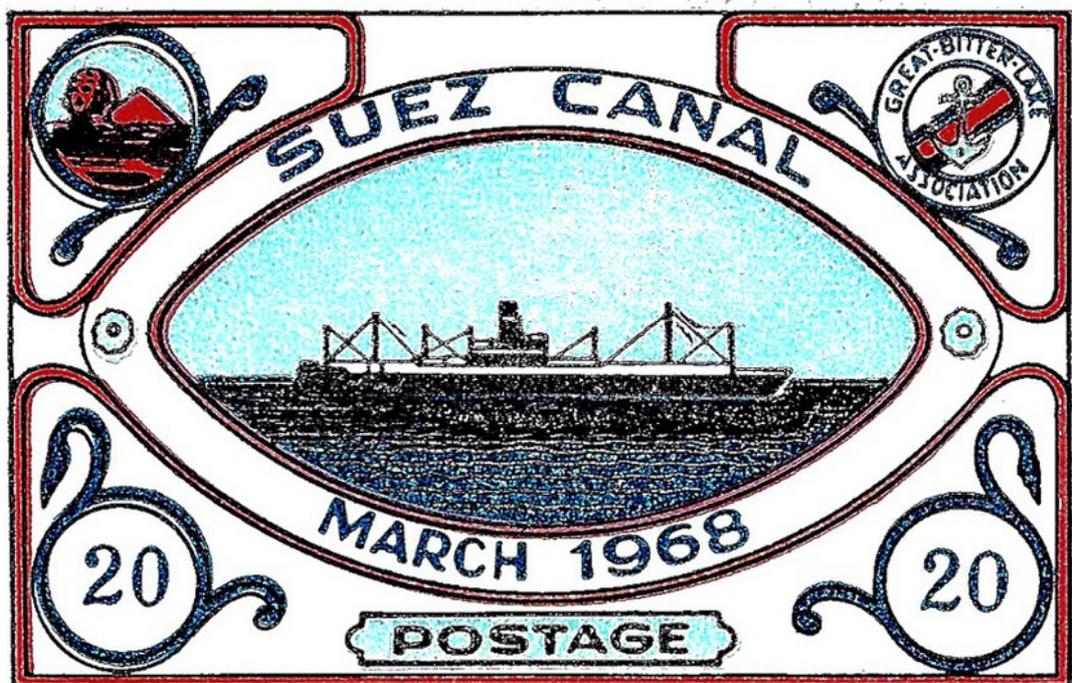


Memory Montage

Uriel Orlow in conversation with Omar Kholeif



Uriel Orlow, from *The Bitterlake Chronicles*, 2010-12,
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In this interview Omar Kholeif talks to Uriel Orlow about his recent project for Ibraaz Platform 008: [2922 Days](#) (2014), a culmination of two earlier works that uncover the undocumented eight-year entrapment of 14 cargo ships in the Suez Canal at the outbreak of the 1967 war between Israel and Egypt, Jordan and Syria. Orlow explains how his discovery of this un-authored historical moment and subsequent detective-like research developed into a project in which the 'heterotopia' of creativity and community-building became manifest in the montage approach he adopted for the work, connecting this 'time-capsule' in the Great Bitter Lake with other events taking place across the world during this period.

Omar Kholeif: How did *2922 Days* (2014) begin as a project?

Uriel Orlow: *2922 Days* remixes two previous works *The Bitterlake Chronicles* and *Anatopism* – both of which are part of the work-cycle *The Short and the Long of It* (2010–12). *The Bitterlake Chronicles* consists of images presented on a display table while *Anatopism* is a slide projection. I wanted to explore the possibilities of combining the two works. I was interested in the time-capsule aspect of the community of sailors trapped in the Suez Canal from 1967 to 1975 – not just what was going on aboard the ships but also in the world around them. I collected book, film and music titles as well as events that occurred during the eight years of the ships' entrapment. These are not presented chronologically in the work; my interest lies more in the connections, repetitions and developments but also arbitrary associations. The apparent standstill at the Great Bitter Lake transforms into the centre of the world and everything revolves around it.

