

## **Transcript: Transmissions 5**

A Reader-in-Residence Conversation with Omar Berrada and Yassine Rachidi

### **KEYWORDS**

mohsen, sea, bottles, images, french, omar, exhibition, tunis, tunisia, finds, people, objects, installation, life, fragments, morocco, imagination, migrants, artist, film

### **SPEAKERS**

Omar Berrada, Yassine Rachidi, Laura Tibi

#### **Laura Tibi 00:07**

Welcome to "Transmissions," a podcast at the Blackwood Gallery at the University of Toronto Mississauga. This podcast begins by covering "Burning Glass, Reading Stone," a series of exhibitions across four lightboxes on the UTM campus running from September 2020 through June 2021. Despite the sunny weather, the campus continues to be empty as we push through another lockdown in Ontario. This one especially reminds us of the first lockdown, which took place around this time last year, urges us to reflect on how it has reconfigured our collective lives, making more apparent the social, economic and environmental disparities in our world. We can begin by acknowledging the land on which the University of Toronto Mississauga operates, acknowledging that this is stolen, exhausted, and occupied land, that has been inhabited, stewarded, and cared for by the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently the Mississaugas of the Credit River, and that it continues to be the meeting place and home to Indigenous people from across Turtle Island. This podcast forms one part of a Reader-in-Residence program featuring a reader and an artist in question-driven conversation. In this episode, Reader-in-Residence Omar Berrada will speak with Yassine Rachidi about his work presented in "Migratory Passages," part seven of the Blackwood's lightbox series. This series explores the politics of sea space and migration, while centering water as a life source, a lifeline, and a dangerous or potential threat. Yassine Rachidi is a Moroccan artist living and working between Montreal and the Maghreb region. His practice explores the threshold between fiction and reality, often working with immersive forms of narrative and storytelling, as they intersect with historical and sociopolitical discourse. And Omar Berrada is a New York based writer, translator, and curator, who works on the politics of translation, and intergenerational transmission. Omar is the author of "Clonal Hum," and has edited several volumes, including "Album: Cinémathèque de Tanger,," with Yto Barrada, and "The Africans," a book on migration and racial dynamics in Morocco. Omar is also the Director of the Dar al-Ma'mun Library, an artist residency in Marrakech. Without further ado, let's hear the conversation between Omar and Yassine.

**Omar Berrada** 02:36

Hello, my name is Omar. And I'm here with Yassine, who is a multi- disci- pli- pli- pli-nary artist. Hi Yassine. What is that? [in French] artiste, multi disci-, disciplinaire.

**Yassine Rachidi** 03:00

A multi di- di- di-disciplinaire artist, I think, is every "di-" is a medium, maybe. So, I work with words, I write texts. I work with images as well. And sounds—and I think I don't know how many "di- di- di-" you've seen? Well, I think there was maybe two or three.

**Omar Berrada** 03:23

Well, it was different. It was different between the French version and the English version. In the French version. It's the di- di- syllable that gets repeated, and in the English version, it's the pli- pli- syllable. So in English, you are a multi-discipli- pli- pli-nary, there are three of them.

**Yassine Rachidi** 03:39

Yeah, so I think the three of them is words, images, and sounds. And yeah, I think I try to build narratives. Moving on between those three mediums and trying to build immersive modes of storytelling. So it can be sounds, installations, fiction writing, collage in the streets, and films. So yeah, I think it's those three mediums. I'm evolving around—for the moment—maybe I'll have a di-di- next year [laughs].

**Omar Berrada** 04:16

So we'll try to get to this multiplicity maybe in a moment, but perhaps we should start by the work that is exhibited at Blackwood Gallery on campus in Toronto. And, it's a photograph, and maybe you can tell me something about it. I mean, it's called "Theme for the Cross," that may be one of my questions—is the title of the photograph. What I see on the photograph is the sea and the back of someone—there's more than one layer. I mean, there's a transparency going on, where you see the sea through the back of the person which occupies quite a big portion of the image. And then you also see boats.

