



# Art Radar

Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond

## “Sealed Time”: Nadia Kaabi-Linke on historical memory and the legacy of colonialism – interview

### Tunisian-born artist Nadia Kaabi-Linke talks to *Art Radar* about “Sealed Time” and her current exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bonn.

Nadia Kaabi-Linke’s sculpture practice often engages with the materiality of historical memory, particularly in relation to the European nation state’s bureaucracy systems. *Art Radar* talked to Nadia Kaabi-Linke about her latest retrospective exhibition “Sealed Time”.



Portrait Nadia Kaabi-Linke at Kunstmuseum Bonn. Image courtesy Kunstmuseum Bonn the artist.

As a Tunisian-born, Ukrainian-Russian artist living in Berlin **Nadia Kaabi-Linke** has had personal experience with Europe’s migratory control system and how it actively intervenes into well being, work, a sense of belonging and the capacity to live free from harassment or social exclusion. Her installation work *Flying Carpets* (2011) was produced after a period of engagement with a community of streetvendors in Venice who, as so-called “undocumented migrants”, experience social exclusion and exemption from their civil rights. As in many cities across Europe, the street vendors can be seen scooping up their goods in the display rugs and fleeing to avoid unwanted encounters with the authorities. In a memorial to a precarious community whose status as workers is placed constantly under threat, Kaabi-Linke constructed an installation of metal structures which represent the outline of their display carpets.



Nadia Kaabi-Linke, 'Flying Carpets', 2015, steel installation, 420 cm x 1300 x 340 cm. Image courtesy the artist and New York Guggenheim UBS MAP.

In other works like *Altarpiece*, Kaabi-Linke explores dominant narratives of European history. The work literally carries the trace of a wall of a World War II bunker situated in the centre of Berlin. The bunker was used as a civilian shelter during the airstrikes of the Second World War, and later it served the Red Army to hold captive prisoners of war. It was subsequently used as a warehouse for storing vegetables during the GDR years, turned into a legendary techno club after the reunification and today finally houses the comprehensive **Boros collection of contemporary art**. The golden double wing doors "seal" the artwork and keep it safe from being transformed any further.

The current exhibition "**Sealed Time**" at Kunstmuseum Bonn departs from this idea of time "sealed", drawing out what have been the main tenets of Nadia Kaabi-Linke's practice for over a decade: memory, architecture, experience and migration. *Art Radar* spoke with Naadia Kaabi-Linke about sculpture as "trace", the meaning of fascism and the influence of survivors of domestic violence, Eva Hesse and the Fort Worth community (on the US-Mexico border) on her art practice.



Nadia Kaabi-Linke, 'The Altar Piece', 2015, Altarpiece with transfer prints and acrylic on paper on canvas, wood, 250 × 450.4 × 6.3 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Kunstmuseum Bonn.

**Could you tell us about the title of your current exhibition project "Sealed Time"? Why not "permeable time" or "time intervened"? Is there a determinism or fatalism here?**

The title is borrowed from the German translation of an essay book of Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky. In his book *Sculpting Time*, Tarkovsky evokes the specific temporality of the cinematographic image while understanding the latter as a technique of reality reproduction. There are two reasons why I chose to quote this title or concept: one is related to my own work and the other reason relates to the city of Bonn and its very specific history. In this conception he applies a very specific, I would even say transcultural and in the first place anthropological, concept of time. It is based on the perception of processes and on the discontinuity of memory – a concept that is critical and aware of its subjective bias and juxtaposed to the idea of a timeline or any simplified interpretation of causalities and continuities.

Time and memories are interdependent: time forms certain kinds of historical memories and approaches to the past, while these memories also influence a person's feeling of being in time. By this reason time is an existential factor for human beings. In this light, modern reproduction techniques such as photography and cinema are more than just aesthetic strategies. The production of images and the editing of film are methods of reproducing and shaping time, and by this reason they are also historical agencies of reviewing our relationship towards the past, present and future.

For Tarkovsky, a film is a temporal sculpture. I see a kind of familiarity between my conception of time and Tarkovsky's, although we work in very different media. While he considers the dynamic medium of film as sculpture, I conceive my installations and sculptural works as temporal objects that incorporate certain dynamics – especially as a historical carrier of meaning.

