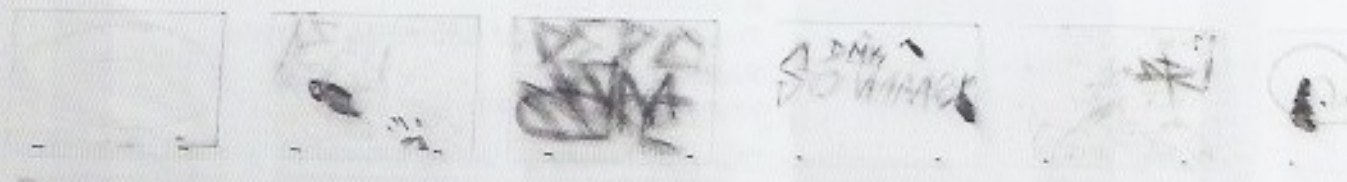


On the Track of History

NADIA



KAABI-LINKE

Falko Schmieder

Nadia Kaabi-Linke, *2010's Jew*
n.p.w. 2010. Velvet black powder,
sweat, sebum, anti-graffiti film, acrylic,
steel. 11 dust prints. Dimensions variable.
© courtesy Museum of Modern Art,
New York. Photo: Ilse Walter

There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.¹ With this sentence, Walter Benjamin is speaking out against a concept of history that treats drastic events as exceptional cases, thus extraterritorializing them from the social sphere. An exemplary locus for such exclusion appears to be the crime scene (in German, *Tatort*). When the term is understood in its ordinary sense, it refers to the place where the law is violated. Officers of the law secure the area, and investigators begin their work of finding evidence to reconstruct the crime and identify the perpetrator(s). The artist-historian in Benjamin's sense circumvents this pattern of rule and exception, law and disorder. His gaze is centered on traces of everyday violence. His motto is: show history the badge of Scotland Yard.² His utopian sense says: what's here and now cannot be everything. His sense of the facts wishes to

grasp the living contradiction within the material. Each thing and circumstance is tied, for him, to its own opposite—every victory a defeat, every coup a wasted chance, the ornament allied with the crime.

In the framework of this delimited perspective, the works of Nadia Kaabi-Linke shown in this exhibition, as fragments from a social matrix of guilt, are subsumed very aptly under the title *Tatort*. Within these works, the artist initiates investigations and proceedings that sharpen our sense of both power and the precariousness of historical inheritance. She subjects her materials to records-division treatment, after which they confess. Her aesthetic forensics probe present manifestations of past events, revealing significations that explode the continuum of our sense of the present. Through a plumbing of the historical depth of things, everyday life is illuminated.



Tatort—Crime Scene, exhibition view, 2010. Mixed media. Courtesy the artist and Christian Hosp Gallery. Photo: Uwe Walther

An Investigation of Reality

Whoever investigates reality also investigates himself and the spectator, who sees himself embroiled in the process. The *Tatort* exhibition in the Galerie Christian Hosp brings together works with different formats. Two installations are hanging from the ceiling: porcelain casts taken from animal stomachs that are suspended on chains; and colored plaster pieces hovering head-high from hundreds of fine threads, configured according to the cartographical shape of the United Arab Emirates. Alongside this, leaning on nails in the walls, there is a small archive of everyday traces, fixed on acrylic glass, that have been taken from the surfaces of transit locations in Berlin. Finally, the exhibition comprises impressions taken from walls in Tunis, Cairo, and Berlin, as well as an additional installation using projection techniques.

Materially and conceptually, all the artist's work refers to a historical context that has remained explosive, or to a concrete public site. They are tied to a specific place through their production and the materials used, but at the same time they wrest a certain form of expression from the place and set it into circulation in the form of the artwork. In addition they are temporally specific, while simultaneously saving and preserving historical traces from the past. Often they constitute remainders from risky performances incapable of being exhibited.

There are certainly biographical reasons why themes such as transience, migration, and rescue fascinate Kaabi-Linke. The artist grew up in Tunis, Kiev, and Dubai, then studied in Paris before moving to Berlin in the summer of 2006. Leaving a place behind and discovering other places, as well as living in a range of cultures, are part of her own history—as are experiences of exclusion and cultural hardening, perhaps the source of her work on walls. As manifest forms of demarcation, walls bear countervailing levels of historical meaning. Not least of all, they are loci for a clandestine culture whose agents inscribe themselves into public perception “from below.” Kaabi-Linke encounters the dialectic of material demarcation and symbolic border violation with the procedure of mimetic-indexical transposition, which cites forensic methods and sometimes imitates them precisely. Exemplary in this respect is her *Berlin à fleur de peau* (2010). The



