



*William Kutz, Randa Maroufi, Kristine Samson & Pei-Sze Chow*

## Traversing cinematic representations of borderland identity and belonging

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IN DIALOGUE WITH RANDA MAROUFI AND *BAB SEBTA* (CEUTA'S GATE)

“The limits of my territoriality are the limits of my mediators.”  
- Claude Raffestin (1984)

Randa Maroufi (b. 1987) is an award-winning visual artist from Casablanca, Morocco. Now based in Paris, she holds degrees from the Institut national des beaux-arts de Tétouan, Morocco (2010), the École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts d'Angers (ESBA TALM) (2013), and is a graduate of the prestigious Le Fresnoy – Studio national des arts contemporains in Tourcoing, France (2015).

Maroufi's artistic practice spans art and politics, the status of the image, and the limits of representation itself. At the core of this work is a recurring interest in borders, notably between nation-states, social classes, genders, as well as the staging and moving of bodies in space. Her engagement puts multiple artistic lineages into conversation with each other - evoking at once performance art, installation, photography, sound and video. The juxtaposition of these techniques, and the refusal to arbitrate fact from fiction and fine art, grants her an uncommon capacity to provide clarity and nuance to the taken-for-granted, politically-charged situations that structure contemporary societies.

*Bab Sebta* (2019), or Ceuta's Gate, is emblematic of her craftsmanship. Moving beyond her initial focus on the gendered segregation of public spaces (n.b. *Attempts of seduction*, 2013; *Le Park*, 2015; *Les Intruses*, 2019), Maroufi's short film consists of a series of reconstructed situations observed at Morocco's land border with Ceuta. Her interest

centres on the thousands of people whose livelihoods are tied to the intense trafficking of inexpensive commercial goods from the Spanish exclave into northern Morocco. In the context of the highly contested geopolitical climate between the two countries, and equally ambiguous legal formalities, it is people who are at the centre of this borderland history. If as Marx once argued that the circulation of commodities is the precondition for the circulation of money, these men and women, who physically carry countless wares on their backs across the frontier, are undoubtedly the *ur*-laborers without which the current border regime would cease to function.

In September 2022, William Kutz spoke with Randa Maroufi about the making of *Bab Sebta*. They were joined by Pei-Sze Chow, a specialist in media-geographic approaches to place-making and identity in film and television at the University of Amsterdam, and Kristine Samson, a scholar and artistic practitioner from Roskilde University with expertise in the embodied, situated co-design of urban-environmental spaces and performative activism. Their conversation has been edited for space.

**William Kutz:** To start, Randa, I just want to say how much I really loved this film, especially how you captured the nuances of how people actually live and experience crossing the Spanish-Moroccan frontier — such as the blending of different languages, gender dynamics, how these relate to the hierarchies of how bordering is physically enacted by different types of (im)mobile bodies in this territorial complex, and especially the way that you seem, from an aesthetic perspective, to combine elements of theatre, cinema and ethnography all in a single artwork. Yet, for me, as someone who has lived and worked in northern Morocco, I can imagine that there are a lot of nuances that people who aren't familiar with this part of the world might have overlooked. What I'd like to do today is to have this conversation with you, so that everyone can get a better sense of the finer details that I think make this such a great film for comparing this Mediterranean borderland to the Öresund region of southern Scandinavia. That said, what I would like to do is start with the most relevant question: what exactly is Ceuta Gate and why are people doing what they are doing in this space?

**Randa Maroufi:** The project, *Bab Sebta*, took four years of work, and there are many other elements related to it, which is why I chose to express myself through the film, but also through drawing, photography, and other installations. The film was actually at the centre of this project. Sebta is a Spanish exclave, only 18 square kilometres wide, located in northern Morocco — a piece of Europe in Africa. I spent a lot of time going back and forth there in 2015 to observe what was going on during a Trankat Art Residency I was invited to in Tétouan. The anecdotal part of this project is that it kindled my desire to work on this topic. Sebta is a territory that I have frequented since a young age as my father was a customs inspector. Also, many people in my family work in this sector, as well as in shipping, import-export and so on. Customs slang was often used in our family meetings. I remember that we even used goods from custom seizures!



Poster for *Bab Sebta*.