**Yassine Rachidi** 05:11

Yeah, so maybe I'd like to, first and foremost, maybe thank the Blackwood Gallery, and Laura, who's the Educator-in-Residence and who made this conversation happen. And to thank you as well for accepting. And maybe if you have time, to discuss further on, I'd like to tell you how your work was related to my work on this project. But to put in context, the image—so the image is the back of Mohsen, the man I've encountered in Zarzis, and who's the main character of the "Lost In Transition" project. And on the image, as you said, there's a double exposure. So there's him watching the sea, and there's a raft, or something lost in the sea. The whole project was about his practice evolving about the notion of "harraga." In Arab "harraga" means—it comes from "harga,"

which means burning, which means fire. And it was—the whole project was about questing on the remaining of these fires happening in the sea. So that's what the the title of the project, is "Lost In Transition," is something that is lost between—in this case, Tunisia and Italy, and Zarzis and Lampedusa. And concerning the title of the image "Theme for the Cross," actually, it was just, Laura who asked me, do you have a title? And at the time, I was working on a little video for a friend who's doing music. And he was doing a music about migration. And he was looking for a visual. So I made a little video that never got published yet—maybe in a near future, who knows. And the title of the song was "Theme for the Cross." And I thought it was this notion of crossing, gazing at the sea, and Mohsen looking at the sea. And when you start investigating more on the character, on the project of "Lost In Transition," you'll see that it's not Mohsen was crossing, but this gaze he has at the sea, is like of a playground almost from working for 25 years. I mean, he stopped working back 25 years [ago]. And he's just wandering at the scene collecting objects. So for me, it was maybe more the gaze between a man and his—yeah, maybe a man in his garden. And yeah, that was what I tried to portray in the photo. And I think the gaze and the photo is also very important. Instead of having someone gazing at the camera, gazing at something else—at the sea for this case—and then the installation, the exhibition that was taking place in Tunis, there was a portrait of Mohsen watching the camera for three minutes. And on another wall, there was him watching the sea. And it was a two [double] projection of maybe five meters—so very big, very, very, very wide. And every three minutes, the two portraits would switch. So, for example, on your left, he's looking at the camera, so you feel like he's looking at you. And on the opposite wall on the right, you'll see him looking at the sea. So you have this kind of gaze where he gaze[s] at the camera. And on the other side, he gaze[s] at the sea—so gaze[s] at his back. And every three minutes, they were synchronized as he was switching positions—and this constant gaze was playing for the visitors visiting the exhibition.

**Omar Berrada** 08:59

Can you give maybe a little more context? I mean, you mentioned the "Lost In Transition," which is this project and exhibition you did in Tunis. Did you go there to do this exhibition? Did you go there for something else? How did you meet Mohsen?

**Yassine Rachidi** 09:20

Yeah, so back in 2019 I was—.

**Omar Berrada** 09:22

Because the exhibition "Lost In Transition" revolves around this character, this person and his work with what he finds on the shore around Zarzis in the south of Tunisia.

