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## **EDN ATELIER: MEETING GROUNDS**

**full text**

**Text by Alexandra Tindall**

This report highlights the focal points of the EDN Atelier **Meeting Grounds** organised organized in close co-operation between EDN, Mercat de les Flors casa de la dansa and Graner creation center for dance and live arts, in the context of Grec festival of Barcelona. For further information, please contact [info@ednetwork.eu](mailto:info@ednetwork.eu).

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## Conference by Raw Material Company with Fatima Bintou Rassoul Sy

**Fatima Bintou Rassoul Sy** opened the session by thanking the participants for their engagement with Raw Material Company's work.

She began the conference with an introduction to the origins of Raw Material Company in Senegal, beginning with the country's former president Léopold Sédar Senghor and the period of engagement with collective art that characterised his term in office. As a poet and writer, Senghor was one of the founding fathers of the Négritude movement, which sought to bring together French-speaking writers and gain recognition for their work through the promotion of Black art and culture.

This framework formed the basis for Senegal's contemporary art scene today, including the founding of several important cultural institutions and events. L'Ecole Nationale des Arts in Dakar, for example, opened in 1960, with the 'visual negro arts' as one of its two main areas of interest. In 1966, the world's first festival of negro arts was founded in Dakar, with the goal of putting African and Diaspora art at the centre of the discourse. The festival invited 2,500 artists to Dakar to celebrate Blackness, including visual artists, musicians, theatre companies and dance troops. Furthermore, the founding of the Biennale of Contemporary African Art in 1996 marked a turning point in the history of Dakar, establishing it as a city with a special ambience on the African continent.

Joe Ouakam was a leading intellectual and artist in Dakar at this time who, with others, founded Laboratoire Agit'Art, whose main mission was to criticise and challenge the notion of Négritude, to produce political and community-focused artwork, and to publish manifestos that raised issues about contemporary African society. Today, it is considered to be the most influential African art collective of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Koyo Kouoh founded Raw Material Company in response to a lack of critical discourse and theoretical writing from the 1960s to the present day. It is a centre for art, knowledge and society, each in equal balance. Their library, RAW base, focuses on contemporary art, but also includes Black literature, philosophy, and audio materials. In 2011, Raw Material launched their residency programme, Ker Issa, to host local and international artists. The main goal is to select an artist who can contribute something to the company and benefit from its expertise.

At its beginning, Raw Material functioned as an arts centre, with a focus on hosting exhibitions. In 2016, the company moved away from this traditional practice to develop other tools. In 2012, Raw created the Condition Report symposiums, which invite practitioners from across the Diaspora to engage with specific topics. The third symposium focused on art history in Africa and how it is applied to the African continent, and the upcoming fourth edition will deal with collective practice on the African continent. RAW Académie was created in 2016 as a non-hierarchical, experimental residential programme for artistic practice, thinking and creating. Taking place in Dakar, each edition of the academy is led by a local or international director whose approach demonstrates an original approach to art.

Other programmes offered by Raw Material include Fridays @RAW, vox-ARTIS, Parlons sénégalaises, RAW Ciné-club, and Citéologies. These events are important for creating links with the people living and working in the local context and staying aware of their thoughts and perspectives. For this reason, the pandemic presented particular challenges for Raw Material's programme, which is based on interaction with the public and exchange through gathering. During this time, Raw launched the podcast *The Morning After The Crisis*, which hosted inspiring and creative individuals reflecting on the aftermath of the pandemic. They also developed an exhibition on remembrance, *D'une rive à l'autre* by Ibrahima Thiam, in lieu of the residency programme, which was postponed.

Raw Material gives an important place to publications, with recent editions including *An Ideal Library*, covering theory and art practice, and *Chronicle of a Revolt*, an examination of the 2011 protests in Senegal. *Breathing Out of School* is RAW Académie's first publication.

On an ongoing basis, Raw is involved in the biannual Dak'Art and the annual Partcours.

