



Raw Land

How are artists rethinking documentary in North Africa?

By Morad Montazami



Zineb Sedira, *Haunted House*, 2006

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If we were to attempt to chart the photographic practices of the Maghreb region, it's unlikely that we'd end up with the expected map, divided into three neat slices of national territory: Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Rather, we'd have an opaque diagram, tangled with intertwined roadways, hybrid landscapes, and fragments of experience to be retraced. Following Roland Barthes's notion that "photography is unclassifiable," it seems that a desire to classify this region geographically or culturally would lead inevitably to colonialist or neo-Orientalist stereotypes. How, then, might we avoid simply filling the need for "counterrepresentations" in the face of clichés that still feed art fairs and platforms? How might we consider the "inactive" or undesignated frontiers, rather than the current boundaries inherited from colonizers—such as the border between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa?

Zineb Sedira (a Paris-born Algerian, now based in London) and Yto Barrada (a Paris-born Moroccan, living in New York and Tangier) are two prolific artists who are addressing the documentary image's spaces of redefinition. They find themselves at the juncture of postcolonial studies and an aesthetic of territorial, fluvial, geological, and meteorological edges—a political ecology in which the scars of living beings are as valid as those of a country road or of an entire ecosystem. Just as Tangier and Algiers lock eyes in a vast oceanic mirror, the figures looking out at the great sea in Barrada's 2003 triptych *Belvédère* seem to find their exact counterparts in Sedira's 2006 diptych *Transitional Landscape*, where a figure also contemplates the sea. An encounter of two Mediterranean dreamscapes? But this dream has become a nightmare—a sea cemetery—as the migration crisis accelerates.



Yto Barrada, *Ceuta Border, Illegally Crossing the Border into the Spanish Enclave of Ceuta, Tangier, 1999*
© the artist and courtesy Galerie Polaris, Paris

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There is another point of contact for these two artists—that of placemaking, of opening paths for a new generation of artists interested in inhabiting frontiers: of photography and film, sculpture and installation. Barrada is a cofounder, and director since 2006, of the Cinémathèque de Tanger, which has played a central role in the contemporary Arab art scene. In Algiers, in 2011, Sedira founded the Aria Artist Residency, which hosts artists from North Africa and around the world who are working across boundaries. Both ventures, as they plant the seeds of cultural development, have created new networks of practitioners, critics, and viewers in their cities through exhibitions, workshops, speaker series, and, at the Cinémathèque de Tanger, even a “viewing school” for children.

Long before the start of the 2000s, a new, medium-centered documentary photography began to emerge mainly in Morocco, less open to interdisciplinary hybridization yet symptomatic of a moment at which the photobook had a particular prestige and newness. We might cite, for example, the memorable photographs of Daoud Aoulad-Syad’s *Marocains* (1989) and Souad Guennoun’s *Les incendiaires* (2000), which had clear ties to the work of leading intellectuals and authors, such as Abdelkebir Khatibi and Zakya Daoud, respectively. Cultivating an alliance between street photography and metaphorical autobiography, these photographers were impacted by both travel literature and the haunting aura of “the decisive moment,” per Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank.



Wassim Ghazlani, *Postcards from Tunisia*, 2016
Courtesy the artist and Maison de l'Image, Tunis

Tangier is the most captivating of “incendiary” ports of call for Guennoun, who with her camera follows Morocco’s vagabond children, without home or family, delivered into the claws of the street. Its status as a “transitional city,” a limbo zone between two worlds, attracts photographers eager to try to capture its mystique. In the same way that one never “sees” New York but can only “re-see” it (because of its innumerable photographic and filmic representations), Tangier carries the sense of déjà vu that is characteristic of particularly photogenic cities, with its teeming medina, its hushed 1970s-vintage hotels, its cinemas and abandoned theaters with their ghostly marquees, the traces of the Beat Generation and of Jean Genet, who described Tangier as a “fabulous city ... the very symbol of treason.”

But the romantic myth of Tangier also warrants a more analytical gaze, as in the work of Barrada, which examines its zones of exclusion, its blind spots, its blank spaces. This task has been taken up by the new generation of Tangerine photographers, foremost among them Hicham Gardaf. Investigating the underside of urban development and the nonplaces of globalization, he seems almost to make a synthesis of photography that *tells* and photography that *analyzes*. For a bit, Gardaf manages to get us to “see” Tangier, finally. There is a connection here to Wassim Ghozlani’s 2016 series *Postcards from Tunisia*, which was featured at the 2016 iteration of Photomed, the annual festival of Mediterranean photography in Sanary-sur-Mer, France. Ghozlani’s antipostcards purport to show Tunisian tourist spots, but do so via mute images of nonevents: a deserted crossroads, a bottle on a shelf, a broken door, or a hostel where visitors pasted their snapshots to a wall. Whereas Gardaf takes great care in the portrayal of his characters—although their function is limited to inhabiting the landscape—Ghozlani often captures spaces devoid of human presence, evoking memories of photography’s earliest days.

