Curating the Present

The Exhibition *New Cartographies: Algeria–France–UK*

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What does it mean to be a curator today? What do we expect of this role – and why? At a time when, arguably, the visibility of curators has grown internationally and, at least in British English, the verb "to curate" has been adopted in popular discourse to signal the general collation of material by anyone – regardless of role, training, or experience – it seems as timely a moment as ever to ponder the status and significance of the curatorial role.

In order to situate my discussion more specifically, this chapter will revisit the planning and mounting of an exhibition for which I acted as one of two curators (alongside Edward Welch) as part of a wider academic research project funded by the AHRC (Arts & Humanities Research Council) in the UK.[1] This project, entitled *Post-Colonial Negotiations: Visualising the Franco-Algerian Relationship in the Post-War Period*, considered how colonial and post-colonial relations between France and Algeria have been represented since the start of the Algerian War (1954–1962), and probed the different manners in which the idea or myth of 'Algeria' has been constructed, perceived, and articulated in France since the war began and following decolonisation. The project's key hypothesis was that it is especially visual forms of representation (including film, photography, television, and the visual arts) that have informed our understanding of relations between France and Algeria. It interrogated the roles played by visual images in shaping and challenging dominant forms of understanding during and following decolonisation, and scrutinised a diverse range of material found both within and beyond mass visual media.

By chance, our exhibition coincided with a moment of significant upheaval across the MENA region. Beginning with the outbreak of the Tunisian Revolution in December 2010, the series of events that would become known as the Arab Spring brought widespread international attention to Maghrebi countries as their citizens' calls for political and societal change reverberated. While Algeria itself would ultimately see no major transformation, the waves of unrest

1 Further funding for the exhibition was also supplied by: Alliance Française, Ambassade de France au Royaume-Uni, Arab British Centre, Durham University, Fluxus, Institut Français, The University of Manchester, Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World, and Mint Hotel Manchester.

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that spread across the Maghreb helped pique visitors' curiosity towards Algeria, a country seldom discussed within British media and consequently largely unknown to many. Upon the exhibition's opening, *The Guardian* duly declared that it "could hardly be more timely," and its topicality was also underlined during an interview with participating artists Amina Menia and Zineb Sedira broadcasted on the BBC World Service's daily arts programme, "The Strand."[2]

Titled *New Cartographies: Algeria-France-UK*, the exhibition opened on 8 April 2011 and ran until 5 June 2011.[3] It brought together recent work by no fewer than ten artists, both established and emerging, in order to probe the complexities of the relationship between Africa's largest country and Europe as the fiftieth anniversary of Algerian independence approached.[4] The ten exhibiting artists were: Kader Attia, Zineddine Bessaï, Bruno Boudjelal, Omar D, Sophie Elbaz, Yves Jeanmougin, Katia Kameli, Amina Menia, John Perivolaris, and Zineb Sedira. In doing so, it particularly encouraged visitors to ponder the significance of migration and diaspora, alongside identity and memory, by emphasising the personal and political effects of travel between and within such spaces. Including UK premieres and specially commissioned installations, the exhibition brought together work in a variety of media, including installations, photography, and video, and gave visitors the space to explore each artist's personal perspective on historical and contemporary links within and between these three countries.

Mounting such an exhibition might prove taxing in the best of circumstances, but given that this was the first time that either my co-curator or I had played such a role, it certainly presented its own challenges. Although I had written on areas of the visual arts beforehand, and explored visual culture within my teaching and research, this was the first time that I had actually stepped beyond the world of academia to carry out such a project. In many ways, it was due to a fortunate confluence of events that this opportunity arose. Our research grant application coincided with the start of the current impact agenda within the UK Higher Education sector. As part of this, British universities must now demonstrate the wider impact of their work within societies, and researchers are increasingly encouraged to embark upon knowledge-transfer activities with cultural partners outside academia. When submitting our project's funding proposal, we thus designed it to incorporate an exhibition in the final year as one of its three main outputs. In this way, we hoped to disseminate some of the findings of our research among the wider public, and duly to emphasise the insights

2 *Guardian Guide*, 16–22 April 2011, p. 34; "The Strand," BBC World Service, 6 April 2011, URL: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00fvl5t [accessed: 24.04.2018].