I lived in Tétouan when I was at the *École des Beaux Arts* for four years, and I have always been struck by the Spanish influence in the region, which is almost omnipresent in the original dialect [of Moroccan Arabic spoken in the region], the way of living, but especially in the culture of consumption in the area. So, when I was invited to this residency in 2015, I spent around one month returning on foot and by car to watch this kind of ballet of individuals around the border of Bab Sebta. I was interested in the dynamics of movement, the plastic and visual appearance of the passage, the characteristic situations and gestures of waiting. I also met two women, Nabila and Keltoum, who were working as smugglers at the border. In the beginning, I just wanted to do some experimentations in a studio with them, and after that I decided to make the film entirely in a studio setting. But Nabila and Keltoum had many different roles in the production of the film — they also acted as stage managers, casting directors, and actresses. In the film, I was interested in specific situations taking place in Bab Sebta and its surroundings, as well as the way in which this geography produces a very special temporal experience like a cyclical route

from the exit of the Moroccan *khzayn* – a kind of warehouse – and from the *khzayn* to the interior of the Moroccan territory. However, it was strictly forbidden to take pictures at the border in the way I wanted to do for the film. It was impossible to do this at the actual border, so I chose to craft the film, let's say, in a more conceptual way.

**WK:** I want to follow up with a clarifying question for people who might not get the appreciate point you are raising. When we're talking about these smugglers or porters, can you tell us a bit more about why exactly this scenario is happening?



Still from *Bab Sebta*.

**RM:** Yeah, so actually before 2019 — not because of Covid, but other political reasons, they closed the border. But before, when you bought goods in Ceuta, anyone going to Morocco could bring as many items as they could physically carry into the country without paying taxes. You are not taxed because these goods were considered personal property. So, if you have more than that, there are many other ways to get around this. For example, some cars with a lot of goods could manage to go to Morocco and sell [the merchandise]. It's not illegal, but it's not legal either, it's an informal exchange. This is why they work with women and men. They use them as porters. They put these packages around their body, [with products like] biscuits and socks. They're cheap goods. There are other kinds of goods too, like weapons or drugs, but I was more interested in the cheap goods.

**WK:** To add to that, something that I think people might not understand from just watching the film is that before Spain became a member of the European Union in 1986, this border complex didn't exist. This infrastructure — the fences and everything

else around it: this is something that has only recently come about since 1993 when the first fences started going up. All Moroccans need a Schengen visa to go to Ceuta – it is formally a part of the European Union. The exception to this, however, is for Moroccans who live in the surrounding area. Tétouan is only about 40km away from the frontier.

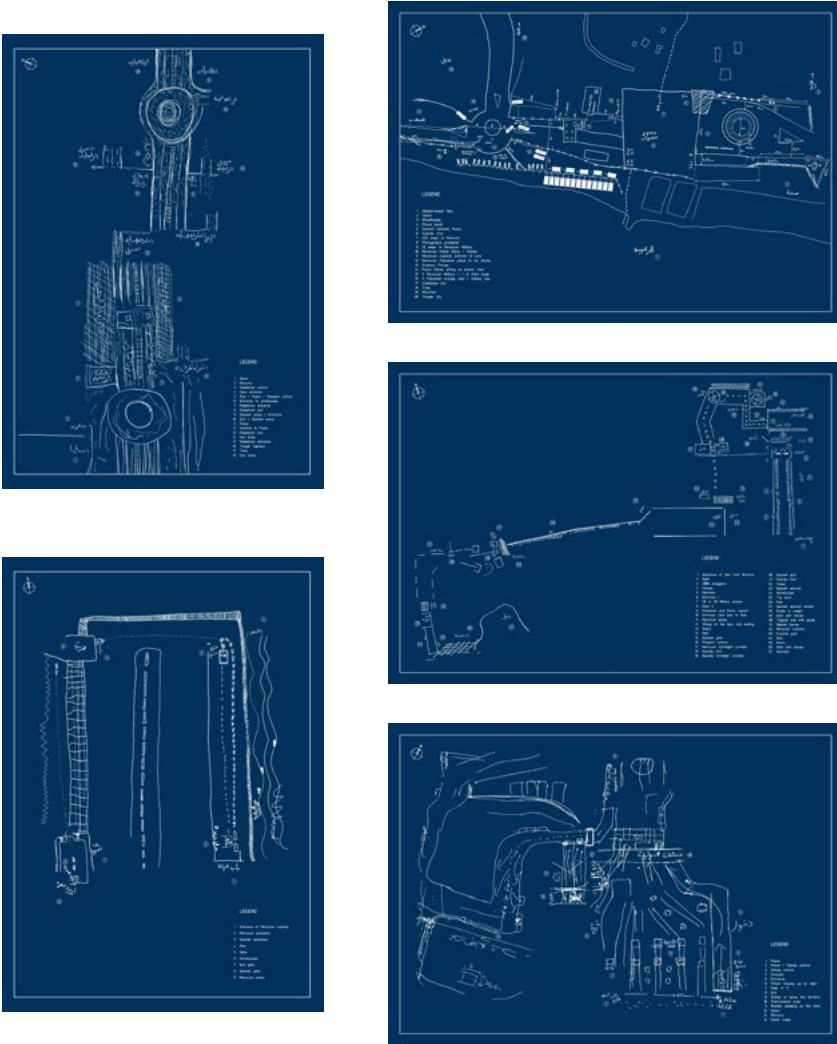
**RM:** Tétouan, but also Castillejos, Martil. Yes, all Moroccans need a Schengen visa to go to Sebta, but people around Sebta, Castillejos, Martil, all they need is a valid passport.