**Yassine Rachidi** 09:36

Yeah, so back in 2019, I was interning at a NGO in Monastir, let's say at the centre of Tunisia on the coast. And I was sent to Zarzis to actually interview a fisherman association about ecological issues. So they had ecological issues with I think, big factories exploiting salt, and throwing stuff in the sea—and they had to go, the little fishers had to go further in the sea. And some could afford, some not. So I was there to interview them. And then when I was interviewing them about this ecological issue, they just happened to tell me about, "oh, have you ever heard of Mohsen, and he's doing this work, which is ecological as well, but also linked to something social." And I found that the link was interesting that, someone who started you know, just taking stuff out of the sea—bottles, but also, I mean, a lot of plastic. He had the world record of 26,000 or 27,000 bottles collected out of the sea in six years. And I was really curious. I was, I found the man on Facebook, when I was in Zarzis, sent him a message, and he just answered, "Yes, come by this road, I'll be playing chess." And then I took the taxi, and then found a mosque where he told me to meet him, and then down [at] the mosque was a café. And it was like the countryside of Zarzis a bit. And then I met him, and some friends of him. And he took me to his museum. So, the museum of Mohsen is called the "Museum of the Memory of Sea and Man." And when you get inside, you understand that the museum is actually his garden. So he just lives behind. And he has maybe a 20 meter square garden where he collects bottles, raft[s], plastics, fossils as well, old rocks—because you know, Tunisia is really full of artifacts. And he does this installation, those clothes, those images are full of objects. And then he started telling me the stories of these objects, where they came from, where they could have possibly come from, yeah, and the installations as well. So we started discussing, and I stayed with him a few days. And then after came the idea to do an exhibition, and to just—rather than having my own thing in the exhibition, to just channel his garden to a place with more visibility, and it was Tunis. And we worked together for about a few months. And then after, I had a friend who came over, two friends actually, Amy, and Sasha. And Sasha, actually her work you can see it in the exhibition, she's exhibiting her work of a photo she took in the garden of Mohsen with an inscription by [inaudible], I think, and it's "why the sea is laughing?" which is a reference to a famous song, I think, or poem. And Amy, who worked with me on the exhibition, mostly on images, and Super-8 film. So we worked together, and we did an exhibition, maybe I can talk about the exhibition, if you want me to describe it, it was in Tunis, Medina, in the old Midhat. So Midhat in the Arab—in the Islamic world, maybe—is a place where you do wudu—ablutions—also before going to prayers, and there was this really nice place abandoned next to the Zaytuna Mosque in the middle of the Medina. And I was able to get a permit to do an exhibition there. So the exhibition was consisting of images of his garden, a portrait of him as I told you watching the scene, and the camera, and there was a big letter. So the whole project was about correspondences as well. With Amy, I met Amy who worked with me on the project. through letters—just through exchanging letters, we never met each other. The first time we met each other was in the airport. And Mohsen, to put this in context, which is also a paradox, is that Mohsen is a postman. So he is a postman, and then he turns into this guy retiring from the post office to collect letters from the sea, and letters in bottles. Then those 26,000 objects in six years, so maybe now it evolves to 100,000

bottles. There's 40 of them containing messages. So these messages—they were, some of them were from migrants in transition, some of them were from sailors, some of them were from sailors having difficulties, they had this German's boat in difficulty sending a bottle he collected and sent it to the German Embassy in Tunis. You had also lovers sending letters at the sea from Italy. You had—yeah lovers from Italy sending a bottle [lauhgs]. And, yeah, so you had those bottles with the messages, and all these objects he found, and what I tried to do in the exhibition was to not focus only on the bottles, but also on the objects, and to investigate the object as [inaudible] bottles thrown in the sea because they were full of narrative. And it was to underline this narrative and to bring them into shape. So there was the big installation in the Midhat that was a little room full of plastic bottles I collected from the Barbasha in Tunis. So Barbasha's in Tunis are people who collect bottles—maybe in Morocco, they have this thing as well, where they collect plastic and then they sell it. So I've accumulated maybe 100 kilos. And there was this sound installation of Mohsen telling stories of how he found the bottles, of how he channels those bottles into performances he does, sculptures he does. And people would come in and just sit into this like huge plastic bath of bottles and listen to him saying messages. So yeah, at the end, what was sad is that Mohsen could not come to Tunis, I tried to bring him telling him, "Mohsen please could you come and just, you know, see from your eyes the exhibition and maybe talk with the people because everyone is curious about your work." And he was hesitant, and he wanted to stay in Zarzis. So at the end, we got the idea with Amy to leave the people writing letters, and then bottling them in the little bath of plastic bottles. And then after collecting all the bottles and bringing them back to Mohsen, in Zarzis, telling them "look, you collect bottles from the sea, but now here's some bottles collected from Tunis." And it was a way to give back to Mohsen.

