



Title

Peripheral views

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Cover image: **Fig. 9** Installation view of *Brutal Family Roots*, by Mohamed Bourouissa, at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London, 2021. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Mark Blower).

Peripheral views

by Alex Merola • 28.05.2021

On 27th October 2005 police were called to a construction site in Clichy-sous-Bois, on the outskirts of Paris, to investigate a suspected break-in. Three teenage boys, who were walking home after a game of football, spotted the officers and, fearing a lengthy stop-and-search, hid in an electricity substation. Half an hour later, Zyed and Bouna were electrocuted in the transformer, while their friend, Muhittin, suffered ten per cent burns. The force of the electrocution caused the neighbourhood to black out and the deaths ignited three weeks of fierce night-time riots throughout the French *banlieues*. As thousands of vehicles were set alight, the spectacle of the ensuing blaze came to symbolise the woeful failures of successive models of multiculturalism, which had left a generation of young people stuck in grungy housing estates and bereft of the tools to make their way in life as a result of their post code, skin colour or immigrant origins.¹

The Algerian-born artist Mohamed Bourouissa was one of these youths. In response to the right-wing media's propagation of *banlieusard* stereotypes during the riots – repositioning their political struggles as anarchist opportunism – Bourouissa set out to bestow a place in art history to those all too often omitted from the canon.² In a series of *mise-en-scène* photographs entitled *Périphérique* (2005–08) – referring to the concrete belt that divides the affluent centre of Paris and the deprived *banlieues* in which he grew up – he and his friends staged the quotidian dramas of the streets **FIG. 1** **FIG. 2**. African and Arab youths loiter in graffitied underpasses and face-off in littered stairwells; elsewhere, a crowd hastily disbands **FIG. 3**. *Périphérique* is undeniably inflected by cliché, but what preconceptions do we bring to these photographs? Through their stop-action framings, Bourouissa draws our eyes to the silent gestures of the body: a furtive glance over the shoulder, a tentatively wandering hand, a softly hunched back in mourning or in prayer.

Since this breakthrough series, likened by critics to the *tableaux vivants* of Jacques-Louis David and Eugène Delacroix, issues of socio-economic exclusion, (in)visibility and value have loomed large in Bourouissa's oeuvre.³ He was awarded the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize last year for his politically charged exhibition *Free Trade* (2019) in a Monoprix supermarket at Les Rencontres d'Arles. Now, the artist's formative street photography is displayed alongside other key works in *HARa!!!!!!hAaaRAAAAA!!!!!!hHAaA!!!* at Goldsmiths Centre for


Contemporary Art, London (CCA). Oscillating irreverently between photography, film, sound and installation, the exhibition interrogates the contemporary conditions of subaltern groups – the dispossessed, the voiceless and the oppressed – while probing, with unflinching self-reflexivity, the paradoxical territory occupied by the artist in proffering an aesthetic ‘solution’ to social reality.


This quandary is most overt in *Shoplifters*, derived from a collection of Polaroids that the artist discovered pinned up behind the counter of a grocery store in Brooklyn [FIG. 4](#). They show people holding loaves of bread, milk bottles and laundry detergent – items that they had allegedly stolen – and were the result of a perverse deal: if the ‘thieves’ agreed to pose for a mugshot, the owner pledged to not call the police. The Polaroids recall the nineteenth-century composite portraits by the British eugenicist Frances Galton, who superimposed images of convicted criminals in order to ascertain the essence of the ‘criminal face’ through physiognomies.⁴ As such, the mugshots serve as a manifestation of society’s sustained efforts to pathologise, and thereby rationalise, alterity – a condition that is seldom seen by the public gaze in such explicit terms and, if indeed it is seen, it is used as a reinforcement of what sets them aside.

Through Bourouissa’s act of rephotographing the ‘thieves’ – relocated from the grocery store to the gallery space, in which they hang, back-to-back, on zigzagged metal fencing – the series operates as a dual examination of the violence enacted when the camera shutter is pressed [FIG. 5](#). Power dynamics also unfold in *Temps mort*. Projected onto a screen in the adjacent room, the film chronicles Bourouissa’s relationship with his incarcerated friend, Al, as conducted through a top-up phone that was smuggled into the jail by the artist [FIG. 6](#). Al’s low-resolution clips range from the topographic – bunk beds, hallways, a train glimpsed through bars – to the ritualistic – eating, sleeping and push-ups. They are juxtaposed with Bourouissa’s recordings from the world outside: footage of a cell floor turns to footsteps trudging through snow. Occasionally, a phone screen displays the artist’s directions via text message: ‘Can u vid some1 smokin without seeing the face .\NThnx a lot!’ Pinging back and forth between their incommensurable milieus, these erratic, elliptical exchanges render the strained bond between two men – one free and one not – circumventing infrastructures expressly constructed to hold them apart.

