

SHORES OF SAHARA-SAHEL: WAVES, FORMS, FUTURES

Master Symposium

As part of the symposium series *Gender and Equality in the Arts*

11 – 12 October 2023

On-site and online:

Auditorium D 1.04, Tower Building, Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW

→ **LIVESTREAM**

Institute Art Gender Nature HGK Basel FHNW
in collaboration with Culturescapes 2023 Sahara

With contributions by Phoenix Atala, Kateryna Botanova, Binta Diaw, Adji Dieye, Onome Ekeh, Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi (crazinisT artisT), Yarri Kamara, Benaouda Lebdaï, Rania Mamoun, Yara Mekawei, Kettly Noël, Temitayo Ogunbiyi, and Mohamed Sleiman Labat

Moderated by Chus Martínez and Quinn Latimer

Research: Marion Ritzmann

Press: Anna Francke

12 October 2023, 4.30 pm

Performance *The Dust in Bed* by Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi [crazinisT artisT]
der TANK

The symposium is open to the public and will be held in English.

More information and program: dertank.ch

Program Culturescapes 2023 Sahara: culturescapes.ch

“For centuries,” Benaouda Lebdaï notes, “the Sahara was a space of human and cultural transhumance.” Neither uncrossable nor empty, as it is often narrated, this prismatic region—a vast desert space of dunes, volcanic mountains, salt flats and rocky plateaus, village oases, and prehistoric seabeds—was long a site of social and artistic transfer and epistemological exchange, before being cast into a colonial system by Europe, and turned into a racialized border, shore to shore. Ibrahima Baba Kaké himself once wrote: “Those who thus separate Africa into two different entities make a historical nonsense. The desert must once again become a catalyst... Restoring relations initiated by the ancestors, stopped by the colonial system, is a necessity.”

Under the sign of this necessity, and in the deep shadow of a changing climate that is violently disrupting the Sahara’s disparate ecologies, the autumn symposium of Institute Art Gender Nature HGK Basel FHNW will be devoted to the artistic and cultural productions, lines of political and aesthetic thought, and epistemologies of the Sahara, and the accompanying Sahel. Titled *Shores of Sahara-Sahel: Waves, Forms, Futures*, the symposium will be held in collaboration with the Culturescapes 2023 Sahara festival, and will take place on 11 and 12 October 2023, at Institute Art Gender Nature HGK Basel FHNW. Over the course of its two days, the symposium and its artists, thinkers, writers, performers, poets, translators,

choreographers, and composers—all come from or engaged with the Sahara-Sahel, or their diasporas—will consider some of the ideas, performances, poetics, politics, fictions, materials, and movements that continuously emerge from this kaleidoscopic space.

Simultaneously, the symposium's participants will reflect on their own artistic and social practices in light of the Saharan region's effects and affects. That said, if light is the irradiating trope of colonial enlightenment, the symbol of knowledge in imperialist thought and violently extractive and exploitative political practices, this gathering will attempt to engage with a more decolonial idea of the Sahara and the rich opacities that constitute it. Should the Sahara be understood as ancient space of connection, circulation, and trade—from its northern to its southern shores, its dunes and volcanic mountains to its lush savannahs—so it might also be seen as a contemporary site of interchange between strikingly singular societies and communities on all sides of the desert, that aspect of the region most often imaged and imagined.

Indeed, the desert has long been a source of inspiration and ideas for artists, writers, and thinkers from both within and without its specific climates. The Sahara—as fact and metaphor both—has resulted in literatures, cinemas, bodies of political and philosophical thought, and social practices and movements that cross not just the desert but the world, often standing in for some larger allegory of place and one's body reflected or alienated within it, a story of self, surveillance, and social world.

What are the images that the Sahara has evoked over time, in history, on the one hand, and in art and literature, on the other? Benaouda Lebdaï asked once. To this query we might add others: What are the forms and futures that the Sahara, and its peoples and nonhuman spirits, its ecologies and migrations, necessitate now? How to see the Sahara through a more decolonial prism, per Yarri Kamara? Featuring the words and works of Phoenix Atala, Kateryna Botanova, Binta Diaw, Adji Dieye, Onome Ekeh, Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi (crazinisT artisT), Yarri Kamara, Benaouda Lebdaï, Rania Mamoun, Yara Mekawei, Kettly Noël, Temitayo Ogunbiyi, and Mohamed Sleiman Labat, this symposium will attempt some ideas and images, poetics and practices, if not answers.

