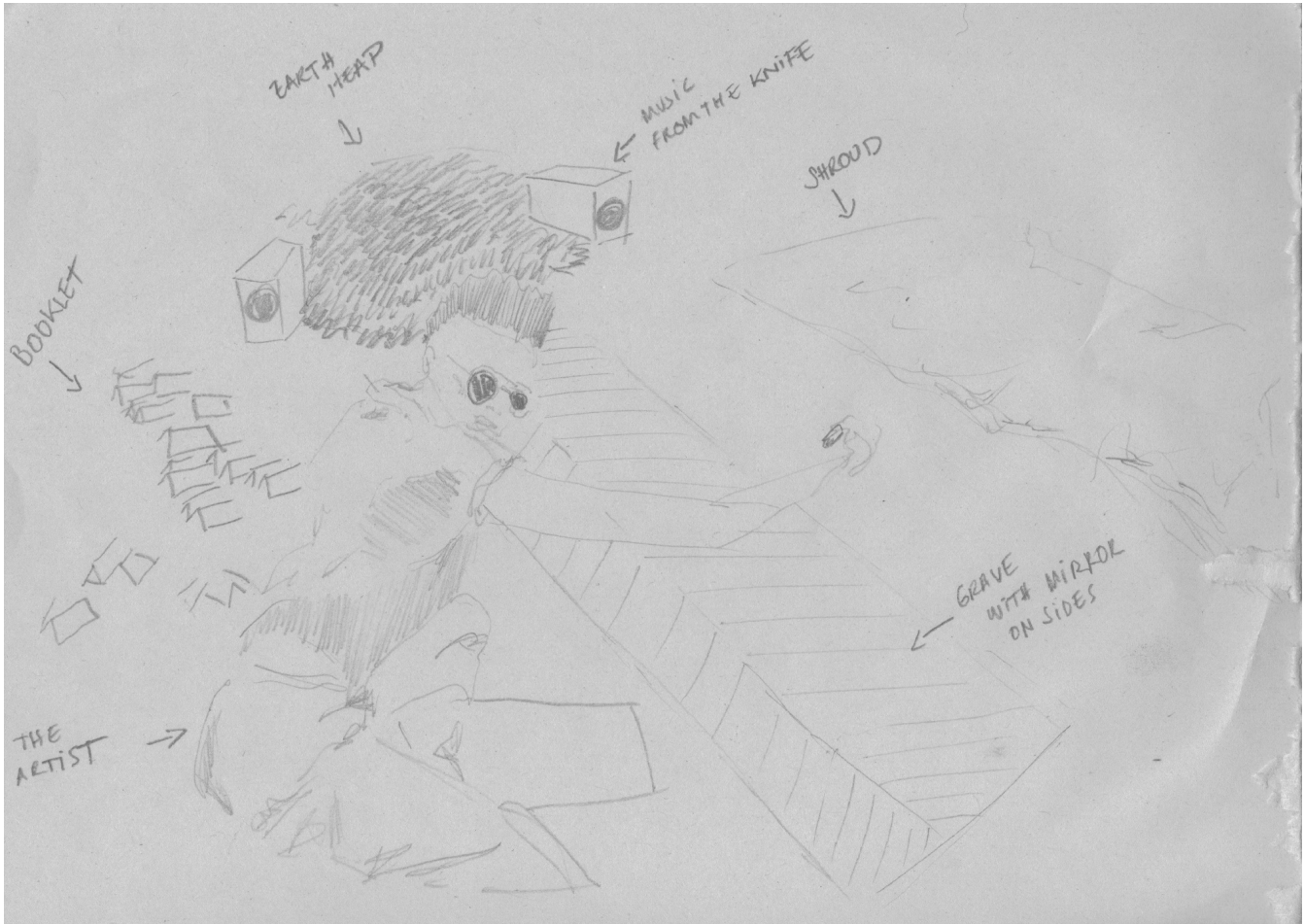


Contextualising Mame-Diarra Niang's "Éthéré"

On *Éthéré*



1. Encountering Mame-Diarra Niang's body of work

I first discovered the work of Mame-Diarra Niang by reading an article on her photograph series *Sahel gris* published by online platform *Contemporary And* that focuses on international art from African perspectives. The series had been exhibited as her first solo show at the *Institut Français* in Dakar in October 2013. Since then, she has been participating in a group exhibition during the Dak'art Biennale 2014, *Les Piétons de Dakar*, and is now represented by the well-known South African gallery *Stevenson* based in Cape Town and Johannesburg where she is currently taking part in an artist residency programme.

