

## Same same but different

The group show Hiwar/Dialog in Tunis searches for the cutting edge of Contemporary Arab Art

*by Timo Kaabi-Linke*



Sidi Bou Siad on the rock of Carthage is one of the most picturesque places in the suburbs of Tunis, the capital of Tunisia. Here is where the Mediterranean nightlife is as brisk as it is calm; where cafés and boutiques line small alleys formed by whitewashed houses donning doors and window shutters in shades of blue, and where strolling tourists and locals alike are lured into small businesses by local artisans and craftsmen. The air 130 meters above the port of Sidi Bou Said is a mix of jasmine flowers and peppermint and carries the panoramic view over the gulf of Tunis. A little more than a century ago this place was a renown hotspot for cultural exchange. Most of the members of the Tunisian painting school, the *École de Tunis*, lived and worked here. The French-British painter Baron d'Erlanger built the Ennejma Ezzhara palace where he also gathered European artists like Paul Klee, August Macke, Louis Moillet, Gustave Henri Jossot as well as composers such as Béla Bartók, Paul Hindemith, the Turkish composer Raouf Yekta and many more. In short, Sidi Bou Said and its open vista on the Mediterranean was the best environment for a group exhibition on the theme of a dialog to take place.

Eight artists, four media, one subject. The show *Hiwar* in the gallery *Le violon bleu* presented artworks from a small group of contemporary artists who are concerned with this subject for personal, biographical and geographical reasons. Most of them live and work in diaspora communities or in the seam between their countries of origin and their countries of destination. For this reason, the show both reflected on the dialog between Arab artists of a younger generation and created a new form of dialog that uncovers some of the hidden dimensions of a contemporary understanding. More than merely showing artworks thematically about dialog, it demonstrated an intrinsic dialog

between different artistic approaches. For this reason, the arrangement of the show was as compelling as the gathered works themselves because it described a dialog of art as much as it performed the art of a dialog.

The Tunisian curator of the show, Khadija Hamdi, who has worked and studied in Paris and London, arranged the commissioned artworks in a constellation that displayed a great diversity of artistic practices and methods to deal with the subject matter. The approach also revealed a certain kind of common understanding of the discourse on the crossover of oblivion and remembrance, lost memories and transmissions, and between the contemporary experience of loss and re-adoption of the past in geographically different recourses. The framework for interpretation of the dialog lies in the personal histories of the participating artists. Therefore, it is less interesting to discuss whether the different approaches to the theme of a dialog are integrated into Arab traditions. Moreover, it became important to consider the contemporary understanding of what it is to be an "Arab artist" in a technologically and socially networked world.

As an art historian, Khadija Hamdi acquired profound expertise in Islamic art and the comparison of the Abbasid period with the Egypt Fatimid period. The recognition of similarities and differences in the history of Arab art is central to her major research objectives. But, the fact that all research on the past is actually performed under present conditions must be kept in mind if the historian reconstructs a series of artistic productions. Therefore, the curatorial inquiries into the notion of "contemporary Arab art" is not separable from Khadija Hamdi's historical research insofar as it is informed by her experience as an art historian. The methodical fusion of these two perspectives, or



Adel Abidin - ping pong - still

to use a term proposed by the writer and curator Irit Rogoff, the “smuggling” of the experience formed from relics of the past into the reception of contemporary art and vice versa, is inherent to the exhibition concept. It also triggers the understanding that nowadays we cannot speak about “contemporary Arab art” without speaking of contemporary art in general—no matter where on the globe it is produced. At the same time, it evinces a certain perspective on the dialog as a fundamental form for producing art which can be related to different personal

experiences of being Arab today.

For the Hiwar-show, Khadija Hamdi initially encountered the artists at international art shows like the Venice Biennial, the Sharjah Biennial, the Biennial of Alexandria, and the FIAC in France; she also visited artists’-studios from Cairo to Helsinki and France. Finally, she made her choice of eight artists who mostly live and work in the state of diaspora or—as probably is more fitting to say—in between their country of origin and their country of destination. During the show, the Iraqi artists Sama Alshaibi, Dena

Al-Adeeb, and Adel Abidin lived and worked in the USA; Alshaibi is based in Tucson Arizona, Dena Al-Deeb splits her time between San Francisco and Los Angeles, while Adel Abidin, who is permanently based in Helsinki, Finland, was a resident artist in New York. The Tunisian artists Meriam Bouderbala and Dora Dhouib live and work between Tunisia and France, while Nadia Kaabi-Linke is at home in Tunis as well as in Berlin. Moataz Nasr and Mohammad Allam live and work in Cairo, Egypt.

