esse arts + opinions

The Voyage, or Three Years at Sea, Part IV

Sydney Hart

Reconstitution
Re-enactment
Numéro 79, automne 2013

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/69762ac

Citer cet article
“A fluid territory,” “concealing the horizon,” “anchored outside the event”: the slow sequence of these phrases by artist Uriel Orlow, slide-projected in a gallery corner, gives the viewer a hint of the covert transactions and shifting boundaries of life at sea, as explored in this exhibition, the fourth in curator Cate Rimmer’s vast project of six exhibitions on the sea. The Charles H. Scott Gallery has hosted the different chapters of the series intermittently since 2011, in a way that has foregrounded Rimmer’s creative and performative method of curating. For instance, the three-year length of the series evokes the long commitments of historical sea voyages—Rimmer has cited the three-year voyage of Moby Dick as an influence—and the gallery’s location on Granville Island reminds the viewer of the influence of the sea in Vancouver’s history as a port city. Part of Rimmer’s curatorial approach has been to cull artefacts from the nearby Maritime Museum, a method which has contributed to the anthropological slant of this series, bringing archival objects to light in, at turns, scientific, exhaustively and lyrically riddled narratives. Exhibitions have thus provided contextual threads to such events as the disappearance at sea of artist Bas Jan Ader and yachtsman Donald Crowhurst, who both went missing on solo voyages in 1968.

The fourth chapter distinguishes itself from the series, however, through its examination of the sea as a crucial but forgotten space of globalization and political conflict. These questions are explored through a film essay charting the flow of global trade in port cities, a historical collection of images contextualizing the centennial of the Suez Canal, and a video installation exploring ethical conflicts in the isolation of a cargo ship. The Forgotten Space (2010), a collaboration between Noel Burch and Allan Sekula, charts the flow of labour patterns in the shipping industry, focusing on three port cities: Hong Kong, Rotterdam, and Bilbao. The invisibility of maritime trade and the complicity of state legislation with the deregulation of its labour, are detailed in the film through a peripatetic voice-over narration, which through a series of interviews and portraits of cities, exposes the economies in which regimes of exploitation can covertly thrive. The narrator thus divulges the enormity of what is at stake: “nine-tenth of world commerce goes through the sea,” through “100,000 invisible ships and one-and-a-half million invisible seafarers.” The collection of perspectives from these workers thereby emphasizes the discrepancy between the invisibility of a maritime labour force and its prominence on the global stage, with the vulnerability of being sidelined in the wake of deregulation.

In an exhibition accompanying the film essay, Sekula presents an installation of photographs documenting his voyage aboard the Global Mariner, a ship that travelled to different ports across the world between 1998 and 2000, carrying an exhibition detailing the conditions of workers throughout its journey. Sekula’s installation presents itself as a kind of dubbed speech justifying the same movements in characters a kind of dubbed speech justifying the same movements in another lens, Uriel Orlow delves into its fictionalization through a panoply of artefacts and historical allusions, from photographs to slide show displays, videos, and drawings. He specifically explores tensions between the documentary form and the romanticization of history by focusing on the sixty and seventies in the region of the Suez Canal.

For instance, in a display case he presents newspaper clippings and historical artefacts documenting the conflict of the Six-Day War between Israel, Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in June 1967. As a result of the conflict, fifteen ships were left stranded in the Yellow Sea until 1975. These ships became known as the “yellow fleet” because of the sand accumulated on their decks. Orlow also presents stamps issued from the ships, as well as various ephemera related to this period and the region for the viewer to slowly piece together a historical and geographical context. The aesthetic of the archival is echoed in video and photographic documentation, in which idle play under the sun belies the highly sensitive nature of its geo-political context.

Through an exploration of the historical shifts in international relations, the three artists of the exhibition probe into how life at sea is represented, and critically examine obscured aspects in the dynamics of international trade. These depictions of sociality at sea, at the fringes of the jurisdiction of nation states and beyond conventional moral compasses, question the familiar representations of the sea as a sublime space of risk and escape, pointing instead towards how it is inscribed in the sublime of globalization with its attendant effects of social fragmentation, misrepresentation, and invisibility.