Under Standing Over Views, 2009. Chipped-off layers of paint from Berlin, Venice, Naples, Bizerte, Tunis, Kairouan, Genua, Kiev, Cologne, and Zagreb, black silk threads; dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery. Photo: Uwe Walther

starting point was formed by diverse traces upon surfaces of public transport stops. After discovering the traces, she applied velvet black³—an adhesive substance criminologists use for rendering things visible—to the surfaces, then covered them with protective liner. Finally, the liner would be removed from the surfaces and, serving as a contact print, placed wet on panes of acrylic glass. In this way, a small archive of ten Berlin “skinnings” came into being, taking in various forms of private bequest: traces of scratches and impact, impressions of sebum, traces of sweat and fat from skin and hair, fingerprints, and so forth.

Although these works involve contact copies developed through mimetic inscription, decisive, thought-provoking transformations have also taken place. Hence, as small as these details may seem, the



Under Standing Over Views. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery. Photo: Uwe Walther

superficial differences resulting from the various forms of inscription at the original site have been leveled in the copies, as has the temporal difference between the various actions leaving the traces. In the pictorial reproductions, the tender contact of skin appears simultaneously and on the same level as the violent cut of a knife. Through the color application as well, the unintended contact between skin and glass is drawn closer to an act of vandalism, and with this the passerby to a perpetrator who is invisible and absent. Intent and carelessness, intimacy and violence now appear equalized. Becoming aware of his most innocent gestures, the individual finds himself suddenly exposed to a double danger through Kaabi-Linke's art: where he leaned over, a knife has carried out its work, the suspicion thus falling on him.

The film of the story developed in these artworks would register the human being as an agent

(accomplice, secret confidant, companion in crime). Under the shadow of suspicion, those who merely saw themselves as plot extras are transformed into protagonists, as in Kafka's *Trial*. Even those who did nothing have left leads that when tied to other leads produce a moment of suspicion. The innocent person can also become identified as someone who at a decisive instance declined to offer help. She is convicted of an uncommitted crime.

Kaabi-Linke always develops her working technique out of the logic of the place and material, which she considers a sort of silent memory. The place and its history are the stage and precondition for her artistic labor: the source of installations, images, and objects allowing the circulation of a statement about the event and its scene. The artist renders herself guilty of this theft of history. The preserved pieces of booty remind the spectator of his own entanglement in the story, thus removing him from his previous existence.

Many of Kaabi-Linke's works investigate the contradictions and entanglements of the innocent, tender, and ephemeral within a context of violence. In *Untitled* (2010), they are sought out in childhood, the root of every personal experience. Through the shadow cast by his body, the observer cannot help rendering part of the text projected onto the floor unreadable, in this way fragmenting and eradicating the biographical report of a childhood stamped by fear and violence. To learn of this violence, he is physically forced to penetrate into the work, do it violence, hence in a way repeat what has been buried in deepest memory. He reproduces a continuum of guilt, in the same way that former children perpetrate the same injustice on their own children that their parents once inflicted on them. In this work, the motif of the inseparable intertwining of experience and destruction is concretized in various ways. The account of a damaged life is projected onto the floor as a spiral-formed text. Those wishing to read it must move in a circle, so that the dizzy feeling generated by the reading doubles. The text's end enters into a paradoxical object—a hair nest. The nest, a place of security and warmth, is made of barbed wire matted with hair, thus becoming an allegory of the family hell as social nucleus. The new life born in such a nest easily perishes within it. That life experiences the world as a state of emergency, an experience from



Berlin à fleur de peau, detail, 2010. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Uwe Walther

which it cannot fully free itself all its life. The account is also concerned with that.

This experience of the state of emergency is reproduced under another sign in *All Along the Watchtower* (2012), which presents the shadow of a hunting post, recalling the watchtowers known from concentration camps or restricted areas. But the material object, the vehicle of the surveillance to which the shadow points, is no (longer) present in the room. Here as well, the viewer loses his sovereign position vis-à-vis the artwork. Where in *Berlin à fleur de peau* the traces could be of his own presence, and where in *Untitled* his own body is manifest as a destructive moment, here he experiences himself as the object of a refined form of surveillance always appearing a step ahead. Only a trace—a shadow—can be seen of the “real” watchtower/hunting post; the “authentic” instance of surveillance withdraws from his view. The ghostly dimension of this situation is strengthened by the

similarity between hunting post and watchtower. The observer experiences his politicization as an “animalization” and vice versa, for he is reduced to his naked life, delivered unprotected to an armed eye—which, to be sure, is nowhere to be seen.

