

# ANOTHER AFRICA

## Nadia Kaabi-Linke | Janus-Faced Realities

Written by [Clelia Coussonnet](#) on Aug 31, 2016 in [Art & Culture](#), [Interviews](#) · [0 Comments](#)

Can subjectivity be mitigated? Ideas assumed to be ‘true’ are relative. They depend on systems of meanings and cultural behaviours; they derive from personal experiences, understandings, and opinions. Trying to limit and contain reality within one prism seems deceitful. What manifests is probably more like a *tessellation of multiple*, complex, and intricate visions, beliefs, perceptions, and *realities*.



Nadia Kaabi-Linke, *Stretched Perm*, 2014. Offset printing with human hair on paper, 30 x 40.5 cm (each of 51).  
Photo Credits: Kevin Todora. Courtesy the artist and Cristiana Guerra Contemporary Art, Lisbon

Through her artistic journey, to understand the manifold undercurrents of society, Nadia Kaabi-Linke scans for fragments, isolated, forgotten, and delicate traces that illustrate the precariousness of our passage on earth. What is most real and capable of testifying to an experience than a trace? And yet, what is most subject to interpretation? Maurice Merleau-Ponty, one of the founding fathers of phenomenology, said, ‘Whether it be a question of vestiges or the body of another person, we need to know how an object in space can become the eloquent relic of an existence; how, conversely, an intention, a thought or a project can detach themselves from the personal subject and become visible outside him in the shape of his body, and in the environment which he builds for himself. [1]

In this line, Kaabi-Linke has been passing on testimonies, enabling all of her subjects to be dignified and *active within absence*.

Her approach somehow mimics scientific techniques; her research process is formal, painstaking, and meticulous, even mechanical at times. As indexers, she collects samples, dissects facts, rummages through layers, and analyses the results compiled. The resemblance to scientists ends there; once materials are gathered, she does not pursue further research in the rational field, but rather transfigures her observations and transposes them into a poetic and aesthetic universe of its own. She works closely with her partner Timo Kaabi-Linke, who adds his approach as a sociologist to these layers. Facts never appear as such, only their distillate surfaces. They are a catalyst for Kaabi-Linke's unquenchable curiosity for anatomising our contemporary society in all its guises. She does not shy away from addressing clichés, paradoxes, or unwelcome issues, such as domestic crimes, colonisation and its politics of representation, power structures and domination ties, wars and violence.



Nadia Kaabi-Linke, *Modulor II*, 2014. Installation, brass, dimensions variable.  
Site specific variation commissioned by The Mosaic Rooms in 2014.  
Photo Credits: Andy Stagg. Courtesy the artist

To me, she looks like an alchemist, *extracting the essence* of things through the alembic of her mind and her handling of metaphors. Thus, it is the birth of a universal language that does not exempt the viewer from being watchful of the risks of interpretation. In her practice, she pushes the public to decode appearances in order to escape traps and self-delusion. Nadia Kaabi-Linke relentlessly interrogates

systems of meanings, and of sense-making, by stepping out of her comfort zone and by taking her partner Timo with her, as an author, curator and thinker. Softly and indirectly, they put the viewer to the test. Furthermore, her ability to apply a reversal technique makes for a compelling strategy, for, just as in a carnival, her artworks deconstruct realities to encourage participants to renew their vision of the world.

**Clelia Coussonnet** | In 2014, on the occasion of your exhibition *The Future Rewound and the Cabinet of Souls*, you published ‘*Digging for Redemption*’ with your partner Timo Kaabi-Linke, who co-curated the exhibition. In it, you stated that ‘artists are not innocent—the games they play follow certain intentions and interests; they apply techniques and strategies to attain their goals’. Could you elaborate on this idea, and place your own practice within this framework?

