

Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative  
*But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise:*  
Nadia Kaabi-Linke on Flying Carpets and Meinstein

I come from a background of painting. And that's why most of my works are very sensitive to the idea of surface. But surface as the etymological *sur-face*—something over. So for me, “surface” is not something flat, it's deep. When you put the point, you already have over the surface, and under the surface. So what is a common point in my work is the idea of layering, meaning history. So I always try to understand the now, the actual, through the past.

In general, my work has a strong link to migration, and the question of immigration, because it tells the history of my life, my biography. I was born in the separation, in the idea of migration somehow, because I was born in Tunis, to a Tunisian father and a Ukrainian-Russian mother—Soviet, at that time. And so this meant that when I was in Tunisia, I was separated from my family, and somehow from my Russian background. And when I went to Kiev, I didn't have a direct link to my Tunisian roots. So there was always this longing for something, and being in between cultures. But also, this in-betweenness is something that, in the end, would become my identity.

The title is *Flying Carpets*. The whole story started with this piece in 2010, I think, when I went to see the Venice Biennale. It wasn't my first time in Venice, but it was the first time that I really looked at the street peddlers, because they were persecuted by the police on the bridge between Giardini and San Marco. There was this kind of aggression in it that was awkward, because everything was quite calm, and the street peddlers, they're all over Venice, and they didn't bother anyone. But there was this particular moment, right? And I saw how they gathered their goods by putting them in their blankets. And I was thinking, innocently, it's a way to protect their goods. But actually, it's a way to gather them fast to fly the coop, to run away from the police—flying. So this was the first idea of flying, running.

And then this is where I noticed that they are somehow invisible. They are on this frontier between visibility and invisibility, because they are very present, but people don't see them as individuals. So what I did is basically get to know them. And every day, I would go from the morning, when they start, until they leave. I took the measurements of these blankets, and their exact positions on the bridge. So I have many drawings of the bridge. And I would position the carpets where they are exactly with their measurements. And that's how the carpets were overlaid during the period of seven days. But the dimensions, and the positions, are the documentation.

And later, once I had this data, I worked with a team who translated it into 3D drawing, an AutoCAD drawing, and we produced the whole thing in metal—stainless steel, in this case. And the reference to the stainless steel is because, again, we said it's the cage, and at the same time, flying. So I wanted to create this hovering, cage-like structure in which you feel somehow imprisoned. But you always have the way out as a spectator, which is not the case of the street peddlers.

There is a piece that ties very strongly to it, and interestingly, I produced it during the same period of time. It was the toughest year of my life, because two huge projects—one was a site-specific public artwork in Berlin, which now is realized, and this very big sculptural hanging

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piece—had to be worked with data, and both are about immigration. I live in Germany, so a lot of my work is related to German history.

So the other piece is called *Meinstein*. And it is in a public square in Berlin, where we have 400,000 stones that were imported from the regions where the inhabitants of Neukoelln come from. Neukoelln is a borough in Berlin. It is the place where we have the most concentrated immigration in the whole of Germany. So the idea was symbolically to bring a piece of your home, of your land, where you come from, and to plant it where you live. In Neukoelln, we did the workshops, and we decided through the abstract data with the software how the stones would lie on the ground. When you see the work, it looks very abstract, and you don't see, really, the people behind it. So now when you walk on the square, you feel like it is actually haunted, because you're walking on all of these symbolic people, and you have crosses also on many stones. And these crosses are the stones that people who participated have put in a particular space; they're their stones, somehow. That's why in German it's called *My Stone*; this is the *Meinstein*, of the title of the work. And in *Flying Carpets*, you don't see the people directly, but it's their carpets, basically. So it's the trace of where they have been, and what makes them live, how they are living. So there is a very strong link between these two pieces—this thin line between visibility and invisibility, where the thin line is the presence. I think that's the presence, the haunting element. And *all* of my work very much is related to this idea of the past haunting our present, and anything that we will do today is actually a line linking us to our past.