



*The future-spanning work of video artist Meriem Bennani*

Dazed, 2018

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Meriem Bennani (right) with her cousin Ghita on the set of *Party on the CAPS*

## **The future-spanning work of video artist Meriem Bennani**

**The Moroccan artist's latest work imagines how the advent of teleportation and biotechnologies could impact the geography of culture**

An inherent contradiction of our world right now is that the movement of bodies around the globe is both freer and more restricted than it's ever been before. Tech is driving a culture of convenience and speedy travel, but to actually move seamlessly and uninhibited around the world is the privilege of a rich, white few. New York-based Moroccan artist [Meriem Bennani](#) encapsulates this paradox with her latest installation, "Party on the CAPS", which poses the question: when teleportation is invented, what will happen to our borders – or more specifically, what will happen to the people who get stopped and policed at borders?

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Bennani's work is currently showing at Geneva's Centre d'Art Contemporain, as part of the museum's Biennale of the Moving Image. Throughout the *Biennale* exhibition, which also houses work by Kahlil Joseph and Fatima Al Qadiri, there's a loose theme of permeating boundaries, and a variety of innovative approaches to displaying video art, where films crawl across multiple screens, or even hover in front of the viewer as a hologram. Bennani's installation stands out as one of the most immersive ways video art can be presented; as she explains to Dazed, it's "like a choreography". The introduction is played on a sculpture, "a curved screen held by two arched metal tubes" that pierce through foam. The 22-minute film then plays across the wrap-around screen that engulfs the space, sometimes from one angle, and sometimes from many. Throughout the room are chairs that light up – though if you sit on them, you block the light source. "Your body is the interrupter," Benanni explains. "It's kind of like a joke, a bad design idea."

The film is one to be experienced with your whole body – from the frantic rhythms of the Chaabi music that soundtracks it, to the belly laughter that comes from its surreal humour. Narrated by a crocodile named Fiona (inspired by Bennani's obsession with collecting images of bootleg Lacoste clothes), "Party on the CAPS" is the story of a refugee camp in a world where people are apprehended by American border police mid-teleportation. It centres around a raucous family party, and stars members of Bennani's own family, including her mum and cousin Ghita, evoking the timeless romance of nostalgia and home, even as it imagines a twisted future of augmented reality.

Dazed caught up with Bennani to find out how she made the film, its themes of displacement and culture, and why she is ultimately optimistic about biotechnologies, but critical of how those technologies could be wielded by people in power.

**Tell me about how the idea for *Party on the CAPS* first came to you.**

**Meriem Bennani:** About a year ago, I got really into watching 'science explained to kids'-type videos about quantum physics, and I started understanding a couple of simple principles, which was really fun and allowed me to watch 'science explained to adults' videos. I quickly realised that teleportation was actually possible, and had been successfully performed by quantum physicist Anton Zeilinger a couple times on a photon from a Canary Island to another one... isn't that insane? If we know how to teleport one quantum bit, one day we could teleport a bigger mass, like a human! The way it works is actually very logical but also still a mystery, and it doesn't involve particles travelling through space, so the way people teleport in the premise of my video is actually physically wrong...

Alternatively, I had been watching interviews and conversations of futurists (mainly Martine Rothblatt), and heard them talking about biotechnologies and their impact on bodies and the world, as soon as a few decades from now. I kept wondering, if teleportation replaced flying and driving, would America and Europe freak out about their borders? And with biotechnologies, could uploading your brain into another body – maybe one across the world – become a new mode of migration?

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So the premise is that, in a world where teleportation replaced airplanes, America created a new border patrol force that people call "the troopers". They are all over the Atlantic Ocean, intercepting migrants mainly from Africa, mid-teleportation – which is super violent on your body and mind. While trying to figure out what to do with these new dislocated populations, they keep the migrants on an island known as the CAPS (Half-Way Capsule), which quickly becomes a huge megalopolis populated by multiple diasporas of people whose arrival is marked by this physical trauma of being disassembled on a quantum level and held in an in-between state. This has lasted for a couple generations, and some people were born on the CAPS, and have never seen their country of origin. The video becomes a lot about fantasy of place: missing where you come from although you have never been there, and longing for a life in a new place that you are not allowed to access.

