

Operation Sunken Sea: *Flipping The Historical Narrative*

From the nineteenth to twentieth century imaginations of people like geographer Francois Roudaire, novelist Jules Verne, geologist Albrecht Penck, officer John Ball, architect Herman Sörgel, President Dwight Eisenhower, novelist Jorge Borges, I was given visions of the Mediterranean Sea. I too will shift geographies and relay the instant at which the world-building dream had been revealed to me, the instant at which I had been given the lines: “sink the sea!” As China is building the New Silk Road, and Turkey creating a new canal connecting the Black and Marmara Seas, we too shall explore the capabilities of human progress in a feat of poetic engineering and sink the Mediterranean Sea!¹

On 25 May 2018, wearing a black suit and with a persuasive tone, Heba Y. Amin, an Egyptian visual artist and scholar, presented an extraordinary speech on transplanting the Mediterranean Sea into the African continent. Amin performed this speech impersonating a dictator, its speculative narrative –including forgotten and improbable attitudes from a colonial past, while bearing surprising parallels to what we hear from contemporary politics—haunted her audience, its suspicious proximity to today’s narratives fused with a non-hesitant flow, combined with strategic pauses and a resonant projection.

As one of the iterations of her project *Operation Sunken Sea*, Amin’s performance, an amalgamation of quotes extracted from speeches by male politicians and statesmen, was realised as part of the *Dal-Bahar Madwarha/The Island is What the Sea Surrounds* exhibition for Valletta 2018 –European Capital of Culture, in collaboration with the Mediterranean Institute, University of Malta. In this instance, the critical geography of the Maltese Islands and the Mediterranean Sea, and the contemporary social and political realities of the islanders provided an appropriate platform and logical entry point for her performance.

BASAK SENOVA



Heba Y. Amin's art practice explores issues and histories of urban infrastructural development and technological advancement through multi-layered, long-term projects that offer critical insights into subjective observations, historical accounts, sociological complexities and political satire. Her recent projects, which utilise public performance lectures, mixed media installations and video works, engage the politically acute issues of global migration, postcolonial politics, and historical and geographical narratives that address how socio-economic and political environments can be altered by contorting opposing and even parallel perspectives. Amin has conducted extensive and meticulous research into the fascist politics, dictators and colonial discourses of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, quoting the overlapping, merging and enmeshing elements and rhetoric from these period's histories, philosophies, politics and technologies.

Operation Sunken Sea has been developed and refined by Amin as a 'speculative' artistic work, utilising performance and parody to examine historical techno-utopian plans from the early twentieth century to drain the Mediterranean Sea. Amin sees such a speculative approach as expedient and necessary to heighten considerations on what influences and motivates communities in differing geographical regions, in their contemporary political inclinations, attitudes and convictions. This approach submits a further perspective to identify and reinterpret current repetitive, hegemonic assumptions foundational to Western societies, by apprehending the logic and reasoning of re-emergent popular nationalism and accompanying xenophobic, anti-immigration ideologies, and a universal intolerance of difference as demonstrated by a number of current global political leaders. The genesis for *Operation Sunken Sea* is the German architect Herman Sörgel's monumental proposal from the late 1920s to create a utopian supercontinent called 'Atlantropa', conceived as an infrastructural intervention on the Mediterranean Sea region along with the cultivation of Africa, as a solution to the economic and political turmoil in Europe at that time. As Amin explains;

Atlantropa would culminate in dams across the Strait of Gibraltar, the Dardanelles, and between Sicily and Tunisia, converting the Mediterranean into two basins and evaporating the sea by 200 metres to uncover 660,200 km of land. Each dam would contain colossal hydroelectric power plants – the infrastructural foundation for Atlantropa – that would produce enough power to sustain the entirety of the new supercontinent. Sörgel proposed the redesign of the entire topography of a continent that he described as “an expecting vacuum”; his vision of converging Europe with Africa as an economic model echoed the many colonial projects of resource exploitation. Not surprisingly, Africans were not in on the project nor were they the main benefactors of it.²

In addition to the improbability of Sörgel's idea of recreating continents, his audacity to imagine and apply such a gigantic proposal detrimental to the Mediterranean region underlines an outlandish and egotistical demeanour, not unlike several comparable gestures of resolute grandiosity by current national leaders. For example, in 2011 Turkish President Erdogan announced his “crazy project”, 'Kanal İstanbul', connecting the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara. This massive engineering dream, similar to Sörgel's – also considered to be a massive ecological catastrophe at the expense of many people – will bisect the current European side of Istanbul forming an island between Europe and Asia, and is intended to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 2023.