OK: *The Short and the Long of It* (2010–12), the project that preceded this work, emerged from a residency in Egypt. Can you talk about this experience?

UO: I spent three months in Egypt in 2010 to do research for this. It was an extremely interesting time; the Arab uprisings were still a year away but there was already a sense of change. I absolutely loved living in downtown Cairo, near some of the more interesting art spaces and in the midst of an extremely rich and vibrant city. As I was already interested in the Suez Canal I made quite a few trips there, travelling its length from Port Said to Suez. I also stayed in a small fishing village on the shore of the Great Bitter Lake in the middle of the canal. I took an intensive Arabic course so I could

communicate with people in the village and eventually go out onto the Bitter Lake with the fishermen to film.

OK: The project revolves around an unusual story that occurred in the Bitter Lake, how did this reveal itself to you?

UO: I had been interested in the Suez Canal for a while and whilst doing research came across a postage stamp that had 'Suez Canal 1968' printed on it. There was no mention of any originating country; instead it had the insignia of the Great Bitter Lake Association. It presented itself as a question mark: who made this stamp, and how come it is solely associated with the Suez Canal rather than with Egypt? So I began to search and found out about the 14 international cargo ships that got trapped on the outbreak of the 1967 war. At the time there was hardly any information out there but it seemed an extraordinary story – 14 ships trapped in the Great Bitter Lake for eight years. And they started making their own stamps to send letters home. This felt hugely significant as it was a gesture that subverted the territorial tug of war around them, proclaiming sovereignty of these no-man's waters (by the end of the war Israel had occupied Sinai and its army was sitting on the eastern side of the canal while the Egyptians were stationed on the western shores). The making of stamps also pointed to creativity and community building...

OK: You often approach your subject like an anthropologist, with nuanced choreography, how did your research develop for this project?

UO: During the three months in Egypt I tried to find local historians or other people who knew something about this episode. Apart from one man in the fishing village by the Great Bitter Lake who himself was in the military at the time and was charged with bringing food to the ships, I could hardly find anyone who remembered or knew about this. Also talking about 1967 in Egypt is still quite a sensitive issue. I ended up spending a lot of time staring at the waters of the Great Bitter Lake and watching the cargo ships go by in the distance. I think of it as the hallucinatory period of the research; I was looking and projecting my imagination onto what I saw.

On my return, I started the detective work. I contacted the various shipping companies

and got lucky. A few of them sent me old lists of crews and I began tracking down sailors in different countries. I eventually found some and visited them at home and interviewed them about their time on the ships in the canal. Most were in their seventies by now. They had extraordinary stories to tell – which I recorded; they also had photographs and 8mm film material that they shared with me. So inadvertently I began to build up an archive. But I'm not a historian and didn't want to make a documentary with talking heads. It was important for me to maintain the evocative indeterminacy of the story and visual material; I didn't want to fix it into a single, linear narrative. After all, this was a story omitted from official historical accounts on all sides; I didn't simply want to re-insert it into history. So it became a work of montage, editing the material down, combining it with material I filmed or constructed. Thinking through the materiality of the archival images became an important aspect of the montage and how I chose to use and present it. The work is also a journey through the image.

Uriel Orlow filming in the Great Bitterlake.

Photo: Ayman
Hussain.
Courtesy
Uriel Orlow.



OK: I want to know more about this idea of journeying through the image – its formal, material and conceptual history?

UO: For a long time I avoided using archival images in my work – I was more

interested in thinking about the past from the perspective of the present, of what's still here, which is usually the place where something happened. I call this spatial history as opposed to temporal history. But with this material it felt important to share it, because most of these images had never been seen before. At the same time it was about more than sharing the pictorial information, the access to the past the images might contain. I was also interested in their material qualities as documents, their medium, how the image and film stock have aged, what apparatus is used to display them. I was inspired by Marcel Broodthaers *A Voyage on the North Sea* (1974), which consists of a 16mm film and a book displayed together and both using nineteenth and twentieth century nautical images; filmed photographic reproductions and details of an amateur painting of a fleet of ships as well as photographs of a contemporary sailboat. The work insists on translating images from one medium into another and presenting them as both moving image and stills in a book. So the sea-journey becomes an image journey. Rosalind Krauss saw this work as emblematic of our post-medium condition.