**Nadia Kaabi-Linke** | Sometimes, I like to use the term ‘context hacking’ from Johannes Grenzfurthner of the *monochrom* group. It refers to visual or conceptual strategies of sneaking around contexts of understanding in order to break established codes, to reverse the common use of symbols, and to alienate the established sets of meaning.

**Timo Kaabi-Linke** | By combining objects and materials in a specific way, it becomes possible to lock the shared routines of understanding, which might allow the viewer to regain a visual experience of things beyond their socially imputed meanings. It is rather about making things visible, instead of finding the truth.

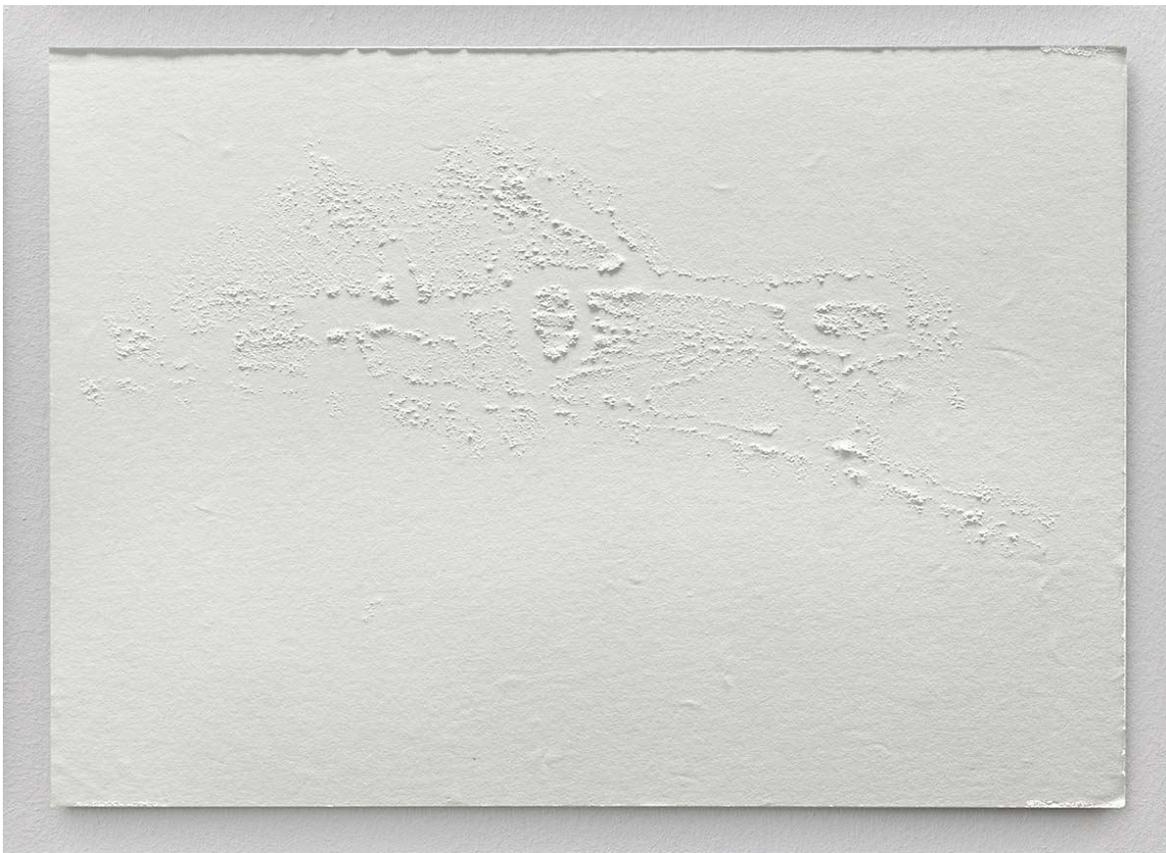


Nadia Kaabi-Linke, *Smooth Criminal*, 2012. Sculpture, electroplated steel, 120 x 230 cm.  
Photo Credits: Paolo Costa, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Arter, Vehbi Koc Foundation, Istanbul

**NKL** | Art can create illusions as it can disenchant what was supposed to be real. The act of making things visible can also be motivated by political intentions, or be guided by personal artistic research, or most often by both.