Framing the picture of a self-taught visual artist

Mame-Diarra Niang is acknowledged as a visual artist and self-taught photographer. She was born in Lyon, France, in 1982 and was raised within the diversities of several cultural identities between the Ivory Coast, Senegal and France. Her 'nomadic' practice as a photographer has never aimed to literally describe or identify places, but rather to focus on questioning the plasticity of territory. She explores the urban landscape as a tool of inspiration to nurture her creative thoughts. Besides, she interrogates architectural patterns or recurrent shapes (see in her series *At the wall* and recently *Metropolis*) and investigates the design of housing in contemporary societies. Photographing the territory of a city leads to encountering its inhabitants or at least to questioning their absence. Thus, beyond the idea of territory marked by architectural materialization one can also find in her artistic approach the notion of the body raising further questions in her work, for instance: How does urban shaping of spaces fashion cultural identities? How do the inhabitants of an urban space shape their own territorialization defining themselves within specific cultural, sociopolitical frames? Is it then the result of individual choice rather than a collective one or both intertwined? Her practice explores the paradigm of the modern city and its unbearable nature of motion. She considers photography as being the perfect medium to capture the relentless ephemerality of time.

Between body, death and territory

"Before construction even begins on the buildings, electrical boxes are put in place. So there are these whole plots full of little boxes. Here I was taking a walk on a plot like that. And it really felt like a cemetery. This thought occurred to me when I was wondering about - that was what I was doing when I took this series of photos, wandering aimlessly. Ultimately we spend our time trying to impose a frame and narrowing it. It's almost as if we are adjusting to our own unique rhythm. In the end, because we are looking to live above others, life side by side with others will no longer be what it once was. It will be found in the cemetery, where we will all end up next to each other. Rambling around this landscape, I was really thinking about this idea, this loss of identity, about everything we've lost. And yes, we also have the need to be alone here, because the family can be a burden, society is a burden. So we have the need to build our own boxes, little boxes, each hidden from the others, above them, below them, but hidden in any case. And this amounts to a kind of death. My thoughts on this subject are still evolving. They are what led me to this photographic series, 'Sahel Gris'".

Mame-Diarra Niang in an interview with Contemporary And magazine 2014

This paragraph caught my attention regarding the relation between body, death and territory that Mame-Diarra Niang draws with discernment in her own words. It expresses quite well how she generates her artistic process and thoughts: as metaphorical approaches that deal with depicting social facts within the performative structures of societies. The same manipulation of elements and realities of the body rendered (in)visible can also be observed in her recent performance-installation *Ethéré* which took place during the Dak'art Biennale as part of the off programme at the gallery *Atiss* between May 11th and June 8th 2014. The artistic project was shown in the garden of the venue using the peacefulness of its environment. It reminded one of the quietness of a cemetery ...

A hole is dug on the grassy ground in the shape of a grave. On each side of the rectangular hole are fitted mirrors that reflect the outside and suggest the emptiness of the space as well as the absence of the supposed bemoaned body. The sun is shining in the Senegalese capital city. People are entering the gallery from the outside space having wandered from one spot to the other and enjoyed the vibrant dynamic of the contemporary art scene. They find Mame-Diarra Niang sitting on the floor and folding booklets, so-called "sanctuaire de poche", which depict a heart as landmark outlined with photographs of bunkers in Dakar. The photographs were taken by the artist. It is an invitation to look for imaginary paths to the grave of the lost. If one person from the audience approaches the artist she pretends to hand her or him the booklet but then throws it into the hole and invites the viewer to grab it from there. In this way, the viewer enters the performance actively and becomes part of it through symbolically burying her- or himself in the hole and suddenly seeing her or his own face reflected by the mirrors. Through this reflexion everyone can experience her or his own imagined, projected burial by performing this ritual.