It was also important for me to quote Tarkovsky's concept of time for the exhibition in Bonn, because I felt that it strongly relates to this place. Bonn has a very specific and unique history. After being the capital of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1949 to 1999, during the critical period of Germany's division, the provincial town on the Rhine became the frontline of the capitalist and neoliberal world in the West and a very opposite world of socialist



regimes in the East. It is still a place for governmental and supranational institutions. The UN campus is close to the Kunstmuseum Bonn and there are also some ministries that are obviously considered of minor importance such as the ministry for education, nutrition and IT – and data security.

However, the more prestigious ministries as well as all the embassies moved to Berlin. While walking through the city one could still feel the former times and the geopolitical pressure that was concentrated in Bonn. The architecture of the buildings still testifies to the threat of a nuclear war – nearly all former administration buildings are equipped with shockwave protection against blaster bombs and they have several underground levels that spontaneously convert into underground bunkers. Time felt to be sealed in the city of Bonn. It expresses the post war era and the bilateral equilibrium of the “Cold War”. At the same time the city feels as if it was abandoned by its threats and burdens. An emblematic case for the idea of a time that is sealed in the urban architecture of the city is the former embassy of Syria. While ambassador and consul already moved to Berlin a long time ago, people still gather there to protest against the Assad regime. The place seems to be occupied by the people’s memories, they still go there to protest although there is no one who can hear or see it.



Installation view at “Sealed Time”, Nadia Kaabi-Linke at Kunstmuseum Bonn, 2017. Image courtesy the artist and Kunstmuseum Bonn.

**Your work explores your experiences of bureaucracy, nationalism, border crisis and fascism in Europe. How do you define fascism currently? To what extent is the notion of fascism a Eurocentric notion?**

I understand fascism as a collective movement that advocates the discrimination and exclusion of the others and alternative views and opinions with violent means. It is a kind of extreme and hostile identity construction based on binaries like pro or cons, us or others that are applied against certain ethnicities, sexes and sexual orientations, religious communities, etc. Fascism englobes a very large spectrum of exclusions and its potential is embedded in all stream of biopolitical, geographical and cultural identity constructions such as nationalism, racism, the collective identity of social classes or religious communities, among others. By this reason I do not see it as a Eurocentric notion. Although fascism is historically bound to Europe, since it strongly manifested on the continent in the era of the rise of nation states, fascist movements and politics happen everywhere else on this planet too. Unfortunately

it is omnipresent. It manifests in religious extremism or in nationalist movements, it functions as well as a kit for groups of protesters as a drive in authoritarian regimes.

It manifests in pogroms and mass killings, and it is always an indicator for the weakness of a civilisation, since it expresses the common inability to tolerate and understand differences. It is a fact that fascism has no compass, it happens in the North, but also in the South, it drove the Western economy but it also fuels new political trends in the East. Again, it is not Eurocentric. A Eurocentric version of fascism would simplify our world that actually expands between neoliberalism and turbo-feudalism – both are, combined with a growing population of seven Billions, hot breeding grounds for neo-fascist movements.

At least we could learn from the European history and in particular from Germany to avoid making the same mistakes again. It is like a slap in the face that racist and xenophobic movements rise in Europe again. With one work that was commissioned for this exhibition, I referred to the very place of the anti-muslim Pegida gatherings in Dresden and tried to hardcode this place with post-revolutionary trends in the European history and the air raids on Dresden in WWII. The work is called *Gekochte Erde*, which means 'burned soil'. It is a floor sculpture that looks like a nerve and that reproduces the soil between the paving stones on the Neumarkt in Dresden. It is the place where the racist and, in my opinion, fascist Pegida movement had gatherings on a regular basis, but it is also the place where the corps of burned people were collected after the United States Army Air Force and the Royal Air Force burned down the city.



Nadia Kaabi-Linke, 'Modulator III', 2015, brass, 468 x 400 cm; 328 x 400 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Kunstmuseum Bonn.

### **What artistic strategies are capable of resisting fascism?**

I feel that art is naturally opposed to fascism. Artistic practice is a kind of multimedia synthesiser of point of views and thoughts; it brings everything together, but instead of assimilating and erasing differences, it even creates and reproduces more information, insights, perspectives and thoughts. Serious art practice is always hard to understand and it never carries an obvious meaning. I learn a lot from the feedback of viewers who talk about works that I produce. Almost every time I experience something new and every feedback or comment can totally change my point of view about the artwork.

Art makes sense, it is a kind of communication, but a communication that can never be controlled by anyone. You cannot produce an artwork that is received by anybody in the same way. This is totally opposite from a fascist ideology and propaganda. While art always provokes irreducible differences, politics seek to gain support for one point of view against others. That is so to say in the bones of any power discourse. Fascism goes a bit further when it seeks to destroy any different point of view except the ruling ideology.