The Invisible Hand of History

What is known is far from being recognized, as Hegel knew. It only becomes so through reflection on its relationship to history. The work *Am Hegelplatz* (2009) is aimed at such contextualizing, thus synchronizing and problematizing various historical levels of time and meaning. Here Kaabi-Linke has tracked down a place into which history has branded itself, and her artistic means serves as a catalyst for this scarred place to speak. Once again, a detecting procedure helps generate the artwork. The referential object is a piece of the wall from the elevated-train arches at Berlin’s Hegelplatz, in view of the Humboldt University, where Hegel held the



Untitled, 2010. Barbed wire, human hair, projection; dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Uwe Walther



Untitled, detail, 2010. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Uwe Walther

philosophy chair between 1818 and 1831. The work is a triptych, playing on the philosophical motif of the dialectic progression from thesis to antithesis to synthesis, which for Hegel represented the principle of spirit come to itself and reconciled with its history. Kaabi-Linke's triptych denies this harmonic structure through a range of syncopic arrangements and its chief contents, bullet holes from World War II. These baleful traces are caught in a narrow frame of German oak—a tree with ancient mythical import that was newly conjured up in the Nazi period. Following their mimetic transposition with wax and ink on paper and canvas, the bullet holes look beautiful: strange concrete flowers; a solidified firework. Those wishing to extract reconciliation can view each bullet hole as the inversion of a gravestone—where one is found, the target cannot

have been hit. As a historical marker, it recalls an unknown person who perhaps escaped with her life. The lower, third leaf of the triptych suggests both a break with this historical inheritance and its noteworthy “sublation”—in the Hegelian sense of *Aufhebung*—into the present. Nowadays a price list is fastened at this point on the wall, advertising what can be ordered from a café located in the elevated-train arches. Where once bombs rained down, life now vibrates. Hegelplatz in the center of Berlin is a place of intellectual exchange and consumption.

Butcher Bliss (2010) is an additional obscure object, this time rendering especially palpable the juncture between civilization and barbarism, beauty and violence always playing a role in Kaabi-Linke’s work. The five porcelain pieces are molds of the interior sides of the stomachs of a ruminant animal. Whereas in *Am Hegelplatz* the traces of a past war remain distinctly visible, in *Butcher Bliss* the disgusting prehistory of the artifact—the killing of the animal; the removal of the stomachs; the foul stench of their contents; the streams of blood—has vanished without a trace. Through artistic metamorphosis, the interior skin of a digestive organ is transformed into an object whose materiality recalls the tableware upon which we ordinarily dine. It opens an associative field taking in both the bourgeois custom of bequeathing expensive porcelain as a dowry and forms of animal existence merely retained for the sake of slaughter.

