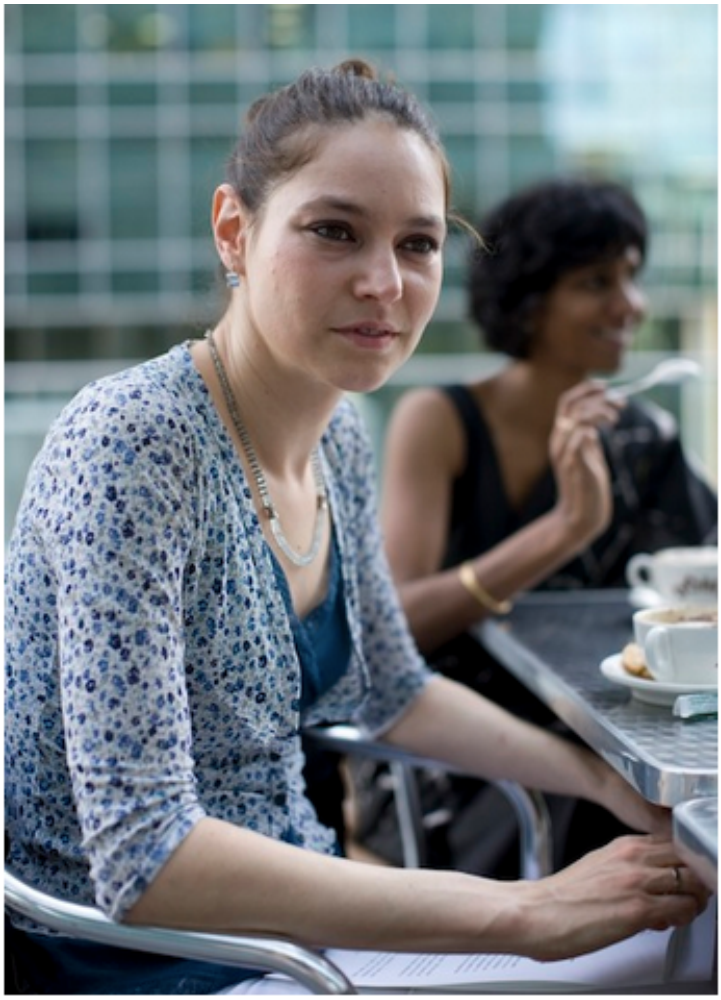
"It Is Life That Inspires Me": A Q&A With Tunisian Political Artist Nadia Kaabi-Linke

by Ben Davis
02/04/11 6:34 PM EDT



Nadia Kaabi-Linke

Of all the highlights of the recent **Art Dubai** fair, "Magic Carpets" by Tunisia-born artist **Nadia Kaabi-Linke** stood out in particular. Hung in the main hall leading into the fair, the sculpture was both grandiose and inscrutable, consisting of minimalist lattices of interlocking squares spanning the length of the hall, resembling the form of a two-level suspended bridge. In fact, the work outlines the form of a specific structure, Venice's Ponte del Sepolcro, and refers to the artist's experiences investigating the conditions of illegal immigrants working there as

vendors, tracing the exact locations of the blankets where they spread out their wares on the bridge.

Kaabi-Linke was born in the Tunisian capital of Tunis in 1978, graduating in 1999 from the city's **University of Fine Arts**, and receiving a PhD in Sciences of Art from the **Sorbonne**in Paris in 2008. She is currently represented by Berlin's **Galerie Christian Hosp**, while her work has previously been seen in the **Sharjah Biennale** — where she created "Under Standing Over Views," a map of the United Arab Emirates made up of fragments of images from all over the world — and the **Alexandria Biennale**, where her contribution was awarded the Jury Prize in 2009. She was one of five winners of the 2011 **Abraaj Capital Art Prize**, which funded the creation of "Flying Carpets."

While in Dubai for the art fair, **ARTINFO** deputy editor **Ben Davis** spoke with Kaabi-Linke about her recent work, the affects of censorship on creativity, and how the recent upheaval in Tunisia might — or might not — change the way she thinks about art.

