CULTURAL EXHIBIT

Mediterranean alternatives

Towards a speculative art residency proto-history

Pau Catà

Our story starts with the tale of two men. The first one is just arriving in Damascus at the turn of the 7th century after a long trip through the Syrian desert. The second is setting up for an expedition towards the desertic lands of the Maghrebian Rif mountains at the turn of the 21st. At a first glance, these two men might not seem to have much in common. While the story will unfold though, we will see how both are part of a common journey: the unpacking of a new way of understanding art residencies and their history placing the Mediterranean at its core.

As places offering temporary living and working space for artists and researchers outside of their usual environments, art residencies provide inspiring contexts to create new

knowledge(s). The three concepts that define art residencies are: mobility (normally art residencies require the artist to travel); knowledge (residents are expected to elaborate on their research and artistic practices); and exchange (residents share their ideas with fellow artists and researchers and, in some cases, with the local communities they temporarily inhabit).

The different attempts to narrate the history of art residencies [1] place their origin in between the journeys of Northern-European grand tourists traveling to the warmth of Italy and Greece during the 17th and 18th centuries, and the spread of art colonies particularly throughout Northern Europe from the 19th century and until mid 20th century. Although this historical narrative might sound pretty coherent, it also recenters Europe and in doing so it neglects, amongst many others, the traveling traditions that, through time, have net multiple synergies throughout the Mediterranean, and particularly in the lands expanding beyond its southern shores. Indeed, the lack of complexity in the discourse that currently shapes the history of art residencies becomes evident if we consider how, willingly or not, the rich tradition that intertwines the relationship between knowledge and the journey within Arab cultures remains invisibilized. The following lines are dedicated precisely to address and challenge this absence.

In order to start unfolding these Mediterranean alternatives, the shared tradition of storytelling is adopted as a way to document the multiple linkages that, besides the many borders imposed, stubbornly persist. The starting point of this journey is the unlikely dialogue between two men: the early-medieval Hejazi scholar Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās and the contemporary Maghrebian curator Abdellah Karroum.

The great forgetfulness

Damascus, May 677

Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās, arrives in Damascus from Basra (current Iraq) on a clear and sunny day at the end of spring 677. Although traditionally inhabited by Eastern Orthodox and Monophysites, over the last decades the city of Damascus has become home to a community of Muslims from Mecca, Medina, and the Syrian desert. They have in turn made the new capital of the Umayyad caliphate an important center of Islamic, Christian, and Aramaic thought. In the different *halaqahs* [2] that are hosted throughout the city, long and intense debates on theology, epistemology, and the nature of the *‘ilm’* [3] are daily held.

Sitting in one of the halaqahs, together with his followers, Abd-Allah proclaims with a grave voice:

> ‘A time will come in which every passing year will be more miserable than the one before it’.

The atmosphere has become tense. Abd-Allah raises his head, looks at each of the scholars

in turn, and affirms:

> ‘And I am not speaking of a year less fertile than another or of a sovereign worse than another, but of your scholars, your pious men, and your doctors, who will depart, one after the other, and who you will not be able to replace’ [4]

The imminent disappearance of the *‘ilm’* produces great anxiety within the scholarly damascene circles. The great forgetfulness recalls the irremediable eclipse of knowledge after the departure of the Prophet Mohammed. How to avoid the danger of loss that hovers over the *ilm*? What can be done to preserve this knowledge from corruption? How to transmit it in its original purity? These are the urgent questions the Islamic men of letters are faced with.

Because the entire Muslim Middle Ages succumbed to the ghost of the great forgetfulness, the scholars of the time cultivated a veritable cult of memory. In this widespread mobilization, the institution of the voyage came to be seen as a shield against forgetfulness: candidates for learning who hoped to become inscribed within a prestigious genealogy of scholarship were advised to connect with the most renowned masters of their time, those found not only in the great urban centers but most importantly in faraway and lonesome landscapes. The common belief was that the language that remained closest to the revelation was that of the Bedouins: spoken in remote lands, it hadn’t yet been corrupted. The mission of gathering the language from the mouth of the Bedouins became an obsession amongst men of letters of the time. And so, the pursuit of such knowledge justified the practice of the journey.

Before departing to his permanent retreat in the Hejazi city of at-Ta’ifon (current Saudi Arabia), Abd-Allah turns his head and looks upon his beloved city for the last time. Damascus seems busy and lively, unaware of his affliction and of the great forgetfulness he sees approaching.