**Omar Berrada** 16:47

It's kind of fascinating that he didn't want to go there. It's kind of consistent in this kind of strange, paradoxical way with his character because he says you did a video with him, or around—in Zarzis that's called "Ya rayeh win tssafer?" And in it—I watched it earlier, and he says at some point, "I don't look for the objects, it is the objects that come to me." So in a way as though he was saying, "I don't go anywhere, you know, I just I wait for things I watch. I listen. And then these things accumulate around me in a way." So he didn't want to go to the exhibition. But the exhibition came back to him in some way.

**Yassine Rachidi** 17:36

Yeah, I think it was this thing, as well, as you mentioned it, but I think also the fact that he's—the thing I understood with Mohsen is that in his perception, he is doing something completely apolitical. And when he speaks about those things, he don't want to, I mean, he sees things happening at the sea. And he's trying to like, move out, maybe from the political side of it, because he see[s] that nothing is really changing. And he's mostly focusing on his practice as an artist. So I think, yeah, the idea of objects coming to him, Mohsen has this character named Boughmiga, and

Boughmiga is like an alter ego of him writing poems and doing sculptures and performances. I think he sees the universe as an entity speaking to him. When you go to the sea, you get these objects, every now and then, you feel like there's something speaking to you, I think, for 20 years when you receive those letters. And then further on, you'll see that Mohsen start[ed] building a dialogue with the sea. So rather than just having a monologue of receiving objects, I think at a certain time he started sending bottles as well. And I have with me a little letter—so he sent letters at the sea as well, which is fascinating is that people answer. So he'll go on a boat, send a bottle, and then people will answer—and I have one that I've kept with me. Maybe I can read it for you. [Omar: Go ahead, yes] So he, it's the sea bottle (bouteille a la mer). "Sea bottle #72, sent on the fourth of March, 2005 at two o'clock, wind direction northeast. So the sea memory collection is an ecological action initiated and suggested by Mohsen Lihidheb invites you to join this flashing post club to communicate with all the Mediterranean people over the borders, the languages, and ethno-theological particularities and of course, to ask for a better ecological and peaceful behaviour towards the sea, the earth and life. If you receive this message through the sea, the post, or the net and agree with this message, you can respond to be a member of this club, and then you can response to Mohsen Lihidheb, Museum of Cinema Recollection 4170 Zarzis, Tunisia." And it says, "If you're responding by fax, please print on this paper indicating the place where you found the sea bottle and the time. Thank you for your ecological interest and your warm shake-hand." And I think, you know, I really love this, "your warm shake hand," so I think he's looking for, you know, something warm from the sea. And this one that he showed me, it was found. So he sent it in 2005, it drifted for seven years, and in 2012, someone found it named Nourdine Houidi. And Saidi Haykel from the Sea of Benkako. I tried to do my research about this Sea of Benkako and never found it. But it's impressive, because you have the stamp and everything. So the guys have found the letter and sent it back to him.

**Omar Berrada 21:00**

There's something beautiful—I think I read it somewhere, or maybe I saw it, because there's a couple of kind of documentary-type videos on Mohsen on YouTube. And in one of them, he says, at some point, I started sending letters back to the sea, and he says, and I include with my notes inside the bottles, some dried food, like nuts, or things like that, just in case there are migrants stranded at sea, who need food and who might find it. So there's this kind of, you know, incredible—you know, the thoughtfulness or generosity, but also, I don't know, some kind of strange faith in what might happen.

**Yassine Rachidi 21:42**

Yeah, you know, I was watching this film, about Yves Klein—completely on the nothing to do with [this], and then he says, at some point in the life of an artist, the "why not?" is always a very decisive moment. And I think in the life of Mohsen the "why not?" is very decisive. Because, I mean, he finds objects he does sculptures that he puts on the shore, [Omar: You mean the land art?].