The ethical precarity of presenting those who are obstructed from being seen or heard is compounded in *Nasser* [FIG. 7](#). Poised tremulously between performance and lived reality, Bourouissa’s uncle reads aloud his convoluted court order for a conviction of robbery with violence. Through stuttering and stumbling, interruptions and restarts, it evinces the struggles of a semi-literate individual’s translation of the legal matrix. The

criminalised citizen's navigation of the carceral state is no less unresolved in the sound piece *Hara* (2020), from which the exhibition takes its name. Within the confining steel walls of the gallery's angular, open-air courtyard, Bourouissa hijacks the colloquialism *hara*, a vocal signal used by lookouts in Marseille to alert drug dealers of approaching police, and distorts it to the point of incomprehensibility. The delirious, incantatory refrains initiate an emphatic reversal of codes: no longer cues to lie low, they are appeals of attention to the conditions which engender such cycles of criminal activities. Although the aural conjuring from the street corners of Marseille is enveloping, there is an uneasy estrangement in the disjunct between Bourouissa, the mouthpiece, and us, the bystanders, hearing from a remove.

That said, Bourouissa is undoubtedly committed to showing disenfranchised groups expressing themselves on their own terms too. The video diptych *Horse Day* transports us to the equestrian stables of Fletcher Street in the impoverished Philadelphia neighbourhood of Strawberry Mansion, where, for over a century, Black boys have learnt to ride roughshod .⁵ Disrupting the dust-strewn myth of the Wild – and white – West, one screen plays out the everyday experiences of these urban riders: groups clip-clop past derelict estates and dodge SUVs; police sirens sound; 'Who John Wayne?' remarks one rider. The adjoining screen unveils the preparations and staging of the climactic 'horse day' – an event Bourouissa worked on with locals over the course of eight months. Adorned in shining armour made of ribbons, flowers and CDs, equine vehicles negotiate obstacles and compete in races, while spectators, smartphones aloft, cheer them on. The complexities of this neighbourhood are palpable, but so is its capacity for community. The result of riders, artists and residents working in tandem across disciplines and languages, *Horse Day* is an ode to things coming together – an example of Bourouissa's collaborative practice at its most emancipating.

Synthesis, however, takes on a sinister shape in the exhibition's sensory apex, *Brutal Family Roots* (2020), in which Bourouissa revisits his childhood memories of Algeria and the golden-flowered acacia tree – and his surprise upon learning that it was native to Australia.⁶ Sunshine-yellow carpets cover the gallery floor, while speakers relay a pulsating soundscape generated by a programme that transcribes the electrical frequencies of the acacia .⁹ Intercutting these modulations are verbal interludes by the Yui hip-hop artist MC Kronic and the Egyptian-Australian musician Nardean: 'I forgot my name, but I remember my roots'. The acacia's history of global proliferation via colonial expeditions is bound up with the exportation – and subsequent appropriation – of rap music out of the United States. Their vibratory dialogue summons the intertwined diasporic trajectories of plants and humans alike, and their ability – for better or for worse – to adapt when subjugated by the violent, kinetic forces that pull things

apart. The acacia has healing properties, but self-destructive ones too. There is an underlying horror story here – one of worlding, displacement and charged colonial legacies – that does not fade quickly.

The scope of such an outlook certainly resonates in our period of the pandemic, which has put into sharp focus the racialised fabric of inequality on a global scale. Yet crucially, despite centring lives unified by their dwelling in the symptoms of colonialism and late capitalism, Bourouissa eschews homogenisation. Instead, the exhibition invokes the world as it is: fractured, but where nothing happens in isolation; broken, but, in the end, redeemable. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, author of the influential essay 'Can the subaltern speak?' (1985), reiterated the notion that representation is a speech act necessitating a transaction: 'For me, the question of "Who should speak?" is less crucial than "Who will listen?"'⁷ Indeed, voices, intelligible or not, follow us at every turn here. Although the complicity between portraying and speaking for others is not easily reconciled, Bourouissa reckons with the burden of representation with critical sharpness and lucid subversion. The urgent task of decolonisation ultimately lies not with representation itself, but rather democratising the routes for those on the peripheries to speak and be heard – even if outside in.

