

you will close your eyes to the memory of the images. Then you will close your eyes to the facts. Finally, you will close your eyes to the context. If we show you a human burned by napalm, we will hurt you. If we hurt you, you will feel that the demonstration of the effects of napalm is at your expense'. These new visual forms and strategies developed by the discussed artists in this short essay show how we ought to address images, facts and contexts, reflecting a clear shift away from the documentary or photojournalistic trope. And incidentally, stresses the importance of visual literacy to grasp the complexities of the contemporary world.

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See for example Kaamil Ahmed and Lorenzo Tondo, 'Fortress Europe: the millions spent on military-grade tech to deter refugees', *The Guardian*, 06.12.2021

2

Sophie Hinger, 'Transformative Trajectories. The shifting Mediterranean Border Regime and the Challenges of Critical Knowledge Production. An Interview with Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani', in *Movements. Journal for critical migration and border regime studies*, Vol. 4., No. 1, 2018

3

See Matthias Monroy, 'Billions for Europe's biometrics giants', *Security Architectures in the EU*, 09.2022

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SAFE ENOUGH TO BE BRAVE

BY ALAA AMMAR & FABIAN HOLLE



“Making art together helped us look for a safe space not in the outer world anymore, but within ourselves” (Ariya).

We, Alaa and Fabian, first read the phrase ‘safe enough to be brave’ in a piece written by Fabian’s supervisor professor Halleh Ghorashi for the LIMBO booklet (2022). We were moved by this reflection on her journey with engaged scholarship, and particularly by this phrase, because it perfectly captured what we’ve been working on in the LIMBO workshop series. We felt that we were seen and recognised. The workshop series culminated in a public presentation opened with performances, co-organised by Sehaq Queer Refugees Group, on 27 March 2022 at Framer Framed in Amsterdam. After the opening, we read the 2021 book *Holding Space* by Aminata Cairo, which has a chapter with the same title: ‘Safe Enough To Be Brave’. The book was lent to Fabian by their colleague Kay Mars after a research team meeting. Alaa first started reading *Holding Space* and was immediately inspired by Cairo’s stories about care, courage, and connection.

LIMBO

The LIMBO workshop series was, and is currently still, situated in the art institution Framer Framed and organised by PhD researcher Fabian Holle (representing Refugee Academy, VU Amsterdam) and co-researcher Noa Bawits, who works at Framer Framed and studies a Master in Sociology at the VU. LIMBO consisted of eight consecutive Sundays, facilitated by LGBTQI+ community organisers and community members with a refugee or migrant background. In this relatively short period of time, our goal was to build community by creating an environment of care. A space that is safe, welcoming and meaningful for LGBTQI+ people with a refugee background (from now on referred to as ‘queer refugees’). A space to experiment, be awkward or fail without pressure to perform. The idea was to facilitate workshops given by the (queer refugee) community for the (queer refugee) community. The workshops entailed: rope play, consent and boundaries by Maha Youssef; story creation by Rochita Loenen-Ruiz; poetry by Sunni Lamin; biographical drawing by Parisa Akbarzadehpoldadi; fimo clay by Jerrold Saija; clowning by Mala Badi; and making

dolls or objects with fabric and stitching by Sarah Naqvi. Our main focus was creating an in-between space in which queer refugees would feel brave enough to share their stories and creativity. A space of mutual support in which they could feel relatively safe and comfortable with the uncomfortable. In line with Cairo, we argue that ‘[a]lternative spaces to the larger, dominant narrative give credence to one’s value and humanity. These spaces where existence is resistance, are created out of needs, an answer to an inner calling to be affirmed in this world’.

LIMBO is a place for queer exilic narratives. Queer for us is not about sexuality. Queer means to be in touch with your inner feminine and masculine energy as a whole, regardless of gender norms imposed by society. Being queer is being yourself unapologetically in all colours, shapes, ways and forms. Being queer means taking steps to dismantle heteronormativity.

