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The Voice of Africa

From Tunis to Berlin and the rest of the world. Nadia Kaabi-Linke. The interview.

by Manuela De Leonardis - June 12 2014

From personal experience stems *No* (2012), video installation presented by **Nadia Kaabi-Linke** (Tunisia 1987 lives and works in Berlin) on the occasion of the exhibition *Ici l'Afrique / Africa Here*, curated by Adelina von Fürstenberg and organized by ART for the World at the Musée des Suisse dans le Monde - Château de Penthes, Pregny-Geneva. Ukrainian mother and Tunisian father, the artist studied art in Tunis in order to achieve a PhD from the Sorbonne, Paris in 2008. Identity - a theme that touches closely - is the basis of his artistic investigation, in which converge the psychological aspects, social, geographical. The work *No*, in particular, shows the dynamics experienced by the same bureaucratic Kaabi-Linke when he had to go from Berlin to London (the work he participated in the Liverpool Biennial 2012). The visa application - having her double in both cases non-EU passport - has spread in a very long time (two months) during which it was deprived of an identity, wrapped in limbo circumstances. The outcome, you know, in these cases is subject to the slew of incisive questions that border on paradox and require the same answer: 'No'. Questions pitted as in a litany of two lips moving in the void of white, hypnotic. While the 'No' is repeated in unison by a crowd of followers (children and adults, men and women) inside a church. There is irony, but also a lot of sadness and anger in dealing with the thorny issue of emigration. Who can enter. Who can not enter. Reflections in progress ...

No one is working on emigration from that part of your own personal experience ...

"I expressed the frustration that I felt when I had to go to England. I wanted to talk about an issue as serious as that of emigration, but I did it in a more ironic and humorous. The force, perhaps, is also taken by the contrast of having something that exists - the questionnaire - and putting it in a different context, unexpected, which is the liturgical season of the church. If I had found in Tunis, perhaps, it would be normal to wait two months for the visa, but living for fifteen years in Europe I have permission to stay. Normally from Berlin to receive a visa for England takes ten days, two weeks at most. Instead, I had to wait more than two months during which, having handed over my passport, I could not leave the country. At that time the revolution in Tunisia was, if anything happened to my family I would not be able to leave! "

From there you went to a universal reflection ...

"It 's exactly what I aspire to. Do not work so much on the events, I do not care. In this case it was a coincidence. I wanted to make a work that would open to many meanings and different levels of reading.

In the video installation destiny of people is decided by those lips moving, shrouded in white ... I am male lips that look more red in contrast with the white. Lips and voice belong to a man English and also the size is the real one, as well as the level where it is found that the height of man. I removed the entire body, leaving only the mouth, because I wanted to recreate the idea of anonymity. When you give your passport - as in my case - no one knows who he sees it. The future

is in the hands of individual people or institutions, or of something that is much bigger than the individual, but from which it completely depends. In the work I wanted to show the imbalance between the forces. One mouth, one voice dominates over all persons and items that should have more freedom, but that somehow are trapped in this situation. "

We speak, however, of your identity ...

"Understanding Identity in the plural! Ukraine, Tunisia, German husband ... I feel like a foreigner everywhere - to Camus - but this also means that, everywhere, at home. As a child I suffered a lot, because at school, in Tunis, I was treated like an unbeliever. For the Arabs it is an insult to say Kefr. It means that you are not Muslim infidels. I told him when I was ten, because my mom is not Tunisia, nor Muslim or Arab. So the feeling of being different, I felt very soon. At home we spoke Russian, though my father is Tunisian and I speak with him in Arabic. But, despite everything, Tunisia is my home and I've always felt good there. The first cultural shock, actually, I was twelve, when we went to Dubai. At the time I thought we'd go in another Arab country and that there would be a huge contrast. But there, the first thing they did not understand my language which is the Tunisian dialect. I have now made it clear that I was not Arab, then their Islam is very different from that of Tunisia. Tunisia is a country more emancipated, where women have more independence and institutional point of view is a republic and not a monarchy like Dubai. It 'was the first country in the Arab world, to have the Constitution. It was not, however, so strange that my mother was Russian, because there are many foreigners in the UAE. So for the second time, I felt different. After five years of *exile* in the UAE, returned to Tunis I was now an adult and it was easier to adapt. When, after college, I went to Paris for a doctorate, once again I felt that I was a foreigner. Not so much because of the physical, because my features are quite European and speak French without an accent, but for my surname Arabic. It took six months, for example, to find an apartment. Despite having the money and the guarantor, I felt that there was another kind of discrimination. Arrived in Germany, where racism is more subtle, I finally felt at peace with myself. I told myself that I would still have been different, foreign, and perhaps live in a country so different from where I had lived until then I would accept my diversity. "

