

SOUS NOS YEUX (BEFORE OUR EYES)

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Continuously, *Sous nos yeux*, before our eyes:

The artist as citizen witnesses reality, the present time;
Art as language interprets history;
Art creates the memory of the world for the future.

What does it mean to design an exhibition that talks about multiple dimensions and the duration of relationships and production processes? How can an exhibition offer a space-time framework for learning about the broader histories told by an artwork or an artist's project?

These are some of the questions explored – or at least used as a springboard for discussion – in *Sous nos yeux*, a project that comprises three exhibitions and this publication. *Sous nos yeux* raises the fundamental question of the artwork's passage from the space of experimentation and creation to the space of visibility, mediation and conservation. It presumes that artworks already contain within them a memory of their space of creation and the subjects that led to their formulation. It is located in the dynamic space between expedition and exhibition – the space that has been a cornerstone of my work as a researcher and curator since 2000.

Sous nos yeux brings together a group of artists whose works can be thought of as actions produced between the intervention site and the exhibition space. The artists were selected through a specific intervention in a geographical place: the Rif Mountains. The curatorial process that accompanied the production of these artworks was defined from the perspective of editorial work: writing, crossing out and rewriting. Some projects required scouting and returning to the sites where the artwork was produced in order to verify relationships, possible histories and translations. Social and political events constantly interfered in the making of these works, as made evident by the many issues addressed

in our artistic and curatorial work. But building closed communities will never be a solution, no matter what the initial benefits might seem to be. The question then is how the art of today, the art of our generation, addresses this history – how it witnesses present time and how it informs us about future possibilities without obstructing historical and current realities.

The works in *Sous nos yeux* were produced during several art expeditions undertaken since 2000 by a generation of artists of different origins and languages as witnesses to their specific moment in human history. Generation 00 comprises Moroccan artists living in Morocco or abroad who, in the early 2000s, began producing artworks that blended the language of art with the language of social or political issues.¹ Many of these artists participated in the *Expéditions du bout du monde* (End-of-the-World Expeditions) as well as in the project *Sous nos yeux*.² The notion of the expedition is put into practice in many iterations of these projects with artists of diverse backgrounds and different artistic vocabularies that are sometimes opposing or contradictory. Some artworks consist of gestures; others, of objects resulting from gestures; and yet others, of concepts or technically reproducible or progressive protocols. The exhibition draws from the experience of art, which encompasses multiple facets because it is first seen in one context (the site of the artwork) and then exhibited in another (in a museum).

I began the process that led to this publication in the Rif Mountains fifteen years ago, during the first *Expédition du bout du monde*. The Rif has always been a region with strong historical movements and migrations that has long raised questions about visibility and invisibility. It is a place whose inhabitants once lived primarily in caves and grottos. The contemporary name of one Rifi community, the Beni-Boughaffar, contains traces of this past: in Amazigh, Beni-Boughaffar literally means ‘the people who hide’. In 2000 the first *Expédition du bout du monde*³ brought together artists Jean-Paul Thibeaudeau and Younès Rahmoun in a Rifi village called Champs de l’Arabe. This expedition, and the following ones, can be thought of as a displacement from the centre of interest towards

the territory and the present. I ask artists not to bring any documents or publications of their previous work because this encounter is the context for the artwork's emergence, its beginning.

The term *expedition* also evokes the colonial campaigns in the Rif that sought to collect local knowledge but also to establish military control. Aware of these issues, the artists replay these questions and participate in the rewriting of history. They construct their own archives and testimonies of a territory where oral culture dominates. Historical interests and expressions are shared between the artists, curators and other citizens, such as inhabitants and visitors. The *Expédition du bout du monde #70* brought together artists Mustapha Akrim, Badr El Hammami, Fadma Kaddouri and Younès Rahmoun and was organised simultaneously with the inauguration of the Rif Residence, an international residence that operated for two years as a catalyst for encounters, productions and experiments.⁴

In close dialogue with these expeditions, the curatorial project *Sous nos yeux* is the result of many years of field exploration and artistic experimentation between spaces of research and production.⁵ It was made through field research and curatorial collaborations with institutions and places of encounter, such as museums and other mediation platforms. Knowledge always follows experience, and a production can follow a careful concept or accidental successions of facts. The idea of progress is contained in knowledge as well as in postproduction and events. *Sous nos yeux* explores the relationship between perception and action, between witnessing and participating in changing the world, as a utopian project or as a more precise architecture.