We, the authors, met in December 2021, a bit more than a month before LIMBO started. Initially unrelated to the research, we became close friends. Alaa then became a participant in LIMBO and later a collaborator providing psychological first aid to other participants. Alaa has worked with refugees and creative practices in the Syrian Red Cross around 2014/2015. Their personal refugee background, Red Cross training, Gerrit Rietveld Academy training, and experience in community building through (techno) dance and art made their contribution very meaningful.

The workshop series was developed during November/December 2021, when the Netherlands was still in lockdown due to Covid-19 measurements. With corona measures in full effect, everything was uncertain: Would the art institution be allowed to open? Could we be in a space together with more than four people? Would participants and workshop facilitators be anxious to meet in groups? Would we spread the virus amongst ourselves, forcing those infected into isolation? Considering such uncertainties, Fabian started pitching ideas to people in their network that had experiences with art, queerness and the refugee community, to come up with something in co-creation that would be

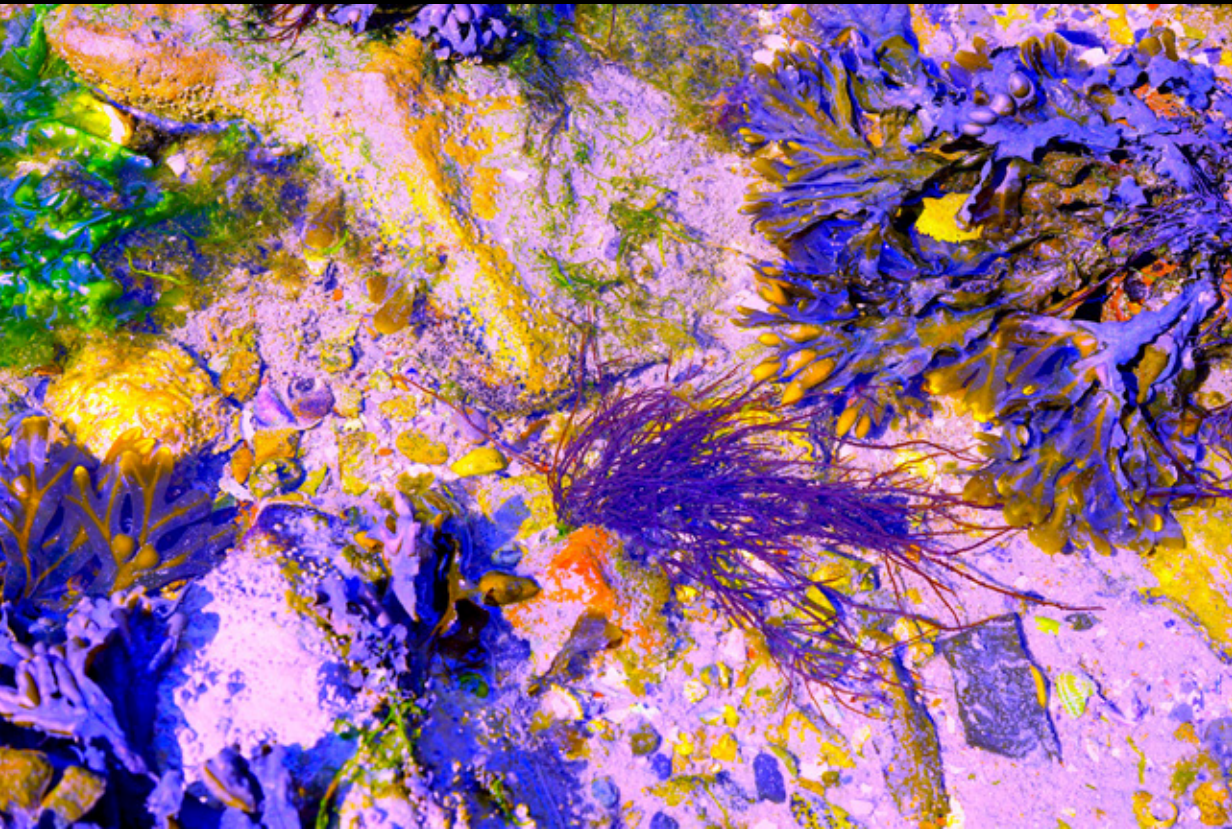
mutually beneficial for everyone involved. After several conversations, we outlined eight weeks of workshops, open for participants to join at any moment. They did not have to commit to the entirety of the project, giving a lot of freedom to choose, (hopefully) lowering the threshold to join. Eight weeks seemed to give plenty of opportunity for participants themselves to start bringing their connections.

