

SUSPENDED LIVES AND EMERGING VOICES: NADIA KAABI-LINKE IN CONVERSATION WITH LINA LAZAAR

Lina Lazaar

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The work of Nadia Kaabi-Linke uses a variety of media to trace transient personal histories, trans-global movement and the passage of time, creating an archive of narratives that provide insights into, for example, the artist's boredom while working in a call centre, or the daily movements of a group of street vendors trying to make a living in Venice. A sense of fragility underwrites these works, not least in the materials used: delicate strings suspend the skeletal form of a bridge, for example, and dust gives form to the fleeting imprint of a cheek on glass, perhaps, or a scar on the body.

Nadia Kaabi-Linke spent autumn 2011 in London developing new work as part of a residency at The Delfina Foundation, which facilitates artistic exchanges and dialogue between the UK and the Middle East and North Africa. In November, the artist sat down with Ibraaz's Associate Editor Lina Lazaar to discuss her previous work and to outline her concept for a new project exploring immigration, religion and identity. Video interview online at <http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/10>.

Lina Lazaar: Your work is often concerned with the notion of tracing and of archiving and in a way it seems that it is almost a psychological process for recording the past and recent present of contemporary history. What would you say the role of the artist is in recording this past?

Nadia Kaabi-Linke: I would look at the question differently, because artists usually work in different media and have different concerns, so the question of the past might not concern another artist but for me the notion of the trace and recording traces became an issue. Through my practice I am always trying to find new techniques and discover new methods that I did not learn in school or



that other people were using. It's like an internal kitchen. I'm trying to discover something new: how can I use this technique according to the idea or to the concept related to the past? And as a role, I feel like I have a responsibility as an artist in regard to the society in which I live and that's why often the themes that I deal with are heavily related to some painful things like illegal immigration.

LL: Exactly. And what are you currently working on?

NK: What I am working on now in London is related to domestic violence. Sometimes my work is political and social but never in a direct way. The work arouses a question but never gives an answer.

LL: Perhaps you can first tell us more about *Flying Carpets* (2011), the work that was recently seen at the Venice Biennale during the exhibition *The Future of a Promise*. Can you tell us a little more about that process of recording through this work?

NK: Yes, *Flying Carpets* is very much corresponding to the idea of tracing stories and it was commissioned by the Abraaj Capital Art Prize. I applied for the prize already with this project in mind. Two years ago, I went to Venice to see the Biennale. After coming out of the Giardini Pubblici, I was crossing one of the bridges and saw police arresting some street vendors, but in a quite aggressive way, not in the way you would expect. I saw the way the vendors just grabbed their carpets, which are not really carpets, more like thin blankets on which they display their goods, and flew the coop. And that is when I understood why they used the carpets, it's not just a way of putting their goods on the floor, it's for a practical reason, so that they can be more mobile. The thing is that I was walking around Venice and I never quite paid attention because these people are there, but they have become so much a part of the scenery, it's like they are almost ...

LL: Invisible?

NK: That's it; they're almost invisible, although at the same time they are very present and everywhere. It required this extreme situation so that even someone like me, who really pays attention to the small details, could see that here was something that bothered me. That was the first point of contact but I didn't know what I was going to do with it. Later when I wanted to apply to Abraaj, I thought of the bridge as a link between east and west. In the past, Venice was a historic bridge between Europe and the Orient. The flying carpet, which is a romantic image of the orient, in this situation is recast in this harsh reality that has nothing



Nadia Kaabi-Linke, *Flying Carpets*, 2011, installation detail, *The Future of a Promise*, Venice, 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Abraaj Capital Art Prize. Photograph © www.alexmaguirephotography.com

to do with the romantic idea of boundary-less travelling, the open world or *The Thief of Baghdad*.

LL: And how did you document the lives of those vendors and what was the process like?

NK: I selected one bridge, the Ponte del Sepolcro, where the vendors usually were and which is between the Giardini and St. Mark's Square. I got in contact with them and I tried to explain to them my project. In the beginning they didn't want to believe me, they were like: is this art? This has nothing to do with art! For them, art means paintings in museums. I tried to explain to them that I was completely dependent on them and that I was doing a kind of tribute to their situation but at

the same time it would not work if they did not participate. So it took us at least one week to really feel confident and I would go every day and talk to them and they were very open, they started to tell their stories, why they were in Venice, where they came from. Many, by the way, come from South Asia but had worked in Libya or Saudi Arabia or the Emirates where I lived, so they even spoke Arabic. Some were from central and South Africa, so it was very mixed, but it was still the Orient in a sense.

