

Crossings by Land, Water and Air, opening lecture by Ursula Biemann for Biennale Democrazia, Turin, Italy, March 25, 2015.

Biennale Democrazia, a unique event bringing the idea and practice of democracy into public discussion, takes place in Turin since 2009 (<http://biennaledemocrazia.it/>). Its program includes not only lectures, dialogues and readings, but also concerts, theatre performance, and various shows. The overarching theme this year is “Passages”, referring to the crossing of borders, walls, and barriers – be they material, mental or virtual. For the first time, Biennale Democrazia includes artistic productions, because the arts, and particularly the visual arts, have been very eloquent in documenting and interpreting the different “passages” of our time.



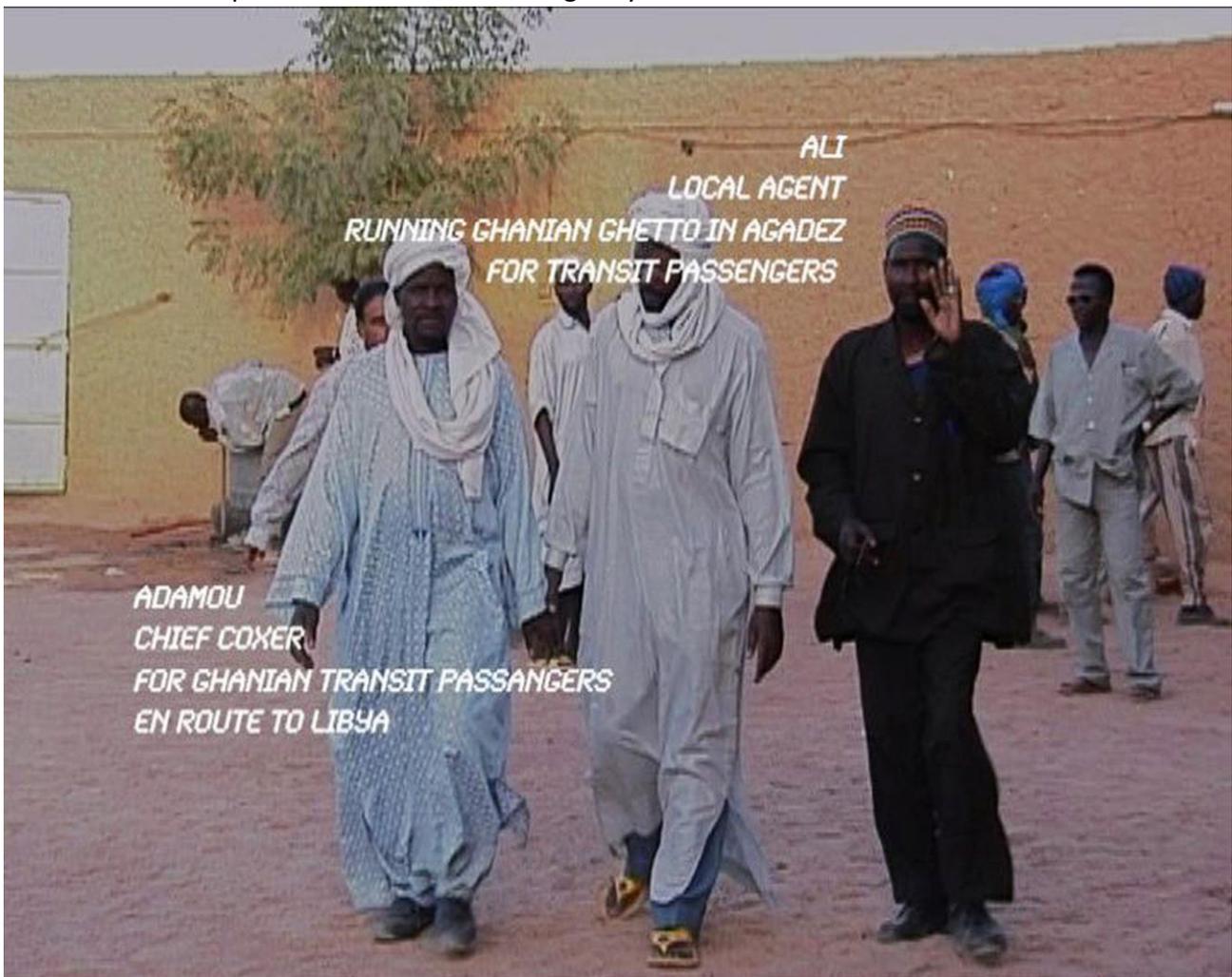
No better way to open the event than by an inaugural *Lectio Magistralis* by Ursula Biemann, which took place in the main hall of the new Campus Luigi Einaudi, designed by Foster&Partners (<http://www.archilovers.com/projects/2369/campus-luigi-einaudi.html>).



