

On the Edge of the Empty Quarter

Readings and Discussion with Yvonne Albers and Mark Prince, organised by Regine Ehleiter

19 October 2023, 6 pm

'On the Edge of the Empty Quarter' features readings by two writers, both based in Germany, who explore the unreliability of their remote access to roots – or familial roots – in the Middle East.

In focusing on the periscopic limits of representation, they resist the erosion of our sense of foreignness by ease of virtual access to locations, which would formerly have seemed inaccessible. The prevailing dogma that all geography is now locatable, and therefore knowable, through the omniscient eye in the sky of GPS software, corresponds to an emphasis, in the highly charged field of contemporary identity politics, on the coercive myth that our relation to our origins, however tenuous they are, should define our identities. They proceed on an understanding that a past one has not experienced at first hand is inevitably a mediated one. This structuralist emphasis is complicated by an auto-fictional take on the relation between a writer's construction of a self through language and the constructedness of the immigrant self, its assimilation to contingent settings never more than provisional.

The title of the event derives from Wilfred Thesinger's 'Arabian Sands' (1959), a British outsider's account of travels in and around the 'Empty Quarter', a vast, mostly unpopulated desert in Saudi Arabia. From a broader perspective, the regions surrounding this area not only include the rest of the Arabian Peninsula, but Iraq and Syria, which, to a remote vantage, are empty in the figurative sense of not having been fleshed out by first-hand experience, or even first-hand information. The event is situated in the context of Research Area 4, 'Literary Currencies', in engaging with forms of writing that take as their subject how the meaning and value of language (among other forms of representation) are specific to their context, and how they can be rendered relatively

opaque by dislocation. Disjunctions between the time and place from which information derives and that in which it is received and interpreted are viewed as a threshold of knowledge, with language as a material screen on which the writer defaults to focusing as the only alternative to assuming a merely speculative access to what it represents.

Yvonne Albers is a postdoctoral researcher in the EXC 2020 Temporal Communities. Her research focused on how the arts have emerged in Lebanon after the civil war, and how print magazines enrich and complicate our reading of 20th century Arab intellectual history. Having grown up in Germany, her exploration of her father's background in mid-century Syria comprehends how his spoken testimony constitutes the limits of her access to that history, if not to contemporary war-torn Syria itself.

Mark Prince is an English writer and critic, who joined the EXC 2020 Temporal Communities in 2022 as a Dorothea Schlegel Artist in Residence. The fellowship supported his work on 'The Beirut Picture', which he describes as an anti-memoir, in that it approaches his mother's experience as an exile from Iraq to England, during the anti-Jewish purges, only through material related to her – images, objects, language – which happens to have come down to him.

The event has been organised by Regine Ehleiter, Professional-Track PostDoc, EXC Temporal Communities.

Time & Location:
Freie Universität Berlin
EXC 2020 "Temporal Communities"
Raum 00.05, Otto-von-Simson-Straße 15, 14195 Berlin

Image credit:
A construction site near Homs, ca. 1980. Yvonne Albers Personal Archive.

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