

Essay

On One Side of the Same Water

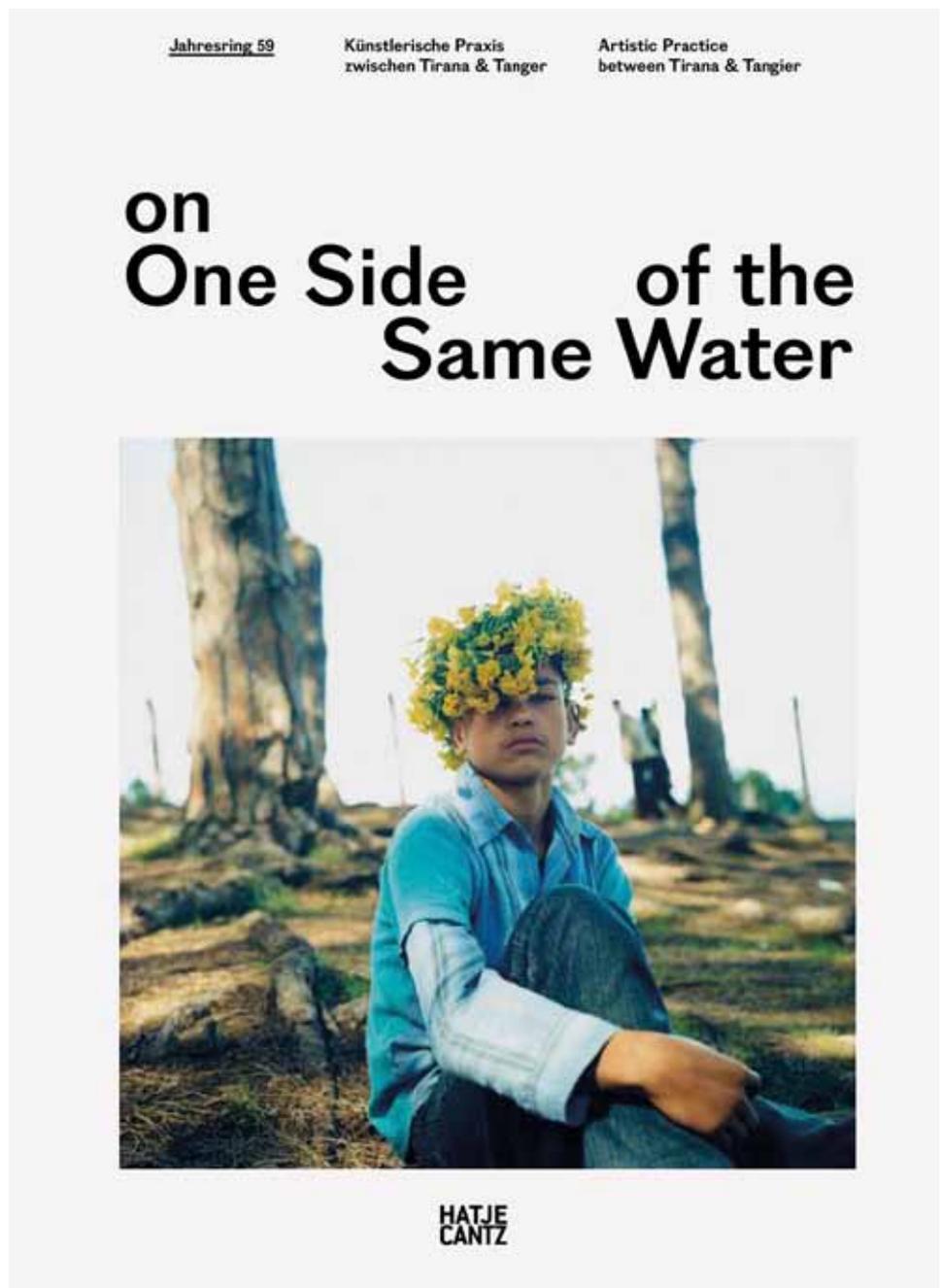
Introduction

Angelika Stepken

This year's *Jahresring* brings together voices by artists, authors, curators, architects, and scientists active in the countries of the south and southeastern Mediterranean. They talk about their projects, about working conditions, and about how individual biographies and cooperative practices reflect political history. Their contributions shed light on an extremely heterogeneous situation for artistic production between Tirana and Tangiers. Hence, this book might seem like a travel report in the overview, with numerous encounters and long stretches left out between conversations and thoughts.