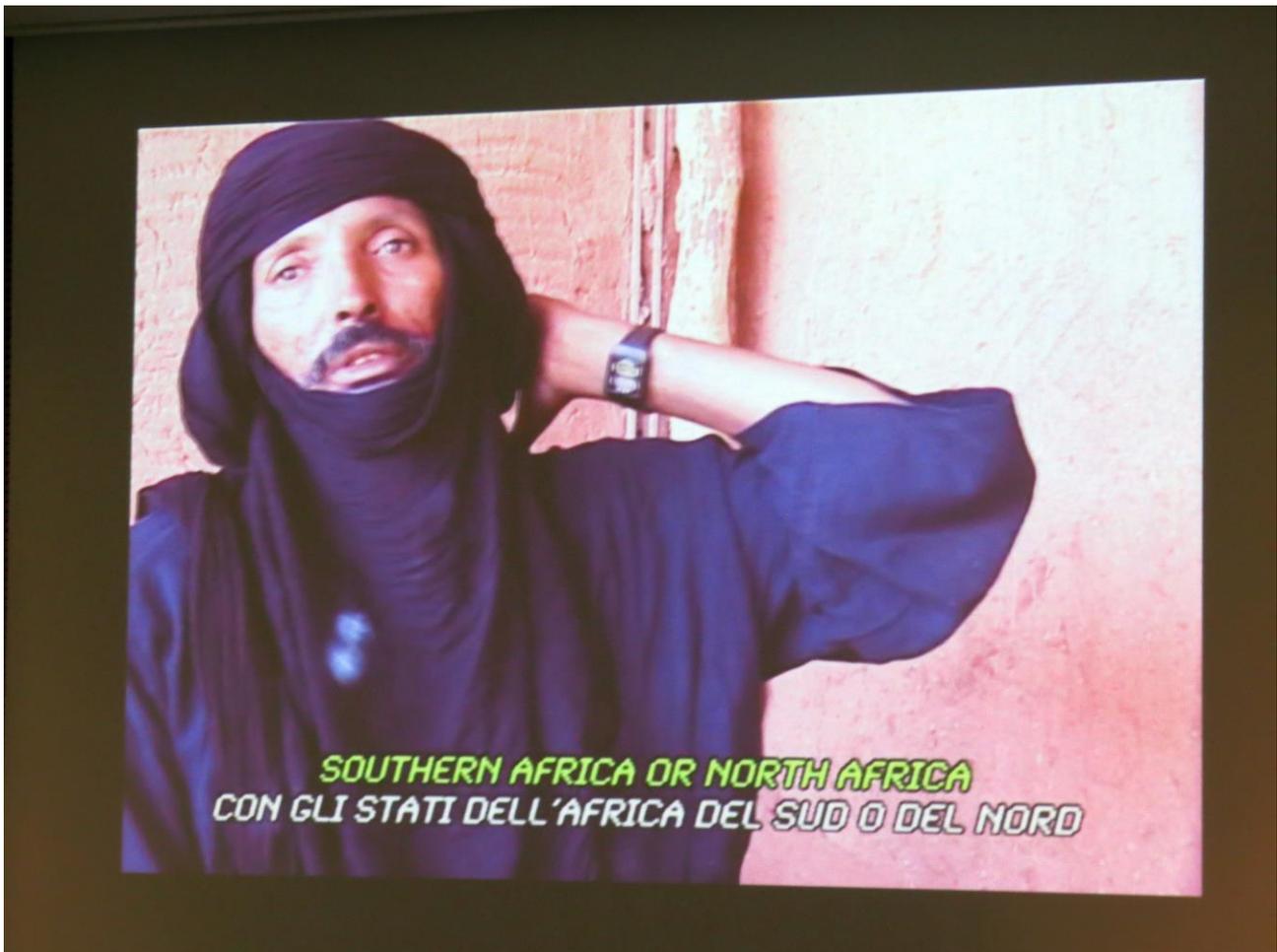
Ursula Biemann’s work on the movements of people across the globe has been innovative and inspirational in the field of visuality. Equally significant are her theoretical contributions, which

