

# Nadia Kaabi- Linke

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by  
Iftikhar Dadi

Nadia Kaabi-Linke was born 1978 in Tunis, Tunisia, and lives and works in Berlin and Tunis. Her practice can be read as a kind of documentary sculpture, creating an indexical relationship with the world and people around her. Her works have made visible such everyday phenomena as the bodily traces of people waiting at bus stops and scrapes of paint chips from various city walls, which she suspends in the air to create new cartographies.

On a more somber register, an ongoing project, *Impunities*, involves creating an impression of the physical marks left on the bodies of women who have suffered domestic abuse.

Kaabi-Linke's recent work, *Flying Carpets* (2011), combines two characteristic modes of practice, indexicality and participation. It was realized after winning the confidence of dozens of street vendors, many of them illegal immigrants in Venice. These vendors display their wares on pieces of cloth that they spread over the steps and footpath of a bridge. When authorities arrive, the cloth is quickly folded and converted into a satchel and thus "flies" away along with the vendor and his wares. Working with vendors, the artist carefully outlined the shapes of several overlapping cloths over a period of time, and she then faithfully reproduced their exact shapes in aluminum outlines. Black threads suspended this assemblage of minimalist-looking sculptural forms, tracing shapes of signs of inhabitation on the bridge by the migrants that Kaabi-Linke has rendered visible as ghosts. *Flying Carpets* is representative of her work in that the artist strives to create aesthetically arresting forms for her conceptually rigorous practice. The combination of black thread and polished metal is visually seductive, and it also creates evocative shadows, creating multiple sensory and phenomenological

experiences for viewers as they look up at the work itself and also examine the shadows cast on the floor by the skeletal metal assemblage.

*All Along the Watchtower* (2012) was created as a site-specific work at the Johnson Museum of Art. This piece, which spans much of the floor and rises to a height of 18 feet in the largest gallery, continues the concerns of the artist in *Flying Carpets* by rendering the shadow of absent forms visible. The missing structure here is an enormous hunting stand, such as those placed in fields and forests to hunt wild animals. However, the artist recognizes the formal similarity of the hunting stand with the edifice of watchtowers at prisons and borders, including those erected at the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz. The artist states:

When visitors step into the empty gallery space and see the shade of an object on the ground and walls, they will immediately try to connect the visual shape to a real object. Perhaps they will recognize the hunting stand; perhaps they will remember the construction of a watchtower. In any case, they will search for what is lost—and for the observer. This awkward situation recalls for me the experience of panoptical surveillance systems, which have become part of our everyday life. Monitoring devices and structures are ubiquitous, but they are hardly visible. We can never see who is observing us behind our computer-screens, or behind the camera lenses in public spaces. *We feel observed without seeing or knowing the observer.*

The conflation of the hunting stand with the watchtower suggests that human beings under surveillance are constantly under threat of being stripped of their humanity, and of being seen as no more than a wild animal that can be hunted without rights, or even without mercy. In Giorgio Agamben's terms, such a human is reduced to the condition of a "homo sacer," or in a state of "bare life," one that can be simply extinguished without legal, ethical, or humanitarian consequences.

By placing this work inside a gallery, the artist has disrupted the normal visual and bodily relationship that audiences have with works of art. The artist notes that inside a museum, audiences usually possess the authority of observation and vision, but upon experiencing *All Along the Watchtower*, "suddenly they find themselves embraced by the evident shade of a non-visible apparatus of surveillance. The observers switch to the role of the observed animals in relation to the real but missing hunting stand—or they will feel like prisoners when they recognize the visual form as the shadow of a watchtower."