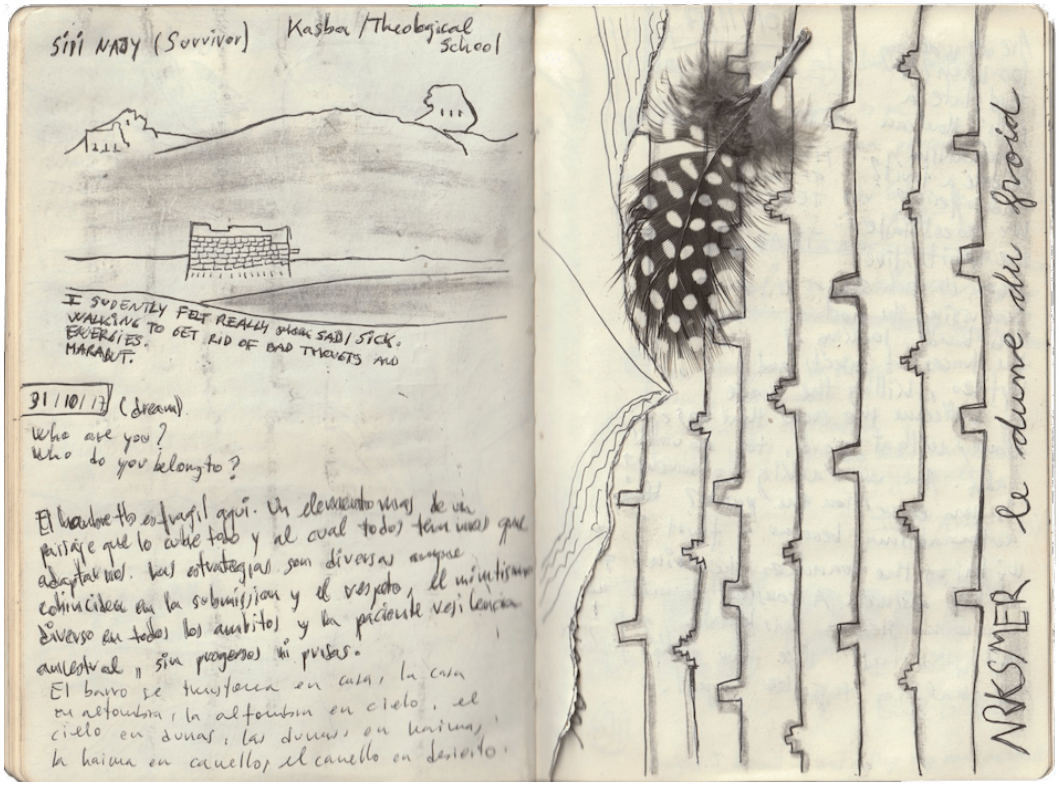
The *Rihla*, or traveling as a method

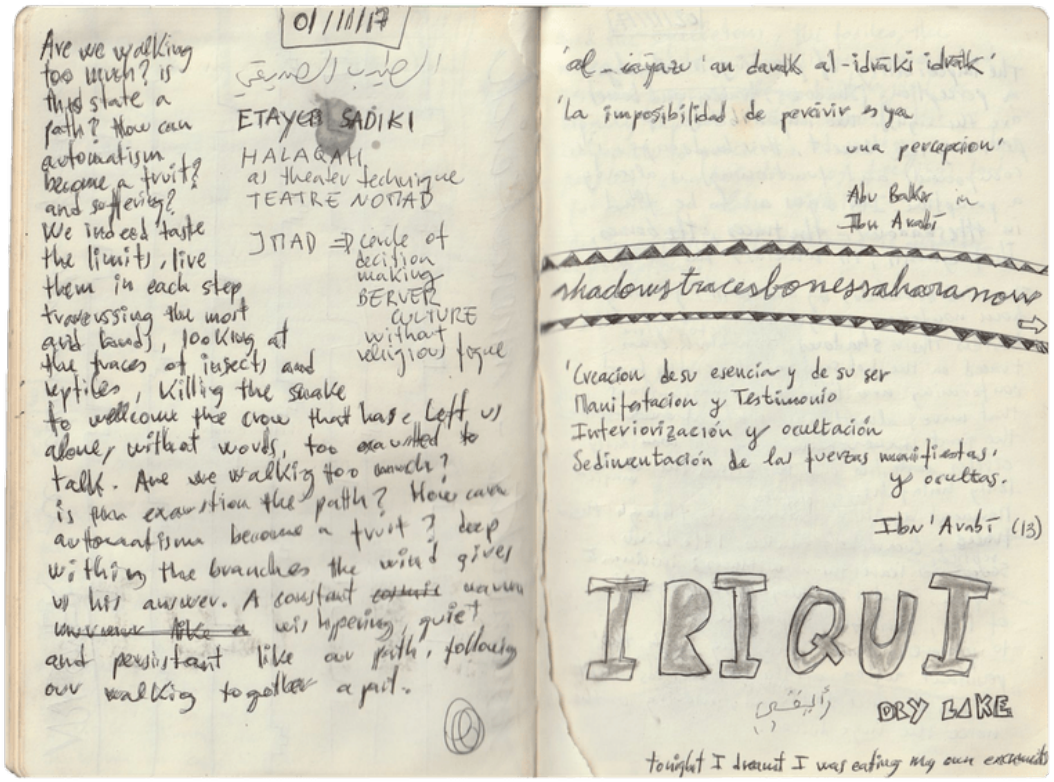
At the threshold of the existence of Islam, the late 7th century in the Christian calendar, the *rihla*, or traveling as a method of acquiring and documenting knowledge, expanded as a Medieval Islamic practice. Over the course of the 8th and 9th centuries, the *rihla* further developed around the *halaqahs*, the first study circles that were constituted in the larger urban centers. Such circles brought together several generations of scholars whose sole preoccupation was to search out, collect, and compare traditions by traveling from one region to another throughout the southern Mediterranean basin and the larger Muslim world.