Talking about resistance I would say that it would make sense to concentrate on the nature of art and show how artistic practices differ from political strategies. Unfortunately that is not always the case. Often art seems to be considered as just another medium for political messages. These messages are mostly of good morals and ready for public consent, but the strategy behind is a dramatic reduction of what art could be. It should raise questions and open new perspectives. It should be uncontrollable and unpredictable. Artistic practice might be the last resort of what Levi-Strauss called "the savage mind" (*la pensée sauvage*), an untamed human thought. Once it gets too close to politics and starts serving as an agency for political ideas, it risks getting tamed by common ideologies. It already happened.

I remember the last words in Walter Benjamin's essay on the artwork in the era of its mechanical reproducibility. The Italian Futurism experienced the "aestheticization of politics" that Benjamin considers a core element of fascist regimes; while the Russian avantgardism was instrumentalised by the politburo of the central committee of the communist party what resulted in a politicisation of art. Both cases are similar in a very strict restriction of artistic expression. I think artists and curators need to beware of these problems, especially that our present expands the extremes of neoliberalism and turbo-feudalism that seem to provide a hot breeding ground for neo-facism.

By this reason, I strongly hope that the art field will emancipate from politics. I would very much appreciate if more and more artist would get into politics, that might really change something, but I doubt that it helps anyone if artists allow ideologies to occupy artistic productions. Deleuze once said that art has no message. It has nothing to do with communication but it has all to do with resistance. I also see art as an act of resistance, a resistance to time, to the finitude and to ideologies, trends and fashion. Art can resist against fascism if it remains brave enough to irritate an observer and the audience.



Nadia Kaabi-Linke, 'Nervous Bench', 2017, modified bench of the museum, site-specific intervention, 75 x 225 x 40 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Kunstmuseum Bonn.

**Could you tell us a bit more about the works in the exhibition that deal with the theme of bureaucracy? What media or artistic strategies have you found to be most suitable for exploring these political structures (and your personal experience of them)?**

The theme of bureaucracy is present in previous works like the video installation *No* (2012), which is also part of this exhibition. *No* refers to the UK Border Agency's inquiry form gathering a stack of suggestive questions. Almost every question needs to be negated, otherwise the chance of getting granted a visa would drastically decrease. The authority seems not to be interested in who the people are who enter the UK territory, but they want to be sure who they are not. The absurdity is that all questions are suggestive and it is unlikely that anyone actually would have to affirm one of the questions. This reduces alleged inquiry to bureaucratic ritual. By this reason I set it up as a kind of Christian liturgy inside an Anglican church in the Medina of Tunis. This set-up made also sense in another point of view. The inquiry of the UK border agency and the "holy inquisition" of the Roman Catholic church are quite similar in the fact that in both procedures it was relatively easy to anticipate the outcome.

In another work called *Bonn Mythologies* that was also commissioned by the Kunstmuseum Bonn, I collected clusters of dust and cobwebs from the cellar of the Labour Court in Bonn. The building is quite inconspicuous, but if one steps down into the cellar that host the archives of the Labour Court one would notice the iron prison door. In the time of the Third Reich the building was used by the SS as one of the infamous wild prisons where people of different beliefs and origins (mainly communists, social democrats and Jews) got tortured. I was deeply impressed by this place. People died in these cells only seven decades ago and now they are piled up with files on employment litigations. The secretary told me that she was frightened going down to the files, but not because of what happened in the cellar, but because of all the spiders and cobwebs. This provoked the idea to work with cobwebs from this archives and use it as a metaphor for a bureaucratic system that captures our lives and becomes stronger than any disaster in the past has been. I projected the cobweb and reproduced its magnified image on the walls of the museums. It looks like a ghostly matter, and I think it was the right material to express the power of banalities and everyday life routines over our memories of the past.

I am attracted and repulsed by the bureaucratic system. On one hand, it legalises almost everything and functions as a highly skilled pacifier on the social level, while it organises the lives of millions and billions of people. On the other hand, human perception is neither equipped to perceive this apparatus, nor to understand how it works. It is a complicated machine and it performs like a black box. It is a quasi mystical entity that no one can control while it controls everybody.

