

Illimitée promesse d'avenir

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Natacha Nisic & Uriel Orlow

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Uriel Orlow, *Still Aftershock* (detail), 2013

"I might have changed, or it might be the world around me that changed, or maybe I just didn't feel things changing. [...] Most probably, we became disillusioned. We have been believing too much. And when everything collapses, there is nothing left behind."

Interview with a trade unionist, in Pierre Bourdieu, *The Weight of the World*, 1993

Gyumri, formerly Leninakan, is an Armenian city located near the Turkish border, and used to be an important center for the Soviet textile industry, supplying at that time the whole USSR.

Tourcoing, in the North of France, contributed to the dynamism of a region, which in the 1960's, used to gather the major concentration of textile factories in Europe.

Gyumri's factory was destroyed in December 1988 by an earthquake that destroyed a great part of the region, only two years before the Soviet Union's collapse –

creating an echo between the topographical and the political seismic shifts devastating the region. The Desurmont factory in Tourcoing went bust in 2004, as a result of an economic crisis undermining the French textile industry since the beginning of the 1980's.

Gyumri's intricate situation is at the heart of **Uriel Orlow's** project presented in the exhibition, while **Natacha Nisic** focused on the former workers from the Desurmont factory.

A priori, there are few points of comparison between those two factories and their closing down are the result

of very different circumstances. Yet, both their stories are about displaced people, abandoned by a political and economic system that didn't keep its promise – that "unlimited promise for the future" proclaimed by André Gide in 1933, still dazzled by the Soviet social project. The course of history gave a bitter turn to this enthusiastic statement, expressed in a revolutionary and idealistic background.

The disillusionments in the face of the Soviet failure and the disasters caused by totalitarianism echo the disappointments related to French economic policy, since the 1980's – the beginning of a critical period for the working-class, marked by disunited trade unions and a weakening of the French communist party.

The collective decline of the Soviet Union on the one hand, and of the industrial companies in Northern France on the other, are accompanied by an individual decline which is at the heart of **Uriel Orlow's** and **Natacha Nisic's** projects. Indeed, both artists deliver an analysis of the human consequences of those political, social and economic failures and investigate the possible futures of people.

In the video **Remnants of the Future** (2010-12), **Uriel Orlow** films the fragmentary architecture of Mush, a new town close to Gyumri planned to house the homeless after the earthquake. Suspended since the fall of USSR, the construction has never been completed. Mush's almost desert landscape, frozen between half finished ruins and outlines of buildings -described by Robert Smithson as "ruins in reverse"- evidences the absence of the factory's former workers. Today, no one except a handful of solitary persons haunt the hollow shells of concrete, salvaging scrap metal in this indefinitely pending site. The gleaners' gestures of sorting, bending and sawing the metal pieces recall those of the workers at the time of the factory-albeit with a difference: the rigorous and huge Soviet social organization gave way to wandering individuals in search of survival. Migrating birds flying over the spectral town refer to a utopian vision of collectivity, as well as to the displacement of people. The video ends on a science-fiction note,

situating the facts in the enormity of History and inviting the survivors to travel to a future that "will accept anyone".

The invitation to look to the future is also present, if in a very different way, in the diptych **Top Lines** (2010). **Uriel Orlow** reproduced by hand a declassified document from the UK interior ministry. The document was written in preparation for an official visit to Armenia in 2008. The censorship, accentuated by the black redaction stripes drawn by the artist, allows the reading of only one paragraph.

The series of photographs **Still Aftershock** (2013) shows different moments of the history of the factory: a chronology of promises and their failures, described through archival images and contemporary views.

Natacha Nisic's video diptych **Nord (Ouvriers-Ouvrières)** (2007) lets the dismissed workers from the Desurmont spinning factory speak—all of them gathered for the first time since the factory closed down. The two screens separate on one side the men, and on the other side the women. Placed in the production line's order, each of them tells and reproduces the gestures corresponding to their task in the factory. The camera focuses on the hands, and more specifically on the gestures –like so many ghosts from a past that only survives through them. The flow and the continuity of the narrative from one worker to another reveal the strength of the working relationships uniting individuals connected through a shared history.

The foreign accents of several workers recall the fact that an important part of the workforce recruited in the Northern textile factories were immigrants from Algeria and Morocco. **Casablanca** (2014), showing the Desurmont factory's building, is a tribute to those workers from the Maghreb, and refers to an eponymous production machine mentioned by one of the workers in the video. Printed on granite with a special technique used for tombstones, this image of the disused building is a beautiful metaphor for remembrance.