

LOCARNO, SWITZERLAND

Uriel Orlow

LA RADA

It was an unusual postage stamp that first set Uriel Orlow on the trail of a bizarre episode in political history, whose many facets he explores and details he retells in changing installations. It is well known that the Six-Day War of 1967 led to the closure of the Suez Canal. Less well known is the fact that in the midst of the conflict, fourteen ships from different countries, laden with a variety of cargo, were trapped in the blockade between the Egyptian and Israeli fronts. Considering the brief duration of the war, it initially seemed as if the closure would remain merely an episode, but it lasted eight years, during which time the ships—sometimes known as the Yellow Fleet—could not move. Rotating crews staffed them, whiling away the time with games. Specially crafted stamps bore the emblem of a “micronation” created out of necessity: GBLA, the Great Bitter Lake Association, as the crewmen of the Yellow Fleet called themselves. Orlow tracked down and visited



View of “Uriel Orlow,”
2011. From left:
Anatopism, 2010;
Yellow Limbo, 2010.

several of the crewmen, recording their stories and archiving their photographs and films. He learned Arabic in order to be able to accompany fishermen on trips into the canal, taking unauthorized photographs in an area that is still a strictly guarded military zone.

The first version of the installation *The Short and the Long of It* was shown in 2010 at Gasworks in London; the presentation in Locarno was its fourth incarnation, and further variations in Alexandria, Egypt, and Porto Alegre, Brazil, among others, are set to follow. The work contains a cornucopia of information, where artistic codes seep into the codes of the sea and vice versa. For instance, two white diagonals cut a blue square into four isosceles triangles—a geometrical abstraction. But in the code of international maritime signal flags, this abstract image is the sign for “M (Mike)” and means “vessel is stopped and making no way through the water.” Scientific schematic line drawings of fish and mollusks reference the biological invasion known as the Lessepsian migration, wherein species from the Red Sea migrated to the Mediterranean following the construction of the Suez Canal, causing an enduring change in the fauna of the eastern Mediterranean. In 1968, at the time of the Olympic Games in Mexico City, the accidental community of the GBLA held its own games in the canal, creating huge sculptures as arenas for newly invented sports. Photographs and clips from amateur films taken at the time combine intimate scenes of life on board with surreal motifs—a shipment of apples floating in the water, bottles collected by children onshore in boxes floating on tires.

But some scenes are reconstructed: Orlow intentionally blurs the boundaries between authentic document and speculative reconstruction in order to make the question of the historical “place” of these events pressing and relevant to the media-saturated culture of today’s world. Seen from a historical distance, the heterotopia lies not only in the stopped ships in the no-man’s-land between the fronts, but also, and perhaps principally, in the changing constellation of verifiable and convincing pieces of imagined memory. The documentary rhetoric of display cases, scientific drawings, photographs, and found-footage films is reinforced with slide shows of text such as TAKING HISTORY OFF-SHORE; OPENING GAPS IN SPACE; ANCHORED OUTSIDE THE EVENT OR STONEWALL RIOTS IN NEW YORK; FIRST MANNED LANDING ON MOON. In Orlow’s work, historical documents contain their own history, which inevitably stirs up old conflicts.

—Hans Rudolf Reust

Translated from German by Anne Posten.