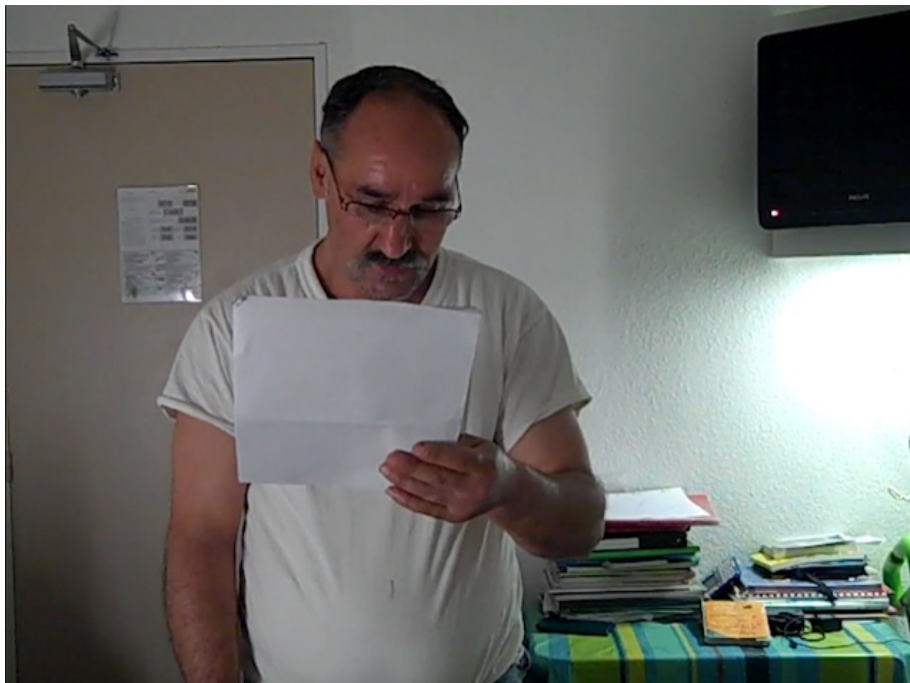


Fig. 7 Still from *Nasser*, by Mohamed Bourouissa. 2015. Video, duration 4 minutes and 30 seconds. (Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour; exh. Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London).



Fig. 8 Still from *Horse Day*, by Mohamed Bourouissa. 2014–15. Video diptych, duration 13 minutes and 32 seconds. (Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour; exh. Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London).



Fig. 9 Installation view of *Brutal Family Roots*, by Mohamed Bourouissa, at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London, 2021. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Mark Blower).

Exhibitions details Mohamed Bourouissa: HARa!!!!!!hAaaRAA
AAA!!!!!!hHAaA!!!
Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary
Art, London
21st May–1st August 2021

Footnotes

- 1** See A. Duval Smith: 'The week Paris burned', *The Guardian* (6th November 2005), available at www.theguardian.com/world/2005/nov/06/france.focus, accessed 25th May 2021.
- 2** See S. Orgad: *Media Representation and the Global Imagination*, Cambridge 2012, esp. p.96.
- 3** See M. Rappolt: 'Mohamed Bourouissa: "there is poetry inside the streets"', *Art Review* (5th March 2021), available at www.artreview.com/mohamed-bourouissa-interview-poetry-inside-streets, accessed 25th May 2021.
- 4** Physiognomy was popularised in the nineteenth century by the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who posited that criminals possessed specific facial features, such as 'hawk-like noses' or 'bloodshot eyes'. Although widely discredited as pseudoscience today, such theories continue to be pursued, most controversially exemplified by a 2016 paper in which AI researchers in China claimed that they had created an algorithm capable of distinguishing criminal from non-criminal portraits with an accuracy of 89.5 per cent. See Xiaolin Wu and Xi Zhang: 'Automated inference on criminality using face images', *ArXiv*, 2016, available at arxiv.org/pdf/1611.04135v1.pdf, accessed 25th May 2021.
- 5** Since the founder, Ellis Ferrell, launched the Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club as a non-profit organisation in 2004, it has faced continual threats of extinction. In 2008 animal welfare officials seized forty horses on the back of allegations of ill-treatment. They were returned days later after it was concluded that the allegations were baseless. In 2019, following a long-waging land dispute, the Philadelphia Housing Authority acquired their pasture grounds for \$1. The stables have been subject to increased interest from popular media in recent years, as evidenced by Rudimental's music video 'Feel The Love' (2012), Google's smartphone advert 'Google Pixel 2: Fletcher Street Crew' (2018) and Ricky Staub's film *Concrete Cowboy* (2020).
- 6** Guided by the colonial ethos of 'improvement', French and British colonies embarked on transcontinental planting programmes of the Australian acacia from the late eighteenth century onwards, with the aim of establishing fertile lands, rehabilitating poor soils and maintaining landscapes that reflected the economic and aesthetic sensibilities of colonising powers. Such a dispersal of biota has been considered a 'hallmark of civilisation'. See J. Carruthers: 'A native at home and abroad: the history, politics, ethics and aesthetics of acacias', in *Diversity and Distributions*, 17 (2011), pp.810–821, available at doi.org/10.1111/j.1472-4642.2011.00779.x, accessed 21st May 2021.
- 7** See G. Chakravorty Spivak: 'Questions of multiculturalism', in S. Harasayam ed.: *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, New York 1990, pp.59–60.

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