Yeah, he makes land art. When the waves come, or when the tide is getting higher, it just swell[s] back everything back to the sea. And I think he was always telling me that his relationship with the sea is like the relationship with nature that he's never tried to build something from nature, but maybe more within nature. So always following the cycle of things of giving, taking back. And I found that like, it's, I find it's a big proof of wisdom just to do your installation land art. And just to leave it like that, maybe not even taking a photo, I don't know. And then the tide[s] come and take back everything. So the intention behind it is what's interesting. So you don't do it to capture it. Maybe you do it as a therapeutical mean[s]. That's what I understood from his practice, I think.

**Omar Berrada** 23:04

Or as a way of learning to live with the environment, right, with the elements as they come. I mean, for me, it's like, it's really this practice of fragments, right? Because it's small things that he picks up, it's like—could be a rock, plastic bottles, shoes, you know, little jackets, you know, sometimes it's very tragic, because you can see, you know, that probably a child has died at sea, and what you find is little shoes or little jackets or something like that on the shore. And, but for me, it's like this idea of holding on to all those fragments; it's like a way of acknowledging or registering that there is something broken, you know, there is something broken with life as it is unfolding around the Mediterranean Sea—and has been for, you know, he's been doing this for 25 years, like since the 90s. So it's not a new practice. And—but—that he's like, and he's been doing it obsessively for all of these years as a way to maybe kind of insist or affirm that in these broken fragments, there is a world, that they make a world and that we can make things with that. They're not this is not just waste, it's traces of life, or something like that.

**Yassine Rachidi** 24:35

Yeah. I think definitely, and I think I'll link it to one of your favorite subject[s], maybe, [Ahmed] Bouanani. And it might seem like something really out of the subject, but I think, for example, in your work about Bouanani, I feel like when I've read your work about Bouanani. So, the topic of memory, but also fragments of something that is broken, the amnesia of trying to re-compos[e] those fragments. And I think it links to Mohsen's own work of maybe counter-geography, of trying to build—a mapping of these objects: where they came from, where they were going. And in his way to build these narratives, I think it's a better way for him to understand what is going on.

**Omar Berrada** 25:32

Ah, I had never—yeah, it's funny, because in thinking about Mohsen I didn't think about Bouanani at all—but maybe to put it in context for people who are listening, this is Ahmed Bouanani, who was a Moroccan writer and filmmaker, and artist who died about 10 years ago, and whom I've been working on a lot. He's somebody who had an important role within the avant gardes of Moroccan art making in the 60s and 70s., but who then kind of receded—he was censored, he had all sorts of difficulties, and then he was not so interested in the limelight. So he just retreated to his, you know,

his own private life, and, and so he only produced few things, a few films, mostly short, and a few books, mostly out of print. And so people thought that after a certain time he had stopped producing, but he just kept [...]. When he died, and when I started getting interested in his work and got in touch with his daughter, I realized that he had kept working throughout his life, he had just let go of the idea of going public with his work. He was doing it for himself and a few friends, as he liked to say. But we found almost 100 completed manuscripts that he had left behind when he died. So it's like this incredible accumulation of paper, you could imagine it as—it's not things he found so much, because—this is stuff he wrote. But to connect it to Mohsen, and this question of fragments—he was, Bouanani was obsessed, as somebody who had grown up under French colonization, he was born in '38. So when Morocco became independent in '56, he was 18. So all of his childhood and schooling was done under French colonization. And then he became an artist at a moment in a young, newly independent nation, let's say. And for him, one of the issues was what has happened to our memory during the decades that Morocco was a colony, like all of the cultural erasure, all of the oppression, all of the deaths, and all of that. And as a filmmaker, and as a writer, he was really obsessed with finding—first of all the material—the physical material, on which memory and history are inscribed, but also finding the right mode of telling the stories. And, one of his films called "Mémoire quatorze," Memory 14 is fascinating because he was trying to retell, in images, the history of the early, just before, and during the colonial period in Morocco. But he says that the only materials we have to tell that story are the images that were shot by the French. So, it's like what they left us, and it's us seen through their gaze. It's our story told through their eyes. And it's only—and also we don't have much access to those images. And actually, for the anecdote, most of, a lot of images he used to make that, are reels that he had found basically discarded on the street, like left on the street, because the French had built something called the Studios Souissi, which were film studios in Rabat that they left. After they left, they were still there, and then they were destroyed in, I think, the '60s. And so around '66 or so, he found all of these reels, all of this film, just that nobody was taking care of. Nobody was archiving it anywhere. It was just on the street and it was, you know, just going to be with trash. And he picked it up. So he had all of this photographic archive all of this film, all of this stuff that in the same way as Mohsen would pick up stuff in the sand or from the shore, he just picked it up in the street as these kinds of fragments of memory that nobody seemed to be interested in. And he would use them to try and tell stories.

