

# Archaeology of the Visual Contemporaneity

The Exhibition “Archives of the Tunis Banalities” from January 17–February 8, 2009 in La Marsa, Tunis

When you turn your head at the Porte de France in the center of Tunis you become aware of the simultaneity of different time regimes, which characterize two sides of urbanity: the economical and technologically designed new city and the historically developed Médina. Like the lithified effigy of Ibn Khaldoun you can look down Avenue Habib Bourghiba bordered with luxurious hotels, dazzling advertisements, administrative buildings, financial institutions, theaters, cafés, cinemas, boutiques, and finally—behind the turret clock at the Place du 7 Novembre 1987, where the pulse of the present is counted second by second—the station that links the city to the suburbs. In the opposite direction you find several entries to the concentrically grown Médina, with its bustling Souqs (El Kmach, El Berka, El Attarine, etc.), animated by traditional customs and the dissonant soundtrack of boisterous trade and filled up with intense scents and splendid colors. Since you prospect the rational infrastructure of the new city that organizes the real time of city life, you feel in your back the steady percussion of a more traditional habitat, which is populated by social and cultural practices that give lots of impressions of how the vibes of modern urbanity are produced.

The initial interest of the young Tunis born artist Nadia Kaabi Linke (NKL), who currently lives in Berlin, is embedded in the context of this vivid production of time. The Médina was one of several spots, like La Goulette, Al Kram, Carthage, La Marsa, and in contrast to these and other Tunisian locations are some places in Berlin, where she has researched, uncovered, and reproduced visual materials for the exhibition “Archives of the Tunis Banalities”.

In general her pictorial work gets in touch with the shifting of the past into the current time by retracing incidental and intentional marks, cracks, notches, and scratches, which are engraved and inscribed on the walls at public spaces. These “inscriptions” articulate

contents of a collective sensibility, such as confessions of love, superstitions, insults and vulgarities, horrors and humors, desires and wishes, and not the least, homages to local heroes and soccer clubs. Since most of these visuals escape our attention in the normal course of life, it would not be out of place to describe NKL’s approach as a recovery of visual relics, which not only represent and stigmatize the particular socio-cultural environment, but also depict the co-existence of the past in the current time we live in. These excavated visuals are far away from being out-of-time; they just rest in our contemporaneity.

In particular her workflow is composed of at least four challenging steps. First, the research in the field has to be done. This part of her work does not allow any distinction between walking and reading; both practices are joined together in the appropriation of an urban site and its popular cultures. Once the visual object is localized, the next step is the mechanical reproduction of the discovery at its very lieu. At this work step the defiance increases with the meteorological and social conditions on site. NKL applies silk paper on the surface of a wall to retrace the figure first with wax, then with ink. This procedure is as site-specific as contextualized. Most of the findings are located in transit places in popular districts, such as the alley of a school in Al Kram, the TGM Station in La Marsa, passages in the Souqs like the Rue Al Azafine, and a crossing in La Goulette. Here, the working conditions are mostly uncomfortable. However, interactions with pedestrians and people subsuming to the anonymous category of inhabitants do not only perturb and intervene in the artistic work; they become part of it. NKL keeps records of dialogues that ignite around her undertaking and opens a stage where spectators trespass passivity and become co-actors of art work.

Following the outdoor reproductions the work continues in the studio. Likewise the photographic and audiovisual reproduction of reality, it is also split into a production of the image and the stage of post-production or poietic work. But the appropriations and interpretations remain as pictorial as pictographical; hence the method of NKL and the mentioned optical techniques have not only in common the structure of workflow but also the naturalistic character of the reproduced pictures. For those who like to apply theoretical brands on artworks, the term of “pictorial naturalism” could be an equitable proposal.

The final step is the configuration of the discontinuous pictorial proofs into an installation that uncovers a specific urban memory. For sure, the result of this “montage” can just be a fictional image of collective sensibilities, but anyone knows that fiction can be closer to the truth than any objective representation.

“Archives of the Tunis Banalities” are embedded in the context of a visual archaeology that recovers the contemporaneity of the recent and earlier urban history—in other words: it refers to the reality that is embodied in multiple and scattered social and cultural fabrications of time. The pictorial reproductions of NKL are a kind of rehabilitation of

mute testimonies that slip our mind in the hustle of everyday life. Furthermore, NKL’s work is not itinerant in the very sense of an artistic movement that seeks to evacuate the artists studios. Familiar but different to classical site-specific art, her aim is not that of art that moves out to work in the streets. Moreover she tends to break the antiseptic visuality of the “white cube“ bringing the streets into the gallery space.

Timo Kaabi Linke