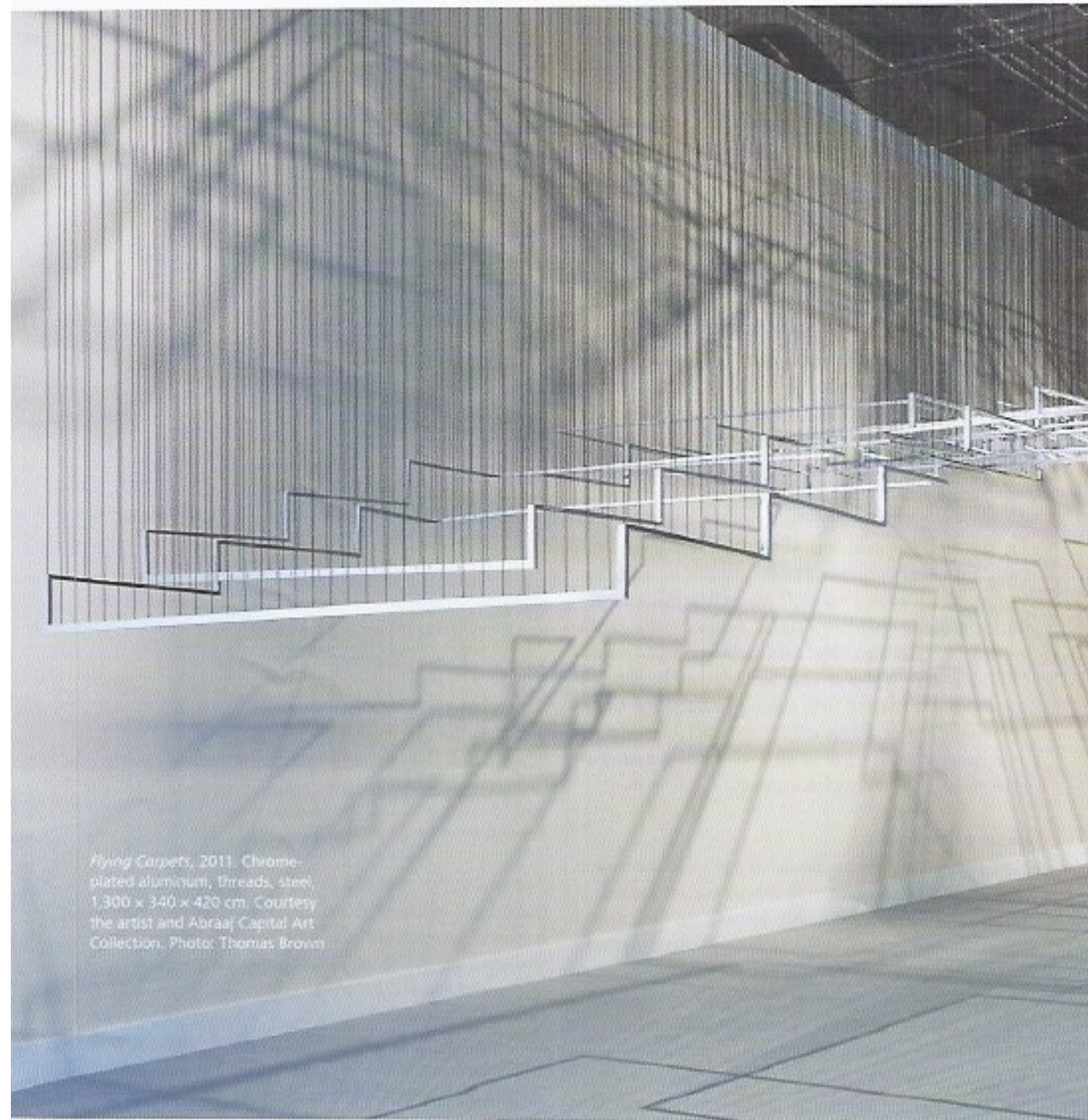
Saving One’s Skin

A risk is taken by anyone delimiting a crime scene and initiating a historical investigation aimed at guiltless observers. Possibly he will be concerned with saving his own skin. Drastic evidence of this is offered in *Rue El Azafine* (2008), from Tunisia, which is part of the series of contact prints taken from public spaces. Here the referential object is a piece of wall located near the Al-Zaytuna mosque in the old city of Tunis. The walls of Tunisian cities have become the domain of youths and unemployed men. A woman who sets about working actively in their sovereign realm represents a provocation. In the form of an acrylic glass engraving hung next to the print, only readable as shadow script, the artist has documented a dialogue taking place behind her back during the wall print’s creation. Initially



All Along the Watchtower, 2012. Pigments, 550 cm high; other dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.
Photo: Bernard Yenelouis