From the exhumation of a dead body to the death of the viewer

Ethéré embodies the death of everyone and no one at the same time. On the right side of the hole lays a carpet with similar dimensions as those of the grave. The viewer is invited to lay on it and meditate or rest for a moment. Up versus down, fullness versus emptiness, sky versus underground: the installation performance seems to be inscribed within symbolic dichotomies indicated through its verticality as well as horizontality. The title of the installation performance refers critically to a local news report of the sociopolitical Senegalese landscape, namely the secular exhumation of the body of a young Senegalese, presumably homosexual. Referring to the cruel act of violence on a dead body, the artist interrogates the viewer on the right of being buried as a permission to render identity visible and therefore to legitimate afterlife the existence of oneself. The title of the work has a double meaning. It evokes the literal idea of digging out a body from a grave but also induces the metaphorical reading that the dead body would vanish into invisibility like in the chemical reaction of the ether. Florian Gaïté suggests the notion of "the burial of an absent body" in his review *De l'autre côté* (2014): "*Ethéré* explores the link between death and territory [...]. Favouring the plurality of perspectives and the singular encounter, free movement and the reflexive network can structure perception just as much as they destabilise it [...]. The installation mobilises intimate judgement and outflanks religious dogmas, recalling spirituality in its capacity for deterritorialization." Death and (de)territorialization, Mame-Diarra Niang's photographic path is extending to a multidisciplinary body of work from depiction of urban landscapes through her photographic lens to the performing of territorialized bodiliness of human beings using performance and installation as medium. Playing with the absence of the body as a recurrent motif in her art she investigates the issues of the (in)visibility of bodies through performative norms and ritual frames such as funeral and loss.

2. From (de)territorialization to (dis)identification of the body. Performing as critical transformation

From territorialization of death to deterritorialization of the viewer

"In Precarious life (2004), I considered the question of what it means to become ethically responsive, to consider and attend to the suffering of others, and, more generally, of which frames permit for the representability of the human and which do not. Such an inquiry seems important not only to knowing how we might respond effectively to suffering at a distance, but also to formulating a set of precepts to safeguard lives in their fragility and precariousness. In this context, I am not asking about the purely subjective sources of this kind of responsiveness. Rather, I propose to consider the way in which suffering is presented to us, and how that presentation affects our responsiveness. In particular, I want to understand how the frames that allocate the recognizability of certain figures of the human are themselves linked with broader norms that determine what will and will not be a grievable life."

Judith Butler (2009: 63-64)

Ethéré was first conceived as an installation taking place in a site-specific space, the garden of a gallery in Dakar. The issue of (de)territorialization is at stake in this work. Firstly, it aims to refer to a specific cultural, sociopolitical environment of a city, its state of governance as well as current events and news. Secondly, it deals more specifically with the territorialization of the body such as its performative materialization taking place in burial traditions and the mourning of death. In his review, Florian Gaïté considers Mame-Diarra Niang's work as a "tribute" in terms of gestures or as a "monument" according to its physical presence which would "give its human dimension