3 Images of the exhibition taken during the preview event attended by over 1300 visitors on 7 April 2011 can be accessed at URL: http://www.flickr.com/photos/cornerhousemanchester/albums/72157626364320827 [accessed: 24.04.18]. Further images can also be found at URL: http://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2011/new-cartographies/photos/ [accessed: 24.04.2018]. The exhibition received 14649 attendances, with 426 participants in our accompanying engagement programme.

4 See URL: https://homemcr.org/exhibition/new-cartographies-algeria-france-uk/ [accessed: 24.04.2018].

that such research can bring to our understanding of wider processes and phenomena within society and culture. We were therefore one of the first wave of academics in the arts and humanities in the UK to benefit from this emphasis in research council funding.

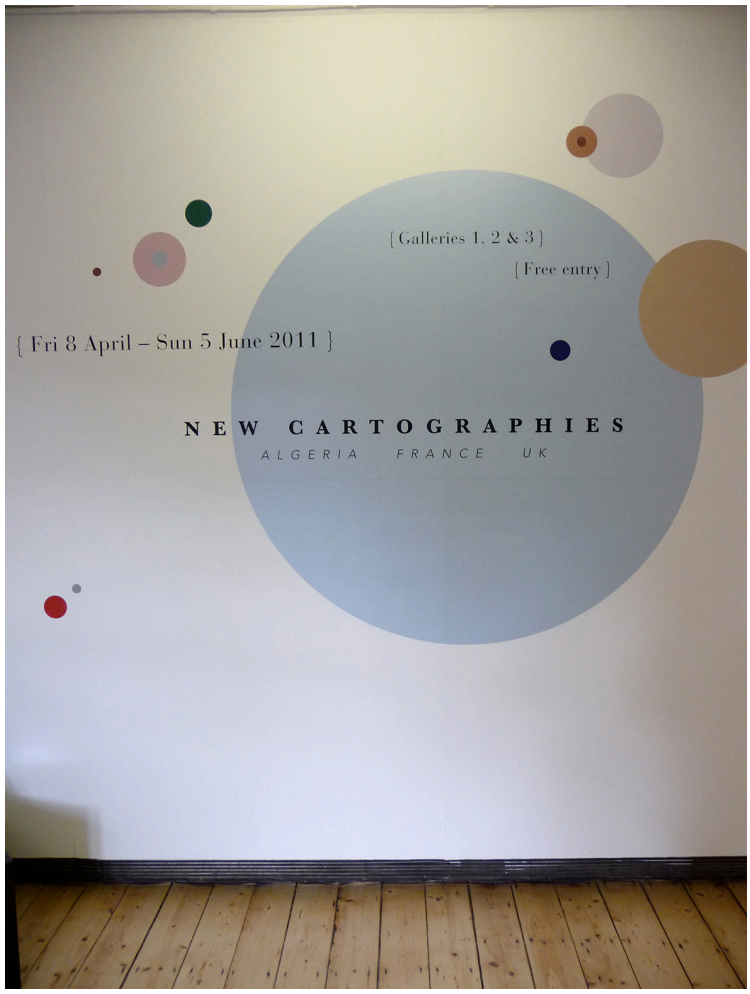
In terms of location, fortune was also on our side. I happen to be based in a city where institutions are open to the idea of inviting outside partners, such as academic researchers, to collaborate in such projects and on this scale. Indeed, the management team at our host venue, Cornerhouse, actively wanted to work with academics as part of their regular programming, and purposely built periodic collaborations of this kind into their exhibition planning. Cornerhouse was renowned as Greater Manchester's centre for international contemporary visual art and film, and described itself as "a place where all can engage with contemporary ideas through a unique, risk taking, cross art-form and culturally diverse high quality programme of art and film."[5] As its name conveniently suggests, the building itself was literally on a corner, in a wedge-type shape, which necessarily constrained the exhibition design.[6] However, it may well have been more difficult for us to find a suitable venue and partners had we held the exhibition elsewhere, and this could consequently have had the unwelcome effect of dissuading some artists from participating.