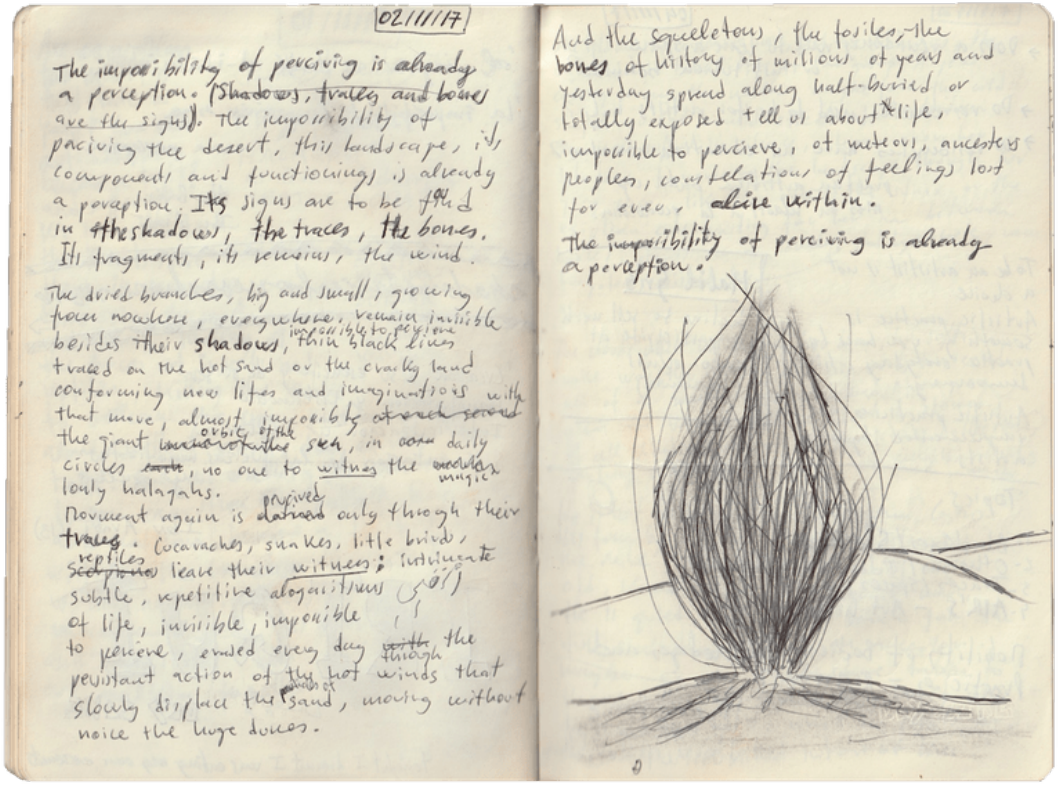
The *rihla* differs from other traveling traditions in one fundamental aspect. In Islam, travel

and the discourse that travel produced did not draw their meaning from a historical or anthropological relationship with the 'Other'. Rather than deriving from otherness, meaning emerged from the construction of the Same. The fact that Arabic rapidly spread as a common language facilitated the exchange of knowledge and tradition through the journey. Indeed, the scholars' obsession with traveling became a matter of method, helping to define a geographically and emotionally delimited space: *dar al-Islam*, the house of Islam.