**Timo, you closely collaborate with Nadia, and, as a sociologist, you have published on topics like the politics of knowledge and technology, as well as on aesthetic arrangement, such as the white cube. If art is bound to alter meanings, do you think that it can also be a source of knowledge and action, as in the social sciences?**

**TKL** | While science functions like an evolving database of shared knowledge, art produces aesthetic and phenomenal first-person experiences, which cannot literally be shared within the traffic of symbolic forms. For this reason, I cannot see many ways of how art could change history, since history is always both the course of past events and its representation in documents and symbolic monuments. History is made of discourses. And although the field of art is organised by discourses as well, the singular artistic operations and the feelings and mental processes of perception and personal understanding—everything that is happening ‘inside’ the artist’s or viewer’s mind and body—can neither be shared through language nor represented through the formation of specific knowledge or conceptual strategies. Art reproduces a feeling for the world that always escapes the rational mechanism of discourse.

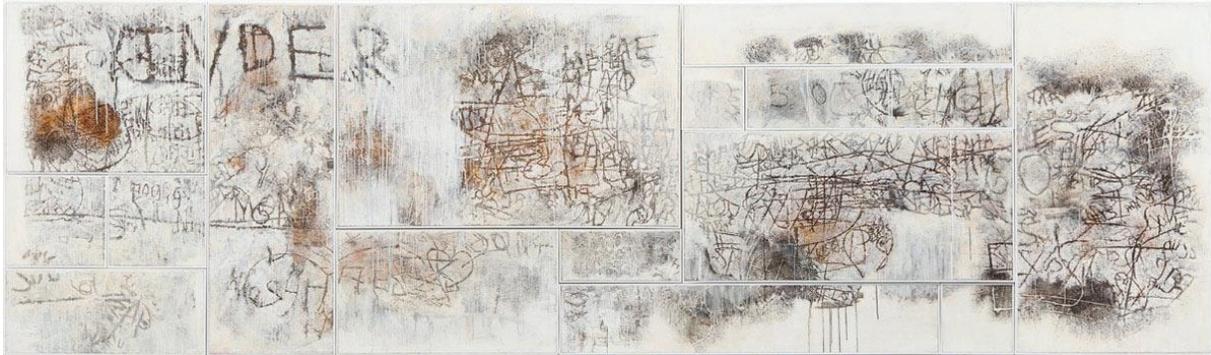


Nadia Kaabi-Linke, *Impressions of Cairo*, 2010. Series of 15 imprints. Paper. 36 × 51 cm each, total dimensions variable.  
Photo Credits: Uwe Walter, 2010. Courtesy the artist and private courtesy.

**Still, in the article published in artasiapacific, you added, ‘Art seems to be a beautiful lie, since it employs fiction to tell the truth’. Do you see any tension between these concepts? Truth/falsity, fiction/authenticity?**

**NKL** | Tension? I do not think so... rather, complicity. Could there be truth without lying, or authenticity without fiction? In the end, these are probably the two extremes of the same phenomenon. Everything depends on the proportions. How many lies does it take to tell the truth, and how much fiction to remain authentic?

The example of the white cube illustrates my remark. In this space—that I find both attractive and repulsive—the artwork is completely isolated from any context. This allows for a form of intense focus on the work itself, even if, alongside it, the positioning in a ‘non-place’ impart something unreal and artificial to it. My work is obviously often presented in the context of this sterile space. However, I have developed a ‘subversive’ strategy to allow for a permeability of the white cube, by having the reality of the world contained in traces, existing fingerprints, and samples from urban space or the private lives of people enter the pure white arena. I collect traces and proceed to make cross sections of space and time.