And then what I did – it was quite a simple process but it was hard to convince them that it was not dangerous for them – I drew chalk outlines of their carpets on this bridge, and mapped how these shapes overlaid one another over the course of the week. These outlines eventually recreated the form of the bridge but only where the vendors put their carpets. I then recreated these forms as a bridge made of metal, so it looks a bit like a cage. You'll notice my bridge is thin, whereas the original bridge is much wider. This is because the vendors put their goods to one side to let the people continue walking. You will also notice that the flat parts of the bridge are more concentrated with carpets than the steps. So, you can see easily through the metal form how they ventured to and how they moved on the bridge.

LL: And do you have any affinity with those street vendors other than what you were saying, perhaps the fact that they spoke Arabic as well? Do you recognise yourself in these street vendors?

NK: Yes and no. Yes, because I am an immigrant myself, in Europe, coming from Africa; no, because I am fortunate enough not to have legal problems with my documents. But in general, and this is one of my convictions, I think that one should have the right to be able to move freely all over the world. If we think back to the origins of humanity, and how we evolved as a human species, there were Neanderthals, Homo sapiens and other species and the Homo sapiens survived. We know from the theories of Darwin and others that we survived because we were able to adapt and move from one place to another when the environment was too harsh. The official theory is that humans, Homo sapiens, came from Africa and that as they ventured and travelled, they settled in different regions, and that is how we also became physically different because we adapted to different conditions but we are all Homo sapiens. So this process of moving from one place to another continued, it's in all history, during antiquity and then in the Middle Ages, there were never



Study for *Flying Carpets*, 2011, Venice. Courtesy of the artist.



boundaries the way we now know them today. This phenomenon of having harsh, controlled borders happened after the Second World War. It is very, very recent but we have the impression that it was always like this and that it is natural to always be asked for a visa and to get refused and to struggle and to not know how to get into some places.

LL: So can you tell me a little bit about your own personal experiences of travelling in Europe? Because I know that you also worked on a similar subject in your 2011 work *Meinstein*, is that right?

NK: Yes.

LL: Can you maybe tell me a little bit more about that, and how that links with your own personal experiences of travelling in Europe?

NK: *Meinstein* is a work that will be built in a public space in Berlin, and I did this work in collaboration with some architects who work on squares and public spaces. I proposed to work with the people of Neukoelln, one of the central districts in Berlin, which has the highest rate of immigration in all of Germany. So I definitely thought about immigration, especially given my back story. I have travelled a lot from Paris to Berlin, when I was a child I lived in the Emirates, my mother is Russian, so it's like my life is a history of travel and adapting and getting to know different languages and people. For me, it's the most natural thing to go from one place to another and I'm surprised that I do not easily get visas because I am Tunisian. It doesn't make sense to me.

LL: Do you not?

NK: Well, I get them but with difficulty, I have to wait a very long time and sometimes I am refused.

LL: You have to tell me about the story of you applying for your UK visa.

NK: It was very important because that experience inspired an artwork. I applied to get a visa to go to the UK because I had a talk to give in March last year. I was coming for an artist's talk but in the end I didn't come. I got the visa but it arrived much later, so I missed it. This took place a short time after the Tunisian revolution. As you know, at that time many Tunisians emigrated to Lampedusa in Italy – it was about 25,000 people in one go. I was very surprised about the social and political effects, with France and Italy suddenly discussing whether or not they should be in the Schengen Area or just suspend the agreement and be like the UK. The UK is in Europe but it is not a signatory to the Schengen Agreement. But I didn't connect this at first; I only connected it when I didn't get my visa.

LL: So you applied for your visa and in normal circumstances it would take a week?

NK: Exactly, in normal circumstances, it will take a week, maximum two or three weeks. But in my case I waited for over a month and a half. They recently changed their attitude at the UK Border Agency; before, it used to be like any other embassy. If you wanted to go to Egypt or to France, you would go to the embassy

and apply with your passport and they would keep your passport on site for two days, maximum one week and then you got it back. What happened is that they centralised the process, so everything must be sent to the UK. So of course there were delays and it was excessive, I didn't expect it.

LL: And you didn't have your passport physically?

NK: This is it, since I didn't have my passport physically and I have only that, in French you would say I was 'assigné à résidence'.

LL: So you were basically stuck and confined to your space.