### **Yassine Rachidi 30:03**

So my question would be regarding Mohsen, and Ahmed Bouanani, on the two sides, who lived different lives at a different time. What happens when those fragments, as you says, are lost or forgotten or unfindable? And, as I see Mohsen's work, I've understood that maybe one of those fragments are too fragmented—or too hard to reach—that's where maybe the fiction came in—the imaginary. You have a void maybe to fill in. And I think that sometimes imagination can fill this void and give a better—give much more justice to the reality than reality in itself. You know, the few



ideas I think are as overused as the ideas of reality. And I think there may be especially migration, when you see that statistics, numbers, articles, research, datas—all of those research they never—I feel like well, maybe I felt like at the time when doing the project and working in the middle of like NGOs in Tunis. In Tunis, you have multiples NGOs—NGOs, about all kinds of problems happening. And I felt like they were not giving justice to a phenomenon that had an ethical and emotional weight. And that imagination sometimes could give justice to this or could help me just channel the topic and not give answer, but maybe just ask questions that could lead to a possible better understanding of what's going on.

**Omar Berrada** 31:50

I think it's imagination and other things like imagination and a certain quality of attention maybe—a certain quality of listening—or because you know, there's more than just imagination in somebody's [inaudible], right? There's all the years that he spent doing it. There must be a reason for that. There is all the... I don't know, like a photograph, you said your work deals with sound also in a photograph is by nature silent, but one can still listen to photographs. So it's like looking at your picture "Theme for the Cross," I kept trying to hear sounds, to imagine things, that maybe Mohsen was hearing, or Mohsen was saying, or maybe we are coming from the sea. For Bouanani, the way he dealt with the fragments in composing his film of montage is imagination plus, poetry, I guess. He had those images shot by the French, he kind of re-edited them a different way to try and tell a different story—his own story, as he saw it—or the story of his people, as he saw it—a story of resistance to French invasion rather than a story of, you know, chaos that the French came to pacify or something like that. But what he added to—what he did that's super important is that he shutdown the French soundtrack, like their military type of music, and the voice over of the French commentator on, you know, this is what we're doing, this is the Morocco campaign. Those were images from the French actualité [...] Canada, or early 20th century newsreels. And what he put instead, is a different music, but also a poem in voiceover that tells history in a poetic way, like not dates and numbers, but the imagination of a people in a way. Yes. But how do you get like, what is it that nourishes the imagination?

**Yassine Rachidi** 34:01

In Mohsen's work?

**Omar Berrada** 34:03

In general, because...

**Yassine Rachidi** 34:05

In general, I think...

**Omar Berrada** 34:07

But yes, like if I were to ask you the question, I would say yes, in Mohsen's work [laughs], and in your work.