Nadia Kaabi-Linke, *Rue El Azafine*, 2009-2010. Wall print. Ink, wax, pigments, silk paper on canvas; acrylic, 100 × 293.8 × 105 cm.  
Photo Credits: Uwe Walter, 2010. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery, Dubai

**To achieve this strategy, you act in turns like a historian exploring archives, a criminologist using forensics, and an ‘archaeologist of the everyday’ excavating fragments of walls in urban space—Tunis, Berlin, Cairo. How do these tools help you to articulate your ideas**

**NKL** | The concept is usually one with the technique, the medium, and the material that I use. It is the theme I choose that often leads me to discover new opportunities in areas that, a priori, may appear alien to artistic creation. As *Impunities* addresses the impunity of domestic crimes, forensic medicine seemed the most appropriate technique. Using it points the finger at police negligence and the lack of criminal investigation into those crimes.

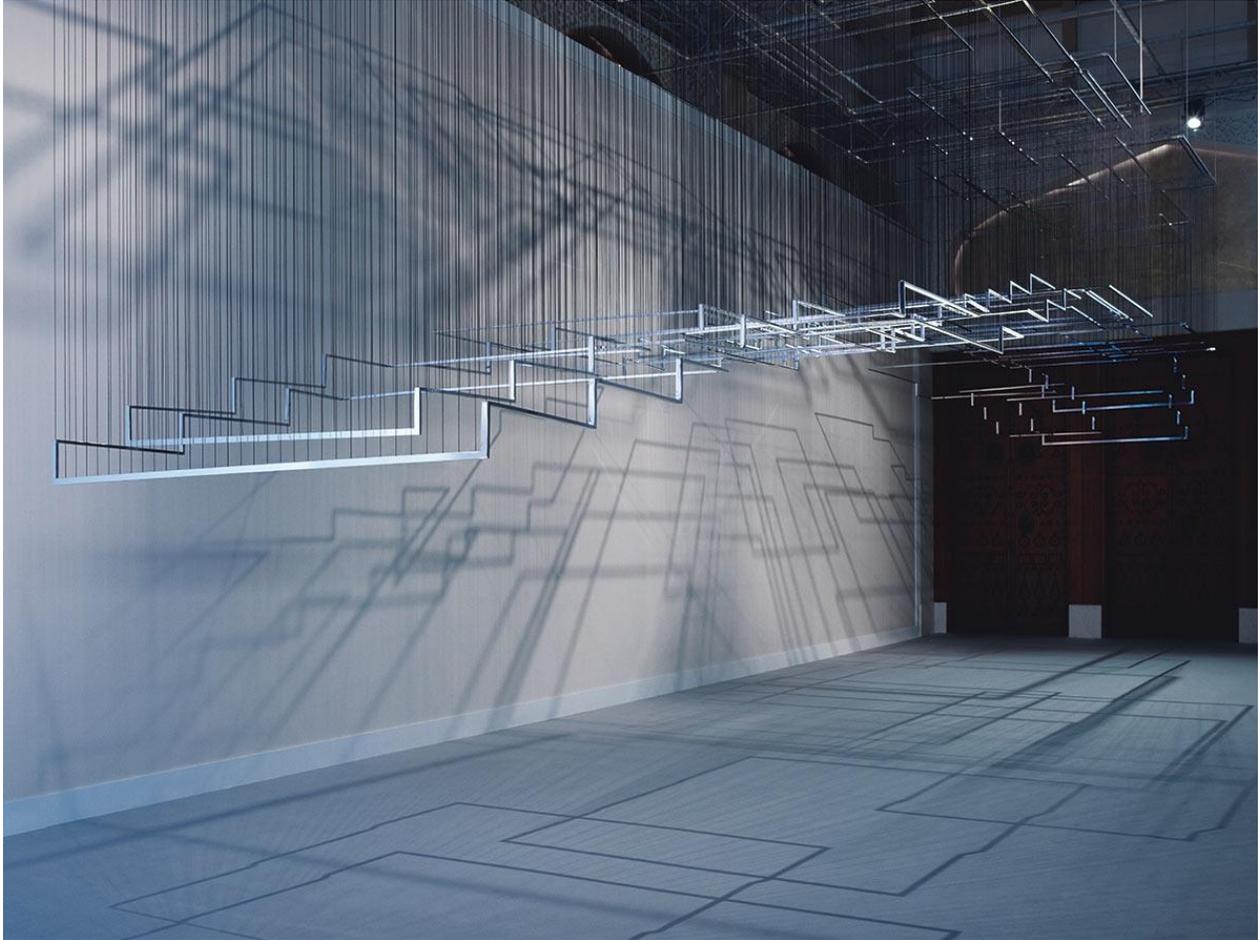
Sometimes, in contrast, it is a material or a found object that calls out to me, the thread for example.... In 2015, it gave birth to the idea of my performance/installation *Walk the Line*, where performers literally travelled the distance of the border between Mexico and Texas, unrolling thread bobbins and forming a wall of coloured threads.