The voices that come together in this book are in reality separated by historical, political, and economic conflicts, crises, and social dislocations. Cities such as Istanbul, Beirut, Ramallah, and Cairo attract attention on the international art scene; they attract visitors. But who travels to Tirana or Algiers to make studio visits? There are places 'without' visual imagery – or, phrased differently, 'with' images that do not, however, find entry into our repertoire. There are neighbors that hardly know each other: the border between Morocco and Algeria has been closed since 1944 as a result of the conflict over the Western Sahara, and the communication between the art scenes in the two countries has been blocked ever since. There are neighboring countries that one cannot travel to with the same passport, even when they are a mere 16 kilometers apart from one another, such as Jerusalem and Ramallah. And, conversely, anyone who wishes to travel north from a Mediterranean country that is not a member of the European Union has to submit to the expensive and

On One Side of the Same Water, cover, Yto Barrada, Oxalis Crown, 2006.



often humiliating procedure of applying for a visa. One example close at hand that we just experienced, in 2012, was when we invited an artist from Morocco for a residency at the Villa Romana in Florence: his visa was rejected three times, despite the invitation.

The Mediterranean is not a unifying entity, even if French historian Fernand Braudel's vision of the 'grande Méditerranée', the geographical and cultural 'space of encounter and movement,' a 'dialogue space' that was even supposed to include Flanders and the Hansa region as well as the Atlantic, the Sahara, and the Indian Ocean, resonates so wondrously.^[1] The second standard work on the 3,000-year history of the microregions around the Mediterranean was published 51 years later, in 2000, under the critical title *The Corrupting Sea. A Study of Mediterranean History*, written by the

[1] Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, Paris 1949, in English trans., *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II.*, New York, 1972.

British historians Peregrine Horden and Nicolas Purcell.^[2] The Mediterranean is – despite the so-called Barcelona Process, with which the European Union has been attempting to reformulate its (economic) policy for the non-European Mediterranean states since 1995 – not a zone that fosters the communication between cultures. This is why it has been left out of the title of this book. 'On one side of the same water' is a formulation the American artist Lawrence Weiner chose for a work of the seventies and later for an exhibition of the nineties, which he generously allowed us to use for this publication. The title suggests distance, a perspective of distancing. From a northern European perspective – as a former colonial power, France takes on a special role – the Mediterranean is more than anything else a projection: there's the beautiful Mediterranean for tourism, and a dark Mediterranean of political instability and war. The political interest of the north for the southern Mediterranean region remains dominated by the themes of migration, energy, and political Islam. The political scientist Isabel Schäfer, who runs the Mediterranean Institute Berlin (MIB) currently being set up at the Institute for Social Sciences of Humboldt University in Berlin, provides a short survey in her essay 'Political Areas Between Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East' and sketches out the perspectives:

The Union for the Mediterranean's orientation toward concrete projects could have supported regional integration in the Mediterranean region, but it was chiefly focused on economic and infrastructural dimensions and deliberately excluded civilian societies. [...] On the other hand, a constructivist concept of the Mediterranean region would rethink it as a region where circles of interest and values increasingly overlap.

Beginning at the south of the Mediterranean is Africa, the continent closest to Europe. There are only 80 kilometers separating Sicily and Tunisia. While tourism to the southern Mediterranean coast has foundered in the wake of the Arab Spring, the migration movement from south to north continues. In 2011, 1,500 dead bodies were recovered from the Mediterranean, refugees who perished in search of safety and a better life. In 2010, the artist Armin Linke traveled with a research group to the Italian island of Lampedusa, south of Sicily, where they were hardly any refugees – Italy's Berlusconi government had signed a 'Friendship Contract' with Libya and Tunisia. Refugees were detained in Libyan camps or sent back without applying for asylum in Italy – a procedure that violates human rights, as the European Court of Justice ruled this past March.

The group traveling with Armin Linke collected images of migration on location that had been left behind or sent out into the world by photojournalists, a captain of the coast guard, non-profit workers, and the migrants themselves and reconstructed their original contexts. An initial overview of these long-term research efforts on an image politics of migration that also includes the African perspective can be seen in this volume.