Through the *rihla*, the *raḥḥālas*, the globetrotters of the age, embraced at least two distinct paradigms: the paradigm of exile, and the paradigm of the voyage as text or '*Ajā'ib*'. Linked to both the narratives of exile and the *Ajā'ib* literary genre, an alternative way to acquire and transmit knowledge arose. This was the *wijada*. The root of the word *wijada*, formed by the consonants w, j, and d, is resonant of the Arabic words for discovery and invention.

- 





Although they were seen with suspicion by traditional scholars, discovery and invention became central concepts in the descriptions of the Bedouins made by younger Islamic travelers from the urban cultural hotspots. For these scholars, the Bedouin —as remote bearers of pure language— had a natural authenticity, exactitude of thought, and subtle intelligence. In fact, in the 9th century, these became the characteristics that were attributed to the ideal portrait of the nomadic Arab which, framed through exoticism, was

widely shared and promoted amongst urban men of letters.

This ideal was short-lived, though. By the 10th century, the sojourn in the desert lost consistency and became less appealing. Hence, after being used for decades as informants the Bedouin communities that had previously been portrayed as exotic transmitters, found themselves neglected. Due to their contact with the men of letters, the Bedouins had corrupted their original purity. Consequently, after a short-lived fascination, soon the urban scholarly idealization of the rural and the remote came to be replaced by nostalgia for an imagined Arcadian past.

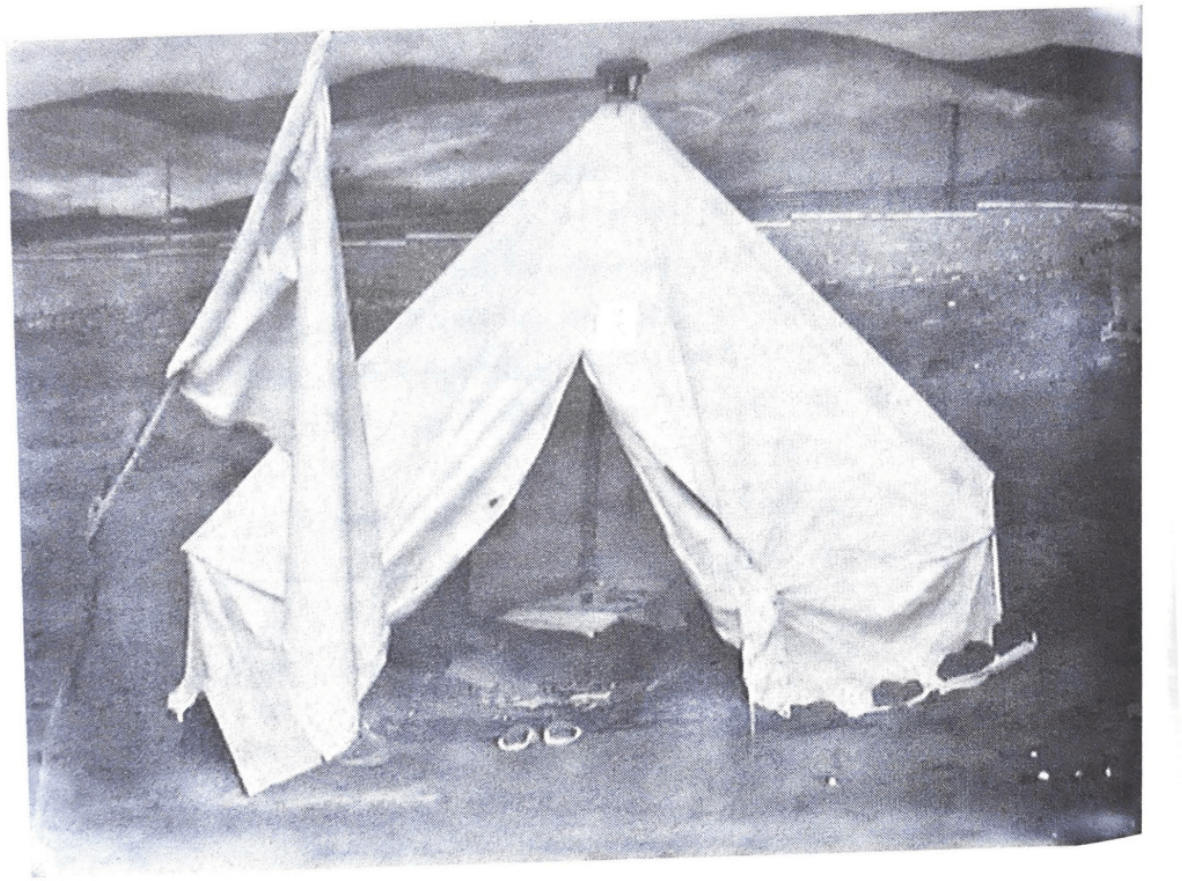
L’appartement 22: From exhibition to expedition