Nadia Kaabi-Linke, *Walk the Line*, 2015. Performance with threads, 2,019 km – 80 days.  
Photo Credits: Kevin Todora. Courtesy the artist

**It seems like you search the skins of buildings and walls, to tell ordinary, anonymous stories and give them importance. Is the notion of testimony important to you?**

**NKL** | The notion of testimony is edifying, but I have always accompanied it with anonymity. The viewer does not personally know the people who left the traces of their scars on the glass panels of *Impunities*, nor the illegal street vendors whom I lived and worked with in Venice for one week to realise *Flying Carpets*. Yet, these people all gave their testimonies, and even actively participated—sometimes physically—in the production of these works.



Nadia Kaabi-Linke, *Flying Carpets*, 2011. Steel, chrome plated aluminium, threads. 1300 x 340 x 420 cm.  
Commissioned by the Abraaj Group Art Prize (ACAP).  
Photo Credits: Tom Brown, 2011. Courtesy the artist and the Abraaj Group Art Collection, Dubai

I avoid transmitting testimonies directly. I am much more interested in how the traces that people leave behind them can become significant. These traces that may appear to be fleeting, trivial, or uninteresting seem absolutely emblematic to me. They have the potential to express and reflect our times.

I am looking for the mode of action in absence—for how traces of an event or person can still be active and emanate something that informs us about our present, or even affects our present. Witnesses and actors become much more present when they are no longer seen as the subjects of specific and personal stories.

**Does art play a role in facilitating the healing process you bring to light?**

**NKL** | The aim is to engage in dialogue, to open a discourse—visually, of course. Breaking the silence certainly appeals to me, but healing already goes into moral discourses. Worse yet, healing is to accept the problem through a silent form of resignation.