**Yassine Rachidi** 34:15

Yeah, I think in Mohsen's, if I focus on Mohsen's work, I think it's after a moment, you know, Zarzis is like the epicenter of migrant transit in Tunisia, I think. So it's like at the border, 40 kilometers off Libya. And to get to Lampedusa, you have maybe 18 hours to cross and further north you have Kelibia, where you can cross to Italy—Pantelleria Island—where you have 70 kilometres, so very close. And these last months or years, a lot of migrants have been drowning in Zarzis especially. And I think for Mohsen because he finds objects, but as time goes on, he finds bottles, but also clothes and migrants, as well. And as I told you with Boughmiga, he has a blog on Skyrock, Boughmiga where he published poems, and he edited the book for a moment—I think he only printed like 100 copies, where he just edited the poems he writes. And you see that, he write poetry about the bodies he finds. I think in Mohsen's work, imagination is directly a way to get a better understanding, or maybe just to channel the weight that it bears to find the body or to find. And that, in the clothes that he collects, he's trying to build the stories of who they belong to, or where they came from. So I think, in Mohsen, I think maybe it's a therapeutical way. The imagination use[s] it as a way maybe to sublimate things, that you have something and then to, to bring them higher, to get a better understanding, then you use your imagination.

**Omar Berrada** 35:58

It could also be a way to, as you say, sublimate but also a way to, I don't know, because, you know, as much as he's getting away from literal politics, as you said, it's not avoidable, right. It's there necessarily. And as you said, he finds bodies, but to his good, he treats them with an incredible amount of tactfulness and dignity, right there is no spectacle of death or of pain or anything like that in what he does. But I assume that also takes a lot from him emotionally, you know, which he transforms into poetic meditations or artistic installations or something like that. But the tragic is there as a background.

**Yassine Rachidi** 36:53

I think at some point, with Mohsen's work, when presenting his work, I was encountering a lot of people who thought that Mohsen was a fictional character. And I found it funny that they thought that it was just a metaphor for the whole thing that is happening in the Mediterranean.

**Omar Berrada** 37:12

They thought you had invented him as a character.

**Yassine Rachidi** 37:15

Yeah, a lot of people thought that oh, this is like, this is a beautiful character. We're like, how the idea came? And I was like, no, this guy exists and is in Zarzis, and this is the address of his museum if you want to meet him, and I think I was important in the exhibition to let the people know that this guy exists, and that everyone can go to his museum to encounter him. And I think about the topic of imagination, at some point, you'll always get the duality or maybe the jealousy between romancing things and their reality. And some people think that romancing is only excessory as a way to put something in, and I think that for Mohsen, the way he works, I don't know if we can say that it's romancing thing. But that in this way, if it is what we may call romancing thing, that it's a better way to understand it, as I think statistics and articles fail that many, many times. And I was having trouble to get NGOs to understand that well. The NGO I was working with, I had trouble to try to explain how I see his work, and they will see him as simply an ecological artist, and not as a means to understand a social issue.

**Omar Berrada 38:41**

Yeah, well, that may be one of the many differences between NGO work and artistic work, right. NGOs approach political issues with a framework in mind that's already established—they have boxes for things—and but, in any case, I was going to say that a lot of your work, as far as I can tell, from what I've seen of it, seems to result from experiences of travel, being elsewhere—whatever else where it is—and, encountering, usually, actually one person. In the work that I've seen, you know, like they` seem to always revolve around one character, whom I assume from what you just said about Mohsen, whom you don't invent, but I don't really know—there is Zouzou, and there's Mohsen, and there's Mabrouk, the blind man, and there's Yacobov Oybek—so you know, a lot of these works are around one person, which I'm choosing to call one character because they are also works of—even if the characters are real, these are works of fiction, you know, texts you write, videos you make, performative kind of, performances that extend in time and in space.