Rabat, May 2000

It is a sunny day in Rabat. Abdellah Karroum is busy in his apartment preparing an expedition, his particular *rihla*. The first such space in Morocco, *L’appartement 22* is set up to function as a cooperative, inspired by traditional systems of production and distribution, in which farmers collectively worked to extract olive oil and distribute it, allowing for exchange and transfer of knowledge. Abdellah envisions *L’appartement 22* as a discursive space. For him, the exhibition as a concept fundamentally rests on the idea of an outward movement, geared toward encounter and discovery. The movement from exhibition to expedition is the path to understand the function of art and its possible autonomy. It is Abdellah’s particular way to bridge tradition and innovation through the language of contemporary artistic practices that will make *L’appartement 22* a referent and inspiring model for a multitude of artist-run spaces and collectives in the Maghreb and beyond.

Resonating with the journey of 7th-century *raḥḥālas*, *L’appartment 22*’s first expedition is about to take place. Together with Younès Rahmoun, and Jean-Paul Thibeau the expedition heads towards a remote community, an Amazigh village in the Rif region. For a period of two months, between June and July of 2000, the three men rent two rooms in a local family’s house and use the flat area over a water tank for their creative projects and discussions. For Karroum, the point is not to educate villagers about art nor to turn them into spectators. Rather, the aim of the temporary residency in this isolated Amazigh community is to invite locals and artists to engage in exchange and discussions about life and the meaning of the creative act.

These exchanges, enhanced through the journey as a method, take place again one year later. This time, the expedition takes place in various marketplaces in the Atlas Mountains where the artists set up a little tent. Residing for several days or weeks in each village, they hold open discussions: What are new media in art? Is oral contact a new medium? Can language and story-telling be considered also an art form? These were some of the questions that fuel the discussions.



Pieprzak, K. (2010) Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Postcolonial Morocco. University of Minnesota
In one of the discursive circles Karroum observes:

> ‘In Morocco, many art practices seem to abandon materiality. These practices do not really leave any traces or objects’ [5]

Indeed, as it might have been the case for the Islamic men of letters, embarking on their *rihla* to encounter and reside amongst bedouins, *L’appartement 22*’s expeditions can be understood as an alternative strategy of an overture. One that claims ‘the possibility of the existence of the margin as an active zone for creative encounters’. [6] In these contexts, as it’s often the case within the Arab artistic milieu,

> ‘the work of making art is often less about the physical construction of the art object (…) [than it is about] discourse’. [7]

Alternative genealogies: Towards an art residency proto-history?

Far from suggesting an isolated eco, the stories of Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās and Abdellah

Karroum —the *Rihla* and the expedition— might become the starting point to trace further resonances. What is to be learned from these cross-temporal and cross-geographical speculative dialogues? Do they suggest an alternative path to the hegemonic discourse? A closer look at the practices that have shaped the relationship between knowledge and the journey within Arab and Mediterranean cultures might as well restore overlooked pasts.

Wonder Wander Spring Sessions (Jordan)

Indeed, even though the Islamic men of letters were taking great pains to learn from the Bedouins through the practice of *rihla*, another emerging class of learned men and women in Islam also began to focus on the desert at the turn of the 9th century. They were mystics seeking fundamental alterity in solitude. Like the other learned men, the mystics used *rihla* to get closer to their master thinkers and local communities. Unlike the scholars, however, they soon felt *rihla*'s limitations. For them, the *rihla* tended to lead to only one aspect of knowledge: the *dhahir*, or knowledge as appearance. In contrast, the mystics considered themselves to be the bearers of a sort of knowledge that reached beyond obvious causes to decipher the hidden, the batin. This is how the siyaha, a new form of travel in search of knowledge, emerged.

