

METEOROLOGY OF ISLAND SOULS



**RAPHAËLLE
VON KNEBEL**

Artist

**ANATOLE
DANTO**

Author

As part of the *Chemin des affinités*, a collaborative programme of travelling residencies set up by Arts en résidence - Réseau national and the endowment fund La Petite Escalère, the artist Raphaëlle Von Knebel participated in a travelling residency in insular and insular-like areas.

Interested in our connection to water and the environment, she links climatic events to life events. Hosted successively between May 2024 and February 2025 by APM-Résidences d'artistes in Saint-Jacut-de-la-Mer, Finis terrae on Île aux Marins¹ (Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon) and the Cité des Arts on Reunion Island, her year-long journey took place under the watchful eye of and in exchange with the anthropologist Anatole Danto.

¹ Translator's note: Sailor's Island; often translated as Pioneer Island.

Meteorology of island souls in the work of Raphaëlle Von Knebel

May 2024. After leaving Brest by train and the gloomy weather behind, I got off the coach at Saint-Jacut-de-la-Mer². I'm welcomed by a northerly wind - cold yet invigorating. I have a meeting at APM - Résidences d'artistes, where I'm embarking on a rather special ethnography. This ethnography is one of research "in the making", of an original "production",



The tides of Saint-Jacut-de-la-Mer - view from the house of the poet Yvonne Le Meur-Rollet and also the location of Raphaëlle Von Knebel's residency programme.

oscillating between design and artistic multidisciplinary, focusing on a relatively changeable human-nature interface on the seashore (perhaps it would be more appropriate to call it a "land's edge"?), involving spatial and temporal expansions and reductions.

The project is led by Raphaëlle Von Knebel, who trained at the Haute école des arts du Rhin (Strasbourg), isdaT (Institut supérieur des Arts de Toulouse) and the Design Academy Eindhoven (The Netherlands). In 2024, she was chosen to participate in the Chemin des affinités programme³. The artist draws some of her inspiration and questioning from her family history. Born to a Creole mother and a Franco-German father, Raphaëlle follows in the footsteps of her grandmother who was a teacher, writer, feminist and polyglot, open to the world with its wealth of cultural diversity. Several years ago, her ancestor published an autobiographical work. This book, which notably describes a cyclone that hit Reunion Island, is a powerful link between Raphaëlle and her grandmother.

² In Saint-Jacut-de-la-Mer, Raphaëlle Von Knebel was hosted and supported by APM-Résidences d'artistes.

³ A collaborative travelling residency programme set up by Arts en résidence with the support of the endowment fund La Petite Escalère.

Years later, on a winter's evening in the Netherlands, Raphaëlle came across her grandmother's text. Initially unsettled by it, it guided her towards a reconnection with her family, to the island's place within, to her past, and to the memories it evoked. Her paternal Germanic family's origins rooted in the region of Pomerania and the Creole identity of her mother's side of the family also play a role in the construction and affirmation of the artist's identity and the orientation of her practice, which are incorporated

into an assertive *mētis* (mixed race), and into auto-ethnographic research, questioning the links she maintains with her work, her person, and the concept of "insularity", by which she has always been driven.

In Saint-Jacut, Raphaëlle has already begun her exploration of the coastal area: sounding out the regional dialect with ethnologist Guy Prigent, recording the many bird vocalisations at Cap Fréhel, confronting the Breton weather, which is particularly inclement at this time of year (May), discussing the coastal winds with sailors, observing the tidal cycles tirelessly making their way across the mudflats of Arguenon Bay at night... Here she carries out a delicate ethnography, the approach of which falls between social science, aimed at deciphering the philosophies of beings, and that of natural science, aimed at understanding the ecosystem and its meteorological and climatic components. Her approach is ultimately artistic and one which allows her to question the materials she's collected and to document them. Her perception of meteorology influences her relationship with the places she visits and the representations that ensue. To gain a better understanding of these interrelationships, we're joining Stéven Tual, the geographer in charge of Temps Breton⁴, for a day trip around



Cover of Waldtraut Helene Treilles' biographical novel *Life is a Chameleon*, 2004 (the prologue of which can be viewed [here](#))

⁴ Temps Breton is a platform for monitoring and analysing the weather and climate in Brittany.

weather stations scattered across northern Côtes-d'Armor. The microclimates of the region take shape before our eyes, geomorphology and farming practices overlap, while a keen reading of human sensitivities to changing meteorologies unfolds, like an "ethno-weather-study". Indeed, Raphaëlle's work echoes the approaches currently employed by the emerging field of ethno-climatology.