illuminate many fields of knowledge. I myself have drawn insights from her work for my research in cultural history. However, it is not only on human migrations that Ursula Biemann's work is crucial. Her Turin Lectio was well representative of the multiplicity of directions of her research.

Her presentation elaborated on the conceptual node composed of mobility, visibility, and democracy, turning it into a multilayered geography of migratory practices. The artist spoke about the issue of democracy in the visual sphere of representation through which migration is communicated to us, and illuminated how the very process of image-making constitutes democratic processes and contributes effectively to the reality in which we live. Her work, besides counteracting media images of migration, is a productive and in-depth critique of the policy of the European Union with regard to its borders. A telling example comes from her video *Sahara Chronicle* (78'), 2006-2009, an anthology of short videos on the vast clandestine migration system in the Sahara, of which she showed some passages during her lecture. This video (<http://www.geobodies.org/>) documents the transit hub in Niger where migrants seek passage across the Sahara. Capturing a moment of potentiality in which everything seems possible, the scene comes to express a wide collective imaginary.



The Sahara video collection also contains interviews with individuals such as Coumba, a young Senegalese woman who attempted unsuccessfully to cross by boat to the Canary Islands, and Adawa a former Tuareg rebel leader who acts as a broker between his people and the migration system.



Both of them are dignified and lively figures, interviewed without any sentimentality, with attention to the global meaning of their experiences. Her decision not to focus on the individual, but on the systemic dimension of migration is in fact key to understanding Biemann's approach.

While these spatial practices help construct a global network and a social form of globality, the second part of the lecture addresses a different sort of global connectedness. She introduced the issue by screening her recent video, *Deep Weather* (9'), 2013 (<http://www.geobodies.org/art-and-videos/deep-weather>), on the changes occurring in the physical and chemical composition of the Earth due to the massive geo-engineering going on in the last decades. The video explores the ecologies of two primordial fluids, oil and water. It shows the devastating extraction of tar sands in Canada, resulting in the loss of an entire habitat. Then, it abruptly turns to the other side of the world, where the rising sea level puts at risk the living conditions in Bangladesh, connected to Northern Canada through the atmospheric chemistry. The images speak of global climate justice, forcing us to think, Biemann says, in "deep time", i.e. geological time. In this instance, the artistic practice amounts to a full engagement in the material and discursive processes that shape the globe.

This lecture with the two videos, deeply appreciated by the large attentive audience of BD, is very representative of Ursula Biemann's approach and the multifarious reverberations of her production. Her artistic path has been fully global, as her videos testify. To name a few: *Performing the Border* (1999) on women dangerously crossing the border between Mexico and the United States; *Remote Sensing* (2001) on the trafficking of women in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia;

Black Sea Files (2005) on the Caspian oil pipeline; and, more recently, *Egyptian Chemistry* (2012) engaging the ecologies of the Nile; *Forest Law* (2014) on the pressure of resource extraction on the rain forest in Ecuador and the relationship between humans and the natural world.

Black Sea Files and Sahara Chronicle can be viewed on World of Matter

<http://www.worldofmatter.net/black-sea-files-0#path=black-sea-files-0>

<http://www.worldofmatter.net/sahara-chronicle-agadez-0#path=sahara-chronicle-agadez-0>

The art section of the 2015 BD included a photographic show of works by Eva Leitolf and Victor López González on migration, which will be presented in our future posts.