The exhibition project *Sous nos yeux* is constructed as a book published at different times for multiple audiences. Building on – and in constant dialogue with – these expeditions, the first *Sous nos yeux* exhibition, at La Kunsthalle Mulhouse, took place in the space without building any new walls, as if it were a found place where the artworks defined

their living space. The second exhibition, also in Mulhouse, was in a space constructed like the pages of a book, a spatio-architectural approach that framed the telling of history in each work. The artists translated their projects for – or wrote into and onto – the space of the exhibition. Other works were borrowed, like so many citations on white walls. The third and final part, at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), was a mix of intervention, documentation, narratives and games at the scale of the museum, installed such that the exhibition never lost sight of the sites where the artworks were produced.

This third part extended beyond the exhibition space with artist Oriol Vilanova's proposal that visitors haggle over the ticket price every Thursday for the duration of the exhibition (p. 14, fig. 3).⁶ In reality, *Sous nos yeux* is an exhibition that cannot be physically contained in a single space and is best thought of as a kind of permanent back-and-forth movement between the site of exploration and production and the site of exhibition and debate. A good example of this is Patricia Esquivias's research, which has taken several forms during the project. At MACBA she presented the projection of a date branch transformed into a sculpture and gave a lecture on her trip to the Rif. This trip was part of the *Expédition du bout du monde #13*, which followed in the footsteps of Spanish sculptor Alberto Sánchez Pérez. The project continued for several months after the exhibition closed in Barcelona at L'appartement 22 in Rabat (p. 14, fig. 2).

Anonymous elements were also integrated into the exhibition as the material of memory that helps activate historical knowledge, including heavy objects charged with meaning: bombshells dating back to Rif War (1921-1926). Despite the importance of these found objects, they are not the primary subject of the artistic *Expéditions du bout du monde*. They nevertheless help show the history of a skewed modernity: industrialisation and a secular people isolated from this history. They are witnesses to an effort to erase the history of war in the Rif: the Spanish bought and exchanged empty bombshells from the Rif War which, at the time, the region's inhabitants were using as pestles.⁷

The Rif's archival memory runs through objects, whether traces of railroads, bombs, weapons or the architecture of souks or the colonial administration.

The artworks and projects contained in this publication come after the expeditions and exhibitions. Together, they offer many convergent and divergent ways for thinking about the relationship between spaces of research and experimentation and spaces for action and collaboration in ways that foster collective thinking and even create change.

Sous nos yeux, before our eyes: a reflection that questions the *work* of art and its relationship to an exceptional everyday, commonplace history. *Sous nos yeux*, before our eyes: an evolving, ongoing project that connects the place of production to spaces of exhibition and documentation and that seeks to answer the question of what an art experience can be. *Sous nos yeux*, before our eyes: history also arrives in the Rif Mountains, a history to which these artworks bear witness as they interact with life. The museum exhibits these gestures indicating other geographies, the sublime changing of the world.

1. Generation OO is a curatorial concept that I have theorised. I first defined the concept in my curatorial text for Mustapha Akrim's 2011 exhibition at L'appartement 22. See Abdellah Karroum, "Mustapha Akrim: Article 13", L'appartement 22.

2. Including Mustapha Akrim, Yto Barrada, Badr El Hammami and Younès Rahmoun.

3. *Expédition du bout du monde #1*, with Younès Rahmoun and Jean-

Paul Thibeau, Champs de l'Arabe, Rif, 2000. <http://appartement22.com/spip.php?article261> [access: 5 May 2015].

4. See <http://appartement22.com/spip.php?article357> [access: 5 May 2015].

5. A number of major artists involved in this project, including Fadma Kaddouri, were not included in the selection for *Sous nos yeux*.

6. This proposal echoes the *Expédition du bout du monde #12*,

where Oriol Vilanova experimented with bartering techniques in the souk. The main market in Beni Boufrah, Rif, is on a Thursday.

7. See Abdellah Karroum, "Le temps du plastique contre 'chaussures déchirées', ou comment situer le Maroc dans les années 60", paper presented at the conference Art Activities and Vocabulary, ESAV Marrakech, 24 November 2010.