



Revealing the invisible: interview with Tunisian-Russian artist Nadia Kaabi-Linke

Naima Morelli
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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

"I never decide in advance why I want to talk about a subject; it just arises from the context. The wall in particular is a symbol that speaks to me strongly," says Tunisian-Russian artist Nadia Kaabi-Linke, to explain her new work at Dallas Contemporary gallery. "For me, walls mean separation. But walls are also skins that say something about a city and the people who live there in hidden ways," she observes. "I have always been interested in revealing the invisible."

Her exhibition "Walk the Line" features six pieces, including the first performance piece by the artist. It deals with issues surrounding the border between Texas and Mexico and will be performed by people for whom the border is part of their lives. By weaving in and out of poles with a thread in their hands, the performers will create a wall. The number of steps they take will correspond to the number of steps required to cross the border. The thread is also the exact length of the whole frontier.

All the pieces in "Walk the Line" are tied strongly to the theme of immigration. This has always been part of Kaabi-Linke's work, from pieces like "NO", commissioned by the 2012 Liverpool Biennial, to "Flying Carpets". The former was a video installation which involved two screens: on the first, a pair of lips recited the heavily charged and prying questions found on British immigration papers, while on the second, a praying crowd opposed the individual voice of authority. In "Flying Carpets" she compared the romantic idea of the Orient to the modern reality of street vendors in Venice. While the flying carpet symbolises boundless travel, illegal immigrants in Venice use carpets to gather up their counterfeit goods quickly at the first sight of the police.

Kaabi-Linke feels that the theme of immigration is very personal for her. Born to a Tunisian father and a Russian mother, she grew up across extremely different cultures. "I have a Tunisian, North African, Arabic background and also a Soviet, Ukrainian, Russian background. Plus, I moved around so much as a child with my parents and as an adult for my studies. Immigration for me is something completely natural and I'm always surprised to

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see how difficult it is for me to get a visa.”

Now that migration is making the headlines, she doesn't want her work to be interpreted as a direct comment on what is happening. “I listen to the news, but I don't understand my work as a reaction to it. With my work I try to do things more slowly. It's really much deeper and it's a very personal investigation.”

But the art world is quick to pigeonhole artists and create expectations based on their nationality. Kaabi-Linke has already experienced this kind of pressure with the Tunisian revolution. Back then she felt that all Tunisian artists were expected to be activists and revolutionaries. Even if her foundation is a philosophical and theoretical background, though, some of her work can be read as political.

“Smell” (2012) is a black flag embroidered with jasmine flowers, reading, “There is no God apart from God, and Mohamed is his Prophet”. On close observation, the viewer realises that the jasmine flowers are rotting over time. Consequentially, the black flag will become more dominant.

Kaabi-Linke has sometimes been asked to speak on behalf of artists in Tunisia. In an interview in 2012 in La Repubblica, she talked about the hardships faced by Tunisian artists. Today, based in Berlin, she feels that she can only discuss the situation at some distance. “I feel that what happened was a necessary clash — both culturally and historically — that had to happen in Tunisia. It had to happen between the intellectuals and artists on one hand, and the increasingly religious on a superficial level, those brainwashed by the propaganda, on the other.”

In her opinion, everything was possible post-revolution on a level of expression, including violence. “Nowadays we still have enormous issues in Tunisia. What's important, though, is that there is a new debate in society, in the open arena.” She thinks that today it is not an entire society that reacts negatively to artists, but only the separatists. “But these people represent dangers for everyone, not only artists.”

Even though it won't be her performing personally at Dallas Contemporary, the choice of a medium like performance involving a body is a return to where it all started for Kaabi-Linke; namely in a dance class in Tunis. “Dance was a direct way to express things with my body,” she says. “In Tunisia my father was the director of a sports club, and I had access to every possible kind of sport.”

The family's move to the UAE in the nineties brought an end to dance classes and sports. “I had to stop when I started to look like a woman. Dubai was a different place back then, with not much for girls to do. What I was left with were four walls and my school — it was frustrating.” That's when she started to write, draw and paint as an outlet. She was taught by her mother who had studied art back in Kiev.