Shores of Sahara-Sahel: Waves, Forms, Futures is part of Institute Art Gender Nature's biannual master symposia series that considers artistic practice within its entanglements with gender, coloniality, language, and ecology. Among the artist talks and presentations, *Shores of Sahara-Sahel* will also include a book launch of *Sahara: A Thousand Paths Into the Future* (Sternberg Press, 2023), the Culturescapes 2023 Sahara publication edited by Kateryna Botanova, Yarri Kamara, and Quinn Latimer. A closing performance by Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi (crazinisT artisT) will take place in der TANK, on 12 October 2023.

This symposium is dedicated to the memory of artist Lin May Saeed.

Technical team

Charlotte von Engelberg, Katharina Kemmerling, Marco Mastrogiacomo, Tabea Rothfuchs, Konrad Sigl, Kenny Süffert

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→ [Livestream](#)

PROGRAM (subject to alterations)

DAY I – 11 October 2023

Part 1

- 10.00 am Welcome by Chus Martínez and Quinn Latimer
- 10.15 am Reading by Quinn Latimer
- 10.25 am Temitayo Ogunbiyi
- 11.05 am Yarri Kamara
- 11.45 am Lunch

Part 2

- 2.00 pm Welcome by Chus Martínez and Quinn Latimer
- 2.10 pm Benaouda Lebdaï
- 2.50 pm Phoenix Atala
- 3.40 pm Break
- 3.50 pm Adji Dieye (online presentation)
- 4.30 pm Round-up of DAY I by Chus Martínez and Quinn Latimer
- 5.00 pm End of DAY I

DAY II – 12 October 2023

Part 3

- 10.00 am Welcome by Chus Martínez and Quinn Latimer
- 10.10 am Reading by Quinn Latimer
- 10.20 am Onome Ekeh
- 10.50 am Mohamed Sleiman Labat
- 11.20 am Kettly Noël
- Noon Lunch

Part 4

- 2.00 pm Welcome by Chus Martínez and Quinn Latimer
- 2.10 pm Yara Mekawei
- 2.40 pm Binta Diaw
- 3.10 pm Rania Mamoun (online presentation)
- 3.40 pm Break
- 3.50 pm Kateryna Botanova, Yarri Kamara, and Quinn Latimer: Book presentation of *Sahara: A Thousand Paths Into the Future* (Sternberg Press, 2023)
- 4.25 pm Walk to der TANK
- 4.30 pm Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi (crazinisT artisT): *The Dust in Bed*, performance at der TANK
- 5.00 pm End of DAY II

BIOGRAPHIES OF PARTICIPANTS

Phoenix Atala is a trans, transversal, transdisciplinary French-Moroccan artist, invested in decolonial and queer practices, and speculative and transformative futures. He explores, chops down, wrongs up film, performance, stand-up comedy, web series, rap, and so on. More often than not, and more and more so, Atala works collectively and collaboratively. He is a Visiting Professor at Institute Art Gender Nature HGK Basel FHNW.

Kateryna Botanova is a Basel-based cultural critic, curator, and writer from Kyiv. She writes on decoloniality, solidarity, and care with a focus on artistic practices and societal dynamics in the Global South and Eastern Europe. She is a co-curator of *Culturescapes Sahara*, and co-editor of its anthologies. Previously the director of the Center for Contemporary Art in Kyiv, she is a member of PEN-Ukraine.

Binta Diaw is a Senegalese-Italian visual artist between Milan and Dakar. Her works sit at the border of the autobiographical and the abstract, the figurative and the conceptual. Whether excavating her Italianness and Africanness, or Black Feminist thought, Diaw is interested in ancestry and ancestors, memory and the way it can be figured into images of the memorial. Her use of soil and land—as metaphor or material—reveals a deep connection to the earth, and all those who came from it.

Adji Dieye is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice examines the construction of national epistemologies within public and institutional settings. Using archival materials, architecture, and advertising, she questions the relationship between our ontological understanding and the paradoxes inherent in the creation of a national imaginary of progress. Her work was recently shown at Fotomuseum Winthertur, the 2022 Dak'art Biennale, and Rencontres de Bamako.

Onome Ekeh is a writer and designer of speculative fictions. Born and raised on both sides of the Atlantic, she started out as a painter, gravitated towards design, and then fell in love with cinema. Somewhere in the collision she went digital and discovered alliances with AI. Her works span film, video, theater, literature, and radio. She is a lecturer at Institute Art Gender Nature HGK Basel FHNW.

Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi [aka crazinisT artisT] is a trans woman with the pronoun sHit if not She. Va-Bene lives in Kumasi, Ghana, but works internationally as a multidisciplinary “activist,” performer, curator, and mentor. She is the artistic director of crazinisT artist and Our Railway Cinema Gallery (ORCG) studio. Investigating queerness and sexual stigma, her body and gender-fluid persona is employed in performances, images, and installations that confront injustice, violence, internalized oppression, and anti-blackness.

Yarri Kamara is a writer, translator, and policy researcher. Of Sierra Leonean and Ugandan origin, she lived for almost two decades in Burkina Faso. Her essays have appeared in *Africa Is A Country*, *The Republic*, and *Welt-Sichten*. She was longlisted for the 2023 National Translation Award in Prose (USA) for her translation of Monique Ilboudo's novel *So Distant From My Life*. Her policy research work revolves mainly around policy for cultural industries with organizations such as UNESCO. She currently lives in Milan.

Quinn Latimer is a writer, editor, and occasional curator. Her books include *Like a Woman: Essays, Readings, Poems* (2017) and *Rumored Animals* (2012), and she was editor-in-chief of publications for documenta 14, in Athens and Kassel. Her recently curated exhibitions include *Perpetual Language*, at Croy Nielsen, Vienna, and *SIREN (some poetics)*, at Amant, New York. She is Head of the MA at Institute Art Gender Nature HGK Basel.

Benaouda Lebdaï is University Professor at Le Mans Université. He is a specialist in comparative colonial and postcolonial literature, focused on the relations between literature and history, gender and identity, migration and exile. He has written widely on African literature—on Chinua Achebe, Zoë Wicomb, Rachid Boudjedra, Assia Djebar, and Frantz Fanon, among others—as well as on the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Narratives. He contributes to *Le Point Afrique* and *El Watan*.

Rania Mamoun is a writer and Sudanese resistance committee activist. A 2010 International Prize for Arabic Fiction Nadwa participant, Mamoun has published two novels in Arabic: *Green Flash* and *Son of the Sun*. Her books also include *Thirteen Months of Sunrise*, shortlisted for the 2020 Warwick Prize for Women in Translation. Her book of poetry, *Something Evergreen Called Life*, translated by Yasmine Seale, was recently published by Action Books.

Chus Martínez is a writer and curator, and Head of Institute Art Gender Nature HGK Basel FHNW. She is curator of Ocean Space, in Venice, for TBA21–Academy, and curatorial director of der TANK, in Basel. Her books include *Like This: Natural Intelligence as Seen by Art* (2022), *Corona Tales: Let Life Happen to You* (2020), and *Club Univers* (2017). Previously, she was Head of the department of artistic direction for DOCUMENTA (13), in Kassel.

Yara Mekawei is an artist and scholar who blends urban rhythms with architectural foundations, crafting auditory vignettes into visual tales. Rooted in architectural philosophy, social historiography, and literary thought, her compositions bridge antiquity and modernity, making sound both vessel and voyage. Her forthcoming work weaves Sufi poetry with the Book of the Dead's wisdom. Drawing inspiration from diverse social philosophies, her art forms a continuous narrative reflecting her cultural identity and femininity in a North East African context.

Kettly Noël is a dancer, choreographer, performer, and actress born in Haiti but often working in Bamako, where she has been the director of the Festival Dense Bamako Danse and of the cultural centre Donko Seko, a space for the development of contemporary dance as a tool for socialization in Mali. Her work has been shown widely, including at documenta 14, in Athens, the Humboldt Forum, in Berlin, and TichÉlÉ—Transmission and Triennial Dance Repertoire, in the Festival d'Avignon.

Temitayo Ogunbiyi is a Lagos-based artist interested in how commerce and history can inscribe public space. In her practice, she forges dialogues between current events, anthropological histories, and botanical cultures. Her work can be currently found at the Museum Tinguely, in Basel, including in a playground installation in Solitude Park titled *You will follow the Rhein and compose play* (2023).

Mohamed Sleiman Labat is a Saharawi artist and writer based in Algeria. He is the founder of Motif Art Studio in the Samara refugee camp in the Hamda Desert. He experiments with discarded materials found in the camp to make art, while facilitating cross-generational learning and the preservation of traditional storytelling. Labat uses various media to document the oral and nomadic cultures of the peoples of the Western Sahara, as well as new narratives of the generations born in the camp since the discovery of phosphate in the 1970s and the resulting land clashes with Morocco.