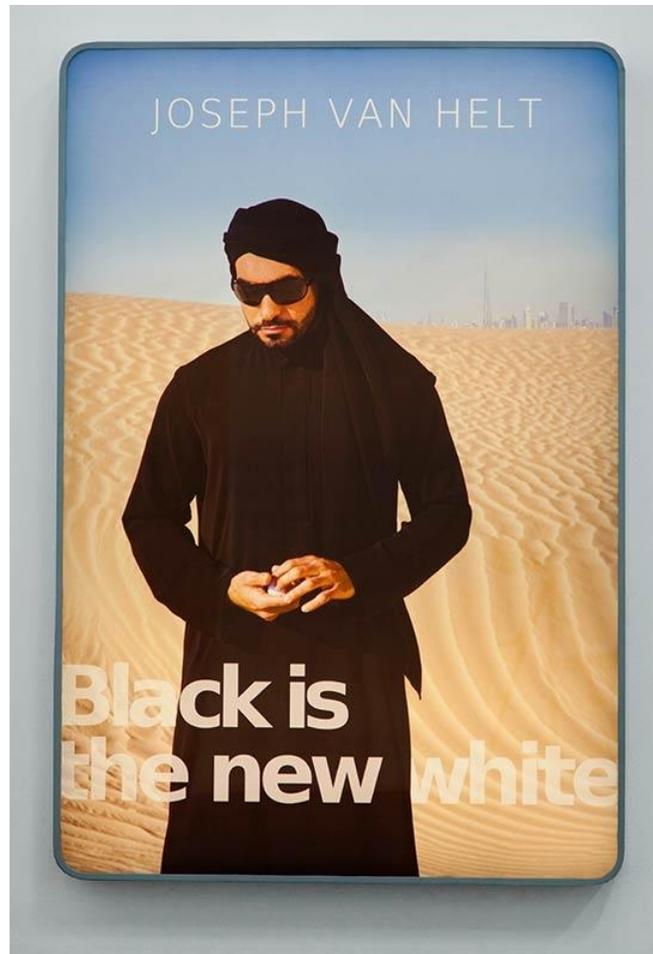


Nadia Kaabi-Linke, *Impunities*, 2012 (detail). 26 laser engraved glass panes, 22,5 x 16,5 x 1 cm (each).  
Photo Credits: Kevin Todora. Courtesy the artist and the Burger Collection, Hong Kong

What interests me is rather to break with injustice. In the case of *Impunities*, through their participation in the project, the victims were active and not passive anymore. A significant change took place. By going into the public space, as part of an exhibition, these victims broke the silence.

**In the same vein, you address machismo and the patriarchal societies we live in. It was the theme of your exhibition *Fahrenheit 311*, and of works such as *Black Is the New White* and *Bait'Atta*.**

**NKL** | My vision of machismo is not gendered, because machismo is not related to men. Many women are very macho, and, when they are, they can sometimes become worse than men. I do not consider machismo a regional phenomenon. It manifests everywhere. I understand it rather in an anthropological way than in a cultural way. My work is directed at a society where all that matters is acting quickly and for maximum profit. I explore the notions of competitiveness, power, and strength. We live in a society where we must continually earn more, on all levels, and where weakness has no place.



Nadia Kaabi-Linke, *Black Is the New White*, 2012. Digital print, aluminium and acrylic, 173 x 117 x 11 cm.  
Photo Credits: Vipul Sangoi. Courtesy the artist and private courtesy

These are the characteristics of a form of machismo harmful to society, psychology, earth, and human relations. On many levels, these intensified attitudes provoke lose-lose situations.

**As you mentioned, humour and the diversion of symbols are tools that you use and that can be found in other works such as *Smooth Criminal*, *Smell*, and *Butcher Bliss*....**

**NKL** | My works act as traps. When something is beautiful, it attracts us and we want to see it up close. Generally, the more beautiful it looks, the more violent it is. This strategy is a reflection of a society that is in an excess of aestheticism.

**In works such as *Torn*, *Ripped*, and *Stretched Perm*, you combine the past and present timeframes. You are looking for 'what once had been and left traces [that] are now reactivated: elements that might influence the present moment'. Is it important to conciliate the continuity and discontinuity of history, and of memory?**

**NKL** | I see no contradiction between the two. In continuity, there is always discontinuity. Besides, continuity is a construction. It is the fiction of a linear temporality as understood in Western culture, while several other forms of temporality have existed in past cultures—like the Mayan cyclical concept of temporality, for example.



Nadia Kaabi-Linke, *Stretched Perm*, 2014 (detail). Offset printing with human hair on paper, 30 x 40.5 cm (each of 51).  
Photo Credits: Kevin Todora. Courtesy the artist and Cristiana Guerra Contemporary Art, Lisbon

History, as told in books, always looks for a connection between events. By doing this, we forget the small 'h'. Small 'h's are, for instance, the story of my maternal Russian grandfather who ran away from the Nazis when they arrived in Kiev. For health reasons, he had not been recruited into the Soviet army. They are the story of my paternal Tunisian grandfather who fought alongside the French colonists. Imagine all the conflicting stories and unimaginable anecdotes that may arise from such troubled situations! In the end, everyday life stories should count, too. All of us, who live these little stories, and who constitute History, are made of contradictions. The theory of narratives makes sense in relation to this. Since the 1970s and the structuralists, narratives have been conceived as forms of interpretation of History. There is no such thing as one History. There are always histories.