Indeed, and most importantly, we were extremely fortunate to have benefited from the opportunity to work with a range of artists who were open to the idea of this kind of initiative and who, by placing their faith in us, allowed the exhibition to take the shape it did. Without the kind inclusion of their works, generosity of their time, and especially patience and good humour throughout, it simply would not have been possible for it to see fruition. We naturally therefore always remain grateful to all ten of them for entrusting Cornerhouse and us with their works, and allowing the exhibition to generate the impact it did.

What were the aims and objectives of the exhibition? As the accompanying promotional material stated, *New Cartographies: Algeria-France-UK* sought to provide a timely intervention into current debates within France and the UK on post-colonial politics and culture, migration, settlement, and links between Europe and North Africa. As we explained to British audiences, despite Algerian independence in 1962 following more than 130 years of French colonial rule, the relationship between France and Algeria evidently continues to play a defining role for each country politically, socially, and culturally through migration, post-colonial antagonism, and memories of a shared colonial past. At the same time, the 2000s and beyond have seen an intriguing shift in Algeria's geopolitical significance. The exhibition therefore brought together recent work by

5 "New Cartographies: Algeria-France-UK," Cornerhouse Manchester press release.

6 In 2012, Cornerhouse merged with Manchester's Library Theatre to form a new arts organisation called HOME, which is housed in much larger purpose-built facilities. See URL: https://homemcr.org [accessed: 24.04.2018].



1 Exhibition entrance: "New Cartographies: Algeria–France–UK"

contemporary emerging and established artists from France, Algeria, and the UK in order to explore aspects of the relationship between France and Algeria as the fiftieth anniversary of Algerian independence approached, as well as to probe current relations between the UK and Algeria in a seemingly ever more globalised era.

Given the exhibition's size and ambition, Cornerhouse generously allowed us to use all three of its gallery spaces, connected by staircases and a lift from floors 1 to 3. The exhibition began on the first floor in Gallery 1 (fig. 1), and reached its end upstairs in Gallery 3. Images of the exhibition online can provide a sense of how the various works entered into dialogue with one another, although – as you may notice – the specificities of Cornerhouse's galleries resulted in some spatial

2 John Perivolaris, *North to North: A Journey from Manchester to the Maghreb in Postcards*, 2011

constraints that necessarily limited our room for manoeuvre.[7] The use of QR codes as part of the exhibition provided a means to give visitors access to complementary content to further enrich their experience. Each artist was assigned a unique QR code that linked visitors via their mobile devices to interviews with the artist and to images of related works online.[8]

7 See URL: http://www.flickr.com/photos/cornerhousemanchester/albums/72157626364320827 [accessed: 24.04.18] and URL: http://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2011/new-cartographies/photos/ [accessed: 24.04.2018].

8 An archive of the QR code content developed for the exhibition can be accessed at URL: http://homemcr.org/media/new-cartographies-qr-code-content/ [accessed: 24.04.18].

While this encouraged visitors to venture beyond the confines of the gallery space, careful thought naturally had to be given to how best to structure their experience of the works within the exhibition itself. While Manchester's cultural industries had a proud track record in exhibiting works by African artists and artists of African heritage, our exhibition was the first to focus explicitly on the importance of Africa's largest country alongside its historical and present-day links both with France (as former colonial ruler) and with the UK (a significant export partner and home to an Algerian diaspora with remarkably little visibility). By dedicating each of Cornerhouse's three galleries to one of the key themes identified by our research as defining aspects of the Franco-Algerian visual economy – namely, journeys, resources, and memories – we duly sought to promote understanding among visitors of some of the complexities of Algero-French relations, to raise awareness of Algero-British links, and to provoke reflection on the attendant politics of visual representation more broadly. Furthermore, the themes explored by artists and by the exhibition as a whole invited consideration of how today Europe as a continent approaches and perceives its relationship with peoples and spaces beyond its borders, and how artists based in Algeria have sought to respond to this.

