

ARTFORUM

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Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri

TENSTA KONSTHALL



Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri, *The Paths to the Common(s) Are Infinite* (detail), 2014, mixed media, dimensions variable.

In their exhibition “The Paths to the Common(s) Are Infinite,” Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri explored the great themes of the era that began with the 2008 financial crisis—the all-pervasive power of money, the disciplining effect of debt, and the unavoidable question, How can this world continue to exist? In the past few years, these issues have spawned a growing body of literature and occupied many a TV panel discussion, but Anastas and Gabri approach this complex of ideas through intimate formats that demand more sustained attention, such as long video interviews and extensive notes.

Papers covered in meandering miniature writing were laid out in glass display cases together with small drawings in notebooks. The texts proffer both catchy messages and theoretical reflections on the social relations of money. Set up next to a large, empty table reserved for group discussions and workshops, the cases structured the room. Framing them were numerous videos shot at different times and in diverse contexts, which were projected on the wall or shown on screens. In one, the Palestinian artist Khaled Hourani, who is known as a gifted storyteller—in that sense, he embodies an Arab tradition—relates his own experiences and other anecdotes from the days of the first intifada. He recalls, for example, how the captured Palestinians were held in tents set up on the grounds of Israeli military installations; every time the army held exercises, the tents were closed so that the detainees would not learn about any secret operations.

To learn more about the economic roots of the social upheavals of the Arab Spring, Anastas and Gabri decided to research the Tunisian vegetable vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, who sparked a revolution by setting himself on fire out of desperation over the circumstances of his life. The artists presented their findings in a video, but the resulting piece is not about Bouazizi himself; instead, it documents a chat with a man in Sidi Bouzid who operated a stall next to Bouazizi’s. Rather than reminiscing about his now-famous former neighbor, he talks about his life today: He is in thrall to his creditors. In other videos, Anastas and Gabri themselves appear in a domestic setting: We see Anastas hanging pages from the early-1970s French feminist magazine *Le Torchon Brûlé* (The Burning Rag) on a clothesline as Gabri quotes philosopher George Caffentzis on the inherent violence of global capitalism.

By interweaving ideas and events from different places and periods, each presented from an individual’s perspective and in his or her own language, the artists created a complex, temporally and spatially open structure tracing the effects of a global economic paradigm or regime. In their quest, Anastas and Gabri study the idea of the “commons,” which, to their mind, is first and foremost a model for sharing the resources of life, a way of aligning themselves with feminist and postcolonial movements and global class struggles in order to contest the capitalist world order. For them, it is what eludes the metrics of neoliberal capitalism and defies the system’s efforts to reabsorb whatever resists it. One note calls the commons the opposite of money: The money-based community is to be replaced by an assumption of social forms and relations based instead on the equitable distribution of life’s resources. Held in Tensta,

a Stockholm suburb mainly populated by immigrants, during a general-election campaign in Sweden, where the welfare state has been crumbling, the exhibition was a timely reminder of the value of the public nature and communal availability of social services and essentials such as education, health care, and infrastructure. In light of Sweden's current situation, Anastas and Gabri's show merited more than cursory notice.

—*Nina Möntmann*

Translated from German by Gerrit Jackson.