*Bonn Mythologies* also alludes to the analogy of bureaucracy and time, both cannot be controlled by human communities while the latter is the subject of both. The dust from the cellar was a good metaphor for me to address this familiarity of time and administration, and Bonn is a city that is still characterised by its former and still present administrative institutions. Time that affects all of our lives and is fascinating for science and religion; everyday life cannot be grasped, touched nor controlled. But dust is what is left and grows as time goes by. Since I was working in the space where archival documents were collected and thus where time was cumulating, I have projected by blowing the collected dusts on the wall of the museum and have reproduced them with another powder, in pastel.



Nadia Kaabi-Linke, 'Colours of Time', 2017, pigment of ground paint chips from aged walls on canvas, 51.5 x 50 cm each. Image courtesy the artist and Kunstmuseum Bonn.

**You have described your own sculpture work as both an "imprint" or "residue", but also as "indexical". These seem like opposed concepts. If a sculpture is indexical it 'refers' (to a historical moment, as in your work *The Altarpiece*) and therefore has a linguistic content. Whereas the idea of residue or imprint focuses on a physical relationship between history and materials. What does this distinction between indexical sculpture and sculpture as residue mean to you, considering the works in the exhibition?**

I would like to go back to the working title of the Bonn exhibition. Before starting my research in Bonn that brought up the final title "Versiegelte Zeit" ("Sealed Time"), the working title of the project was "Reading what was never written", a quote from Austrian novelist, librettist, poet and dramatist Hugo von Hofmannsthal. He was certainly not a person that inspires me in my own work, but the line was great to express what I aimed to do during my research in Bonn. I wanted to read the architecture and decode the urban landscape.

For the work *Color of Time* (2017) I visit and research the history of buildings, some of them abandoned places, others converted into new purposes. In any case, whether it is the engraving on a wall in public space or the paint chipping off from walls inside old buildings, my work always starts by touching the matter. It always starts with a touch and a material that triggers historical research and the smaller histories of people and places. This is also the idea behind the book *Matter Matters* (2015). Everything starts for me with the contact of a surface and a certain material out of which follow stories, narratives and meanings. Maybe this is what connects the real world with semiotics and the imprint with the index.

I remember that Pasolini had trouble to separate real objects and semiotic categories in his theory of cinematographic reproduction (*semiologia generale*). And even Barthes discovered in his analysis of the cinematographic image a new degree of signifiers that undergo any signification. He called it in terms of a communication theory the "obtuse" (or dull) meaning, because it refers either to the signifier itself or to real object that functions as its own signifier. I esteem that this tendency to mingle semiotics and matter is due to the logic of reproduction. The reproduction results in a composite image of semiotic elements, but in the audio visible reproduction these signifiers are fully dependent on what they mean. One can write a book about aliens and



everybody knows what it means, but one cannot shoot aliens in a movie without aliens. In a quite similar way I cannot work on a historical perspective of a place without material residues of the past. These remains or traces become signifiers for me, since they refer to historical contexts and personal (his-)stories. In this sense they allow to read what was never written.

In relation to the exhibition, I have produced five new works, which are again all print-based and have an indexical relation to the objects and to the theme I am working with. For example *Gekochte Erde* that I have already mentioned above... The piece is made of cut terracotta tiles. The denominator "terracotta" literally refers to cooked earth which exactly expresses what the work is about: the ground of Dresden the day after the firestorm. In this work the very material (terracotta) and the conceptual idea (recall of the Dresden burn out in February 1945) go hand in hand, resulting in a semiotic disorder where the meaning and context indicate the material of terracotta, while material and form are automatically charged with meaning.



Installation view at Nadia Kaabi-Linke "Walk the line" at Dallas Contemporary, Dallas Texas, 2015. Photo credit: Kevin Todora. Image courtesy the artist and Dallas Contemporary.

**You have talked about how the art world has "dragged" you into certain readings by focusing on your Middle Eastern and North African identity while largely ignoring your Russian and Eastern European affiliations (you have a Russian passport, for example). Which works in the current exhibition do you think interrupt these easy readings of your work and identity?**

Actually I am Ukrainian with a Russian passport and that is a bureaucratic disaster. I am about to fix this, but all attempts add further bureaucratic disasters to my life. Well, at least that explains why I am interested in bureaucracy. But this is future talk, let's get back to the past. I experienced a kind of geocoding mainly after the Tunisian pro-democracy protests in 2010/11. I followed the events of the so-called Arab Spring from afar mainly via Facebook. Later I was often asked about my political ideas and my opinion about the protests in Tunisia. Suddenly, my Tunisian origin became a kind of signifier for political engagement. But all that I knew about the "Jasmine Revolution" was from social media, and my family and friends since I was not in Tunis during the upheavals. That circumstance was totally ignored, and since I was holder of a Tunisian passport, the expectations that I could have a say on the protests and their origin automatically applied. However, later when I spent long periods of time in Tunis I learned that no one really knew what happened. There were a lot of theories but they mostly ranged somewhere between conspiracy theory and urban legends.

