel and their families. They are letters written in tiny writing on very thin sheets of paper and wrapped up in layers of plastic or cellophane so that they are pill-shaped and can be transported outside the prisons. The capsules were often exchanged by means of kisses on the mouth between the prisoners and their relatives, which enabled them to pass them from one to another hidden beneath the tongue.

In his projects Akram Zaatari poses the fundamental question of who writes history and how its various "truths" are disseminated by the production and circulation of images, especially in a country such as Lebanon that is seeking its identity after a truly convulsive period

In his projects Akram Zaatari poses the fundamental question of who writes history and how its various "truths" are disseminated by the production and circulation of images, especially in a country such as Lebanon that is seeking its identity after a truly convulsive period. And in that search he encourages us to become directly involved in the series of problematic contradictions bound up in the violence, wars and hatred that are devastating the country. In his video *Nature morte* (Still Life), 2008 (page 33), we find a contrast between two people of different ages (one older and the other younger) who have different attitudes to the war and the occupation of part of their country. It is a silent film that does not try to explain or give easy solutions, but rather to describe the grave crisis in Lebanon and, specifically, the present occupation of the area known as the Shebaa farms, a very narrow strip of territory situated between Lebanon, the Golan Heights and Israel. A place occupied by the Israeli army in the 1967-73 war which still remains under its control. The video focuses on the two people, who look at each other, interact and "talk" silently about what should be done with regard to resistance to the shameful occupation. However, as we can see, there are no clear or simple answers, and at the end of the video we are left not with certainties but rather with a series of unanswered questions. Should arms be used in these circumstances? What relationship is there between the two men? Why does it seem to be so affectionate?

Complex questions, contradictory sensations, hopes cut short, heated attitudes, convulsive times … these are the aspects that now, at the start of the twenty-first century, preside over the relationships between the various peoples and countries that surround us, and that give life to the Mediterranean Sea. However, this is no time to remain indifferent and on the edge, nor is it a time to avoid taking part or acting one way or another. As Akram Zaatari explains, "I learned from Godard that we are not commentators on conflicts but also part of them."