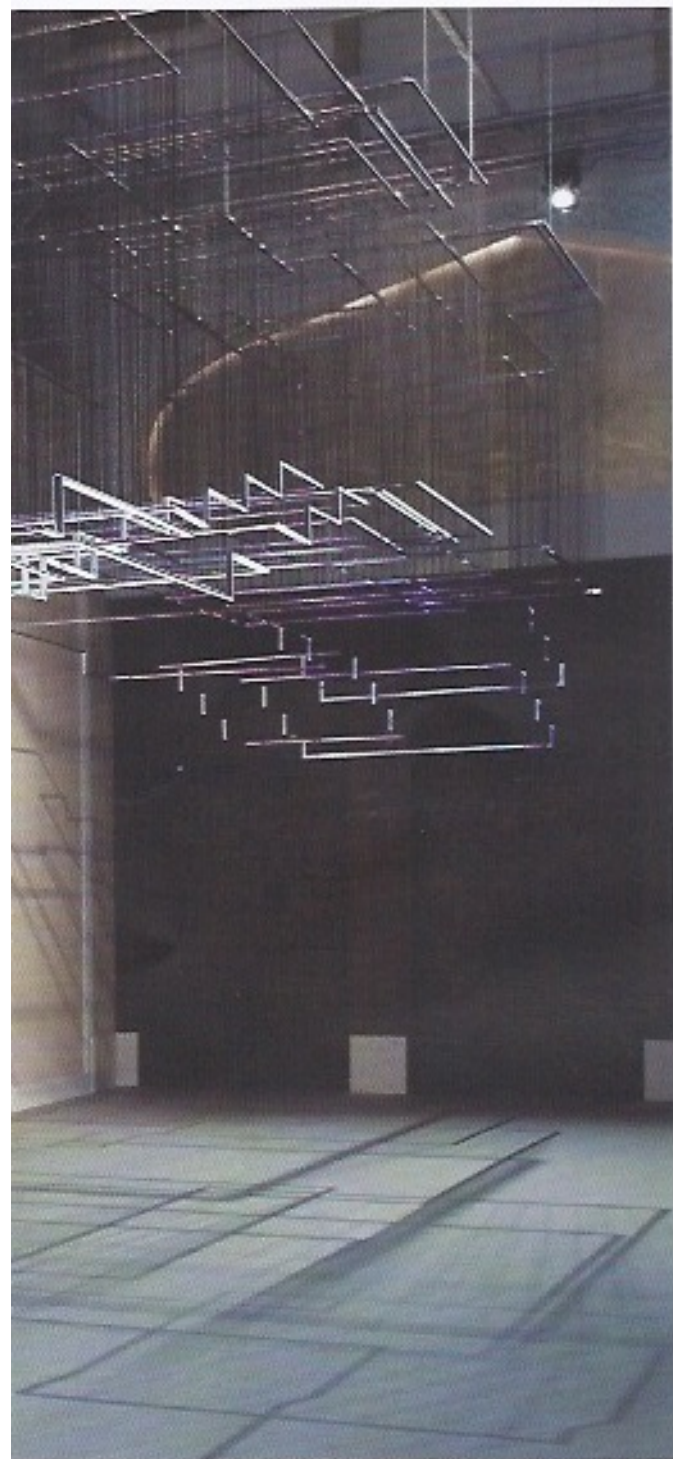
passersby observed the artist at her work with well-meaning curiosity. But a short time later, when it became clear that with “عصية,” she was transmitting the most vulgar Tunisian expletive for the male sexual organ from the wall to paper, she heard angry words to the following effect: “Look over there, even sluts have now become artists.” As an anonymous statement on a wall, the word “عصية” was registered with indifference. But in the form of an artistic reproduction, it became something explosive, its treatment by this artist perceived as a danger to order, one’s self-identity, and role models that have been culturally honed. Only a redeemed humanity, Benjamin suggests, enjoys a past whose every moment is fully citable.⁴ We have not reached that



Flying Carpets, 2011. Chrome-plated aluminum, threads, steel, 1,300 x 340 x 420 cm. Courtesy the artist and Abraaj Capital Art Collection. Photo: Thomas Brown

point. Kaabi-Linke in any event documents a deep-seated intolerance in the resentful muttering of the passersby: a sentiment aimed at bringing to a stop the interrogation of stones and inscriptions, objects and meanings that might harbor a knowledge convicting one's own form of existence of self-delusion.

The artist becomes a "slut" because she doesn't leave the history of the walls in peace, secures the traces of someone oppressed, and makes these accessible to other views. In this way her procedure of mimetic transposition stands opposed to both mere repetition of past events and the abstract negation



of a flight from history. In the direct confrontation with the transmitted material, the contact copies of microhistorical “hot spots” open an experience of difference and thus a potential pointing past the given.

The redemptive aspect of her artistic methods emerges in *These Goddamned Boys All Stealing (Zossener Straße 7)* (2008). In her forays through Berlin, Kaabi-Linke came across the image of a penis until recently scratched into the wall of a now-empty basement area in an apartment building at Zossener Straße 7 in the Kreuzberg district. With some research on her part, she learned that in the Weimar period, a bar for homosexuals was located precisely at this site. In Christopher Isherwood’s memoir *Christopher and His Kind* (1977), the author vividly describes the activities in the bar, called Cosy Corner. Isherwood experienced his coming-out here and discovered a language for his sexuality. In *These Goddamned Boys All Stealing (Zossener Straße 7)*, Kaabi Linke has transferred the penis image scratched into the cellar wall into a new arrangement: a squadron of penises. This formation also cites the bullet holes in *Am Hegelplatz*. It thus recalls the rise of Nazism to power, which forced Isherwood, among others, to leave Berlin. When the artist later revisited the site, the penis had vanished, in another irrevocable burying of the past. Like many other traces of history, it has been preserved in the work of Kaabi-Linke.

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Notes

This essay is reprinted from Nadia Kaabi-Linke: *Tatort*, ed. Jamila Adeli (Bielefeld: Kerber, 2010).

1. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 256.
2. See Walter Benjamin, “The Theory of Knowledge: The Theory of Progress,” in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 51.
3. Luc Maltais, “Composition of Fingerprint Powders,” in *Royal Canadian Mounted Police—Forensic Identification Operations Support Services (PROSS) Bulletin*, January 2008, www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/lcis-ssji/lirs-srij/bulletins/fing-empr-powder-poudre_eng.htm.
4. See Benjamin, *Illuminations*.