Saint Jacut-de-la-Mer - digital data collection

June 2024. The big day has arrived - crossing the Atlantic. Like the Terre-Neuvas⁵ of northern Brittany, who once frequented the Grand Banks, Raphaëlle is fully focused on her second residency on Île aux Marins⁶, in the French archipelago of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, in North America. Once independent of France, Île aux Marins is now uninhabited all year round, but the houses have been preserved, one of which is used as an art residency. The cold June weather in the Newfoundland region is offset by the warmth of the archipelago's inhabitants, not unlike the coastal community of Saint-Jacut. From one Saint to the other, the vast ocean appears to be a link rather than an impassable space. This is what Raphaëlle is observing, and she too is taking on board the "oceanic turn" that has taken place in the social sciences over the last few decades, and which now extends to art and design. Her ambition is to see the ocean as a connecting whole, but also to take a topographical approach to the coastal biocultural diversity. In a lastly quasi-anthropological approach, she compares the social and environmental systems operating in and around this "one and only ocean". Just as she did when she met the geographer S. Tual, Raphaëlle exchanges with local natural scientists, notably in Canada, about

⁵ Translator's note: Terre Neuvas were fishermen who often embarked on perilous expeditions across the Atlantic to fish, usually for the best cod.

⁶ On Île aux Marins, Raphaëlle Von Knebel is hosted and assisted by Finis terrae - centre d'art insulaire.

ensuring that knowledge is unified in its complementarities, from the vernacular to the scientific or the artistic.

January 2025. Still as part of a kind of "Spilhaus projection"⁷ of the ocean, it's time to sail from one shore to the other, from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, with Reunion Island as the destination, and the programme's third stop-off: Saint-Denis⁸. There, Raphaëlle continues her approach of observing and collecting, questioning human memories of cyclones and the memory of water, the creolisation of natural and social elements, and

the notion of forecasting, building bridges between the interrelations between natural meteorology and the meteorology of souls, reflecting on the intertwined links between bodies and islands. And their transmission, as well as their erasure, whether spatial, temporal or generational. Raphaëlle has already spoken of her previous residency on Île aux Marins as a "hazy" dream which is also rooted in the day-to-day workings of ethnography: archiving, memorising, transmitting material, encouraging orality, culminating in a recording of the "sounds of meteorology", in all its diversity.



The coast of Île aux Marins - seen from the Atlantic Ocean - Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon

⁷ In 1942, the South African oceanographer Athelstan Spilhaus proposed a new cartographic projection to represent planet Earth, centred on the world ocean, which was thus positioned at the heart of the map. According to this representation, the continents became peripheral and surround the ocean, which then appeared as a single, connected body of water, covering most of the globe.

⁸ On Reunion Island, Raphaëlle Von Knebel is hosted and supported by the Cité des Arts de la Réunion.



The coastline of Île aux Marins - seen from the Maison Bleue, where Raphaëlle Von Knebel is staying.

Réunion, the final stage of this programme, is an important territory for Raphaëlle: an integral part of her identity, her birthplace to which she regularly returns. It's where she ends one cycle, and begins another, following these oceanic crossings. Her trips back to the "mother" island are an imperative necessity, at the source of all her inspirations and influences.

Being her third residency, Raphaëlle's work on Reunion Island also gave her the opportunity to think in more comparative terms, particularly about the media that could be used to report on these island ethnographies. The hypothesis of a form of an archipelago

atlas, highlighting certain circulatory and reticular aspects of both the approach and what was observed, is emerging. Local and regional specificities, and even particularities, are identifiable (patterns), but often in the form of gradients (gradients of (de)colonisation, for example), all of which fight in their own way against the dangers of uniformity. Numerous phenomena external to the three territories, both natural and man-made, past, present and future, local and global, interact with local systems, without any influence on island communities. The complexity of the singular, but also, and above all, the complexity of the plural, becomes apparent.



View of the studio at the Cité des Arts on Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean

These islands find themselves caught up in an all-encompassing, fluid maelstrom which is dispersed across the vast expanse of the world, not unlike quantum (the infinite, the scalar, distance, with space-times of separation or coming together). Similar and methodical shots, sections and scopes then allow us to grasp points of comparison, while orchestrating a poetry of that which is perceived, experienced or felt.

February 2025. Raphaëlle's final residency as part of the Chemin des affinités programme came to an end on Reunion Island, when the island was hit hard by cyclone Garance on the 28th of February. It was an event that led the artist to experience in situ and in vivo the effects of a cyclone of this magnitude on the island's souls at the same time as the three-year residency came to an end. And it opens up future prospects for research and creation.

*Anatole Danto,
March 2025*

Translated by Sadie Fletcher



Nights without electricity after cyclone Garance on Reunion Island - February 2025



ARTS EN
RÉSIDENCE
- RÉSEAU
NATIONAL

FONDS DE
DOTATION
LA PETITE
ESCALÈRE

CHEMIN DES AFFINITÉS 2024