Although the practice of the siyaha may seem to belong to a by-gone era, the tradition of vagabond hermits is still alive. With its focus on experiential immersion into the desert through the practice of walking, the project *Wonder Wander* curated by Spring Sessions (Amman) in spring 2018 is an interesting case in point. The project *Wonder Wander* was loosely structured through a collective pilgrimage, starting from the northern tip of Jordan and ending in Sinai desert lands. Spanning a distance of more than 400 kilometers over the course of 6 weeks, the 30 participants engaged with the act of walking to investigate journeying, premonition, foresight, and pilgrimage. [8]

Traveling Narratives Le Cube (Morocco), Townhouse Gallery (Egypt), WaraQ Art Foundation (Libya), l'Espace Culturel Diadie Tabara Camara (Mauritania) and Les Ateliers Sauvages (Algeria).

Away from desert lands and spread throughout the southern Mediterranean main urban hotspots, at the turn of the 16th century, the *majālis* or literary salons constituted important spaces for social and intellectual exchange. [9] While usually formed around a core group of people living in the same city, the majāli became an integral part of elite travel. Indeed,

> 'as arenas for discussion among scholars on the move, literary salons facilitated the circulation of books and ideas and the establishment of a shared intellectual tradition. As occasions where stories were told and history was made, they supported the formation of a common past.' [10]

Over the course of their travels crisscrossing the Mediterranean, men of letters, mystics, and artists joined the multiple majālis organized by leading local scholars, becoming, in some cases, residential spaces that structured the practice of journeying.

The establishment of a shared intellectual tradition through temporary residencies for artists and researchers is also at the core of the project Traveling Narratives (2017-2018). Articulated through a network of cultural spaces [11], several artists, curators and researchers met to share ideas and tell stories by means of creative practices. By collaboratively examining forgotten stories, the group of traveling curators and artists

sought to value the differences that unite peoples across and beyond the southern Mediterranean region.

KawKaw Le18 (Morocco)

In parallel with the rising of the *majālis* in the great urban centers, other practices and places where artists and scholars could find time and space to network, discuss, and perform unburdened by institutional constraints. This is the case of the hafalats or residential translation and study circles that arose particularly in non-urban sites at the turn of the 17th century.

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In a similar fashion as the *ḥafalāt*, in 2017, Le18, a cultural space placed at the core of the Medina of Marrakech, organized Kawkaw. Curated by Younes Baba-Ali, KawKaw was a project structured around an artistic residency, a series of gatherings, and a final collective exhibition. KawKaw united artists from the five Maghreb countries (Morocco, Libya, Mauritania, Algeria, and Tunisia) with the aim of creating a new space of trans-Mediterranean dialogue and research through artistic practice. The project faced unexpected challenges though: due to the restriction of movement through VISA requirements, one of the artists was unable to do the journey. Differently from the Islamic men of letters' freedom to travel throughout Arab lands, the contemporary zeitgeist is characterized by multiple fractures. The colonial ambition and geo-political clumsiness impose borders. Neglecting the tradition of the journey, these are today higher than ever.

Restoring overlooked pasts to envision possible futures

Closely related to both the phenomenon of migration —currently considered illegal as a result of the creation of Fortress Europe— and its touristic exploitation, the Mediterranean continues to be a liminal space. One that is crisscrossed by the hopes and speculations of thousands of individuals. Despite sharing the practice of travel, they confront opposite realities. In contemporary societies, the practice of travel has become polarized. Some travel by choice, others are forced to leave their homes and families. The former is expected and received with all kinds of attention and comfort. For the latter, the journey is illegal and, if they reach the destination, are treated with hostility and forced to confront a reality marked by indifference or xenophobia. This polarization has profound cultural and psychological consequences; these are what the sociologist and philosopher Zigmunt Bauman calls the experience of the 'tourist' and the 'vagabond.' The disparity between these two traveling experiences, before but also beyond the effects of this dramatic pandemia, takes in the current context a dramatic turn —one which, despite our beloved

blindness, is continuously manifest. It is in this context in which a gaze into the past becomes important:

What is to be learned of the *rihla*, the *siyaha*, the *majālis*, and the *halafats* as spaces and practices that, through history, have fostered dialogues and exchanges throughout and beyond the Mediterranean? Which were the socio-political and intellectual contexts that made them possible? Is there a way to obliterate physical and cultural borders by further enhancing these dialogical modes linking knowledge and the journey as proposed by cultural spaces operating in the increasingly challenging contexts of the Southern Mediterranean?