[2] Peregrine Horden and Nicolas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea. A Study of Mediterranean History*, Oxford 2000.

Nadia Kaabi-Linke,
Black Is the New White,
2012, lightbox. Photo
by: Russ. Courtesy of
the artist.



For artists in Casablanca, Alexandria, or Beirut, the biennials of Dakar, Bamako, and Sharjah are no further geographically than the Documenta in Kassel or the traveling European Manifesta. And the fair in Dubai is as interesting as the Frieze in London or Art Basel. At home, though, art is for the most part a private affair – this is perhaps the only generalization that can be made about this region. There are nearly no state structures that foster, fund, or conserve contemporary art. Even the biennials of Istanbul (since 1987) and Marrakesh (since 2005) were founded as private initiatives and are run as such to this day. This is why artistic initiatives such as project spaces, cinematheques, archives, symposia, and exchange programs are all the more dependent on the support of local foundations and international cultural institutes. The notion that committed professional art projects of international scope only began on the North African coast or in the so-called Middle East with

the Arab Spring is one of many distortions of the politics of media attention: in Cairo, the internationally connected Townhouse Gallery has been operating since 1998, and in 2004 the Contemporary Image Collective (CIC) was founded there as well, followed by the Art and Cultural Center Darb 1718 in the Fustat district four years later. And in Rabat, Abdellah Karroum already initiated L'appartement 22 in 2002 as a project space for encounters, exhibitions, and artists' residencies.

As the editorial deadline for this year's *Jahresring* approaches, political news from the region emerges in rapid succession: in Tunisia, Salafists storm an art exhibition in the wealthy suburb La Marsa near Tunis; artists and curators receive death threats, also from Salafists in Germany; while in Egypt the first free parliamentary elections from the beginning of the year are declared invalid. A coup by the military council? Whether or not Greece remains in the EU continues to remain doubtful. After a fourth round of voting, Albania has a new president, while the opposition still contests the election results from 2009. But this *Jahresring* is neither a journal of current events nor a political manual. The contribution by the artist Hassan Khan – *The first lesson I remember learning is that humiliation exists* – deflates the stereotypical question as to the relationship between political relevance and artistic work: he answers with a sublime text in which collective spaces of memory open up, blur, create layers. 'For I believe explanations are now not necessary unless they serve the revolution in a direct and practical fashion; anything else is fetish and representation and counter-revolution.'^[3]

None of the texts in this book is representative. Art questions, rejects, undermines representation. In her text 'Time for Athens?', Greek art critic Despina Zefkili investigates the lack of self-understanding in her country, which has not been discussed since the fall of the military junta in 1974 – while Greece has subjected itself to the ideological stereotypes of modernism and the market. She calls for a reinterpretation of recent art history, an interdisciplinary discourse, and a recontextualization of art production away from the discrepancy between commercial hype and the lack of institutional and independent structures.

Adela Demetja finished her studies at the Art Academy in Tirana in 2006 and, like so many of her colleagues, left Albania only to found the Tirana Art Lab four years later, a laboratory for artistic research and production. In the late 1990s and at the start of the new millennium, hope for the Albanian art scene prevailed. In 2001 the Tirana International Contemporary Biannual was founded, but then ended after three runs due to lack of support. International

[3] This essay is a reprint of the text that originally appeared in 2011 in *Index*, no. 2 the magazine of the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACABA). An earlier and slightly different version of this text premiered as a live lecture-performance under the title *A Short Story Based on a Distant Memory with a Long Musical Interlude* at Objectif Exhibitions in Antwerp on 6th May 2011. The short story included here also exists in Arabic as an art piece called *Mystery* (2011) that was first shown at the Beirut Art Center in the group show entitled *Image in the Aftermath*, which opened on May 17, 2011.



foundations withdrew. Today, contemporary art is in a standby mode, without money, without space, without perspective. The painter Edi Hila was among the first generation of students to attend Tirana's formerly socialist Art Academy, which was founded in the 1960s. He has been teaching there since the 1990s, following decades of work camps and being prohibited from practicing his profession under the rule of Enver Hodscha. Edi Hila did not leave the country; he encouraged many artists of the younger generation, including Anri Sala, Adrian Paci, and many more, to define their artistic language more precisely. As a painter, he was witness to the upheavals his country went through; today, disillusioned, he says, 'I believed that democracy guaranteed a cultural and artistic future.'