Deciding quite how to introduce these questions and areas to visitors from the exhibition entrance itself thus became crucial. Our choice to place the work created by John Perivolaris as part of a commission for the exhibition (fig. 2) as the first to greet visitors strategically allowed them to follow his own journey from Manchester through the UK, France, and Algeria itself. Perivolaris travelled from Manchester to Annaba, in north-eastern Algeria, from 5 June to 5 July 2010 in order to probe contemporary links between the UK, France, and Algeria in visual culture. His month-long journey resulted in the creation of *North to North: A Journey from Manchester to the Maghreb in Postcards*, an original installation that premiered at Cornerhouse. Informed by the artist's many encounters with people who share personal links with both France and Algeria, and by his visits to sites of memory important for understanding how Franco-Algerian relations are displayed and perceived publicly today, *North to North* incorporated many conversations and interviews, documented via the images created by Perivolaris and collated in his accompanying blog.[9] This material, made and found in the course of his journey, inspired the form and content of Perivolaris's ultimate exhibition installation.

Sadly, however, not all the participating artists who should have joined us for the exhibition's opening were actually able to attend. Given his own work's focus on questions of travel and migration (fig. 3), it was a bitter irony that Zineddine Bessaï, a young emerging artist based in Algiers, was refused a visa by the UK authorities to visit Manchester and see his work displayed to an international

9 The accompanying blog and images created during John Perivolaris's journey can be found at URL: http://thecardographer.wordpress.com/ [accessed: 24.04.18].

3 Zineddine Bessaï, *H-Out*, 2010; *SOS*, 2010; and *Harragas*, 2010

audience.[10] It sadly provided a timely reminder of how governmental agendas can actively curtail movement and directly impede knowledge exchange and cultural mobility, which only compounded our mutual frustration.[11] On a more positive note, however, due to the help of artists and contacts, we were able to facilitate a residency for another Algerian artist, Atef Berredjem, at the Delfina Foundation, which enabled him to spend six weeks collaborating with fellow artists while living and working in central London.[12] Given our collective disappointment for Zineddine, it felt like a symbolic victory to have ensured that at least another fellow emerging artist from Algeria could visit the UK. All the more so given that an explicit aim of the wider exhibition, beyond facilitating collaboration among the exhibiting artists, was precisely to encourage visiting Algeria-based artists to network with fellow artists and with British arts organisations while in the UK, so as to inform their own practice and to gain wider international exposure for their work.

As mentioned earlier, this was my first venture into the world of curating. In many ways, the experience was relatively straightforward compared to what I imagine can transpire. We nevertheless faced a series of challenges along the way, and I quickly realised that being a curator comprises infinitely more than the practicalities of helping design and create an exhibition alone: based just upon this experience itself, at different times I had to assume the roles of negotiator and fixer, translator and interpreter, diplomat and promoter, salesman and fundraiser, and, of course, educator. Needless to say, my respect and admiration for professional curators increased immeasurably as a result, and working on such a project from conception to delivery over several years reinforced to me how heavily such kinds of initiatives always depend upon a team effort. Our exhibition's relative success was therefore due to many collective endeavours, and the considerable patience and understanding of all involved.

It is worth perhaps reflecting briefly here, however, on the stakes at play in terms of academics from outside the 'art world' acting as exhibition curators. In many ways, we were very fortunate to be able to collaborate with such an established and celebrated institution, and it is easy to imagine that, whatever the merits of our wider research project and exhibition plans, the doors of many other institutions may undoubtedly have remained firmly closed.

It might be tempting here to bemoan the presence of gatekeepers within this field, and suggest that the choices made with regard to who gets to curate exhibitions, where, and when remain tightly conditioned and conveniently opaque

10 A copy of the letter sent to Zineddine by the UK Border Agency can be accessed at URL: http://www.flickr.com/photos/cornerhousemanchester/5594983307/in/set-72157626317138835/ [accessed: 24.04.2018].

11 Campaigning by English PEN and others subsequently led to government policy change in this area, which was designed to facilitate the invitation of foreign artists to the UK. See Robert Sharp, "Government Announces New Visa for Visiting Writers and Artists," 29 February 2012, URL: https://www.englishpen.org/campaigns/government-announces-new-visa-for-visiting-writers-and-artists/ [accessed: 24.04.18].