to the deceased person" (Gaîté 2014). There is indeed this relation between body and memory that operates here. The medium of the performance enlivens the constellation and activates it. The artist involves the audience to explore extreme forms of behaviour and bodily constitutions. It draws the aesthetic experience back into the sphere of communal ritual, nearly centered on the body. Performance as a form of artmaking transgresses representations in challenging physical boundaries of the body and therefore establishes cultural sensibilities. By using this critical strategy, the artist -connects her work -to a specific aesthetic that 'threatens' and questions social orders and performative norms of the body. Driven by a back and forth dynamic, she first received the local news. Then she reshapes it through a critical sensitive set-up (the performance installation) as a way to reflect upon it within a living conversation that engages the audience. If, as Ute Frevert once said, the emotions are not only made by history but emotions also make history (see Eva Illouz 2012) performance as a medium is then a way to generate emotions and reactions from the audience. It endeavours to create alternative narratives which could empower minorities and shape sites of resistance against repressive sociopolitical system. The artist involves the audience's bodies in order to reactivate collectively the painful memory of the exhumation. Reflected in other drifting thought, this artistic gesture aims at performing memories in a ritual frame, takes position and asserts a statement concerning the violence of this dramatic event (violence on the dead body). To involve the audience seems of paramount importance in this work. Thus, it restores the body as well as the symbolic lack of a being. By re-appropriating the body it reclaims our bodies (viewer) to make visible the invisible which might have been rendered minorities from the normative framing of identity policy. Here we find one of the main foundations of feminist critical theory embodied by one of the pioneer thinkers in Queer Theory: to resist by becoming visible (Judith Butler) the reappropriation of the oppressed, dehumanized, reprimanded body, but also the principle of performance that enables social, critical dialogue beyond language structures on themes rendered invisible or ignored within the public space (such as taboos, prohibitions, interdictions, etc). If one could draw the use of the body as an artistic medium, it is here involved within this relation between performing, existing and expressing in order to create apprehensions of the body and its circulation. Furthermore, Mame-Diarra Niang reframes the traditional practice of grief and burial by exploring formally its physicalness and corporeal territoriality. She points out the frame of such a normative tradition that allows the representation of the body or excludes it. As Judith Butler has notably emphasized in her book *Frames of war. When is life grievable*: "grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters" (Butler 2009: 14). The author investigates the power of mourning underlined by this point of departure noting that "specific life cannot be apprehended or injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living [...] within certain epistemological frames" (Butler 2009: 1). Butler investigates this notion of frame and questions: what embodies those frames as operations of power in which life is apprehended? Thoroughly, "subjects are bounded to one another", as Butler argues (Butler 2009: 43). By analysing this question of ungrievable life further at length in the context of migration policy she points out the very narrow relation between identity and territorial claim. An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has not been acknowledged as living or it is not registered or counted as life within the normative sociopolitical frames. Following this emphasis one can see how *Ethéré* restores body at death and therefore materializes a critical statement in response to the violent exhumation of the dead body. The artist as well as the involved viewer take action with their own bodies to call into question brutal, criminal deed and dehumanization of human beings. Bodies are exhumed in order to render invisible their physicality out of the grievable normative framing of death identity.

Reflection of death

"Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people."

(Susan Sontag, *On photography*, 1977, quoted in Butler 2009: 63)

Following further Butler's analysis about normatives frames of death representation I want to underline Susan Sontag's quote in order to build the bridge with Mame-Diarra Niang's photographic approaches in *Ethéré*. Indeed, the photographic practice is here 'sculpturally' such as 'metaphorically' materialized in full-scale (life size). On the one hand, the mirror in the hole reminds one the technical set-up of an analog camera. A technology device has been inspired from optical science which has been shaping foremost representation in art such as perspective principles. On the other hand, photography tends to fix time within a shot, capturing its vanishing characteristic and thereby makes it motionless. There is also the reference to death, this tension between absence and presence of the body. If the mirror reflects the image in the process of photography, here in the device contained in the grave, it allows the viewer to 'picture its own death'. Besides, he or she is facing his or her own reflection, the image of the presence of his or her body and thus a result of a possible lack of yesterday, of the past and his or her future ending, finitude. Photography as a medium is therefore completely imbricated within this relation to the body and its absence. Mame-Diarra Niang's translation of one artistic medium practice to the other makes great sense. The body and its identity through its absence or marks of representation is at stake in her art. The idea of the body as a territory is embodied by her urban wandering photographs as well as by the process of installation-making to incorporate either her pictures or a live-performance. Both help to affect physically the viewer in what he is seeing, to engage a circulation of bodies as a frame of perceiving and recognizing. This circulation and acting of different bodies aims to reframe legal recognition of life and denounce the dehumanization at work in cultura representations such as the derealization of the body (embodied here by the chemical aspect of ethereal).

