

# NINA FISCHER AND MAROAN EL SANI

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In their early days as free-lance artists, Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani were significantly influenced by the environment where they lived and worked, a run-down district in central Berlin – home to many artists and musicians – during the period of German unification. In 1990, they and some of their colleagues took possession of an abandoned butcher's shop on Tucholskystrasse, and here they installed their studio, their home and even a bar, using the premises for events and exhibitions. In so doing they created a setting where they could produce and present their art, and also promote discourse around it. This experience of freely available space, and their observation of how places detach over time from their original functions and attributes, was to become a distinctive factor in their artistic work. The duo are particularly intrigued by places and buildings which – as a result of social, economic or political change – lose their (cultural) significance. Fischer and el Sani are interested in the phase before the building or place is destroyed or converted: the period when artists are able to discover a location without constraints and to redefine and rethink it.

## **Klub 2000 – rome paris marzahn (1998)**

“Klub 2000” is a reaction to the period after 1998, when the sense of a new dawn in central Berlin began to fade in the wake of gentrification and urban redevelopment. Bored by a surfeit of bars, clubs and cliquey hang-outs, and looking to escape from the comfort zone that “Mitte” had become, a young couple relocate to the outer borough of Marzahn. Once they get there, however, surrounded by multi-storey concrete silos and hot dog stalls, their initial enthusiasm for opening a new club in the area vanishes. The atmosphere on this enormous housing estate is not what they expected, and the bold new venture they envisaged on the urban periphery gradually turns out to be nothing more than a change of address: the place may be new, but they are still also catering for their old clientele from Mitte. Interestingly enough, this expedition was not something the film-makers invented. They were drawing on an idea tried out in the late 1990s by housing associations in Berlin, when bus tours were organised to pitch the less popular areas of town to young, experimentally minded, new arrivals in the city. In spite of these efforts, the deserted shops lined up on the streets of Marzahn usually failed to appeal. That pioneering spirit celebrated with such euphoria in Mitte dissipated as soon as people left the centre behind them.

## **The Line (2010)**

This film about a shipbuilder was made in the south of Denmark at a defunct shipyard in Nakskov. The man returns to his former workplace and wanders about the site, now almost vacated, where a new company has begun manufacturing blades for wind turbines. The audience witness his inner struggle, unleashed not only by the closure of the yard and the loss of his job as a consequence. He also has to bid farewell to his trade, and this marks a difficult watershed in his life.

This grieving process is played out as a performance of land surveying techniques. Using chalk, a spray can and a piece of rope, the man draws a line behind him which charts more than just terrain. The line also visualises his efforts to learn how to let go of the past by grasping how empty the land is. His manic approach reflects above all the uncertainty and tension he feels because he cannot predict his own future or that of the shipyard site.

## **Narita Field Trip (2010)**

Since their first visit to Tokyo in 1998, Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani have returned to Japan many times to carry out projects, show their work and teach. In 2010 they stumbled across this story about the origins of the airport at Narita, 60 kilometres north-east of Tokyo, which opened in the late 1970s. From the outset, Narita had been the scene of the longest, bloodiest conflict in post-war Japanese history. From 1966 onwards, farmers in the area were not only obliged to defend their land and assets from clearance and expropriation, but as the airport has spread they have had to fight the environmental pollution that damages their crops.

In this film, the conflict is uncovered by two protagonists representing a generation in Tokyo that is now hardly aware of those protests during the 1960s and 1970s. They explore the airport site, witness constant rallies, and portray a rural idyll bizarrely criss-crossed by runways.

## **Sayonara Hashima (2009)**

The rise and fall of Hashima, an island measuring 480 x 160 metres in the sea off Nagasaki, exemplifies the dynamics unleashed by the exploitation of natural resources. Coal was discovered here in 1887, and in the 1950s the seam was so productive that the island became one of the most densely populated places on the planet. At times there were over 5,000 people living on it. By 1974, however, output was waning and the mine was abandoned. The architecture, uninhabited and deprived of its function, was left to the forces of erosion. The location was later rediscovered by the Japanese film industry, serving for example as a set for the blockbuster “Battle Royal”. The film by Fischer and el Sani combines different tales of the island. In one thread, a miner's son talks about his childhood. Documented memories interweave with a cinematic perspective on the place, breathing life into the ruins with stories.