On the other hand my work mostly relates to the places where I live and travel to work. I am also more interested in universal anthropological themes than in specific styles that are linked to certain cultures. I think it is very difficult to work with and about culturally specific features, because one can never be sure whether it is authentic or just ascription or a stereotype.

At the Mosaic Rooms in London I produced works that connect to the history of the building and of London in a wider sense. For the Kunstmuseum Bonn most of the works connect with the history of Germany, the post-war years, the division in FRG and GDR and the post-wall time. I am very happy that from the museum I never felt a slight expectation that it would be different and that I would deliver works with a certain culture touch. Barbara Scheuermann was rather interested to see what would happen if I put my researched focus on the city of Bonn. However, whatever I am currently working on there will always be an Arab/African link. The region is part of my life and it belongs to my personality like I always spoke Russian in Tunisia. Given that there is something that one could call a personal identity, in my case it would be very complex and I don't feel the need to simplify it through my work.



Nadia Kaabi-Linke, 'Butcher Bliss', 2010, porcelain, steel. Image courtesy the artist and Kunstmuseum Bonn.

**Many of your works deal with German history, as you live and work in Germany. You have mentioned that these works have not attracted so much support or attention in Europe, as the art world tends to request of you that you work with your "native Tunisian history". Is this starting to change as your career advances? And if not, what are your strategies for coping with the racism and (as you say) "orientalism" of the art world?**

I answered to a previous question by defining art as an act of resistance. Insisting on working on matters that interest me and that seem intuitively relevant and by not answering to the market demand is also a way of resisting. It is indeed starting to pay off after long years. In general my previous institutional solos have been independent from the trendy national and regional expectations. I am very happy and thankful to the opportunities that were given to me to realise new works related to different places and contexts like Texas, where I produced my first sculptural performance "Walk The Line" as well as my exhibition in London at the Mosaic Rooms, where I produced works related to the history of the building in relation to the Colonial past of Great Britain.

This first exhibition in Germany in one of the most established Museums of the country represents a new step in my evolution, since I could arrange existing works together with new productions that totally change my perspective on the newer German history. I also learned a lot from the architecture and about the Cold War. In any case, if one wants to better understand the Cold War era, I would recommend going to Bonn. It is maybe the best place to study the permanent threat that the older generation had to face.



Nadia Kaabi-Linke, 'NO', 2012, two-channel video installation, dimensions variable, length 4min:19sec (each channel). Image courtesy the artist and Kunstmuseum Bonn.

**What communities, literature and mentors have been particularly important to you in developing your most recent works?**

Obviously Andrey Tarkovsky with whom I started this interview, but also and always Pier Paolo Pasolini. These are the most important two artists and theorists for me. In literature I need to refer to Abdelwahab Meddeb, Dostoevski, Tretiakov and many more. Talking about communities I must say that I learned a lot from the undocumented street hawkers in Venice with whom I spent a week on the bridge of Sepulchre. In 2012, I worked with a group of women in a shelter in London who experienced domestic violence. These women were incredibly strong characters, they faced the abuse that they suffered and they confronted the offenders with the deeds. In Texas, I got inspired by people of the Fort Worth community who daily have to deal with the restrictive conditions of the border between Mexico and the USA.

I have a huge respect for people in precarious situations and state of beings. They seem to bring out the best that humans can be. From the visual arts there are many, but I admire the work of Doris Salcedo, Eva Hesse, Louise Bourgeois, Ilya Repin, Francis Bacon and Joseph Beuys. In theory, and/or let's say political theory, I must admit that Jonathan Crary's book *24/7* had a huge influence on my life. He wrote that the most radical political resistance of our times would be to sleep more. Our economical and political systems would certainly collapse if anyone would sleep as much as needed. I took this to my heart and try my best to contribute to the big change of the system.

**Rebecca Close**

***"Sealed Time" by Nadia Kaabi-Linke is on view from 26 October 2017 to 28 January 2018 at Kustmuseum Bonn, Friedrich-Ebert-Allee 2, 53113 Bonn, Germany.***