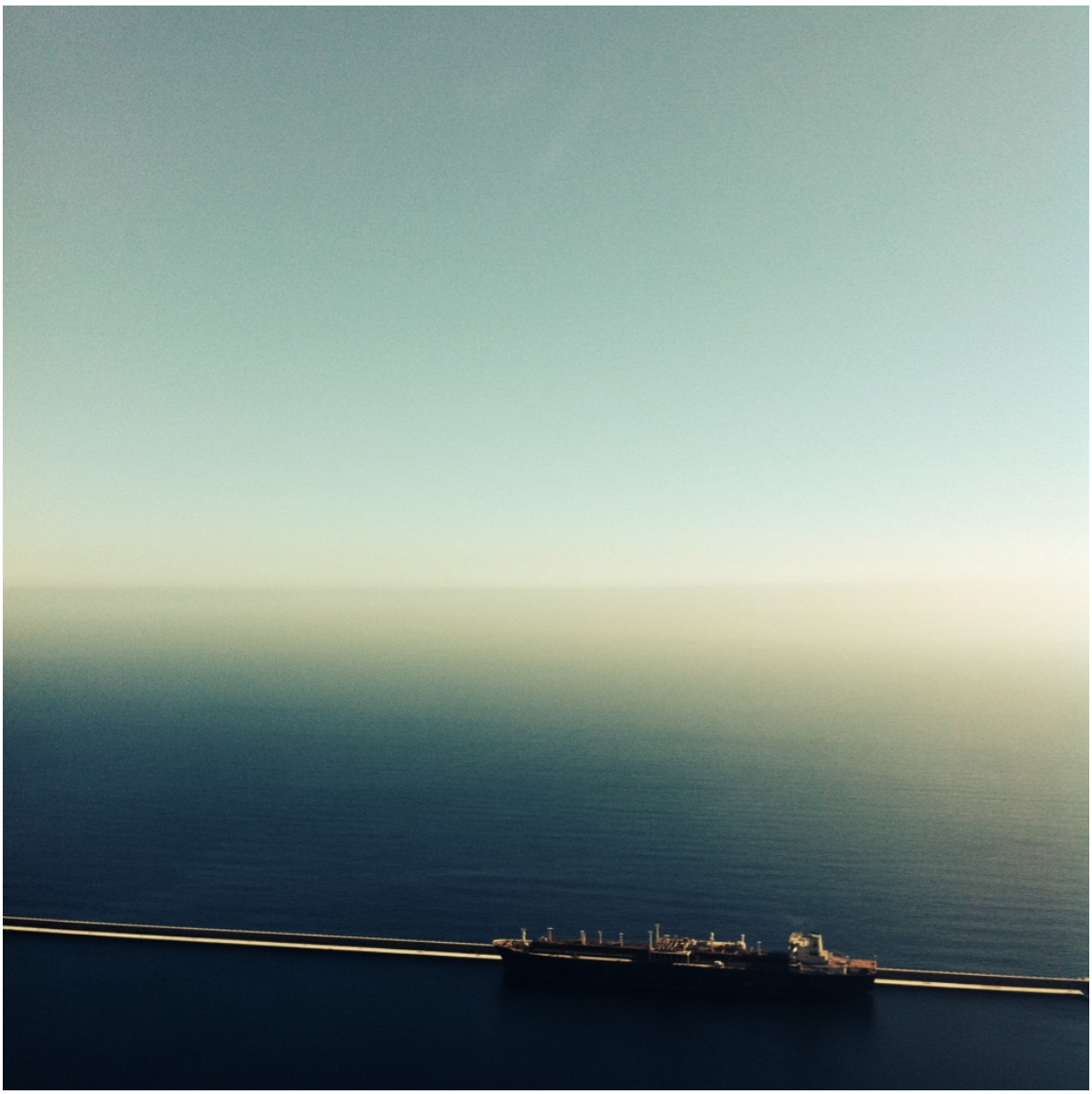
By suggesting resonances between Arab and Islamic intellectual heritages and contemporary art residencies this text has wanted to function as an unfinished constellation, laying bare the traces of a path in need of restoration. Indeed, the speculative art residency proto-history proposed here should not be understood as a self-rewarding narrative, nor as a conclusion. Instead, these pages have wanted to document the histories of Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās and Abdellah Karroum as the starting point to reflect upon alternative genealogies to the journey. Through this story and the multiple analogies proposed, this text has wanted to stress that, besides all kinds of impediments, the Mediterranean and the many cultural initiatives operating along its shores should be understood as essential spaces to continue embracing sameness rather than otherness.

Ultimately, through experimental archaeology of globalization, the stories of Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās and Abdellah Karroum might suggest that it is only by unsettling the grounds on which established discourses currently stand that a multiplicity of points of view can emerge.