The art, for you, it was a form of therapy?

"When I was little I wanted to be a dancer. In Tunis, studying modern dance at the Conservatory, but when we arrived in Dubai, in the 90s, there were no dance schools. That was the first shock. So I started to draw and write poetry. Temperamentally have a very open person, but in those five years in Dubai I shut myself. It 'was then that I realized that I wanted to become a painter. I think that art has saved me. "

So you went from painting to get to the installations. Your art work is conceptual ...

"In Tunis, where I attended the Academy of Fine Arts, I specialized in painting, then I went to Paris for a doctorate on scientific aesthetics. I think this study has taught me a very systematic way of thinking that has given another dimension to my work conceptual and experimental. For me it is very important especially experimentation and even if a job works well, once achieved is concluded and I have to throw myself into something new. "

I remember seeing in the pavilion *The Future of a Promise*, at the Venice Biennale 2013, your job *Butcher Bliss* (2010), in which you express yourself using the white ...

"I used the white and porcelain to play the parts inside the stomach of a cow. I wanted to work on the contrast, on the extreme subtleties of the aesthetics of the Arab-Tunisian, where there is a

relationship with the beauty that is very special and that, on the other hand, it is also very violent. A duality that I feel everywhere, every day: in the family, in the street, in human relations, architecture. On the one hand, in fact, everything is very fine - as is the eroticism - not mentioned, but there is so much violence. I, then, do not eat meat and one thing that continues to sciocarmi is to see our butchers, in Tunis, which also expose the heads of the animals with blood dripping. The more you see blood, the more the meat is fresh. Once again a contrast. Another thing to hit me are names like *Butcher of Peace*. Names that always express the opposite of what is a butcher. The work is entitled *Butcher Bliss* which in German means *Butcher of Joy* but also of *Fortuna*. There is an undercurrent of beauty-violence, but the story that inspired the work is related to **Abedine Zine Ben Ali** when was still president was said that there was a butcher who was gone, because he had called his butcher *Butcher on November 7*. *butcher* in Arabic also means *slaughter*. The butcher, perhaps, thought to glorify the regime, because November 7 is the day when Ben Ali took power, but in a double sense also alludes to the cultural massacre took place on the same date. But it is just an anecdote, I do not know whether it is true or false. This work has a relationship with Tunisia, but indirectly. The Ben Ali regime was not like that of **Saddam Hussein**. But the system of Ben Ali - throughout his life - took advantage of the people, land, resources, taking everything for his family and leaving the country as a carcass. This work has many levels of interpretation. I used the porcelain because it is a delicate and elegant material that is used for the cups of the tea ceremony, but in this case shows the skin of the stomach of the cow. One way to show that it is usually not visible. I opened what is hidden. In a way it is also a job on me. "

The lines of the skin bring to mind a writing ...

"Yes, they seem arabesques, geometric shapes. I was about eighteen years old when I saw a market in these parts of the stomach. All the rest came later, in 2010. This is my way of working. I put aside a number of elements that then, at some time, acquire a sense. "

Consider it a political work?

"I do not see my work in categories: political or non-political. This is my life, my daily life that is made up of social, political, love. Topics that cross forever. No, my art is not political, it just exists from his time. "