All of them are familiar with the criss-crossing of cultural exchange and this is apparent in their practices. They make use of various technical voices—media such as installations, videos, photographs, and performances—and they ignite a sense-making that is immediately related to personal histories as it is embedded into the contemporary life-forms of cross-cultural dialogs. The curatorial concept of the dialog organized the works in a constellation that displayed both reflection on, and the performance of, the difficulties of mutual understanding. In the following flow path I will concentrate on showing how the works converse with each other for all their differences, incongruous perspectives, concepts and intentions.

Dena Al-Deeb and Sama Alshaibi contributed to Hiwar with the collaborative project Baghdad Mem/Wars. The work is a suite of three parts, including photographs and video, which produce a subtle tension in relation to the ambivalent puns of each subtitle. The number three has a tragic correspondence in the three Wars of Iraq's recent past, and each part is dedicated to the psychological and physical embodiment of war and displacement. All together, they tell the story of a life-threatening experience, repression, dislocation and suffocating loss. In the first part, Still/Chaos, two female protagonists, performed

by the artists themselves, are caged in besieged white cubes. The first photographs show a short distance between the two figures; later on with the increasing enclosure of the hygienic white box, they are propelled into one another with intensifying interactions of rebellion and resignation that follow the ambiguous shape of the survival and escape of the threat of war. The dualistic wordplay Still/Chaos suggests the rescue is just an illusion. The events of the wars remain present as they are physically and psychologically embodied in personal memory. The second part, Efface/Remain, deals with the mechanisms of self-censorship and political forces that work hand-in-hand to hush a whole community. The video shows a female writer who scrawls repeatedly on a chalkboard the verse "With the passing of time silence is like the mood of winter", from Iraqi poet Nazak Al Malaika. From line to line the writer becomes more obsessive and frantic in her performance. Her aroused gestures reflect the dialectic of historical amnesia driven by the political forces of collective repression, while on the other hand they insinuate the escalating obsession with documenting past events and overwriting lived history. As history is always a representation of cohesive past events, the discrepancy between personal memory and collective history can provoke political concerns. The third part of Baghdad Mem/Wars indicates the aura of war, homeland, and the schizophrenic belonging to a state of non-belonging, as is already characteristic of the diaspora in the subtitle Absence/Presence. Like a descant in the enclosing space of Still/Chaos, it displays the interrelation of the two figures themselves and the vast landscape. The picture expresses that home, war and belonging remain virtually present in the appearance of something that seems to be far away although it is as close as it could be, for it is a part of yourself:

your body, your memory, your emotions.

The context of *Baghdadi Mem/Wars* is the personal experience of both artists, while the case seems quite different for the characters of the third Iraqi artist, Adel Abidin. Much more directly, the video *Ping-Pong* creates a strange aura of irony by displacing two table-tennis players to a bunker-like space. For this little scene, Abidin adopted a big picture mode of representation with hidden dynamic cuts and stalking close-ups. The desire to win flickers in both players' eyes as every point is tallied on a scoring board. Aside from this, the match is far from ordinary as a beautiful nude woman replaces the net in the middle of the ping-pong table. Passiveness and silence are her only expressions and are all but broken by a slight, bawdy moan emitted whenever the ball smashes into her delicate skin. As Khadija Hamdi wrote in the exhibition catalog, Abidin understands the passive woman as a fleshy metaphor for the beauty and fragility of his former hometown Baghdad. The irony of this masculine view on the beautiful nude that incarnates fragility and weakness is that in reality all the hard balls of the butchy players fail to rebound from the smooth female body.

