

MUNTREF CENTRO DE ARTE
CONTEMPORÁNEO

LEILA ALAOU

Migrants



**MARCH 9
TO JUNE 3**

Tuesday to Sunday, from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Free admission

HOTEL DE INMIGRANTES: Av. Antártida Argentina

(between Dirección Nacional de Migraciones and Buquebus), Puerto Madero.

FOUNDATION
LEILA ALAOU

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UNTREF



Crossings

2013

Video installation

6' 55"

"She was a radiant artist who strived to restore life to the society of oblivion, the homeless and the migrants with photography as her sole weapon. She was a correspondent of peace", wrote Jack Lang, President of the Arab World Institute upon hearing the news of Leila Alaoui's death during the attack on Burkina Faso in January 2016.

Leila, whose work we knew and whom we invited to bring her pieces to our show *Migrations (in) Contemporary Art*, arrived at MUNTREF and filled the space with her vitality. While she wandered enthusiastically around the large hallway on the third floor of Hotel de Inmigrantes, she said: "I am so glad to be part of this show, which in addition to the relevance of the topic, features fourteen women out of a total of twenty artists!"

She stood for the new model of the Arab woman "without ties, with a presence in the

art world, a visionary who addressed issues like immigration and women's rights", as her cousin Yalda Alaoui pointed out for the British newspaper *The Independent*.

In turn, French-Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun expressed with perplexity: "Neither her talent, nor her intelligence, nor her sensitivity nor her beauty has protected her. Leila Alaoui was a passionate artist who knew how to discover the real behind appearances and how to reveal the splendor of a body behind the veil of prejudice".

At the Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero we are deeply sorry about her absence and the persistence of various forms of violence, which she, just like many others, tried to change through her work, in which art and life were inextricably involved. By showing Leila's work, we feel we contribute to pursuing her objectives.

Anibal Jozami
UNTREF Rector

Diana B. Wechsler
UNTREF Director of the Department of Art and Culture

"We could endeavour to create a different political culture in which the hardships of sudden violence and loss, as well as violent political retaliation, cease to be the norm of political life".

Judith Butler (*Precarious Life*)

Precarious Life by Judith Butler was part of the set of readings I used to conceive the project *Migrations (in) Contemporary Art*, which in 2015 became an exhibition presented as part of the MUNTREF programme in its Hotel de Inmigrantes venue. In the course of the research for this project I came across Leila Alaoui's work, an excellent occasion to get to know her and reflect upon her pieces and experiences.

That exhibition, which sought to probe contemporary life experience from the concept of "migration", showcased a selection of works by artists from different backgrounds¹ whose pieces address issues such as migrations, exiles, identity, itinerancy, belonging, boundaries, and borders. Likewise, assuming that symbolic production is part of the current experience, the exhibition was intended as a reflection on the conditions of contemporary art from the perspective of the mobile concept of the migration of ideas, media, platforms, practices, socio-cultural representations, and the condition of artists themselves.

Thus, pieces like those by Leila Alaoui were selected for their ability to bring to the forefront one of the topics-issues of our world, and to inquire into the conditions of contemporary art, in the conviction that this exploration will extend boundaries to turn the art space into a new space for reflection upon our everyday experience.

The experience of sub-Saharan migrants is featured in *Crossings*, Leila's video installation, which looks into the transit of those who embark on a dangerous journey to reach the elusive European coasts. The piece focuses on the collective trauma created by the experience of crossing borders and becoming a fragile community in a new habitat. It not only captures the textures of the physical and psychological transition but also addresses

the concept of Europe as a problematic Utopia in the collective imaginary of Africans.

"After weeks of research as a participating observer in migrant communities of Morocco, I conceived the idea of an immersion audiovisual experience to share personal stories and recreate the disturbing feelings of the journey. I was interested in the possibilities of contemporary video art to explore the limits of traditional narrative.

Shot from the imaginary point of view of migrants, *Crossings* incorporates shreds of reality amongst images reconstructed in a fictional manner and sound effects from real stories. The result is a video installation of three screens combining off-screen voices and static pictures of migrants and landscapes.

Along with the video installation, a series of photographic portraits where Leila applies the strategies used by Richard Avedon to define the American character in his images serves to dignify individuals who have been exposed to the most extreme conditions and degrading submission: it is Leila's gaze that restores human dignity to them.

These considerations make it possible to rethink the current role of art. Let us formulate a possible answer that would be effective in the light of the works herein gathered: contemporary art appears to be



1 Cameroon, Chile, Algeria, Lebanon, Morocco, Poland, France, Spain, Israel, Brazil, Palestine, Uruguay, Turkey, Guatemala, Czech Republic, Iran, Paraguay, Italy and Argentina.

the enhancement of world experiences that prompts the emergence of critical thinking.

Going back to Butler, the dominant forms of representations can and must be destroyed in order for the precariousness of life to be apprehended. Pictures like those by Leila Alaoui and her videos afford such a possibility by suggesting images and arousing experiences different from the dominant forms of representation or by seizing them and offering them to other individuals, the ones generally rendered invisible by the system.

Her pieces helped to shed light on those who are usually identified as “the others”

while questioning the role of “us”: the human faces featured (and dignified) are the silent bearers of inhuman stories, the traces of violence are revealed, the invisibilization of human trafficking adopts a form, and precariousness is exhibited. This modality of artistic actions related to the research of concrete emergency situations and experiences helps to include other perspectives, thus allowing a gaze at *the other*. It may perhaps represent a way to envisage the possibility of moving towards a contemporary humanism.

Diana B. Wechsler

LEILA ALAOU

She was a French-Moroccan photographer and video artist born in Paris in 1982. She lived and worked in Marrakech, Paris and Beirut. She studied photography at the City University of New York before spending time in Morocco and Lebanon. Her experience in different cultural and geographic environments influenced her critical and creative practice. Her work explores the construction of identity and cultural diversity, often through the prism of contemporary migration stories across the Mediterranean. Her images reflect social realities through a visual language that combines the narrative depth of the documentary and the aesthetic sensitivity of fine art.

Her work has been exhibited worldwide since 2009 at the Institut du Monde Arabe, Art Dubai, the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris and MUNTREF Centro de Arte Contemporáneo in Buenos Aires, among other venues. Her photographs have been published in newspapers and magazines such as *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*.

She died in January 2016 during an Al Qaeda attack on Burkina Faso, where she was working on a documentary project commissioned by Amnesty International about women in that country.

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