

Grasping Borders, Understanding Territories: Artists-Researches Facing their Subject.

Marko Tocilovac

How can we understand what is real? This simple and ambitious question is at the heart of the issues many artists and social science researchers face. The exhibition *De liens et d'exils* provides answers by questioning the relationships between human beings and the landscapes we create. The seven participating artists put forward their viewpoints, share their experiences and techniques and offer original and promising leads to address the relationship between links and exiles. Two artists specifically address spatialized political objects – borders and territories. Randa Maroufi, with her film *Ceuta's Gate*, offers a reflection on the circulation of women, men and goods through a terrestrial border between Morocco and Spain. Similarly, with his project *Al Amakine, une cartographie des vies invisibles*, Abdessamad El Montassir deals with the collective construction of a historical memory of the Sahara in southwestern Morocco.

These themes have deep connections with my own work and research. As an anthropologist and specialist in contemporary borders, issues relating to the State, transnational flows and citizenship, I similarly share an interest in the political construction of space. In my two main ethnographic surveys, at the borders between Mexico and United States, and between Spain and Morocco, I lead a study on the political policies of neighbouring counties. By specifically questioning the players in these configurations, I attempt to understand these landscapes in their symbolic and tangible dimensions – what they are, what they represent, what they do. Through their research, Randa Maroufi and Abdessamad El Montassir also investigate territories, their limits, and the different ways mankind has of developing these themes. Beyond these things we have in common, we also share a way of confronting the reality we want to examine. Ethnographic work, which is at the heart of an anthropologist's job, implies meticulous and lengthy field investigations.

When Abdessamad El Montassir is off collecting accounts, intangible archives and micro-stories from the Sahara in southwestern Morocco, he immerses himself in a world he has taken the time to examine. Randa Maroufi has chosen to observe and understand the workings of the border crossing in Ceuta – the dynamics that govern this territory and the variety of its players. These approaches are not free from difficulty or risk; in their investigations, I see the same problems that I have to face. Thus, at the Mexican-American border, the US border patrol's wariness forced me to find strategies to escape the control they were attempting to exert on my work. The simple fact of my presence in this sensitive site arose suspicion and inquiries. It was only over time, and by constantly negotiating with the authorities, that I was able to begin to carve out a place for myself. Randa Maroufi also faced similar constraints. In Ceuta, she was stopped by both the Spanish *Guardia Civil* and the Royal Moroccan Gendarmerie who monitored and questioned her. She had to be

cunning and patient in order to assimilate this border area and to be accepted by its inhabitants. On a different note, Abdessamad El Montassir had to cope with the omnipresent political tension unique to the Sahraoui territory. By depoliticising his own remarks as well as those of the subjects of his investigations, he was able to legitimise his approach to Moroccan authorities. By navigating the inherent pitfalls of field research, these two artists, both intimately linked to the world they described, enlisted a methodology which enabled them to generate this distanced perspective so dear to social sciences. One of the original features of their artistic approach stems from this gaze on what is tangible and how it is recreated. They use fiction, each in their own way, to depict the reality they are describing. In *Al Amakine*, mythical narratives, poems, and tales of the Sahraoui form the backbone of the story.

By deliberately avoiding deconstructing or contextualising these narratives, Abdessamad El Montassir lets them perpetuate the storyline of a work where fiction and reality are interwoven. The artistic experimentation in *Ceuta's Gate* offers an alternative methodology. It is indeed a reconstitution, in a studio, of the practices observed at the border. Treating the border crossing like a theatre stage, Randa Maroufi directs the actors to reenact everyday gestures, postures, and attitudes as faithfully as possible. This fictional documentary describes a certain reality which, now choreographed, has become clear and explicit. In anthropology, the use of fiction is not uncommon. We rely on it for studying mythical tales, of course, but it can also be useful to help depict complex situations where a plethora of different experiences are intertwined. It is, in fact, an effective way of synthesising stories and taking responsibility for our inevitable interpretation of reality by highlighting the traits, characteristics and particularities which interest us.

The two artists have thus produced a thorough study on the ways of appropriating political spaces. Each artist has aimed to overcome the official representations of the territories, of which the State claims monopoly control, by giving a voice to the people who live within these borders, who shape and construct them every day. In the multidisciplinary scope of border studies – within which my research falls – many of us address the “spectacularisation” of borders. When, for example, an international border is materialised by imposing border barriers, its symbolic effectiveness is forcefully put into question. Borders thus produce a continuous show within which the State depicts the sovereignty it exerts on a territory. This strong visual is used to serve a multitude of goals, sometimes contradictory, aimed at specific audiences. It also signifies a State's determination to convey a certain narrative on its control of a given space. Facing the omnipotence of the narratives of power and the invisibility of practices and experiences, Randa Maroufi and Abdessamad El Montassir create subjective political cartographies.

Abdessamad El Montassir chooses to showcase micro-stories which focus on conveying the traumas resulting from 1975 military conflict. He thus conveys the multiplicity of actors and points of view which have moulded this territory, all the while forming a genuine alternative framework to those generated by those in power. Randa Maroufi applies the same dynamic by showcasing cyanotypes from her project *Ceuta's Gate*. In this collection of subjective maps, printed as blueprints, players from the borders retrace their daily commutes, translating the artist's desire to give a material and symbolic value to these forgotten practices. Both artists show us that a strict analysis of state apparatus is not enough to give a

full account of the complexities and the exercised controls of a territory. Their work offers a way to perceive a reality based on the effects it produces. We can find a comparable approach in the scientific study of borders, where solely the experiences of the migrants who cross them are able to reveal the diversity, discontinuity and profound nature of the border system. Raised to the level of more official representations – whether historical or geographical – these subjective political cartographies suggest focusing our investigations on lived experiences, and therefore participating in the creation of other images, other performances, which address the expected depictions of power.

Although artists and researchers don't often use the same tools, our work nevertheless has the common goal of decrypting a complex reality and bringing it to light. Surprisingly, we sometimes do share the same methods, challenges and ways of investigating. These similarities and differences make scientific and artistic perspectives complementary. Beyond the illustrative nature of a piece of art for research work or the theoretical framework which enables the artist to clarify his or her creation, these two approaches fuel one another and help collectively move towards a better understanding of what is real.

For the catalog *De Liens et d'Exils*, 2018