**Throughout your practice, you investigate many facets of power structures. Today, the disembodiment of power is problematic. Its mechanisms seem automated and de-individualised. Is that why you are so interested in the question of surveillance, and imprisonment, both in the sense of physical and mental spatial restrictions?**

**NKL** | I am really interested in the theme of invisible monitoring devices, which reminds me of the panoptic prison architecture that allows guards to monitor prisoners without them being aware. Around the world, the situation of citizens has become similar to this. Even the simple fact of using the Internet makes us likely to be supervised at all times by people we do not know, or, worse yet, by machines whose parameters, algorithms, and search criteria remain completely unknown. We have become, so to speak, potential criminals, and, for this, it would therefore be lawful to watch us, to protect our security. Logical, right?



Nadia Kaabi-Linke, *All Along the Watchtower*, 2012. Site-specific installation, airbrushed paint on walls, dimensions variable. Commissioned by The Mosaic Rooms, 2014.  
Photo Credits: Andy Stagg. Courtesy the artist

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*This article forms part of the [In/Visible Voices of Women](#) series. [Read more](#) about it.*

**Nadia Kaabi-Linke** (b.1978) is a Tunisian-Russian artist. She studied at the University of Fine Arts in Tunis (1999) before receiving a PhD from the Sorbonne University in Paris (2008). Her installations, objects and pictorial works are embedded in urban contexts, intertwined with memory and geographically and politically constructed identities. Her last solo exhibitions were *Lost and Found* (2016) at Experimenter Gallery, Kolkata, India; *Walk the Line* (2015) at Dallas Contemporary, Texas, USA; *Fahrenheit 311: Seven Legends of Machismo* (2015) in Dubai, UAE; *No Frills* (2015) in Lisbon, Portugal, *The Future Rewound and The Cabinet of Souls* (2014) at The Mosaic Rooms, London, UK; *Stranded* (2014) at CAM in Lisbon, Portugal; *No One Harms Me* (2013) at Experimenter Gallery, Kolkata, India; *Black Is the New White* (2012) in Dubai, UAE, and *Tatort/Crime Scene* (2010) in Berlin, Germany. She has participated in group exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA, the Nam June Paik Art Center, Geonggi-do, South-Korea (2013); the Liverpool Biennial, UK; Herbert F Johnson Museum, Ithaca, NY, USA (2012); and 54th Venice Biennial in Italy (2011) and the Sharjah Biennial in 2009. Her works are part of several public and private collections including Burger Collection, Switzerland, Sharjah Art Foundation Collection, Sharjah, UAE, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA, M+ Museum, Hong Kong.

**Timo Kaabi-Linke** is Nadia Kaabi-Linke's closest collaborator. His research concentrates on historical and anthropological studies while he lectures and publishes on a variety of topics. In 2012, he cofounded

the platform Carthage Contemporary and organized the international group exhibition *Chkoun Ahna* at the Archaeological Museum of Carthage, Tunisia. He lives with his family in Berlin.  
[nadiakaabilinke.com](http://nadiakaabilinke.com)

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#### References

[1] Merleau-Ponty, M. 2003, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith, Routledge Classics, London/New York, p. 406.

[2] Stigmata: (In Christian tradition) marks corresponding to those left on Christ's body by the Crucifixion, said to have been impressed by divine favour on the bodies of St Francis of Assisi and others. (*Oxford Dictionary*)

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Interview by [Clelia Coussonnet](#).