FUNCTION MUSHROOM

To our surprise, nothing was cancelled, people kept on coming back and started to invite others. However, in thinking of care, the unpredictability and inconsistency of the group formation was challenging. One week there was a specific formation of people, the next week the formation was completely different. How do we then build an environment of care? We agree with Cairo that ‘[y]ou must consciously choose to come from a place of care and compassion when trying to hold space’. The changing formations reminded us of how Deleuze and Guattari describe a rhizome. A rhizome is a specific kind of root system different from a tree. A tree has a stem

and a core or central root system. A rhizome has no central root system nor stem. It’s all connected and grows in different directions, like ginger, crabgrass, or mushrooms. Also, ant colonies, flocks of birds, schools of fish, can be considered rhizomatic, as well as the internet, or social movements such as Arab Spring or Black Lives Matter. They are multiplicities without a central system branching out in all directions. Everything is multiple, in-between, liminal, and relational, never fixed, always in flux, ever-changing and developing.

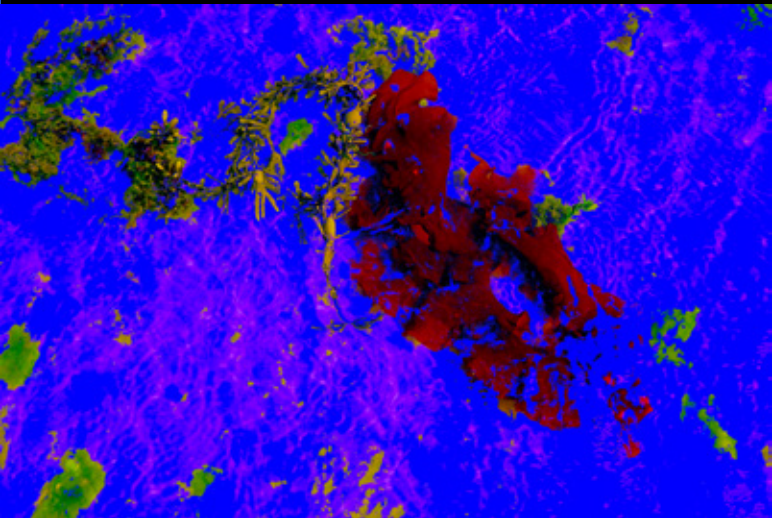
LIMBO is a rhizome in the sense that participants, like mushrooms, pop up unexpectedly, invisibly connected to one another, in ever-changing formations and constantly branching out in different directions. At the same time, each person brings their own connections, in terms of participants, and in terms of ideas, skills, desires and visions. It also works the other way around. The connections, ideas and skills in LIMBO are shared by individuals to other contexts and groups. Alaa refers to this as *function mushroom*. We combine the words *function* and *mushroom*, because each word represents something specific. The term ‘*mushroom*’ represents the



‘Queer is a mindset representing my personality and thoughts, my Arabic roots, Dutch nationality, Amsterdam, refugee background, love for nature, veganism, pride, love for techno, the underground community, revolution for climate change and human rights. Queer is what is inside me and how I express these choices freely’ (Alaa Ammar)