**WK:** It's like a special ID that allows them to go back and forth across the border. Yet, because Morocco doesn't recognize Ceuta or Melilla – the other Spanish exclave – as being part of the Spanish territory, the Moroccan government considers both as occupied territories, there is no formal agreement between the Moroccan state and the governments of Ceuta and Melilla. As a result, there are essentially all these loopholes around what people are allowed to do, which I think is what makes this such an interesting phenomenon that you've captured through the figure of the female porters. It's partly the fact that they don't have to pay taxes, but it's also partly the fact that other larger-scale commerce and shipping isn't happening at this crossing. It is all being taken up almost exclusively by individual people carrying these inexpensive Spanish commodities – chips, gum, things like that – for sale throughout the region. The economy on both sides is massively dependent on this foot traffic. So people work on both sides, some people live on one side and have family members on another. It's a super tight community of people that is divided by this border, that also has this interesting set of social practices that have developed and that I think you've illustrated so well in your film.

Could I also ask you more about how you went about designing and putting together your way of representing what is going on? It so remarkable and I think it comes from another project, the *Diwana* (Customs) series, that you did with people who were also working at the border.

**RM:** Yeah, they are cyanotype print drawings. I tried to use the same method that architects use to design their master plans. I asked people, some smugglers but also some warehouse owners and people who live in the area, to draw for me the paths from the warehouses in Sebta to the entrance of the frontier and back again. I was trying to represent this cyclical movement and we can find also in the legend the same features – entrance, police, *gendarme*, *Guardia Civil*, etc. to connect the drawings together.

**WK:** Did this project happen after the film was made or was this something that was happening at the same time? For me, when I look at this work it reminds me very much of the mise-en-scene of the map of the border you zoomed out to show at the very end of *Bab Sebta*. Until this shot, so much of what we had been seeing actually takes place on a slow panning micro level with individual people doing very specific actions in a longer chain of people and commodities circulating across the border. The final images, however, this map you created here, puts together these otherwise fragmented steps. Was



*Sans titre 1-5, série Diwana, Randa Maroufi.*

this something that came about through the work that you were doing with the porters themselves helping you to link their stories together?

**RM:** I actually started with interviewing people when I was visiting Sebta and the surrounding area, so this drawing was made before the start of the film. I was also at times recording audio, so the sounds we find in the film, for example, when one woman Tamo said “we wake up at five...” this was recorded at the same time as she was drawing. It was a kind of *mode d’emploi*, a guide, for how to use the map. Then, for the film – there is actually no camera movement throughout the entire film – it’s only still shots with a lot



Still from *Bab Sebta*.

of additional work in post-production. I took the final map of the border from Google maps and moved the lines around as I saw fit. There's no relation to the actual scale, however. It's an artistic representation not a literal representation. I was mostly playing with moving borders, trying to fit all the shots that we took in each sequence.

**WK:** For my last question, you grew up in a family where your father was a customs agent. Did working with the different porters change your impression of the border complex, what it was like and how it worked for people?

**RM:** For sure, I grew up with this situation in my family, but when I was younger, I didn't really understand what it was like. There would be conversations about how they stopped such and such a car because of drugs. When I was younger it was more of a game, but later it was more a personal experience crossing with just a passport into Sebta. Being able to do this raised my awareness of the tension caused by not knowing whether you are able to cross or not. Also, I was very intrigued by the people working there. The fact that my father was a customs agent and other family members worked in the border zone – these were more anecdotal elements that helped me to make the film, and connect it to broader socio-political questions. If I hadn't come from these family circumstances, I don't know if the film would be the same.