Fatima Bintou Rassoul closed the conference by thanking the participants for their attention and engagement in Raw Material's work.

### **Panel 1: Sustainability, visibility, adaptability**

*This panel was presented by Raw Material Company (Dulcie Abrahams Altass) with contributors Bruno Leitão, Gabriel Panaibra, Fatou Cissé, Nadia Beugré, Salim M'ze Hamadi, and Roberto Casarotto, and moderator Bàrbara Raubert.*

**Dulcie Abrahams Altass** opened the panel by reflecting on the past decade since Raw Material's founding, which has been marked by protests against anti-democratic government actions in Senegal. The months before this meeting have been a moment of reflection on change and on how sustainability, visibility and adaptability can be measured. This panel sought to address the question of the scale of change, and how it can be affected on bodily, emotional, and structural levels.

Financing is key to the issue of sustainability and public funding for the arts is particularly limited on the African continent. 'Sustainability' describes "a system that can endure over time in a sustainable manner", so it is important for both artists and institutions.

Raw Material considers its own sustainability in three main ways: physical space, programming, and people. Dulcie Abrahams Altass believes that space for possibility emerges from the combination of these factors, and that space must be adaptable to sustain itself. This panel therefore explored the tension between sustainability and adaptability.

Key terms for this panel included: negotiation, scale, translation, support, federation, and transformation.

**Bruno Leitão** is Curatorial Director at Hangar, an artistic research centre in Lisbon. Hangar aim to put artists, curators, researchers and the audience on an even playing field; to discuss the history of Lisbon critically; to put emphasis on artists from the African continent and Central America; to receive international resident artists, provide studios for local artists, and encourage dialogue between the two groups; and to host discussions and workshops around documentation and performances.

**Salim M'ze Hamadi** is a dancer from Grande Comore and founder of the Tché-Za company and dance school, which is influenced by Dakar but showcases Comorian tradition. For him, there are three central axes that interact within his art: religion, modernity and tradition. The establishment of his dance school was driven by a desire to stimulate a movement.

**Gabriel Panaibra** works in live art and contemporary dance. His work focuses on identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, specifically in a postcolonial context, and how he can better understand himself and others. His work seeks to understand contemporary society and how we coexist amidst our differences, through the lens of colonial privilege. He set up a contemporary dance community in Mozambique to create a movement, amplify community voices, and provide a space for exchange and training programmes. The movement is not sustained by public funding, so they are reliant on touring their work and self-funding initiatives, such as hosting a festival.

**Fatou Cissé** is a Senegalese choreographer. She described the challenges of her work in Senegal, where tradition and religion often work against women. Her most recent work interrogates the evolution of arts in the context of tradition, society and the choreographic sector, and is bound up with her identity as a woman and with finding her place in the sector. She seeks to encourage participation in the realisation of art by creating a public space to share, participate and integrate, so that other people's points of views contribute towards the development of the practice. She is currently engaging leaders to support her work in the public space.

**Dulcie Abrahams Altass** commented that many of the practices described by the panellists originate from a personal need for expression, which requires an adaption of the space and work conditions in order to be achieved.



**Roberto Casarotto** asked the panellists to comment on where they find sustainable tools for their activism in today's context.

For **Bruno Leitão**, the keyword is 'adaptation'. For him, this means seeking funds wherever you can, regardless of political views and ideology, then distributing the tools to allow artists to put out relevant work.

For **Fattou Cissé**, adaptation means visibility. In her work, she questions how they can show what they have learned, but also how they can apply it strategically and socially to the space and conditions available.

In **Salim M'ze Hamad's** work, it is important to recognise that Comore remains under the influence of France. He explained that the lack of local government support for culture forces artists to turn to the support offered by France, which in turn forces them to adapt their practice to fit Francophone criteria. While French funding offers visibility for Comorian artists in Francophone culture, it restricts their visibility further afield. This means that while their dance practice is large and without limitations, the pedagogical aspect remains limited to France.