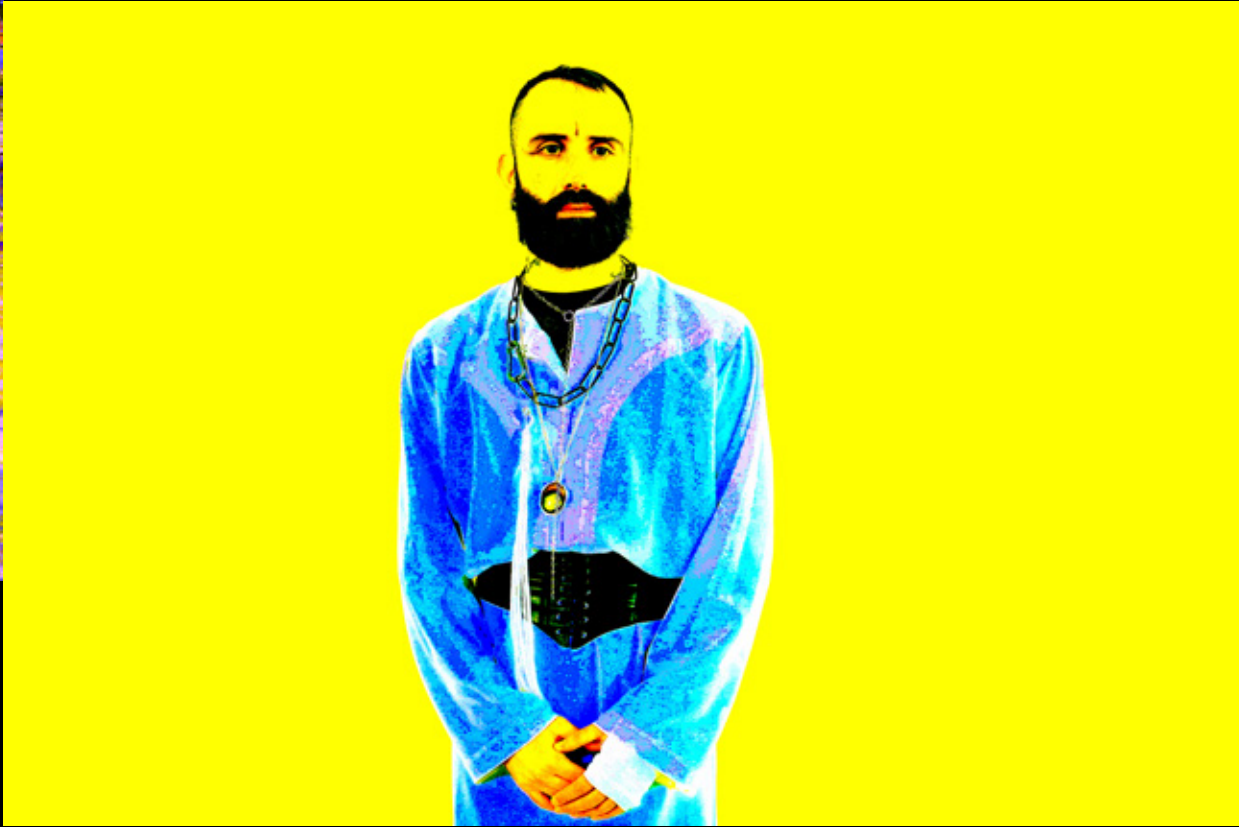
‘After I attend the first LIMBO workshop, and practice the constant consent, checking in with myself and others to make sure each decision is based on what I really want in the moment... and sharing what we shared, your openness gave me a strength that only the community can give and I felt the community power’ (mAmin)



visible outcome people can see or experience. Like a literal mushroom popping up in a forest. That is to say, every tangible outcome such as art works, texts, stories and performances. The images in this article are examples of mushrooms popping up in Foam Magazine. In nature, mushrooms are connected through an ever-expanding underground web of relations. The word ‘*function*’, then, represents the process of the growing invisible underground connections and how mushrooms (e.g., the images) start functioning. It represents the invisible layers hidden behind the image, the stories, the people, and the creation processes. *Function mushroom* is both the process and outcome of these powerful rhizomatic connections in all directions influencing different spaces and people.