NK: Exactly and I was thinking how unjust, this cannot be legal, it is as if I have a problem with the police and then the police are telling me I'm not in prison but I'm not allowed to leave the city for, let's say, two months. I'm an innocent person but just because I was accused of wanting to have a visa, I could not leave my house or Berlin. Even in Germany, what can I do without my passport? Let's say something happened to my mother, I cannot go visit her and that was like, my god, this is like hilarious, incredible. And at a certain point I wrote an email but the strange thing is you don't meet people, the UK Border Agency hires an external company called WorldBridge but all they do is take your documents and send them on. You cannot even ask them a question, whatever question you have you have to ask it in an email or make a 12 Euro-per-minute call, something crazy. I didn't get any response to my requests for information. So I said I wanted my passport back, I resigned myself to the fact that I could not go to the UK, but then I realised I would have to wait even more to break the process of getting the visa, so you're in a situation with no way out.

LL: And what was the application like? You told me a little bit about the form itself but can you elaborate?

NK: That's also the funny part – that is why this work is disturbing. The form is like a questionnaire, and in the beginning it is normal, you put your name and other information, the names of your mother and father, where you were born. And then at the end you have a series of questions, I don't know how many exactly, maybe 15 or 20 and – they are strange.



6.11 In times of either peace or war have you ever been involved in, or suspected of involvement in, war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide? Put a cross (x) in the relevant box. Yes No

6.12 Have you ever been involved in, supported, or encouraged terrorist activities in any country? Have you ever been a member of, or given support to an organisation that has been concerned in terrorism? Put a cross (x) in the relevant box. Yes No

6.13 Have you ever, by any means or medium, expressed views that justify or glorify terrorist violence or that may encourage others to terrorist acts or other serious criminal acts? Put a cross (x) in the relevant box. Yes No

6.14 Have you engaged in any other activities that might indicate that you may not be considered a person of good character? Put a cross (x) in the relevant box. Yes No

Part 7 Travellers under the age of 18 Read Guidance Page

ONLY TO BE COMPLETED BY APPLICANTS UNDER 18 (or parent/guardian on behalf)

Study for *No*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

LL: How are they strange?

NK: Most of them presuppose that you are already a criminal. So any question that they ask you, you cannot say yes, it is impossible. There is even one that is very awkward, which asks: 'Do you think that there are any signs that you are a person of bad character?' And then it asks you questions about terrorism and genocide, big things. Because I want to travel to the UK, I am not accused but it is presumed that I am potentially a criminal. I thought that this paper was so interesting that I couldn't miss the opportunity of working with it.

LL: And so how did you apply this to your new video installation *No* and to the Tunisian Protestant Church?

NK: Well as usual, my work is very much anchored to life but it's not a cut and paste job, there is always a switch, or a twist; and this twist prompts new questions and you look at things differently and start to interpret them differently. So I was actually reading this with my husband and we found it funny.

LL: The questionnaire?

NK: Yes, the questionnaire, it was funny but also enraging. And we started to sing it, he actually started to sing it, and I already was thinking about the liturgy in church, it was very similar. Usually you have the priest singing something as a long phrase, and then the congregation will say 'Amen'. It's the same in the Orthodox Church.

LL: For Muslims as well.

NK: Yes, like 'Amin' after prayer. It's used in a different way but it's the same basis, they are all monotheistic religions. I think that was the point where we thought about a certain kind of situation in the church. But then we come back to the question of Protestantism in Tunis.

LL: So you have those questions linking to the church setting but you did not know anything about that church by that point.

NK: I did, but I didn't link it. I first visited this church in 2007 with my husband, we were in the old city of Tunis, in the Hafsiya, the very core of the city, and we came across this beautiful old building. It was a small, cozy church, which had old stones and you could almost imagine it not to be there.

LL: Very unexpected?

NK: Totally unexpected, like the street vendors in Venice, who are there but people don't see them. It's the same with the church, and the people who live in the Hafsiya, of course they see the church, but in Tunis when we talk about it no one really knows because it is so concealed. We have so many churches in Tunis, for instance the Russian Orthodox church on Mohamed V street and we have another one in Bizerte and there are other cathedrals, but we always think, and this is mostly the case, that it's the Europeans or people from other religions who go there, Africans from other countries.

LL: Expatriates.



Protestant church in Hafsiya, Tunis, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.



NK: Yes, expatriates, or like my mother who is Tunisian and sees herself as Tunisian after so many years, but is originally from Russia and she is Orthodox and no one ever asks her to change her religion. But we are not used to thinking that a Tunisian person born from both Tunisian Muslim parents would convert.

LL: Would ever convert, it is a taboo subject.