Standstill, crisis, and boom exist side by side in Albania, Greece, and Turkey. In Istanbul, artists from three generations converse with one another: Gülsün Karamustafa, Banu Cennetoğlu, and two members of the artists' group Ha Za Vu Zu. Gülsün Karamustafa recalls the city of 16 million inhabitants while it was still termed 'periphery' in the early 1990s and she was making ephemeral works with simple materials. Banu Cennetoğlu left Istanbul in 1994 after finishing her studies and returned eleven years later. When she opened BAS in 2006, the space meant for her an end to fear: a place to gather, present, and produce artists' books. Now numbering seven members, Ha Za Vu Zu had its first appearances the previous year as a performance collective and has received numerous international invitations since that time. How does a city's boom reflect in its artists' production?

Parallel to all territorial conflicts, digital communication and technical mobility have made artistic exchange easier, faster, and more international and have established new temporary networks and institutional models. Heritage is biography, an individual fate. The bond to heritage is experienced individually in many different ways, and migration is often the necessary consequence to artistic self-realization. In a country like Israel, the disturbed relationship to the home country is never resolved, as Roy Brand explains in

his introductory essay 'Exile at Home'. Israel is the home of the homeless, while at the same time deeply marked by a collective identity in its social construction. Brand quotes Walter Benjamin, who called creative acts 'organs of the collective', and investigates how contemporary art in Israel can find meaning outside this value collective. 'How can one live in such exile at home [...]?'

DAAR – Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency – is an art and architecture collective in Bait Sahour in Palestine. It was initiated in 2007 by the Israeli architect and writer Eyal Weizman,^[4] the Italian architect Alessandro Petti, and the Palestinian architect Sani Hilal. Taking the example of the Israeli organization of space in the occupied territories, they investigate and infiltrate an architecture of delimitation and control. DAAR combines discourse, spatial intervention, education, collective learning, public meeting, and legal challenge. Their contribution to this book is dedicated to the investigation of the former Ottoman rail network, which the British continued to operate as the 'Palestine Railway' until it was destroyed in the war in 1948 and came under Israeli control. During the reconstruction of the track network, a connection to Palestine was omitted from the plans. In cooperation with the art historian and philosopher Lieven De Cauter and the Berlage Institute of Rotterdam, DAAR has drawn up a reactivation of the remaining fragments as a first step towards Palestine's future reconnection to the region's transportation networks. 'The Reactivation of the Network' is part of a long-term research project on community at the DAAR.

While the education system is over-institutionalized in Europe, new models of artistic training, research, and education initiated by artists and active individuals are being created, for instance in Egypt and Palestine. Last Year, The International Academy of Art Palestine was able to promote its first year of art students. It is a small academy with 33 students and involves explicitly research-based teaching. International artists are invited to give lectures, while students are offered semesters abroad in European academies. How should young Palestinians otherwise become acquainted with Europe's art and artists or professionalize themselves within the country's total geographical isolation?

Last year, in Alexandria, the artist Wael Shawky initiated an independent postgraduate program: MASS Alexandria. In a 5,000-square-foot former garage, it offers space for work and study to young artists who apply to a seven-month program that includes workshops, guest lectures, visits by curators, and a final exhibition. MASS is internationally well connected. Three students from the first year were invited to the Thessaloniki Biennial of Contemporary Art. Ten students from the second year are taking part in *The Cairo Seminar. Study of (d)OCUMENTA 13*. To date, MASS is the only alternative in Egypt to the conservative academy, which prevents young artists from engaging in an international context instead of pushing them in that direction. The English curator Daniella Rose

[4] Cf. Eyal Weizman, *Sperrzonen, Israels Architektur der Besatzung*, Hamburg 2009.

King, who worked at MASS in 2012 as program curator, introduces the project.