Can you talk about the work you have here, "Flying Carpets"?

"Flying Carpets" is a documentary work, but it is not executed using the classic media of documentary — photography and video. I often work with prints, where I take some pieces from one place, then put them together and assemble them. In this sense, I am not creating new forms — I just find things and select objects or events. The new work, "Flying Carpets," is about creating a tribute to the illegal immigrant street vendors whom you see in Venice, and generally in the south of Europe.

During eight days in Venice, I lived with them and I followed their work, on a bridge called the Ponte del Sepolcro between San Marco and the Giardini. I noticed that the street vendors put their goods on a kind of white cloth, which both looked like a carpet and had the function of a carpet, since they could use it to pull all their goods together and then fly the coop when the police came. That's what made me think of the "flying carpet," which is this image from Orientalism — the romantic archetype, the object that represents the Orient, and which in the imagination makes it possible to go from one place to another without borders or checkpoints or visas. I wanted to see how I could create one object that carries within it this contrast. Because in the

case of the street vendors, it is really like they are in a prison. It's true that they can run away from the police, but this situation is also their cage at the same time.

So what I did is actually just take the outlines of their carpets on this bridge, and map how these shapes overlaid one another during one week. After my journey with them I just had numbers and measures, and what I did was to translate this data and information into a visual form, recreating the forms of the carpets laid on the bridge as a structure made out of metal. The installation, in the end, is not something I invented — it's something that happened. That's why we notice, for example, that on the upper part of the bridge, you have many more carpets than on the lower part. This is because it is a flat surface, where they can better see the police. Additionally, the bridge is higher on one side than on another, and the higher part is closer to San Marco, while the lower part is closer to the Giardini. San Marco is the most touristy area of Venice, and where the police are concentrated. It is riskier for them to go in that direction. Whereas on the other side it is easier for them — and in my sculpture you have more "carpets" concentrated at that end.

It's an interesting genre of work. I guess I'd call it "social abstraction" — taking a social structure and producing something abstract out of it. What are the influences on you in terms of making that sort of work?

I can't say exactly. I can tell you the artists who I think are interesting, though I don't know if I am going in exactly their direction. I know for sure that there is Mona Hatoum. She also is working with political background, and I like the intelligence in her work. She never creates direct statements. Instead, her works draw the spectator into asking questions. Because, if art makes a direct statement, it is as if the artist is saying they have the answers, and there's something prophetic about the work, which I don't like. Another inspiration is an Italian artist who is not that political, but who works a lot with prints and engages the idea of time and archeology in his work — Giuseppe Penone. But of course, any artist synthesizes various influences. In my case, more than art movements or genres, it is life that inspires me. That's why I work primarily with urban contexts. It is much more the people I meet, or situations that happen that draw my attention as an artist. My work is very social. I like your description, because the work is social and concrete, but at the same time it gives birth to a kind of abstraction, in the sense that it is not figurative, it is not a representation — it's more of a presentation.

This work was made for Abraaj Capital Art Prize. Can you tell us about that process, how the work came together?

Well, I won the Abraaj Prize — I am one of the five winners. This prize has the peculiarity that artists win on the basis of a project they have proposed. So I submitted my project some months ago, and from that moment we started a collaboration with Laura Egerton, who is the ACAP curator, and curator Sharmini Pereira. The first part of the project was staged in Venice, and then in Berlin, and finally I actually produced the project in Sharjah.

At the announcement of the the prize, there was this interesting moment when, after they announced the winners of this prize dedicated to artists from the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, they had the new finance minister from Tunisia [Jaloul Ayed] come up to congratulate you and share the stage. Can you talk about that moment or give me some background for it?

Well, that moment was also surprising for me! I knew that the new minister of finance would come to Dubai. In this particular case, after the revolution, the presence of someone who is representing the government can be a pleasant one, as an artist. It might not make so much sense in the future. And in particular, it would have been very unpleasant if this had happened before the revolution. Because, you know, the situation of Tunisia was very particular: it was not democratic, artists were not free to do, say, or create what they wanted. There was very strong censorship. It was a police state. But after the recent events, it makes a whole lot of difference — his presence becomes symbolic, and to meet in this particular situation, because I am representing Tunisia here... yes, it was fantastic.