Thinking with Butler. From *detritorialization* to a queering *disidentification* of performative body

"How we respond to the suffering of others, how we formulate moral criticisms, how we articulate political analyses, depends upon a certain field of perceptible reality having already been established. This field of perceptible reality is one in which the notion of the recognizable human is formed and maintained over and against what cannot be named or regarded as the human - a figure of the non-human that negatively determines and potentially unsettles the recognizably human."

(Butler 2009: 63-64)

Ethéré embodies a 'device of perceiving and seeing' that invites the viewer to apprehend life rather than recognize it. Apprehension bounded

with seeing and perceiving encourages a critique of norms of recognition and therefore a critical shifting on the question of queer (in)visibility which was the inspiring point of departure of this work. By shaping the territoriality of the tragic news (the exhumed body) Mame-Diarra Niang puts realities into question: the outbreak of violence concerning same-sex desires in Senegalese current political agenda. The frame of burial is here exposed as the representation of the human (dead body). However, the artist (re)appropriates the social practice and by means of art, transforms it in a new critical frame. As we usually mourn for some lives but respond with coldness to the loss of strangers, *Ethéré* puts the viewer sensibly at stake with the representation of her or his own death, and so she or he becomes the subject of the artwork. Thus it challenges the viewer to rethink the conception of responsibility concerning violence and critically counter global normative frames which define lives that are regarded as being worth saving and defending or not. As Butler argues: "The subject that I am is bound to the subject I am not, that we each have the power to destroy and be destroyed" and thereby "we are all precarious life" (Butler 2009: 43). By the circulation of multiple viewer bodies, this performing device formalizes what Butler emphasizes in this quote: that we are all bound to one another in this power of being a living body and the precariousness of our upcoming death at the same time. *Ethéré* underlines this precarity of being. It embodies the vulnerability of facing mortality of oneself. Accordingly, this artistic gesture is engaged within the poetics of the body, as a political statement. The relationship between the social body and the personal body encompasses a critical site of resistance on norms and societies. If, at first, the territorialization of the dead body has been stressed as one of the paramount characteristic of the work I would now like to further emphasize the circulation of bodies within the performance. By means of the performing reappropriation of the installation, this particular physical motion of each viewer on the representation of his own death has then displaced this first gesture, from the territorialization of the burial to its own deterritorialization. Thus, this displacement confers to the performance a further valuable aspect: to rethink the process of recognition or identification of the individual body through the frames of performative norms. The critical transformation allowed by the performance aims to invite the viewer to perform (what I call) a disidentification of its body which puts into question the performative materialization of the gendered, social body and so its gaze: who is gazing at this work and how and towards which purpose? Thinking on the territoriality of death through its ritual and representation has led Mame-Diarra Niang to break with every single materialization of a supposed existing body identity. Indeed, her work performs a boundless representation of bodies and identities, according to each step of the viewers that will tread upon the ground of her installation and self-perform their own identity and its boundaries of existence.

3. Performing disidentity: Re-appropriation of identity politics and location of agency

These aspects of deterritorialization and disidentification of body and subject at stake within *Ethéré* allows us to question queerness as a method of (physical) mind translation. How could we think further on the body as an 'instrumentalized' support of identity between numbers of performative languages and preexistent definitions as well as categories? Could we foresee "bodies without bodies" as a better way to approach art performance as Renate Lorenz suggested (Lorenz 2009: 135)? What would it mean then to queer the human being? However, theorisations of queerness must begin from the apprehension that the term 'queer' is itself a site of permanent moving possibilities. As Lee Edelman argues: "Queerness can never define an identity; it can only disturb one" (Edelman 2004: 17).