For **Dulcie Abrahams Altass**, solidarity and alliance within and across institutions are key to sustaining their practice.

**Gabriel Panaibra** commented that today's uncertainty calls for greater closeness among creators in the sector. He cited a gathering of Southern African artists in November 2020, which sought to ask how they could open creative borders and continue to collaborate across closed borders. For him, it is a question of seeking to exist, and merely existing in the context of corrupt systems demonstrates their relevance.

**Roberto Casarotto** asked the panellists how they have been able to maintain relationships with their various communities during the pandemic, and whether these new conditions have changed or informed their connection with people who might be physically isolated.

In **Gabriel Panaibra's** community, they explored alternatives such as online classes, but for him it was more significant to acknowledge the need for connection and the feeling of its absence. He commented that prior to the pandemic they had been too preoccupied by the idea of physical presence, which entails travelling and inhabiting a physical space. The pandemic opened up his community to new ways of having conversations without physical presence and its associated costs. This has meant that artistic collaboration can continue without funds, which is essential on a continent where there is little funding available for the sector.

**Bruno Leitão** agreed with this sentiment, describing a shift in focus from the pre-production concerns of travel, etc., to the work itself. Taking more interaction online has not only allowed for more exchange, but has also allowed for funds to be redirected directly to the projects themselves.

**Bàrbara Rauber** opened the question and answer section of the panel. She began by commenting on the relationship between past and present, which must be sustained. History must be criticised so that we can better understand it, and sustainability can apply to ideas and how we see them change. She noted the use of words such as 'borders' in terms of physical space, but suggested thinking about them emotionally, too.

She cited Fattou Cissé's comment on public spaces as political spaces, and the common thread among all the panellists of sharing their work in public space. The traditional dances being discussed come from a practice of using public space. She asked the panellists to comment on how we can bring contemporary knowledge to traditional dances and how this transforms and changes the practice. She asked if it is possible to speak about aesthetics and sustainability together.

For **Fattou Cissé**, the most important thing is to use public space as a process of education. Each performer has the opportunity to reflect their personal experience back into the practice, and her company is reflecting on how they can redefine and redesign the space to share with people as a way of evolving the tradition rather than changing it.

**Salim M'ze Hamadi** spoke on the inspiration behind his book, *Les danses traditionnelles des Comores*, as coming from his dual influences of hip hop, contemporary, and urban dance on the one side, and traditional Comorian dance on the other. The dance that his company practices speaks to both sets of genres, acknowledging the roots of popular dance genres in the African continent and elsewhere. For him, their practice is a way of understanding Comorian history and its multiple influences.

**Gabriel Panaibra** commented that in his practice tradition is not a focal point but rather a tool, along with aesthetics, for making art.

**Dulcie Abrahams Altass** closed the panel by thanking all the panellists for their contributions.

## Panel 2: Gathering, community, animism

*This panel was presented by Qudus Onikeku, with Aïda Colmenero Díaz, Nelisiwe Xaba, Albert Ibokwe Khoza, and Elisabetta Bisaro as contributors and Clàudia Brufau as moderator.*

**Qudus Onikeku** opened the panel with a reflection on its main themes. For him, gathering is at the core of community and there can be no community without gathering. He understands 'gathering' not only as a physical gathering, but one of forces, minds, practices, and questioning among kindred spirits. He commented on the unsustainable organisation of the art world, which led him to abandon the type of individualistic practice that is centred in France in order to continue his work in Lagos with a different understanding of community. During his time in Paris, he began the Afro/Parisian Network as a community that blended artists and audience members without hierarchy.

He connects animism with Yoruba culture, which has spirituality and ritual at its core. Reincarnation is central to their belief system, which understands the soul as being unlimited in space and time. This cultural context has led him to consider how we can rethink space and time in the art-making process.