12 See URL: http://delfinafoundation.com/in-residence/atef-berredjem/ [accessed: 24.04.2018].

to outsiders. Any possible suspicion by the former of the precise motives of figures from outside the art world and art history acting as curators may seem quite reasonable, and artists are justifiably concerned with how and in what context their work is displayed and presented. Although it would probably be more suitable here for others more familiar with these fields of power to comment further, clearly any successful working relationship depends upon developing a mutual sense of trust – and, crucially, maintaining it. As curators, both Edward Welch and I felt an acute sense of responsibility to all the participating artists, and sought to gain their confidence by working with them all as closely as possible. In hindsight, however, taking on the considerable challenge of working simultaneously with ten artists as one's first experience of curating was rather ambitious, and it certainly would have made the planning and logistics considerably easier if numbers had been smaller. Yet what you gain in one way, you may risk losing in another, and arguably one of the exhibition's strengths was its range of participants and the diversity of work displayed.

In June 2017 when presenting this paper at the Deutsche Forum für Kunstgeschichte in Paris, the specific title of the panel session to which I contributed was the wonderfully evocative "Décoloniser le musée," which naturally invited consideration of the broader questions such an initiative might pose. Indeed, within the context of my own experience, a key challenge we faced working in Manchester was how to present an exhibition to UK audiences that focused so much on Algeria. This was perhaps more of a challenge than it might initially seem: when we approached potential partners and stakeholders in the UK, it was not uncommon for people to mishear the word "Algeria" as "Nigeria" instead. Given Britain's colonial history with regard to the latter, and the presence of Nigerian diaspora and people of Nigerian heritage in the UK, such misunderstandings might seem unremarkable. Nevertheless, given the comparative invisibility of Algeria within the British media and public sphere, they also inadvertently served as a reminder of how the legacies of Western imperialism can so readily inflect cultural knowledge.

As a consequence of this general ignorance towards Algeria, we chose to adopt a somewhat pedagogical focus for some of the paratexts created to accompany the exhibition; and when leading curator tours and participating in public events, I would seek carefully to explain the complexities of post-colonial ties between France and Algeria, while also signalling some of the ways in which Algeria now appears to be moving confidently beyond this binary.[13] Arguably it was here that our exhibition title came into play. The choice to frame the works in terms of "new cartographies" allowed us to gesture at once towards the

13 The extensive engagement programme devised to supplement the exhibition included: documented guided tours in English and French; exhibition tours with artists and curators; the seminar "The State and Stakes of Contemporary Art in Algeria"; an Arab and Maghrebi film season; and a public education course "Introduction to Contemporary Art: Art and Politics," incorporating insights from the exhibition.

importance of mapping and location within this field, and towards the sense that these contemporary artists are now plotting coordinates different from those of the past. Our subtitle of "Algeria-France-UK" was also purposely hyphenated: first, to posit relations among these three peoples and spaces as part of a wider signifying chain, and, second, by adding the UK at the end, to attempt to complicate the Franco-Algerian dyad. To place Algeria first here, and to hold this exhibition in the UK but outside London, played their own parts in unsettling some cultural and institutional norms.

At the same time, hyphens are never just mere punctuation marks. As the philosopher Jacques Derrida so sagely reminded us when he considered the historical and cultural significance of Franco-Maghrebi identities, for all the pleasures and privileges that hyphenated identities may bring:

> The silence of this hyphen pacifies or appeases nothing, no torment or torture. It will never silence their memory. It might even aggravate terror, lesions and wounds. A hyphen is never enough to conceal protests, cries of anger or suffering, or the noise of weapons, planes and bombs.[14]

The subsequent 2013 monograph that I co-authored with Edward Welch, *Contesting Views: The Visual Economy of France and Algeria*, demonstrated how our study of the diverse images that link France and Algeria led us to argue (following the anthropologist Deborah Poole) that we need to approach visual material here not just in terms of a visual culture, but also as part of a visual economy[15] – in other words, as indelibly marked by the many varied processes that characterise the "circulation, consumption and production of images."[16] In probing the visual economy of what we termed the Franco-Algerian relationship, we argued for the importance of remaining attentive to the many ways in which images circulate within and between both countries, and to which kind of images usually dominate such flows. As this lexical field suggests, such an approach raises attendant questions of power and agency too. Questions that remain the all the more prescient, given the historical disparities that remain in terms of which actors get to shape and influence those flows across both sides of the Mediterranean.