NK: They are converts to Protestant Christianity, because this is an Anglican church. So when I came in to the church with Timo, my husband, we met this priest. His wife is Tunisian and is also a Christian convert, while he was Lebanese, and he told us that many Tunisian people come to the church as Muslims and then become Christian. And I remembered a very long time ago, in 1998, I took a taxi in Tunis and I had the usual conversation with the cabbie, where everything is open and you can talk about anything. But that day, he asked me about my origins and I told him that my mother was Russian. He told me that he was Tunisian but he was also a converted Christian and he told me that Christian converts in Tunisia are very few and that they have to hide because it is dangerous, it is not accepted by society or by the government. If you think about the laws in Tunisia, if you are born Tunisian, you never lose your nationality. Officially it is not written that you are a Muslim but it is not accepted in my country if you say, you know what, I change my mind, I want to become Christian or any other religion or no religion.

LL: If I would like to take your mother's religion though, it would be totally unacceptable.

NK: I mean, nothing would happen to me but I do not think the official authorities would even register the information.

LL: The information will never be factual, recorded information.

NK: Exactly, it will never be recorded. In my case I will always be a Tunisian Muslim, I was born a Tunisian Muslim and I will die Tunisian Muslim, whatever I think or don't think. So this is why this taxi driver was telling me, we cannot say it openly, it's not just society that cannot accept that we have changed our minds but also unofficially the government would not be happy about it, either.

LL: Was this before or after the revolution?

NK: This was in 1998, when I was still a student in Tunis. And when I went to the church with Timo, I realised there is a whole community of Protestant converts. But to come back to the question of how many Christian converts exist, the priest told me that often the church is full with Tunisian Christians. But we have no numbers.

LL: Are you finding that Tunisians are increasingly revealing differences and complexities since the revolution? Do you find that the society, which was assumed to be very homogenous, is in fact not that homogenous?



NK: This is the feeling that I have, exactly. I spent the summer in Tunis and not only is this something that you see really in the streets – for example, with the way people are dressing – but it is also very present in public, political discussion and civil society. People speak a lot about their identity nowadays, and before it was never really an issue: we always had the idea that we were all Tunisians and that our identity never changed, even before independence.

LL: That was the uniting factor.

NK: Exactly. And we were all most of us Muslims, moderate, Sunni, so there was a kind of homogeneity. Of course there were Christians and Jews living in peace with us but there was a sense of homogeneity still. But when I came back to Tunisia, I didn't really understand why this question of being Muslim or not was such a big issue. Suddenly these issues arose, and then I heard about some Berber communities in the south of Tunisia who are creating an Amazigh organisation and this was another interesting development.

LL: And they speak a different language.

NK: In Jerba you have people who speak a Berber dialect. So the big debate is: are we for religion and announcing it officially in politics, do we want to be secular or not? But aside from these two poles, there are other differences that slowly start to arise. This could be really fantastic because it is difference that can unite us and can enrich society. I was remembering when I was living in Tunisia in the late 1990s and thinking that it was so upsetting that the Christians and the Jews left Tunisia in the 70s and 80s, because we heard from our parents that it was the centre of culture, that people were so much freer and society was much more open and no one ever asked the question: are you Tunisian or not? And these people by the way, the Europeans that left, they always come back, they always feel that their roots are Tunisian, whatever happens.

LL: Now you're in London – you moved here a month ago?

NK: Yes.

LL: And you're working with The Delfina Foundation in London as part of a residency programme, for two and a half months. What are you going to be working on, what is your project? You briefly spoke about domestic violence.

NK: Yes, I am in London working with The Delfina Foundation in collaboration with the Pump House Gallery. My work will be shown alongside that of another artist, Baptist Coelho, and we are both working on projects that have to do with direct interactions with communities and people. We will show the work we produced in March 2012 at the Pump House Gallery in London. And I am starting a long-term project that I aim to continue in different countries around the world because I think that the question of domestic violence is unfortunately international, it is not related to any one community or tradition. What I think is especially contradictory and awkward is that we live in a modern society with a lot of technology and we think that human rights and women's rights are really advanced. But domestic violence is something that is again,

invisible, taboo. The victims often do not think that they are victims, and this can happen in France as much as in England and Germany. In Germany for instance, where I started my research, I was talking with a policeman who told me that ten years ago the police didn't have the right to intervene in family matters, it is considered a private sphere and they didn't have the right even if the woman asked for help. This is ten years ago, it's incredible.

LL: You decided to start your research in London.

NK: I started research two years ago just to get information, and one thing I learned was that England has the highest rate of declared domestic violence in Europe and this is not something you expect. It is not only women, but men and children. You can't say that this doesn't directly concern us: if your children go to school, the teacher can be going through something like this, or maybe their friends are, or your neighbours and since we live in society and we want to have a certain project for society, we must accept that we are all related. This is how we come back to the idea of responsibility and the responsibility of the artist. Art plays an important role that is completely different from that of the media, from journalists and documentary filmmakers. Art can show how interconnected everything is and this is what I wish for with my project *Impunities*, where every spectator will be part of this problem directly or indirectly.