As V. Y. Mudimbe rightly stated back in 1988,

> ‘Stories about Others, as well as commentaries on their differences, are but elements in the history of the Same and its knowledge’. [12]

Indeed, the emergence of a common future, within and beyond the Mediterranean, needs to be achieved by way of a return to our shared pasts.



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LIST OF CULTURAL SPACES:

L’appartement 22 (Morocco)
Spring Sessions (Jordan)
Le Cube (Morocco)
Townhouse Gallery (Egypt)
WaraQ Art Foundation (Libya)
Espace Culturel Diadie Tabara Camara (Mauritania)
Les Ateliers Sauvages (Algeria)
Le18 (Morocco)
Project Qafila (Morocco)
Cafe Tissardmine (Morocco)

REFERENCES

1 — See for example https://www.transartists.org/residency-history or the Policy handbook on artists' residencies' Annex 1. *Artists' residencies – a short essay on their origins and development*. European Commission (2014)

2 — Circle. In general, the term refers to a group of students studying under a particular professor. In Sufism, it is used to refer to the circle formed around a spiritual leader, as well as to the circle of students or devotees who adhere to a specific course of study or set of rituals. The term also refers to the circle that may be formed by followers for contemplation.' Oxford Islamic Studies [online] Available at: http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e783 [Accessed Day 16 June 2020].

3 — *'Ilm* is the Arabic term for knowledge. In the Western world, 'knowledge' means information about something, divine or corporeal, while in Islam, *'ilm* is an all-embracing term, encompassing theory, action and education. It is not confined to the acquisition of information, but also embraces socio-political and moral aspects. It requires insight, commitment to the goals of Islam and a willingness to act upon one's beliefs. It is reported in a *hadith* that 'Knowledge is not extensive learning. Rather, it is a light that God casts in the heart of whomever He wills.' in Al.Islam [online] Available at: https://www.al-islam.org/journal/vol-12-no3/islamic-concept-knowledge [Accessed Day 16 June 2020].

4 — Touati, H (2010) *Islam and Travel in the Middle Ages*. Lydia G. Cochrane (Translator). University of Chicago Press. (p.26)

5 — Pieprzak, K. (2010) *Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Postcolonial Morocco.* University of Minnesota Press (p.168)

6 — Pieprzak, K. (2010) *Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Postcolonial Morocco.* University of Minnesota Press (p.168)

7 — Winegar, J. (2006) *Creative Reckonings. The politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt.* The American University in Cairo Press. (p.10)

8 — Also relevant to this text, however, is the interest that has been shown in artistic and curatorial practices that investigate the space of the desert. Examples include Project Qafila, developed by architect and curator Carlos Perez, and Cafe Tissardmine, founded by Karen Hadfield, both adopting the southern Moroccan desert as geographical loci.

9 — Derived from the Arabic root j-l-s, and widely used in both Arabic and Ottoman Turkish, *majāli* literally means 'a place where one sits.' Similarly, the word 'residence' derives from the Latin root sidere, or 'to sit:' a resident is one who remains seated.

10 — Pfeifer, H. (2005) 'Encounter after the conquest. Scholarly gatherings in 16th-century Ottoman Damascus' Published online by Cambridge University Press.. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743815000021

11 — Le Cube (Morocco), Townhouse Gallery (Egypt), WaraQ Art Foundation (Libya), l'Espace Culturel Diadie Tabara Camara (Mauritania) and Les Ateliers Sauvages (Algeria).

12 — Mudimbe, V.Y (1988) *The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, philosophy, and the order of knowledge. Indiana University Press.* (p.78)

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Pau Catà is the founder-director of CeRCCa and Co-coordinator of NACMM - North Africa Cultural Mobility Map and Platform HARAKAT. He is currently finishing his practice-led Ph.D. in Art at Edinburgh University, a project which is available online. His work, focusing on historiography, artistic research, epistemology, and the journey within the Euro-Med context, has been published in several journals such as Artnodes, reVisiones, Transartist-On AIR, Interartive, and TCE. He has co-curated several exhibitions such as *The Art of Getting Lost* in Gudran-El Behna (Alexandria), *In between wells _ reloaded*, Le18 (Marrakech), Estat Previ in Es Baluard Museu d'Art Modern i Contemporani from Palma de Mallorca, *Resistances by the Sea* at the Museu d'Art Modern de Tarragona, *Transformer* at Blitz as part of V18 (Matla) and also *Focus Magreb* and *Focus Mediterranea* at SWAB Barcelona International Art Fair 2016 and 2017.