QUEER EXILIC NARRATIVES

Even though insecurity in a rhizome is challenging, LIMBO created a sense of care and connectedness. Coming together on our own terms, in our own time, whenever we felt ready. Ultimately, LIMBO is about enabling connections by sharing stories. Stories can have many different forms: text, poetry, photography, drawings, or collage, for instance. Stories have the potential to connect people through empathy and recognition, because they resonate or are relatable. Before sharing stories, it is necessary (for some) to first practice and develop in a private and safer environment. Most queer refugees share experiences of not being seen, recognised, valued, or even believed by society. Nationalist tendencies have rendered most refugees





‘You can’t really take home out of people. Even if you’re forced to move, or if you move by choice, it really is something that you carry within you. It’s like blood running through your veins’ (Sarah Naqvi)



unwelcome because they are seen as threats for Dutch national culture, making it more challenging to construct and share one’s story. In LIMBO we work on constructing and sharing stories amongst ourselves first, because ‘one has to be comfortable and confident in one’s own story. One has to understand and holding the space for the story of the other does not take away from one’s own story. Our stories can co-exist. They do co-exist, whether we see or hear them or not. Ultimately, every story is an opportunity to be reminded that we are connected by our stories’ (Cairo, p. 229).

Queer refugees have their stories rejected in multiple ways. Sometimes their own families reject their gender or sexuality, other times, the IND (Immigration and Naturalisation Service of the Netherlands) does not believe their claim for asylum based on sexuality. In addition, within the Dutch context, many people do not want to listen to, or believe, stories about racism. The struggles around the Black Pete discussion have made clear how difficult it is to address this theme in Dutch society. Considering all these rejections, it is challenging to share stories of who you are or how you feel to a potential hostile other, because ‘failing to hold the space for each other’s stories and immediately asking clarifying questions or making defensive statements [...], results in the sending party cutting off and checking out’ (Cairo, p. 228).

LIMBO is thus an urgent and necessary safer space to practice together in constructing one’s story. Sensing what works, being inspired by other stories, and allowing our stories to be told in all kinds of ways, created a sense of togetherness as we didn’t have to deal with such vulnerable issues alone. Also, Rochita Loenen-Ruiz reminded us in one of the workshops, there is no ‘right way’ of telling a story, because we are the authors and directors of our own stories. There are no mistakes, we don’t have to do everything correct, we can fail or be awkward or stupid or strange. Step by step, LIMBO provided safety which enabled the courage to start sharing. After building up the courage, stories and art works could be shared with other spaces, institutions and/or networks to activate the *function mushroom*.

GOING PUBLIC

After being together and practicing in private, sharing content amongst ourselves, we opened up to a public audience at our event on 27 March. A moment of truth. Were we ready to share? Was the audience ready to receive? While the event progressed, our nerves faded away and we could confidently answer: ‘yes, we were ready’. It was a warm and sunny day and over 200 people came to visit and share the space with us. We celebrated with multiple performances, food and drinks. We saw participants of LIMBO claiming their space, dancing and taking the microphone to share their stories. People in the audience noticed and commented on how safe the space felt. One of the highlights was when some participants shared a poem. Sunni Lamin, a participant as well as a facilitator of the workshop on poetry in LIMBO,

organised and presented an open mic. Lamin is twenty-three years old and just recently came from the Gambia to the Netherlands. He asked for asylum, and received his residential permit only a few weeks prior to the start of LIMBO. He asked participants to share the poem they had composed in the workshop. It was moving for us to see participants opening up in front of a full crowd. Not long ago, they were quiet and timid, hardly taking up any space. At times speaking so softly that it was challenging to understand. In the week prior to the opening, Lamin offered coaching sessions which we were not aware of during the process. It came as a surprise when we saw them in front of the microphone. One participant shared that this was the first time, at age fifty, she could speak about her sexuality and how much she loved LIMBO. Another participant, Jackie, shared the following poem:

The sun’s rays are melting
Into orange, red and purple
Here we will stand
With dreams and faith
As darkness creeps in

The sun’s rays are waking
Into orange, red and purple
Here we still stand
With hope and promise
As darkness fades away

It was heart-warming to see care, connection and courage coming together. We were impressed by the poems, Lamin’s way of moderating the entire event and the courage portrayed. Participants felt safe enough to be brave, even in such a large public event. This moment reminded us of Cairo’s words about courage: ‘Courage can be big, and courage can be small. If one has been conditioned and grown used to being silent, it takes courage to speak up. Just opening one’s mouth and speaking can be a courageous act. Sometimes it takes a lot of work to come to that first effort to break the silence. For those who are always quiet even a whisper can make a statement. Perhaps we should start by understanding courage as making a statement’.

IMAGE STATEMENT
The image series is called *Queer Function Mushroom*. All images are digitally edited photographs. In this series, Alaa Ammar shows artists participating in LIMBO. This image series is connected to Alaa’s documentary portraying the *function mushroom*. The film shows members in the LIMBO workshops as well as their connections to other communities and contexts. The first picture shows Ariya (he/him) from Iran. Ariya is an artist and graphic designer who has been in the Netherlands for five years. Ariya makes digital art works that represent healing journeys into the unconsciousness. They are borderless manifestations of introspection about life, society, the past, the now, and carefully dreaming intentions for the future. The second portrait shows Alaa (they/them) from Syria. Alaa is a visual artist, activist and art director of underground events. They provide psychological first aid within LIMBO and have been in the Netherlands for six years. They use film, photography and performance while frequently collaborating with (mostly queer) artists from various disciplines. The third portrait shows mAmin (they/them) from Iran. mAmin is an activist, conceptual artist, currently practicing at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy. mAmin has been in the Netherlands for eight years. Their multi-disciplinary practice revolves around storytelling, photography, design and place-making as a means of constructing radical togetherness through the celebration of difference. The last portrait shows Sarah Naqvi (they/them) from India. Sarah is an Indian contemporary artist. Their work has been described as subversive, and covers topics such as gender, sexuality, race and religion. They advocate for various social and feminist causes including that of body positivity. Sarah has been situated in the Netherlands as well as in India for two years.

All images from the series *Queer Function Mushroom* © Alaa Ammar

ALAA AMMAR (they/them) fled to the Netherlands from Syria in 2015. In Syria, Alaa obtained diplomas in psychology and communication. Before the Netherlands, Alaa worked on creative practices with refugees in the Syrian Red Cross in 2014/2015, where they obtained multiple trainings. In the Netherlands, they study at Gerrit Rietveld Academy and volunteered at Secret Garden, an organisation for LGBTQI+ refugees. They are currently building community through a collaborative project that includes techno dance, art and performance. At LIMBO, their work is mainly focussed on connecting migrants and refugees through creative processes, and together working out first steps to start their new lives.

FABIAN HOLLE (they/them) graduated as a theatre maker at the HKU (University of the Arts Utrecht) in 2004. They worked with directors, choreographers and artists, co-founded the theatre collective Ponies (2005–2015) and performed in drag. In 2020, they completed a Master in Sociology (cum laude) at VU Amsterdam. They won the 2020 ARC-GS MA Thesis Prize (Amsterdam Research Centre for Gender and Sexuality at UvA), in which they analyse how art-practicing queer refugees challenge exclusionary social structures. Together with Maria Rast and professor Halleh Ghorashi, the master thesis was rewritten and published. Currently, Fabian is a PhD candidate within the research project: *Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change*.