LL: And *Impunities* will be shown in March, is that correct?

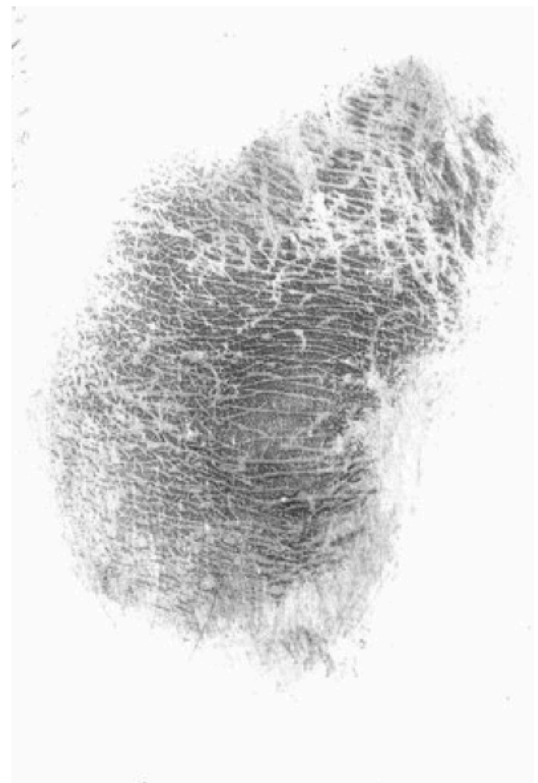
NK: The first part will. It will be an archive, so I am hoping after London to continue in other cities.

LL: And how are you effectively documenting these instances of domestic violence? You told me you found someone who is happy to collaborate with you on this project, how is that? Is it going to be installation-based, is it going to be video-based – what is it exactly?

NK: It's not video, not photography, I chose to use a forensic technique instead: it's the technique that criminologists use to find the traces of criminals. When the police come to the crime scene, usually they use this black powder to reveal invisible traces. So I'm going to use this technique ...

LL: On the scars?

NK: Yes. I'm going to collect scars using this forensic technique. It's very hard. And the process is also very complicated, very deep and it's personal and very heavy for me. You present your work, you try to be objective but it always becomes emotional. The first thing to do is to get in



Study for *Impunities*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.



touch with these organisations that are committed to helping women, children or husbands, and if they are convinced with my project, then they can put me directly in touch with the victims. And if they want, we can work together.

About the artist

Nadia Kaabi-Linke is a Tunisian artist living and working in Tunis and Berlin. She held her first major solo show *TATORT* at Galerie Christian Hosp in Berlin in 2010 and is preparing for her second major solo exhibition in March 2012 at Lawrie Shabibi gallery in Dubai. She has participated in several international group exhibitions, including *Drawn from Life*, at Green Cardamom in London (2009–10) and Abbot Hall Art Gallery in Kendall (2011); *Split* at Darb 1718 Contemporary in Cairo (2010); *Aftermath*, 25th Alexandria Biennale (2009); 9th Sharjah Biennial (2009); *Art Connexions: Arab Contemporary Artists* (2008) and *Archives des banalités tunisoises* (2009), both at Galerie El Marsa, Tunis, the latter a solo show. In 2009 she was awarded the Jury Prize by the Alexandria Biennale, while in 2011 she was granted a residency at The Delfina Foundation in London as well as receiving the Abraaj Capital Art Prize. Her work was included in the exhibition *The Future of a Promise* at the 54th Venice Biennale, curated by Lina Lazaar, and *Based in Berlin*, at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin. Kaabi-Linke is represented by Green Cardamom, London, Galerie Christian Hosp, Berlin, and Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai.

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About the author

Lina Lazaar is the Associate Editor of *Ibraaz*. She has an MA in Statistics, an MA in Art History and is a specialist at Sotheby's London in Post War and Contemporary Art. Her passion for Arab and Iranian Contemporary Art led Sotheby's to hold their first European auctions in this category in 2007. Since then she has curated these sales annually and significantly increased the international exposure and discussion of Middle Eastern contemporary art. Lina is a member of the Middle East North Africa Acquisitions Committee of Tate Modern, London. In 2011, she curated a collateral event of the 54th Venice biennial *The Future of a Promise*, the largest Pan-Arab contemporary art show in Venice.