It is evident contemporary geopolitics cannot be read separately from that of a colonial past. As Edward Said proposed, like capitalism, modern empires need to constantly expand.³ While discussing both geopolitical and cultural perspectives, and examining the discourses of Orientalism, Said asserted that Western colonialism was driven by a quest for knowledge and power,⁴ referring also to Foucault's ideas of power⁵ and the relationship between it and knowledge:

We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a file of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.⁶

Having the same intention, the motives of such futurist ideas, with a desire to destroy the 'old' and demonstrate a better future through technology, can be detected in Erdogan's proposal in its most severe form. It presents a curt vision of the future, easily dissipated by worsening socio-economic and political contexts. This bluntness often appears as an audacious virtue for those in power. They not only possess but also express a privileged and mostly inelegant political imagination, enabling their envisioning of the 'bigger picture' of the structural transformations of society, for the society. Heba Y. Amin articulates through her project these overlapping elements of numerous, imposing political enterprises by elaborating upon how proposals such as 'Atlantropa' appear as examples of radical political imagination.

Her long-term project takes on past colonial visions of macro-engineering projects as a provocation to "imagine what such enterprises of social engineering would look like if designed through the demands, methods, potentialities and paradoxes of decolonisation and internationalism."⁷ As 'Atlantropa' proposed to provide access to energy and employment beyond the nation-state, the *Operation Sunken Sea* project asks the viewer to challenge the criteria of the individual in relation to their fundamental human rights exemplified, in this case, by the transnational provision of land, labour, and energy. In this way, one might take the so-called 'refugee crisis' as an occasion to think beyond the structures that shape our society, and to consider what are the most precarious, unstable and urgent issues in our time, rather than to encounter such conditions as a threat to social order, or a call to its preservation.⁸ Beginning with Sörgel, Amin researched and analysed various archives, read and watched films of speeches and re-performed them, re-staged photographic portraits, and designed specific installations—in her terminology, "plagiarising" their ideas, re-using the devices and methodologies of Sörgel, and others.⁹

The initial phase of *Operation Sunken Sea* was launched at *Dal-Bahar Madwarha/The Island is What the Sea Surrounds* during Valletta 2018–European Capital of Culture in Malta, as a first point of contact between Africa and Europe, including the establishment of a fictitious office and the performance of a public speech. The next presentation of the project, as an installation, will be the 10th *Berlin Biennial* June to September 2018, followed by several other iterations including the *CrossSections* project, September and October 2018, in Vienna. *Operation Sunken Sea* will continue to evolve with various iterations and exhibitions as an ongoing process in different geographies, in future exhibitions and events.

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The performances in *Operation Sunken Sea* are critical, integral elements, not only as appropriation and simulation, but also given Amin's position as a woman re-enacting the speeches and scenarios of these particular protagonists, the majority of whom, as men, have articulated or implemented their monumental proposals through overtly masculine convictions. Amin reverses the order of this dominant power nexus by dissipating its representational codes. Her proposition thus evolves into a 'woman's vision' by reconstructing and representing its masculinity metonymically, as well as metaphorically, exposing the political and social implications of the transposition of past power structures onto today's configurations of popular narratives. As Amin explains;

In the spirit of utopian planning, Operation Sunken Sea proposes alternative narratives in the face of crisis. The resurrection of early twentieth century techno-utopian plans through performance and parody aims to transform totalitarian thought into a severe critique of colonialism and its fantasies. This project takes as central to its concept the figure of the megalomaniac utopian 'mastermind' and aims to exaggerate and subvert the narratives and imagery that surround him through the centralising of my own identity as an Arab, African woman, proposing equal scale and temerity. I am to appropriate and invert the ideas, fantasies, and materials of figures like Herman Sörgel, writing them out of history just as women and subaltern subjects have been written out of the archive.¹⁰

Amin's artistic methodology additionally references (Benjamin's) theories on reproduction. Today, all media platforms (especially social media) collect and distribute images and data at immense speeds and magnitude, communication technologies infusing our lives with a constant onslaught of information. Nevertheless, we have also learned from these same sources that the meaning of any image is dependent upon its context – it is not only such images but also the ideologies and realities behind them that are being created and disseminated. Along with intentionally distorted information, the speed with which the enormous flow of mediated images is propagated prevents its comprehensive ingestion and perception. Correspondingly, the constant and repetitive reproduction of reality through social media cultivates faster and broader models for sharing information. In this respect, what Amin achieves in her project is to visualise how this continual reproduction of reality draws out the essential implications of the principles of image reproduction formulated by Walter Benjamin in his seminal essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.¹¹ Amin utilises the mediating actions of reproduced images and messages by processing and examining their profound impact upon how people might perceive the world. These fragmented images and messages are pervasive, provocative and speculative. This is best articulated by invoking the artist's project rationale at length:

*Invested in the power of technology to generate a new future for humankind, Operation Sunken Sea initiates a large-scale infrastructural intervention unparalleled in scale. A new era of human progress will be initiated through the draining and rerouting of the Mediterranean Sea to converge Africa and Europe into one supercontinent. The operation promises to bring an end to terrorism and the migration crisis, provide employment and energy alternatives and confront the rise of fascism, all of which pose profound existential threats to our future. The project instills a fervent movement towards technocracy which takes a proactive stance towards the reparation of Africa and the Middle East by relocating the Mediterranean Sea within the continent. Expanding upon early twentieth century techno-utopian visions, Operation Sunken Sea investigates the abundance to be acquired from the significant transformation of territorial constructs. It responds to the contemporary moment of political uncertainty in Europe, the unrest and collapse of nation-states in the Middle East, the neo-liberal failure of globalisation in Africa by shifting the paradigm in a time of neo-fascist necropolitics. The operation instigates enterprise, invention and ingenuity with a new vision for Africa and the Middle East. It pinpoints what could be attained by and for those most affected in the last century by the wars waged for oil, resources and power.*¹²

In bringing together the findings of her research, utilising elements from cultural imagination, technology, fantasy and (science-)fiction and presenting them in an eclectic form, Amin's methodology reminds us of Umberto Eco's renowned reading of the film *Casablanca*, that, "*Casablanca* has succeeded in becoming a cult movie because it is not one movie. It is 'the' movies."¹³ Infamously, the script was written at the same time *Casablanca* was being filmed, with actors re-enacting previous dialogue and roles, creating a lasting sense of *déjà vu* by continual appropriation. As Eco further stated, "two clichés make us laugh, but a hundred clichés move us because we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves and celebrating a reunion."¹⁴ In the same manner, Amin's project assembles compelling historical narratives and their components, unifying them into a powerful rhetorical tool to influence the disposition of her audience. In her insistence upon 'details' becoming an integral element of the project's rhetoric, Amin's presentation of archival material offers

BASAK SENOVA



a salient entry-point to understand how its content mirrors current geopolitics, instanced by the differences in maps and geography in archival photos and her office (installation) setting, conveying an ironic and satirical tone to the project. *Operation Sunken Sea* thus formulates a mechanism that demands an understanding and awareness from its audience.

*Shifting geographies and rewriting history, however, requires collective thinking. The project seeks to create an art lab for critical and speculative thinking in order to continue in developing new methods of research, critique, and creative intervention within these colonial narratives and their contemporary residues. The project aims to build a kind of mobile institution devoted to imagining and proposing new historical constructs, and putting forth alternatives for future feminist and anticolonial worlds, as ours becomes increasingly uninhabitable.*¹⁵

In doing so, Heba Y. Amin performs an act of 'flipping history', by becoming these implausible but quite effective personas, re-presenting their speeches and proposals as influentially and provocatively, if not more so, than their originators. Amin's aspiration is to reduce and displace their importance by transposing them into mere background material for her project's setting, subtly eliminating them not only from history, but also the absurdity of their reasoning and discourse in endeavouring to solve global crises and conflict.

Notes

¹ Heba Y. Amin performance speech, performed at the St Elmo Examination Centre, Valletta, 25 May 2018

² Email correspondence with the artist, April 2018

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin, 1977, p. 105

⁴ *ibid.* p. 21

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan trans., New York: Pantheon Books, 1977, pp. 27-28

⁷ Heba Y. Amin performance speech, *op cit.*

⁸ Heba Y. Amin, *ibid.*

⁹ Skype interview with the artist, 4 May 2018

¹⁰ Email correspondence with the artist, *op cit.*

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008

¹² Artist's project statement; <http://www.hebaamin.com/works/operation-sunken-sea/>

¹³ Umberto Eco, "'Casablanca': Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage', *SubStance* Vol. 14, No. 2, Issue 47, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 10

¹⁴ *ibid.* p. 11

¹⁵ Email correspondence with the artist, *op cit.*