**Albert Ibokwe Khoza** is a performance artist and sangoma, whose work brings together art and healing by reconstructing mindsets and discussing social ills. Gathering and community is essential to his work, which takes place in a ritualistic space. His practice is innately animist, using onflow to tap into the cosmic and metaphysical realms and allowing his ancestors to take over his body to produce work that is beyond human. Vulnerability, bareness, flexibility and possibility are important factors for his practice, which is intended as a sensory experience. For Khoza, gathering, community and animism are bound up together, and he seeks to create a performance that encourages the performers and audience to engage internally with the experience, with moments of disruption to bring them back to the physical sphere.

**Nelisiwe Xaba** described her own introduction to animism with a childhood anecdote. As a child, she would play with a girl whose father was a sangoma and his practice influenced their games, where they would dance to drums. Later, she learned of certain practices associated with the sangoma initiation process through her aunt.

She described her work as being layered, revisiting the same topics in new ways, citing a piece of work commissioned by the Quai Branly Museum in Paris as part of two shows on a village group in Burkina Faso who dance during the full moon. Her work includes rituals that may look real – through the use of props and face powder, for example – but are based in fiction. She works as a solo artist for reasons of affordability, but also creativity.

**Aïda Colmenero Díaz** is an artist, creator and mother who gathers and connects people around the world. For her, community and gathering are part of everyday life, and these concepts were clarified for her during the years she spent living across the African continent, where she began to consider how she could reach her community in Spain and give something to them. This led to the birth of Africa Moment in Barcelona, which seeks to gather new ideas and bring new faces to theatres and academic programmes. For her, gathering serves a purpose of encouraging change, whereas working in isolation as an artist only serves creation itself.

She spoke of her first encounter with animism as a child with her family in Galicia, Spain, where her mother would perform a ritual conjuring during a meal, using alcohol and fire to communicate with and honour family ancestors. For her, animism is to bring life to the dead.

**Qudus Onikeku** invited a discussion on the purpose of meeting grounds, whether they be physical, spiritual, mundane, political or poetic. In Yoruba, the word for 'performance' derives from the word for 'remember', so for him remembrance is at the core of performing.

**Nelisiwe Xaba** spoke of 'multiplying herself' on stage through the traditional Venda dance, Domba, a ritualistic coming of age dance for girls. Her performances have explored the same ritual in Zulu girls, who perform the Reed Dance.

**Qudus Onikeku** observed that within the animist practice there are separate circles for initiates and non-initiates, asking how it is possible to bring the practice to an audience in a communal space, while also limiting access to the practice.

In response, **Albert Ibokwe Khoza** commented that traditional performance spaces, such as theatres, do not always align with his practice, which has led him to introduce his work to different spaces and people. It is difficult for his type of performance to take place virtually.

**Aïda Colmenero Díaz** added that creating the right kind of space was also a problem for Africa Moment, as her practice does not align with the traditional organisation of art into categories, such as dance, music and theatre. She seeks to enter into a dialogue with her space in her work.

**Elisabetta Bisaro** works at La Briqueterie, just outside Paris. She commented on the lack of understanding in Europe of animist practice by Black African artists. She asked the panellists how European centres can provide better spaces for artists to contextualise their performances when they come to perform.

For **Aïda Colmenero Díaz**, it is less about how the work adapts to the space, but rather having a conversation with the space.

For **Qudus Onikeku**, the term 'animist artist' is problematic as 'animism' – in its English definition – describes a belief that inanimate objects have a life of their own and is not necessarily connected to

whether the artist is a sangoma or not. For him, animism is about treating objects as if they are something alive, so puppetry and digital animation can serve as forms of animism. According to this definition, every artist uses animism to bring their material and surroundings to life.



**Elisabetta Bisaro** asked the panellists how, in their interaction with their communities, they go about training other people's bodies to be alive.

For **Aïda Colmenero Díaz**, her starting point is finding memories and emotions that connect people to experiences.