Queer Theory as a critical analysis of performance art

The concern of applying an overview of Queer Theory on Mame-Diarra Niang's performance intends for an enlargement of critical theories on contemporary art in a global context in order to (re)conceive art theory in an interdisciplinary broader sense. This contribution leads to examine such performative translating art practices that do not lend themselves easily to a 'blind' aesthetic framing and do actively challenge universalist, globalized masculine heteronormative modes of description that have long dominated the field of study. I argue that Mame-Diarra Niang's artwork implies to reframe our perception and modes of gazing and, on a wider understanding, concerning the issues of homophobic violence and homophobia as being currently a global sociopolitical phenomenon. However, it presents specific peculiar manifestations according to the historical and sociopolitical specificity of its locality. Although her artistic process has been engendered as a reaction to Senegalese news we cannot only understand the homophobic issues at work there as being the manifestation of an isolated phenomena of damaging civil rights in specific place of the globe that supposedly would suffer from the lack of 'real' democratic dynamics, but rather embedded within complex transregional and transnational dynamics over centuries. The artist has prompted the debate on homophobia as violence in a broader frame by the ingenuity and efficacy of her performance installation as a critical device. Everyone can reflect on this issues of violence from any perspective (embodied by the physical reflection of mirrors as producer of representation of identities). Furthermore, she has chosen to enact this project within the frame of an international art event such as the Dak'art Biennale that gathers viewer from all over the globe. The artist was bouncing on a local sociopolitical landscape while she enlarges it comprehension and matter of responsibilities to a broader frame of identity. Therefore, performing becomes a possibility of transformation and discursive displacement.

Queer and queering. Meaning in motion

In this terms, this artwork highlights the act of queering as a critical lens to stress the ideological heteronormative system that regulates the expression of sexuality, gender, body identities and in general body recognition as well as perception phenomena within framed, constructed, fixed performative norms. Queering is an interpretive method, based on the re-appropriation of the english word 'queer' (meaning something odds, stange, etc.) originally used to stress LGBTI issues of (in)visibility. Empowered as a transitional verb, queering implies to rethink 'in flux' by applying Queer Theory's body of knowledge which is based on a deconstruction of 'fixed' identities of sexuality, gender and sex. Queering does not attempt to become a dictionary word or a fixed definition or something materially, physically graspable. On the contrary, it aims to rather apprehend things in an act of motion or a strategy in translation whereby we could deconstruct and reframe at the same time, the value giving to visual culture that encompass a critical dialogue on norms and societies. Yet, my closing issue will be to review queer theoretical perspectives on contemporary art without reframing it within a categorizing nature (of rationality of thinking). However, this final part -remains a little suggestive as a summarized formulation of what we could understand under queer knowledge production in this context. Queer is above all linguistically a re-appropriation and politically a claim to challenge normative assumptions about our place in the society.

Between queer and displacement. A “disidentificatory venture of the self” (Muñoz 1999)