**As all great sci-fi does, it reflects on our current world – were there specific events that inspired the CAPS?**

**Meriem Bennani:** Yes, it's a 100 per cent a documentary. The CAPS is a geographical analogy for diaspora or displacement. These thoughts were of course related to current politics and reinforced by my relatively hard time circulating through the world because I need a visa everywhere I go. I also couldn't help but try to imagine how biotechnologies would challenge our understanding of the body and mortality, and my first impulse was to imagine its impact on Morocco, a place where I think about my body and death a lot. I would say what makes it really a documentary is that the main characters are role-playing themselves, so aside from a few rules they had to respect in order to make the CAPS believable, they are talking about their lives.



Still from *Party on the CAPS*



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**How long did it take to shoot, and what was that process like?**

**Meriem Bennani:** The shoot of the party was in real time – afternoon to evening. I threw a real party with the help of my friend Ayla Mrabet, who produced the video, and managed to convince [Khadija El Ouarzazia](#), stellar vocalist, to come play with her all-female percussionist group. The film is structured around this party scene, where my mother plays herself and celebrates her own mother's birthday. (Her mother is turning 80, but just went through a reverse aging process, and looks 20 – she is played by my cousin Ghita.) The party is packed with people from the Moroccan neighborhood of the CAPS who want to celebrate her, and also see what she looked like when she still lived in Morocco. Initially, I had planned to only shoot at the party. At the end of the party, I had a feeling I needed to show more of the CAPS, to make the island real and more complex, and so I decided to shoot more scenes. I had two days, so I interviewed my mother at her pharmacy, talking about post-teleportation health and what it's like to work for the Troopers. Then I went to Casablanca to film Lil Patty, the host of the party, and we ate and walked around the ocean, asking kids if they had seen the croco.

**The film blurs the boundaries between the body and technology, between past and future, old and young, tradition and newness. What is it about these in-between spaces that interests you?**

**Meriem Bennani:** I think the endless potential for new systems and scenarios that come from the blurriness interest me, and a lot of other people too! The in-betweens operate on a personal level in terms of my identity, but also as a storyteller interested in mixing genres, in-between spaces feel nuclear and unclear, like a high intensity emotional generator waiting to be directed and channelled into new ideas.



Still from Party on the CAPS

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**It feels like there's an anxiety in the film about tech invading bodies – is this something you're wary of?**

**Meriem Bennani:** I don't feel any anxiety about technology invading bodies, the physical trauma present in the CAPS is more political, I would say. My intention really wasn't to talk about the future of technology. There are kind of like cyborg moments where I added a hearing aid of the future to my grandma's ear, or the "eye phones", but those are making fun of futuristic tropes. The part I intended (to be) more anxious is the final sequence, which has to do with surveillance systems, privacy and power: we see images of the island from the other side, a network of cameras set all around the CAPS, that we guess is the Troopers'. I am a technology enthusiast up till it comes to privacy issues and power. Biotechnologies genuinely interest me – like improving your memory by implanting nanobots in your brain, why not? As long as they don't come from your Facebook feed!

**What else are you working on right now?**

**Meriem Bennani:** Right now, I am doing research for my next projects, trying to be very open to different directions and new ideas. I want to work with Moroccan teenagers from French schools (schools that were initially established under colonisation), something about our fractured identity as French-educated Moroccans.

**When teleportation is invented, where will you teleport to?**

**Meriem Bennani:** My teleportation choices would be mostly structured around gastronomy; like, instead of going to a Japanese restaurant, teleporting to Japan for dinner, you know? Then going to surf in Indonesia maybe. I would shop for olive oil in a new Mediterranean place every week.

*Party on the CAPS can currently be seen at the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève until February 3*