**Qudus Onikeku** believes everyone has a body memory and this is his way of activating dances in his workshops. In his solo practice, he would first engage in work on his own body to understand its history; second, reject that history as something he didn't recognise; then finally, find a different way into the past through body memory. The process can be violent, involving trance, music, light and colour to shake out body memory, whether it is an active body on stage or a passive body in the audience.

**Albert Ibokwe Khoza** tries to put a mirror up to his audience so that they can engage with themselves. His 2020 work *Red Femicycle*, for example, was about the femicide being experienced in South Africa at the moment and the audience was invited into a family homestead as everyone can connect to this image. His work includes placing front and centre those actions that usually take place behind closed doors. The acts of praying and talking to ancestors are usually private, for example, so what happens when we take a phone on stage to talk to our ancestors? His work is about the audience seeing some things through his eyes, but also seeing themselves.

**Elisabetta Bisaro** asked the panellists to respond to an audience question on whether there are therapeutic elements in their practice.

For **Albert Ibokwe Khoza**, an artist's work is a part of their own therapy and his approach to therapy is to be led by the spirit, not his body.

For **Aïda Colmenero Díaz**, artists are healers of society rather than individuals.

**Qudus Onikeku** spoke on the separation of artists from their community, commenting that communities must be considered as intelligent and self-aware. He cited the French government as an example of a body that imposes projects on communities without consultation or engagement. For this reason, artists operating outside of Western conventions are deliberately pursuing other ways of connecting and making art.

**Nelisiwe Xaba** asked the panellists how artists can work around the economics of running a centre and making a living.

**Qudus Onikeku** shared his experience of creating the Afro/Parisian network to serve the Black community in Paris. Although it began with funding from the French government, he later decided to return the money as, upon review, his project was not considered to be culturally significant. This led him to pursue other methods of funding. In his current company, their work is centred around 'ACTS': Art Making, Community Engagement, Talent Development, and Services. The final Services element serves to drive money back into the first three. They are moving away from the economic diktats of the mainstream art world, and instead creating a space and inviting people to join it.

**Clàudia Brufau** raised an audience question, asking the panellists to share their opinion on the European-centric definition of the panel themes.

**Qudus Onikeku** responded that programming should entail a dialogue between different places within the arts world, not only within the communities the art institutions exist in. Community engagement should be about actual rather than conceptual change, which requires listening to the community, gathering data, and creating intelligence to channel into your programming.

### **Panel 3: Trauma, memory, repair, identity**

*Panel presented by Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja with Ana Pi, António Tavares, and Moya Michael as contributors and Bàrbara Raubert as moderator.*

**Bàrbara Raubert** opened by thanking EDN and Africa Moment for making the panel possible. She noted the absence of Trixie Munyama.

**Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja** is a Namibian performance artist and PhD scholar based at the University of Cape Town's Center for Dance & Performance Studies. He highlighted the importance of connection and reflection in the context of pandemics. For him, today's context has led to a heightened need for care work. He invited the panellists to each speak about the themes of the panel with reference to their work, or other ideas and concepts that come to mind.

For him, memory is at the heart of his scholarly and performative work, which centres on colonial archives. He is interested in how different archives, including the body as a type of archive, can speak to each other through performance. Archives present baggage and past trauma that we must engage with,

although he also considers archives to hold the key to the future. As a performer, he has worked with trauma as a method for seeking restorative justice.

Namibia was colonised for over a hundred years, suffered a genocide, and lived under apartheid. Growing up in a postcolonial context heightened his awareness of the trauma he had suffered from heteronormativity, racism and capitalism, even before he had the means to process it through performance.