**Kristine Samson:** I was actually quite amazed by your film, Randa. I think it's incredible how you both work with the cinematic image but also sonography and choreography. When I saw *Bab Sebta*, I was intrigued by the psychological space, by the fact that you actually saw a lot of scenographies determining the borders and making a specific choreography of the bodies moving, or not moving, and how this was embodied in a psychological

atmosphere reinforced by the camera angles from above and into the specific viewpoints of the changing narrators. You could say this is a way of engaging aesthetically with the border that somehow mirrors the political violence, or the power that compels bodies to move or not move in certain ways. I could expand a bit on it, because I have my own hypothesis, but...

**Pei-Sze Chow:** Yeah, I think the psycho-geographical exploration of space and power and the idea of visible and invisible borders is so powerful in your film. The question of how politics inscribes itself into space, especially the politics of the border, plays out on women's bodies very strongly. The women who are carrying the goods on their bodies – I mean that itself is such a strong visual inscription of the border onto a woman's body and I found that striking as an image. It definitely brings to the fore all these questions of how the politics of borders materialize through people's bodies, women's bodies. I found that gendered dimension really fascinating.

**WK:** Randa, was this something that was a conscious choice on your part in the making of your film, to show how women are particularly affected by these border regimes?

**RM:** The reality of the film was the reality of scouting and shooting. To give you two anecdotes that are interesting to consider: the props in the film are filled with straw. In reality there are goods inside but the way in which these bundles are packed is very particular. There were about three people on the team [in charge of accessories] but they couldn't pack the bundles in the way they do at the border. So, after three or four days we had to bring people in to show us how to do it the right way. It was also the case for certain goods that we filmed, for example the quantity and the brand of socks or underwear. I wanted to use actual contraband, not just accessories. So the question we needed to figure out was how to transport these goods between Tetouan and Azla, the city where we were filming. There are gendarmes between Tétouan and Azla and if we were stopped with real contraband, the pretext of filming would not be enough to keep us from being arrested. So, yeah, we had to proceed in the same way as at the border to get these goods through without a problem — that is to say through informal channels.

**WK:** This reminds me of something else about your film in that it is not just that you show that women are carrying these goods on their backs. They are actually wrapping them on their bodies, as physical appendages almost like cyborgs. The goods themselves become *part of* their bodies.

**RM:** Yes, there's a certain *grossophobie* (fat-phobia) because if the woman is too large she cannot pass through the turnstiles. This was a big problem around which a lot of discussions were had. It is one of the reasons why they removed the turnstiles at the border. Some people die because the goods are wrapped too close to their bodies, and when they get tired they fall and get trampled to death by others behind them.





Still from *Bab Sebta*.

KS: I think the last example was quite interesting and it reminded me of a performance scholar called Dorita Hannah who talks about barricade mentality and the performativity of the space. She talks about how the built environment reinforces a contemporary barricade mentality curtailing our freedom and movement. I think it's very clear in Randa's *Bab Sebta* how this space is actually reinforcing a barricade mentality. Conversely, when you compare it to the Öresund region, you can't really find the same physical space, and this is actually a thing I'm interested in: how can we actually talk in the Öresund region about barricade mentalities because obviously they're here. It's like the whole structure seems to be so open and inclusive; is it because the whole biopolitics of the border and restrictions are so much more imminent or embodied in the Öresund landscape? It's like it comes out of nowhere but obviously it's here so I think it just addresses something about the internal and external violence of these spaces, what can be seen and not seen which is interesting.

P-SC: To add to that, I think on the point about how infrastructure and the built environment channels or determines movement across borders, or this barricade mentality, the only way to cross the border of the Öresund in a legitimate way is to take the train, drive across, or possibly by boat. So I think that we can see a bit of how the built environment does perform the border or make it fairly visible and material. You know, in the 2015-16 period when passport controls were reinstated which violated the whole Nordic passport Union, that was such a bold gesture of demarcating the border. I think that is a very paradoxical moment because we see the water and we see the marine environment as a free, open space, and the idea of Saltholm — I don't know if people know it — but it's a nature reserve, it's a protected space for wildlife. The visual aesthetics of it, the openness,

the brightness — it all contradicts this sense of an open region that's ready to help anyone, but really the borders are still there.

**WK:** I think that's such an interesting insight to think about how everything in this open space is illegitimate if it isn't already following pre-established modes of mobility.

**RM:** At the start, the project was originally a documentary, but as I said, it was not possible to film at the border. This is why I was thinking of how to make a documentary but not in the same place. For me it's still kind of a hybrid documentary; the *mise-en-scene* is a fiction, but I am working with the real people. Also, my background, I'm not a filmmaker. I'm coming from a fine arts background, which is why I try to combine performance, photography, sound, installation and décor — all these mediums in the film...

### ILLUSTRATIONS

The photograph on page 19 is a detail of a still from *Bab Sebta*.