I know very little about the Tunisian art scene. Is there a community of artists that you consider yourself a part of with shared concerns? Can you speak a little bit about the art scene that you are a part of?

I came out of this community, I was born there, I grew up there, I went to school there, my first solo show was in Tunisia, and my friends and colleagues are there, who are also artists. But as in any country, we have different interests, and artists work in different media, with different concepts and ideas. It is also true that I live

between Berlin and Tunisia, so the way I see things is different from the people who live in Tunis.

Were you in Germany for the Tunisian uprising?

I was in Sharjah, here, producing my piece.

You make work that incorporates political context, so I guess it is logical to ask you: With the political scene changing and with the unrest, uprisings, and revolutions in the Middle East, does that affect your practice? Does it affect the way you think about what you are doing?

I will answer you on two points. The context will definitely affect me in the sense that I have lived with self-censorship — on the level of titles, for instance. Because I knew that it would be dangerous for me as a Tunisian artist to attack the former Tunisian government, for example, there is a work that I wanted to call the "Butcher of 7 November." November 7th is the date when president [Zine El Abidine] Ben Ali executed his coup d'etat, taking power from [former president Habib] Bourguiba. At the same time, in Arabic, the reference to a butcher suggests a place where war happens, a place where people are killed, not just a place where animals are killed. I wanted at that time to make a sort of ironic statement, because there is an actual butcher in Tunisia who called himself "The Butcher of 7 November" — he wanted to glorify Ben Ali, but he didn't think about this contradiction, so he ended up in prison. I wanted to do something working with this background. But in the end I called it "Butcher Bliss," so there was a kind of automatic censorship. Now, in fact, I even prefer the title "Butcher Bliss" — sometimes censorship can be very creative. This is one way to address your question: I think my practice will change in the sense that it will be more direct, though I don't know if that's better or worse. That's something that I will experiment with. Because I think that censorship can be very positive for creation, to have to do things indirectly.

But back to the question of how the recent events will affect my work. Because my art is often social and political, right now, given the situation, it could only take the form of a comment. It is too early. All Tunisians, we need to understand what has happened to us. So for sure, there will be art that comes naturally from this context. After this fair, I am going to Tunisia, and I am going to spend some time there, and I have no doubt that there are thoughts and ideas that will arise, while working in the

context of what has happened, and what is happening — because, you know, the revolution is continuing. Not in the sense of people going into the streets, perhaps, but the big revolution is the revolution in the mind. We have to change not only our political structures, but also our ways of thinking, of being open and accepting others. For example, I have a problem with Islamists, but I have to accept that these people exist in Tunisia. They are part of society. Perhaps they will be politically represented. So even for me, it is important to make an effort on myself, and to understand that we can all be completely different, but we can live together, and that we are all Tunisians. I think this is the most important revolution, and this is what Tunisians have to work on. My work will reflect this, for sure — but I don't want to make "comment art." If I did something now it would be just a commentary, and that's not interesting.

My last question is about how you feel about this context — the context that your work is seen in here. For me personally, I find it very weird to be here, in Dubai, when it feels like the world is ending — in Japan, in Bahrain — and I wonder if you feel the same thing, or how you deal with the context in which your work is presented. Do you feel any contradiction at all? Is this something you think about?

Yes. Completely. Art fairs are about glamor. The elite come here. Professionals from the art world. My work has to do with the little people, with the invisible, with the things that people don't take the time to look at. So there is a contradiction. And it is true that now, with what has happened in Egypt, in Tunisia, but especially the drama that is happening in Libya — I think it's strange that we don't speak about these things. Our discussions are only about art. It's as if art is talking about art, and art is separated from the world. And I think maybe there is something wrong with this. No, there is something wrong with this. Because art is about, in the first place, understanding your surroundings, criticizing them, digesting them. We live in a kind of global world — you are here, I am here, we are from different backgrounds and countries, and there is a global market. But how come the things that affect all of this are the last things we talk about?