The concept of the body as an archive has driven him to fire as a significant element of his performance practice and scholarship. Working in the colonial photography archive in Hamburg, for example, brought trauma to his centre vision and led him to question fire in performance as a response. In Namibia and indigenous cultures around the world, fire is also central to transcendence, and it acts as an archive of trauma, healing, connecting to other worlds, and transferring. He has sought to incorporate fire into his performances with museums and archives, but this is subject to negotiation due to the reluctance on their part to use fire around their collections. For him, fire points to recovery and has been central to his work in attending to his trauma. This work asks the audience to reflect on the kind of intervention fire can represent.

**Ana Pi** is a Brazilian artist based in Paris. Her hometown of Mina Gerais is where the biggest quantity of gold and diamonds have been extracted in the world. Her people have known a great deal of injustice and use dance for prayer. For her, the themes of this panel recall hope, perspective, and persistence. In this way, the divine dances of her community are one of the few 'archives' to have crossed the Atlantic. She sees things from the periphery of city structures and economic activity. She shared a short film featuring peripheral dances from her city with the panel.

**Moya Michael** is a South African artist based in Brussels. She spoke of personal and global trauma, and the rich archive shared by all Africans. Trauma, memory, and identity come out of her work. She moved to Europe to study dancing and gain acceptance in the white world. When she began her work, it was focused on movement and deconstruction, rather than trauma and recovery. Since then, she has worked to decolonise herself and talk about these topics through her own experience.

For her, dance training in Europe teaches you to forget where you come from and what your history holds, which is something her younger self sought. Her personal trauma lies in learning about her immediate family history and searching for information about her own community through white channels. She is no longer interested in making dance pieces, but rather sees her work as bordering dance and performance art. Her work is not explanatory, and she has actively sought to ignore the white gaze as she moves into the future.

**Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja** responded to António Tavares' idea of a circle, which is a central shape to healing processes across Africa. The panellists have acknowledged archives of trauma, but it is also important to look forward. For him, his performance art is about transgression, which includes

transgressing the rules of the space, such as a museum or archive. His work looks for joy and pleasure, which can be challenging, because he is more familiar with seeking critique through transgression.

Concerning Moha's practice of decolonisation, he asked the panel to comment on what kind of language is required to speak about recovery. The pandemic has added a new layer of restriction to artists, and it also leads artists to ask how they can touch without touching.

For **Moya Michael**, artists have all the tools they need, and they must create their own language to communicate with them. She commented that Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja's words have touched her without any physical touch, for example.

**Ana Pi** demonstrated a gesture of raising and rolling her shoulders, which symbolizes auto-authorisation and stubbornness. For her, there are many dances that remind us to find joy in our reactions to trauma and violence, such as structural racism in Brazil.

**Bàrbara Raubert** invited questions from the audience, beginning with a question on care and where it should go in creative practice. Secondly, can the body be understood as a colonial archive? If so, should it be healed or transformed? Thirdly, do the panellists share the feeling that their body has been at the service of a colonial body, and how can that be reconciled? Lastly, when speaking of using fire to heal, what needs to be saved for the future?

**Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja** responded to the second question on the body as a colonial archive. As a queer, Black man from Namibia, his body is not just oppressed but also implicated in colonialism. In order to rid ourselves of colonialism, there is fire.

**Ana Pia** spoke on colonial language as a mindset: the languages we speak or do not speak, and the restrictions they impose on our expression reinforce colonialism. When we speak of care, it is important to note that it is indigenous and marginalised people who take care of the world, as they do not have the luxuries of laziness and indifference.

**Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja** commented that, as an artist, he presents the work and it is up to the audience to do their own work in coming with an open mind and decolonising their own perspective.

**Moya Michael** commented that the body as an archive means carrying generational trauma with you.

**Bàrbara Raubert** concluded the panel with a comment on the revelation between the personal and communal that arose in the panel. Global trauma contributes a personal trauma, which lives in each person's bodily archive. There is a need to find a language that is neither colonial nor peripheral. For her, the key themes of the panel were finding ways to think alternatively through art, using transgression to break expectations put on artists, and bringing care, joy and criticism to the discussion. She thanked the panel for sharing their work and experiences.