After high school in Dubai she went straight to the art academy in Tunis. “My dream was always to go back to Tunisia. But my destiny is never to go back home for good. I always carry my country as a nostalgic phenomenon.”

Kaabi-Linke's work is very much influenced by this feeling of nostalgia and separation. This is common in those growing up between different cultures. “When I'm in Tunis, I'm not in Kiev. That nostalgia that is always there; there is nothing ever complete or total. There is always a missing part.”

The artist describes nostalgia as the most natural feeling for her: “It's like people who as a child always ask you: ‘So are you more Tunisian or more Russian? Are you a Muslim, or are you influenced by Christianity?’ I always thought, ‘What a stupid question!’ I don't know anything else; for me, normality is what seems crazy to other people.”

In her household, no one culture prevailed over the other. “The debate about what was better or worse didn't exist at home, ever. We celebrated all the religious festivities; it was always an opportunity to have a good time.” Nevertheless, it was during her time at the art academy in Tunis when Kaabi-Linke felt the most rooted. “It was the best time of my life. My department was painting. I wasn't doing any installation at all at university; that came much later. My theoretical research brought me to installation.”

Going from a hands-on school like the art academy to the theoretical studies of a PhD at La Sorbonne was quite a shock. The opportunity to go to Paris came via a scholarship. It was one of only two assigned yearly by the Tunisian government. “I thought, ‘I'll just go to Europe, just to have a new experience.’ I was thinking of going back to Tunisia after I finished. I didn't know what university studies involved, so it was the biggest shock. It was the first time I found myself out of place.”

Of course, the thought of giving up wasn't an option: “I had won the scholarship and, besides, it's not in my nature to quit.” After a while she became truly passionate about the research, which ended up influencing her work as an artist. “My art became more research-based and much more down to earth.”

Even while doing her PhD, she never stopped making art, but she was mainly keeping the work to herself. It was an important incubation period. At the time, however, it was fashionable in the art world to make big stars out of extremely young artists. Worried about being considered too old, by the time she handed in her thesis, Kaabi-Linke had already



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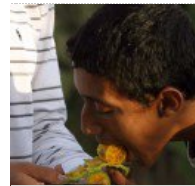
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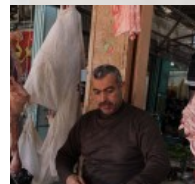
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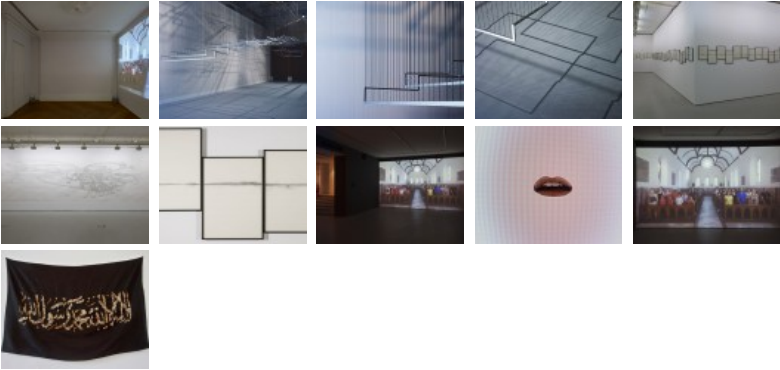
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organised her first solo show in Tunis. "And my career as an artist went from there," she smiles.

Kaabi-Linke remains a bit critical of the art world. "Today its dynamics are very close to those of the fashion world. You have to produce something every season. Of course, in the end, what's important is that you remain steady."

The independence of the artwork - which shouldn't need a written explanation - is key for her. "The reasons why I produce the work are the motor, but the artwork still exists without them." She sees her pieces as having an internal grammar. "My work creates a language that people can understand or interpret themselves. I'm very interested to see where the public take the work; how they understand it, in which context they put it. That's when I discover something new about the work."

Nadia Kaabi-Linke, "Walk the Line", at Dallas Contemporary, Dallas, Texas, USA, from 19/09/15 to 21/12/15



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