What we can learn from the subtext of the video is that not only women are suffering from masculine power-play and the theatrical behaviors of men. Perhaps they are much stronger than men would have them, and perhaps the men themselves are not strong enough to realize that the impulse to demonstrate power serves only to mask their own weakness. This weakness or powerlessness is amplified in the sound-installation of Mohammad Allam who presents a more symmetrically balanced relationship between men and woman. The chosen scenario is far from being exceptional. Allam omits any special effects so the viewer may concentrate

on the ordinary and near-meaningless aspects of the everyday. His work *A very private conversation* is comprised of a photograph which shows a couple and a scooter on the shore of the Nile somewhere in Cairo; woman and man lean against a banister, only a blurry profile of the man visible. The underlying audio track introduces the middle-age couple to the spectator. They are probably engaged and discuss how they would get married if only Egyptian conventions didn't demand that they own an apartment. Without first securing a domicile, the male partner experiences acutely his weak position in Egyptian society. He is incapable of deciding what he wants, and while his fiancée asks him for one of the most mundane things on earth, he seems to evade the reality that they cannot advance to the next step without owning a home.

Allam's work reveals that a very private conversation too can be like playing table-tennis. One partner is inquiring while the other dodges by changing the subject. And what about understandings and misunderstandings in impossible conversations? With this question, we come to the works contributed to *Hiwar* by the Tunisian artists Dora Dhouib and Meriam Bouderbala.

The work of Dora Dhouib, who is a Tunisian born and living in Paris, is an example of miscarried intercultural translations. *Five and Thursday on you* is a wall installation made up of a white neon tube and the literal translation of a traditional Tunisian expression to defy the evil eye. The meaning of the sentence seems to be lost in the past and between the "clash" of two different cultures, yet this loss is forced by a mechanically literal translation. In Dhouib's work, the reference is totally opaque and thus there is no context to elucidate how the expression is used or to fathom what it means.



*Show - Mohamed Allam - A very private conversation*

Thus, contact between the symbolic boundaries of the different languages is explicitly denied. Meriam Bouderbala's work "Topos" is all about the feeling of being lost in migration. The installation is made of four separated cartographic elements with a thin red yarn tied tight around small objects on the boards. The quotation marks in the title indicate that Bouderbala refers to a double meaning of the word "topos", whose referent can be searched in the dimensions of space and semantics. The red yarn is a well-known metaphor for mutual understanding, which gives an ironic aspect to the work. One characterizes our time as a post-hermeneutical era during which the yarn of understanding is torn. In Bouderbala's

installation, the yarn provides the only continuity between the disparate topics and represents the fact that a common understanding becomes an illusion once we are set adrift amid an array of narratives and idioms.

After all this, the works of Nadia Kaabi-Linke and Moataz Nasr show that understanding is not only confronted with the loss, but also with the recovery, of references. The wall installation Rue Abderrahman Ben Mami from NKL fetch one of the many mute witnesses of popular micro-histories of the city of Tunis. The artist made a print with ink on paper and canvas in a suburban street in Tunis where the name Batata was carved into a wall. While she was working, she recorded the conversation of bystanders

who began with telling the story of Batata. The outcome of this conversation was a mixture of rumors and local myths which shaped a new context for this name appropriated by the artist. As well as reproducing the name on canvas, NKL engraved the dialog in a pane of acrylic glass suspended next to the Batata painting. Ultimately, only the shadow of the dialog was

discernable and composed a kind mystical aura. The work shows that a name can shed its bearer but never its magic.

Following NKL's evolving echos of a name, an inter-generational dialog is pictured in Moataz Nasr's video *Father and Son*. The artist used a split screen which allows display of the parallel reactions of the son (the artist himself) and his



Moataz Nasr - From the video «Father and son»

father during their conversation. This technique functions in a paradoxical sense for bringing both persons together in their dialog while simultaneously separating them via a thin black line. As the comprehension of a past—as well as a present—empirically rooted in one's own lived experience evolves from one generation to the next, everyone drafts history in a different way. Truth is always incomplete and threatens to slip away altogether in the breach between

older and younger generations. The video gives intimate insight into Nasr's personal attempt at reconciliation with his father and profiles a micro-portrait of the dynamics of familial conflict within a patriarchal society.