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Hicham Benohoud, *La salle de classe*, 1994–2002

Courtesy the artist and Loft Art Gallery, Casablanca

These photographers' practices—which are linked more to a fabrication of “the real” than to the documentary tradition—have an instructive model in Hicham Benohoud's series *La salle de classe* (The classroom). In this long-haul project, undertaken in two stages between 1994 and 2002 when he was an art teacher in Marrakech, Benohoud used the confines of the classroom as a setting, placing his young students in situations that are incongruous to the point of surrealism. It is as if the artist were seeking to mimic the dynamics of domination that reverberate throughout the society that lies just outside the four walls. The metaphorical power of these images—and the ingenuity of the “sets” cobbled together from the accoutrements at hand in an art classroom—have brought *La salle de classe* much attention: it was exhibited at the 2014 Marrakech Biennale and acquired by the Marrakech Museum for Photography and Visual Arts and London's Tate Modern.

In addition to art fairs and museums, both crucial platforms, the development of photographic practices in Morocco can be credited to new exhibition and publishing ventures. Rabat's Kulte Gallery & Editions, by creating a proper artistic research platform, articulated through a residency program, has proved influential since it opened in 2013. Its 2014 publication *New Africa*, a groundbreaking overview of the continent's impulse for photography and video, perfectly illustrates founder Yasmina Naji's rethinking of preconceived national and cultural boundaries. “The development of photography not only as a tool for identity tracing but also a catalyst for identities in motion,” she says, “is what we hope to highlight in our program, as we also need to overcome the artificial boundary between so-called North Africa and the sub-Saharan territory.”



Carole Béniach, *maquillage rituel (rituel marocain)*, 2012
Courtesy the artist and Sous Les Étoiles Gallery, New York

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With a clear commitment to women artists, Kulte recently showcased the refinement and compelling irony with which Carolle Bénitah infuses her embroidered photographs, turning intimate memories and archives into mechanical mementos (for example, in *Le désert de Sodome*, 2016). Also confirming Morocco's step forward is Galerie 127 in Marrakech, the pioneering photography venue opened by Nathalie Locatelli in 2006. Locatelli's experience and undisputable expertise have allowed her to bring together established local photographers (Malik Nejmi, Aoulad-Syad, Benohoud) with emerging ones, such as Hicham Gardaf, but also foreigners (DaeSoo Kim, Denis Dailleux). These proactive gallery spaces have paved the path for newly established larger institutions, such as the Marrakech Museum for Photography and Visual Arts. (The latter is temporarily closed in anticipation of resettlement on a new site, after a highly promising two years.)

During the 1990s, the magazine *Revue Noire* helped lead the way for the boom of galleries and art spaces occurring in North Africa today. Published from 1991 to 2001, it was one of the first independent media outlets to offer African photography a distribution platform, showcasing its artistic direction and cosmopolitanism (with a focus that included everything from Abidjan, Kinshasa, Johannesburg, and Marrakech to New York, Tokyo, and beyond). Its Paris-based—and thus French-speaking—editors facilitated exchanges with the photographers of the Maghreb. It was a role that was all the more important at the time, as news agencies did not welcome Arab photographers as readily as they do today, and galleries and biennials had not yet absorbed new approaches to documentary.



Zied Ben Romdhane, *Site of phosphate processing, Redeyef, Tunisia, March 21, 2015*, from the series *West of Life*

Courtesy the artist

However, the Arab Spring of 2010–11 provided photography with a new role, accelerating the emergence of “citizen photojournalism”—by violating the long-standing taboo against photography in heavily controlled and supervised public spaces of the Maghreb countries. In Tunisia, a postrevolutionary generation of artists and photographers is only now beginning to take shape. Last year, the *Washington Post* published a series titled *West of Life* (2016) by Zied Ben Romdhane, realized in Tunisia’s Gafsa region. The project, which received an unanticipated level of attention, shows with exceptional accuracy the stigmas and other “scars” left by phosphate mines on inhabitants and workers, as on the landscape itself. It reveals not only the photographic talents of Ben Romdhane, but also his ingenuity in distributing his images on social media without passing through an agency or other intermediary.

Speaking to new forms of image distribution, the project *Cairo. Open City: New Testimonies from an Ongoing Revolution* began as an exhibition at the Museum für Photographie in Braunschweig, Germany, in 2012, and traveled across the country, as well as to a gallery in Dubai. Its catalog (2014), edited by Florian Ebner and Constanze Wicke, is an archive devoted to the double revolution—political and visual—that took place at Cairo’s Tahrir Square in 2011, including news and blog images, Flickr accounts, anonymous photographs, and works by artists such as Lara Baladi and Randa Shaath. The project shows that if indeed “photography is unclassifiable,” it must “organize” in order to better operate in the outsider zones of insurrectional imagery.

The overlap of photography’s hyperdistribution with the dizzying sociopolitics of an entire region augurs well for a very wide range of formats and platforms still to be invented. Through this acknowledgment of infinite particularities, focus shifts to the idiosyncratic, individual voice. In 2010, Zineb Sedira completed her video installation *Gardiennes d’images* (Image keepers), an investigation into the photographic work of Mohamed Kouaci, notably his epic experiences as a photographer during the Algerian War of Independence. What Sedira tells us through the work of Kouaci—more than half a century after his photographs were made—is that photography can no longer be defined simply as a “fine art,” nor as purely subjective evidence. In the Maghreb, at least, documentary-style and humanistic photography have given way to an art of investigation in which one author’s subjectivity calls out to those of others, seeking to join his or her solitude with the solitude of others.

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