It was undoubtedly a privileged opportunity to be able to shed light on this field. Consequently, it also seems appropriate to close by reflecting upon our own position and intervention within this field. The singularity of this particular experience for me, however, raises more questions than provides answers.

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14 Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, Patrick Mensah (trans.), Palo Alto, 1998, p. 11.

15 Edward Welch and Joseph McGonagle, *Contesting Views: The Visual Economy of France and Algeria,* Liverpool, 2013.

16 Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*, Princeton, 1997, p. 8.

While I hope this account of our experience may illuminate some of the benefits and challenges that such kinds of collaboration can bring, how best can such initiatives probe questions of identity, circulation, translation, and territory? How can such spaces be used effectively to incite reflection on these elements? And how can institutions actively encourage visitors to engage meaningfully with the ideas and concepts presented?

Gratifyingly, in terms of the reception of the exhibition, the public and critical reaction was positive.[17] It received favourable coverage from reviewers nationally and internationally, with *Art Monthly* praising the range and quality of the works included, and *Nafas Art Magazine* highlighting how it "introduces the British public to burning topics and opens a debate around the place of Algeria in the global world" by showcasing works that seek to "give a voice to stories that have been and still are silenced."[18] Without wishing to appear overly self-congratulatory, we did take some pride in having helped bring these ten artists to the attention of such a large constituency, and in having encouraged visitors to contemplate some of the many questions their works raise. The exhibition formed part of an increasing focus on the MENA region by visual arts curators in the UK, and provided a key example of Cornerhouse's long-term, international investigation of political and social conflict via its programming of contemporary visual art group exhibitions; the legacy that duly informed its subsequent transition to the new organisation and building HOME.[19]

At the time of writing now, recent debates and polemics regarding influence and power within cultural industries have underlined the importance of intersectionality in informing our understanding of how access to positions of power and influence within the visual arts remains perennially constrained.[20] Initiatives such as curatorial activism, as advocated by Maura Reilly, might help spark eventual long-lasting change.[21] If visitors to *New Cartographies: Algeria-France-UK* felt they gained at least some small insight into the richness of these fields of academic enquiry and artistic production, and therefore pondered some of the questions we posed in terms of colonial legacies and

17 "New Cartographies: Algeria-France-UK: Final Report" (report produced by Cornerhouse and sent to curators, artists, and funders).

18 Stephen Lee, "New Cartographies: Algeria-France-UK," in *Art Monthly* 347, 2011, pp. 28–29; Yasmina Dekkar, "New Cartographies: Algeria-France-UK," in *Nafas Art Magazine,* URL: http://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2011/new-cartographies/ [accessed: 24.04.2018].

19 Email statement by Sarah Perks, Visual Art and Film Director at Cornerhouse, Manchester, 25 June 2013.

20 With regard to the determining factor of social class in the UK, see Orian Brook, David O'Brien, and Mark Taylor, "Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries," URL: http://createlondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Panic-Social-Class-Taste-and-Inequalities-in-the-Creative-Industries1.pdf [accessed: 24.04.2018]. For an example of a recent polemic in the US with regard to race and ethnicity, see Carla Herreria, "People Want To Know Why Brooklyn Museum's New African Art Curator Is White," URL: https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/brooklyn-museum-white-curator-african-art_us_5abc09e6e4b06409775cd2d7 [accessed: 24.04.2018].

21 Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, London, 2018. See also Maura Reilly, "What is Curatorial Activism?" *ARTnews*, 7 November 2017, URL: http://www.artnews.com/2017/11/07/what-is-curatorial-activism/ [accessed: 24.04.2018].

post-colonial materialities, then this would certainly be a cause for celebration. For, ultimately, to return to the panel session title, if we are to de-colonise the museum, must we not also de-colonise the mind? In our own modest way, my hope remains that the exhibition created a space precisely for the kind of reflection that might inform such a dialogue.