**Yassine Rachidi 40:08**

I think it's interesting to talk about migration where all, most of my project, they come from traveling. And I'm from the same region as Mohsen, not Tunisia, but Morocco. And I have a certain privilege in a way. But to answer the question about Zouzou, Mabrouk, Mohsen, Yacobov, the three out of the four, they are old, and I think there's Émile Ajar, who is also known as Romain Gary, the writer, he says, at some point, "there's the fire in the light of the youth, but there's the light in the eyes of the elders." And I think that in Mohsen's, in Mabrouk l'aveugle, in Zouzou, there's something enlightening about the relationship to life where there's some kind of magical realism in all of them. So Mabrouk l'aveugle is a photographer I met in Tunis, who's blind. So the reality is that he's not completely blind, he just doesn't see too much. And the whole story is evolving about a man who got blind by gazing too long at the sun. So it's always about—and Zouzou, the same, is like someone who you don't know from where she comes from, but she has something very ephemeral in the way she encounters people and meet those people in her little shop that you don't know

what is the purpose that serves her shop. So I think there's always a part of reality, and a part of fiction. And Mohsen, I think I didn't even have to build the part of fiction because he was already building it. So it was just about channeling it. And a lot of people thought that it was a part of fiction I was building. I would like to ask you a question.

**Omar Berrada** 41:59

Yes.

**Yassine Rachidi** 42:00

So reading you, I thought I felt like you get a lot of interest into the etymology of words. In some talks, I was watching at the, especially one at the MFA art writing, where you—there's like many words, that you investigate their etymology—and you go between French, Spanish, English—and you, you kind of show that. I mean, by defining their definition, you also show that they have a social in the context, and by focusing on the context, you understand something much wider. I would like to hear you about the concept of "harraga," where you say, in a podcast—a really beautiful podcast where you go and investigate about the story of your 'jidda,' your grand grandmother. You said something that I really felt when you said, "travel is never innocent." And I would like to hear you about the concept of "harraga," especially in these days, or in the popular culture that you grew up in, and I grew up in, in Morocco, where you have "Ya rayeh win tssafer," a famous song from Rachid Taha. Or you have [a] popular Chaabi song about 'el ghorba,' traveling. And yeah, I'd like to hear you about this kind of stuff.

**Omar Berrada** 43:24

I mean, the question of etymology. Yeah, it's not, I don't know, I mean I'm always fascinated by etymology. But in the case of the talk, you mentioned, yes, it's a way to try to understand how words when we translate them, like in each language, they transport worlds, different worlds. And, I mean, you know, your project was called "Lost in Transition," it's hard not to think of translation right, lost in translation in this. But so for me, because of, now living in New York, because of all the histories of colonization that are never finished, and that, you know, you see them in what Mohsen finds in the water on the shore, right—they are proof of a continued history of inequity, and colonization, and unequal or asymmetrical travel in a way—like who can cross and who cannot cross? So because of all of those reasons, we have conflict, or I certainly have complicated relation to languages like I'm a little lost between my tongues. I am not sure I have a mother tongue even though I grew up with one, which is Moroccan Arabic, Darija, but it turns out I think, perhaps most naturally in French. I like, I thought, I wrote in French, but now I'm finding myself writing in English. Language is a mess. And so sometimes it helps to just kind of, you know, take an idea or a thought and translate it between the language and another and try and see if it gives you any clarity. It's in a way, it's like it's the opposite of translation. You know, we spoke of counter-geographies earlier, maybe this is a counter-translation kind of move, where to kind of—it's almost

reassuring to realize that words are not translatable, right, that there are things that don't necessarily cross transparently from a language to another, and that it's always good to zoom in on that distance, on what it is that doesn't go through—what it is that is left behind when you think you have translated in a way. It's not a bad thing. On the contrary, it's like there's so much reserve for thought and even fiction in that space between languages. And about "harraga". I mean, there's so much to say, and so much has been said and written but it's, it's such an incredibly rich term, because it's about burning, "harraga": to burn—'harga' is to burn. I mean, when I was growing up, and this notion didn't exist in relation to the Mediterranean, what people would burn is the red light, is the traffic light, you know 'harga feu rouge' means it's like he or she drove through the red light without stopping. So there is something about breaking the law in this burning. But in the case of this migration through the Mediterranean, it's so many other things like: burning one's papers, burning one's past, burning one's bridges. And it happens through water, so it's kind of very, very paradoxical and complicated.

**Laura Tibi** 47:09

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