So far I did not yet explained what queering inquiries really mean. Thereby, I would like first to introduce a glimpse of Jacques Rancière ideas on the relation between aesthetics and politics in the artistic regimes. In an interview with the magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* (2009), Rancière mentions his interest for artistic forms that endeavour to displace expectations, representations and what we expect as being normative forms of representation. He attests that the critical possibilities in art are to be found in the concept of displacement, shifting, moving - to displace the boundaries of forms, medium, as well as representations. According to Rancière, the aesthetic experience is only conceivable as a political gesture, if we refuse anticipation of receiving what the viewer will possibly see and what she or he will do (see the concept of mobility of the gaze in *Le spectateur émancipé* 2008: 19). Mame-Diarra Niang stresses the issue of representability of death in her work. She has displaced, deterritorialized, disidentified and at the same time, re-appropriated representability of death rituals and the queer body - an affiliate social identity of the individual which has been displaced by means of the viewer participation (through the mirror reflection of its face as well as the meditative reenactment of the burial), and thus, whose identities take part in this act are able to self-identify and re-appropriate their own affiliated social identity. In a manner of displacing, such as Rancière pinpoints, *Ethéré* embodies an active reflecting circulation on inclusion and exclusion of identity politics that appeals the viewer's mobility of gazing and expressing. However, the viewer remains free of gazing and therefore choosing. Gazing is an immanent action. The viewer is able to compare, interpret, select, observe what she or he is gazing at within the performance installation. Thus, the location of agency, the subjectivity of the body viewer is in focus here. Mame-Diarra Niang gives space through her device to authorize the specificities of each and everyone as being agency, considering the difference of body identities in a whole hybrid form of performing, that provides place for race, ethnicity, desire and the queer body. As a mode of performance, the disidentificatory venture, at stake here, aims to articulate a back and forth between reception and production, encoding and decoding. It is a “strategy to resist conception of power as being fixed discourse” (Muñoz 1999: 19). To disidentify means to deconstruct the universalizing rhetoric of selfhood. According to Muñoz it is a political gesture, an empowerment of the agency to resist dominant ideology. Yet, the author also asserts through meaningful examples in his book, that disidentification could apply also “a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (Muñoz 1999: 31). While Muñoz emphasizes the complex, manifold disidentification processes at work in queer performance art and at large in the culture, I am aware that applying his ideas straight forward on Mame-Diarra Niang's installation performance is extrapolated out of the empowering frame designed by the queer of colour theories as a strategic tool for self-determination that Muñoz has underlined by stressing specifically enacting examples of aware, self-conscious people from the queer world-making. However, my claim to refer to his postulations is rather to build a bridge of thinking. If Muñoz's groundbreaking perspective of disidentification on minority performance and activism aims to fashion the queer world, Mame-Diarra Niang's point of departure was a news report, a response against systemic violence on the (dead) body orchestrated by the state and global power apparatuses that apply systems of racial, sexual and national subjugation. Therefore, the disidentification as a claim or underscored as dis-identification not voluntarily performed, endured stress common ground of issues and intersectional analyses on the making as well as dealing with body identities and identity politics. The final goal would not be to attest *Ethéré* as part of the queer performance art framework, but rather a cross-connection between cultural productions such as scholars and performance art that both have in common to raise issue concerning the queer visibility as strategically being a groundbreaking claim of self-empowered (dis)identification of the individual sexuality within the modern society.

Beyond queer art. A performative gesture that displaces expectations

As the term queer art (as well as queer in general) seems to circulate more and more in the art market, I would like to be careful about its use and beyond it - the tendency of commodification of trendy cultural productions within global art linked to the neo-liberal capitalist world system economy. If the term might have been first used as a departure from narratives about LGBTI specific self-definitions on sexuality, a so-called queer art platform would not remain as a process of sexual identifications but a platform dealing with issues on sexuality in society, and rather everyone could be queer. Maybe we should not encompass strictly only people's identities within queer art, but also objects, knowledges, attitudes, etc. that discuss subversively normativity. The over-usage of queer could be bound to the nihilation of the term's essence itself. Nevertheless, it remains vital that such a boundary breaking term as queer is overlapping and spreading nowadays in the cultural field. It might be the sign of its worthy state of mind as a fluxus, re-appropriable, as being an endless never-defined body of thinking. So far, Mame-Diarra Niang does not identify herself as a queer artist nor does she claim to create art as political activist (see in *Lotte Lovholm's* article on *Ethéré*). Nevertheless, her work *Ethéré* does imply a visual critical practice and embodies queering thinking as a matter of reflexion that it opens to the viewer. Indeed, the performing tool puts at stake critical transformation on identity politics. Furthermore, by taking position on news, the artist disrupts dominant, heteronormative achievement and unquestioned positions, such as binary identifications of the body at large. By means of doing art (performance) she embraces the diversity of the viewers and emphasizes the ambiguities of ‘otherness’ sustained within the process of encountering an artwork. Above all, *Ethéré* raises the precarious construction of identities in a broader frame, but specifically refers to queer (in)visibility at stake in the local Senegalese cultural, sociopolitical news (see also article on *Raw Material Company's* show during the Biennale). The installation performance provides a starting point to explore the split of body boundaries that crosses the regulatory system of sexualities and genders. Reflecting on sexuality and gender identities, body (in)visibilities become thereby a point of departure to encompass a wider criticism on the binary oppositions that frame human identities issues, such as linguistics, national affiliation, desire, cultural practices, visual representations, etc. *Ethéré* happens to be a thoughtful invitation to rethink the ontology of the body (such as explored by Butler) and the notion of empowered agency concerning the issue of queer invisibility whereby the transformation of empirical thought into performing design has rendered its visibility possible within contemporary art.

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