OK: The film that we see here, which was previously an installation in its different forms, is composed out of a play of image and text. You are narrating a story, but there is also opacity at times in the structure – the work is open to subjective readings. This brings me to the tension and pressures of representing historical moments – how do you negotiate your position in relation to a history that you may not have directly been involved with?

UO: If you don't make everything visible or transparent, or tell the whole story, there is space for the viewer to imagine the rest; in this sense a level of opacity is an invitation for the viewer to collaborate in the work, to construct their own meanings, to make up their own narratives. The story of the 14 cargo ships stranded in the Suez Canal for eight years is a kind of blind spot in the story of 1967 and its aftermath; I have not found any book that even mentions it in a footnote. I suppose it is considered historically irrelevant or at least secondary, to the major events and their consequences – which is precisely what made it interesting for me; it is already an oblique event and allows us a sideways look at history. It shows something that had been overlooked and complicates things.

Another reason for its exclusion from the many partial or partisan historical accounts of 1967 was that, as a story, it didn't 'belong' to any of the historical players involved; it's not an Egyptian or an Israeli story. So the fact that I'm not personally connected to it

actually makes sense. I'm not trying to speak for or on behalf of anyone. I have, for a while, been interested in developing precisely this position; making work without having privileged access or performing an 'authentic identity'. I am more interested in how, especially in a globalized context, certain events and places are connected and how they concern us all in some ways; how we are and have been historically implicated in things. It's about an ethics of events and images, not just their overt politics.

OK: I suppose for me, this work becomes about tracing a moment, and re-constructing it as if it were a memory?

UO: Yes, that is a good way of describing it. Historical narratives want to be definitive and authoritative. Moving an event into the terrain of memory opens it up to its experiential lining; to details and nuances, to images and sounds, to associations, and to the oneiric. There is no one version of a memory. Every time it occurs it is slightly different. When I install *The Short and the Long of It* in exhibitions, it is a different version each time. As a moment or event which is seemingly inconsequential but where a lot of strands of history come together, it is nevertheless below history's radar; it's a kind of infra-history, a blind spot or an excess of history. And that's precisely why these kinds of moments demand an act of individual or collective recollection; granular, fragmented but evocative memory.

OK: For me, the issue of desire is very present, particularly male desire – these men trapped in this lake are half pin-up boys for an other-world (a free world) but also, within this lake, they start to form their own insular, beautiful utopia. Did you consider the notion of utopia in relation to this particular moment of isolation?

UO: In his beautiful short text 'Of Other Spaces' (coincidentally also from 1967) Foucault introduces the term heterotopia and describes it as an enacted utopia, a counter-site which is outside of all other places but at the same time contains and troubles them. He calls the ship the heterotopia par excellence. It's a slice of civilization, containing a microcosm of our life but floating in the sea, far away from civilization. Aside from its real cargo, it also contains a civilization's dreams and desires. The shipwreck pushes this even further: what if the temporal eccentricity of the ship is stretched, what if its 'state of exception' is extended? What if the exclusively male crew remains bound together beyond the normal time of the journey? And what if

time can no longer simply be filled with work and ship related activity? I was interested in the potential of this situation and in the realization of beautiful forms of community and creativity in response to it. The alternative postal system, alternative Olympic Games with their own sports, Sunday drinking sessions called mass, dressing up in drag... All in some ways propose alternatives and thus question given norms.

Right: Marcel Broodthaers, *A Voyage on the North Sea*, 1973-4. Left: Uriel Orlow, *The Short and the Long*



of It, Installation view, *Au loin une île*, Frac Aquitaine, Bordeaux, 2011.
Courtesy Uriel Orlow.