The most remarkable attribute of a dialog is that despite all differences understanding is possible. When Nelson Goodman wrote his seminal book about *The Languages of Art* in 1976, art was theoretically constructed similarly

to formal languages. But, the plural form in the title of his book indicates what the author was really interested in: no major code of visual representations but a polyphonic variety of styles, techniques and materials related to visual forms that he considered to be the “languages” of art. In this sense, art functions not as a single representation of the world and time we live in but as a practical field of inventing new languages we need to express ourselves in time. In this regard, the dialog can be considered as the basic form of artistic production; it has become the common ground for the contemporary array of “artistic languages”. From this perspective, the group exhibition Hiwar took a remarkable step in visualizing the function of an existing cross-cultural dialog of styles, media, techniques and personal issues despite the inclusion of works by artists exclusively from Arab countries.

Without a doubt, Nelson was interested in the function of art as agency for visually transmitted communication. The word “communication” implies second-order-expectations, which are the expectations about the expectations of another. All kinds of socially and geographically constructed frames of identities, such as Orientals and Westerners, belong to the “expectational loop” of communication. They exist, but as secondary constructions and not as primary entities. For this reason it is better-suited to think about the global sphere of visual exchange in terms of worldwide communication, distribution and exchange, instead of categorizing art with outmoded ethno-labels. Furthermore, the reality of artistic life seems to be juxtaposed with the idea of a unique brand of Arab art. In the era of global communication, technological and social networks, the habit of ethno-geographical labeling has lost its reliability—especially as it is obvious that first and foremost the artists belong to the group of electronic nomads who

use devices for worldwide socializing day-to-day. In this respect, it is highly improbable that ethnically and geographically constructed identities have an enduring future.

For ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato, the truth that lay between different perspectives was brought together in open conversations. This notion of a dialog has not lost its meaning today. The group exhibition Hiwar confirms that differences are fundamental to productive exchange and sense-making. Instead of drafting common traits in Arab art, the visual dialog between the commissioned works reveals the reality of different styles and voices in what we are used to calling “contemporary Arab art”. Once again, it has become evident that we cannot speak about “Contemporary Arab art” without considering contemporary art in general. Perhaps the show curated by Khadija Hamdi is a kind of experimental study that prefigures a turnaround to a new inter-cultural understanding; it no longer matters where the artist comes from to understand his or her work; contrariwise, to apprehend their work it is important to comprehend where they come from.



Motaz Nasr - *Ather wal Baten*



**Nadia Kaabi** - *Rue Abderramen Ben Mami* - 2008



**Meriam Bouderbella**

*Timo Kaabi-Linke is a writer, philosopher, and art critic who lives and works in Berlin, Germany. His major philosophical concern is how artistic productions and conceptions change under the condition of a technically and socially connected world. He studies pragmatical, political and aesthetic strategies in artistic practices that reflect their “contemporaneity” as both a value in the art markets and as a mode of existence. He is also concerned with recent approaches in art history related to “pragmatical” and “iconic turns”, the principle of generalized symmetries and the interplay between humans, programs, and machines. Furthermore, he challenges the role of technologies as agencies of cross-cultural understanding and examines the cognitive effects of optical devices on theoretical interpretations of perception and history during the 20th century. Kaabi-Linke has participated in international conferences and has published articles in several languages on topics germane to art, cultural studies, political sciences, and studies in technology.*



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# Hiwar

## حوار

25th September - 30th October 2010

٢٥ سبتمبر - ٣٠ أكتوبر ٢٠١٠

Opening 25th September 7:00

الإفتتاح ٢٥ سبتمبر الساعة ساء١

Adel Abidin /Iraq  
Mohamed Allam /Egypt  
Meriam Bouderbala /Tunis  
Sama Alshaibi /Iraq  
Dena Al-Adeeb /Iraq  
Dora Dhouib /Tunis  
Moataz Nasr/Egypt

عادل عابدين / العراق  
محمد علام / مصر  
ميريم بودربالة / تونس  
سما الشايبي / العراق  
دينا الاديبي / العراق  
دورا دهب / تونس  
معتز نصر / مصر

Curated by: Khadija Hamdi /Tunis  
Hiwar will host two young artists  
from the workshop "Visit the Artist",  
An initiative of Darb1718  
Noha Hesham  
Hager Masoud

فكرة وتنسيق: خديجة حمدي / تونس  
يستضيف معرض حوار اثنان من الفنانين  
الشباب من ورشة (استديو الفنان)،  
مبادرة من مركز درب ١٧١٨  
نهي هشام  
هاجر مسعود



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