When Marwa and Mirene Arsanios called their project *98weeks to life in Beirut* in October 2007, it was at first a self-determined artistic research proposal. They wanted to dedicate themselves to a theme, for instance publications, for 98 weeks. Two years later, they opened a 500-square-foot storefront project space in the Armenian quarter of Beirut with a library and a reading area: "a room to support self-organized initiatives and to collectively take part in artistic sources." In her text, Mirene Arsanios, who grew up in the Francophone part of Beirut, refers to the Arabic poetry magazine *Sh'ir*, which was founded in 1957 and called for a radical renewal of language and life. It was prohibited at the time both in Egypt and in Syria. A're-reading' of this kind of historical magazine opens the collective consensus and prevents allocating history to memory and the past.

The artist Nadia Kaabi-Linke attended the state art academy in Tunis and then, curious, went to Paris on a grant. Today she lives in Berlin. In a conversation, she describes how important the confrontation with international art and international artists was to her artistic development, how vital it was to submit herself to 'constructive competition.' The art scene in Tunisia, a country with 10 million inhabitants, is easy to gain an overview of; in the past it hardly had any international orientation at all. Since the Jasmine Revolution, artists and intellectuals have been working on building up civilian social structures. State institutions such as the Centre National d'Art Vivant de Tunis are reformulating their purpose, working groups are holding discussions on what should happen with the state art collection that was amassed under Ben Ali, and what function a museum for contemporary art should have. Not far from Tunis, the private B'chira Art Center opened. At the same time, Salafists are attacking exhibitions and film performances and causing huge disruption to teaching at the universities. In the first free elections in Tunisia, the Islamist En Nahda party received 90 of 217 seats in parliament.

While Tunisia aimed for 6.7 million foreign tourists under the Ben Ali regime (2007) and 82 percent of all earnings from tourism came from the EU, Algeria's neighboring country is still deemed to be "dangerous" on the website of the German Foreign Office, with warnings against attacks and kidnappings. Already in 2005, only a few years after the end of the Algerian civil war, the London-based artist Zineb Sedira used an apartment in Algiers to informally invite artists and curators to initiate an international dialogue with the local art scene. In May of 2011, a pilot project developed out of this for an artists' residence with the name A.R.I.A.: 'A melody that is sung alone, with accompaniment.' This year, the first artist guests are expected: Alfredo Jaar of New York and Nicene Kossentini from Tunisia. Students at the International Academy of Art Palestine can apply for a residency. Since January of 2012, Yasmina Reggad (as curator) and the local association Chrysalide have been supporting the project. A.R.I.A. is funded in part by the AFAC, the Arab Fund for Art and Culture, the French Embassy, and UNESCO.

It would be worthwhile to investigate the support of local artistic projects with European funding. In 2004, the political scientist Babak Khalatbari published an initial detailed study on 'The Euro-Mediterranean partnership between goal and reality' and described therein, among other things, how incompatible European support requirements are with regional structures.^[5] The artist Yto Barrada, in a conversation with curator Marie Muracciole, was also critical about these grant applications, their jargon and criteria. Since 2006, she has been running a cinématique in the former Cinema Rif in the center of Tangiers, which was founded in 1938.

'To change life in Tangiers, we wanted to change the people,' she recalls. Cinema fostered new ways of seeing and encouraged people to dream. But it is also an instrument for collective hypnosis and a colonization of the imagination: 'Our desire is still occupied by old models.'

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About the author

Angelika Stepken, born in 1955 in Moers in the Lower Rhine, has been director of the Villa Romana in Florence since 2006. Following her studies in art history, philosophy and political science at the Freie Universität Berlin and a period of training as a painting restorer in Florence, Stepken took up work as an arts review editor and art critic. From 1987 to 1998 she carried out numerous international exhibition projects in Berlin and abroad (as far flung as Poland, China, Scandinavia and Turkey). Between 1998 and 2006 Angelika Stepken was director of the Badischer Kunstverein in Karlsruhe. Besides this, she teaches at the art-historical institute of the University of Karlsruhe and is the deputy chairman of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft deutscher Kunstvereine (AdKV, Federation of German art associations). (Courtesy of the Goethe-Institut).

[5] Babak Khalatbari, *Naher Osten, Nordafrika und die EU im 21. Jahrhundert. Die euro-mediterrane Partnerschaft zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit*, Wiesbaden 2004.