OK: The iconography of the Mediterranean weighs heavily in the mise-en-scène here – it is history as a site of trade/movement, but also exile, and territorial in-fighting. We live in a moment now where the context of the Mediterranean has started to become an allegory for a new territory – one that links southern Europe to Central Asia and the Middle East – and it is believed/argued that this 'region', as it were, boasts a shared culture. Looking back at this historic moment, could we trace a route/a journey to the 'imagined' context of the Mediterranean today?

UO: The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 was heralded as a huge achievement, not just with industrial and economic consequences, but literally connecting the East with the West, the South with the North, or perhaps it was the other way round? In *Orientalism*, Edward Said debunks some of the stereotypes and concealed colonialism

of the opening ceremony. Since the canal's opening, the Mediterranean and the Red Sea are connected by a waterway; this is also used by migrating marine species that are attracted by the warmer temperatures and higher salinity of the Mediterranean. This zoological phenomenon is called Lessepsian migration, named after Ferdinand de Lesseps, the entrepreneur who realized the old dream of joining the two seas with a canal. Biologists observe that since the canal's opening there has been an influx of foreign species in the Eastern Mediterranean basin. Some of the fish are considered invasive and are described as taking over the habitat of indigenous marine life. Perhaps this can serve as an allegory for the Mediterranean today, which is increasingly seen as a site of feared/prohibited/prevented migration into Europe. (I actually made a series of drawings depicting these migratory marine species as part of *The Short and the Long of It*).

While the closure of the Suez Canal for eight years of course did not prevent the migrating fish from travelling north, it did abruptly stop the flow of goods and capital. The economic consequences of this were enormous, including a huge fall of the pound sterling and eventually the construction of larger ships to make the circumnavigation of Africa more profitable. Considering the Mediterranean and Suez Canal as commercial conduits between southern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East might be a useful compass to explore the region's shared culture. On the one hand, literally sharing ingredients and recipes, objects and stories across the waterways but on the other hand, we need to look at the ways in which this exchange is governed by buying power, commercial interests and political control. For me the commercial journey (or its failure) is interesting and highly revealing in itself. Bertolucci's only feature-length documentary *Via del Petrolio* (1967) that follows an oil tanker from Iran to Italy as well as the more recent *The Forgotten Space* (2010) by Allan Sekula and Noel Burch are important precedents focusing on the commercial sea journey from a 'historical-materialist' perspective.

See Uriel Orlow's project 2922 Days

Uriel Orlow lives and works in London, England. He studied Fine Art at Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design and The Slade School of Art, London and philosophy at the University of Geneva, graduating with a PhD in Fine Art in 2002.

Orlow's practice is research-based, process-oriented and multi-disciplinary including film, photography, drawing and sound. He is known for films, lecture performances and modular, multi-media installations that focus on specific locations and micro-histories and bring different image-regimes and narrative modes into correspondence. His work is concerned with spatial manifestations of memory, blind spots of representation and forms of haunting.

Orlow's work was shown at recent survey exhibitions *Edinburgh Art Festival*, *Recent British Artists Film and Video* at Tate Britain, London, *EVA International*, Limerick, *1st Bergen Assembly*, *Manifesta 9*; the *54th Venice Biennale* and *8th Mercosul Biennial*, Brazil.

Orlow's work has also been presented in museums, galleries and film-festivals internationally including Tate Modern, Whitechapel Gallery, ICA and Gasworks London; Centre Pompidou, Palais de Tokyo, CCS, Maison Populaire, Fondation Ricard and Bétonsalon Paris; Les Complices, Shedhalle and Helmhaus Zurich; Centre d'Art Contemporain and Centre de la Photographie, Geneva; Al Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art, Jerusalem; Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart; Extra-City Antwerp; Alexandria Contemporary Art Forum (ACFA) and Contemporary Image Collective (CIC) Cairo, Egypt; Casa del Lago, Mexico City; Kunsthalle Budapest; Spike Island Bristol, Jewish Museum New York; Museum of Contemporary Photography Chicago; Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; Videonale, Bonn; Oberhausen Short Film Festival and others.

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