

Bottleneck pressure: Port Said

Jürgen Baumann

Jürgen Baumann is an artist based in Winterthur, Switzerland, who explores industrial legacies and imaginaries, in particular through references to engineering and design techniques. His sculptural work often evokes the large-scale infrastructural scale and impact of industrial production, while conveying the poetic associations attached to specific industrial sites, tools and people. In the Spring of 2018, he was an artist in residence in Cairo, Egypt. There, he went on a trip to the Suez Canal, which, in 1869, opened a new maritime route between the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean and the China Sea. In the following text, in the style of a holiday report, he touches on the political, historical and social textures of the canal. The canal was cut through the Middle Eastern hinterland, to facilitate maritime trade between Europe and Asia. In a site infused with intense past and present political significance, the artist muses on the global routes passing by, while confronted with the limited visibility conferred by its strategic position.

I went to the bustling Ramses railway station by metro. Despite the entrance looking immense from afar, you get sucked into the stream of people, pushed and squeezed through a tiny security door just to get spit out on the inside of the building – very much like the luggage going through the metal detector. Everything was written in Arabic, and I could not understand a thing. I faintly remembered a map I had seen on the internet (yes, there is a map for the railway station), and I navigated my way through the crowd to a booth in the corner. Here I would get my train ticket.

I wanted to see Port Said for a couple of reasons. It is the entrance to the Suez Canal on the Mediterranean, and I was curious as to what a canal, dug through the desert, looks like. Also, I once worked at a ship diesel company and I wanted to see the huge bulk carriers slowly moving through the desert. This strategic landmark, built out of nothing, had its appeal. I thought that

Port Said was probably quite a boring town, without too many tourist attractions, if any. The thought of being there, in a normal town, watching ships go by, seemed hilarious to me. I was going to have great fun.

The rail tracks leading from Cairo up to Port Said went through the lush Nile Delta, before taking a turn right, passing through Isma'ilia and then straight up north along the Suez Canal. As soon as we left the green fields of the Delta, the train followed the tracks through the desert. A little tin box on wheels directly under the sun. Because of the air conditioning that made first-class way too comfortable, I had to put on a hoodie. Then we reached the canal and aligned with it. It was a surreal experience, freezing inside a train travelling along a man-made canal through the desert, watching the huge ships from a close distance, the dark blue water contrasting with the yellowish sand. It looked better than I had imagined. Artificial and magical at the same time.

Unfortunately, I had a seat on the wrong side of the aisle. The other people were still busy inside the coach. Chatting, walking around, sitting here and there for a while, and laughing. So, as soon as the space across the aisle from me was freed up, I took my camera from my backpack and jumped over. A guy some seats further down yelled in a sharp voice: 'No Photo!'. 'I'm just a tourist,' I responded, smiling, and explained that I did not want to take photos of any people, just the canal. He too now smiled but nonetheless repeated his barked 'No photo!', just moments before I took my shot. Now I got a little bit upset. With a straight posture, I asked him challengingly whether he was a policeman, and why he thought he had the right to tell me not to take photos. He nodded, pointed to his shoulder where his badge would be if he was wearing his uniform and then proceeded to show me his gun. I did not take a photo. It turned out that there were about three police officers in my coach. They were the ones walking up and down the aisle, chatting with each other. Approximately every 200 meters there was a little booth on stilts next to the canal. Each made for exactly one person. I wonder how many lonely young soldiers were guarding the canal.

The next day I took a stroll along the waterfront in Port Said. After waiting a couple of hours for the big ships, I gave up. I was taking photos of all kinds of stuff, buildings, birds, cars, and of course, the canal. It was not as impressive as in the desert though. A man approached me and kindly reminded me that it is forbidden to take pictures of the canal. He apologised and told me that he was only concerned because of the political situation in Egypt and its

history. Due to the strategic importance of the canal, the Egyptian Military took special measures to ensure the secure passage of cargo ships at all times. The canal had become a symbol of human capability, much like the pyramids.

It turns out there are two entrances to the canal in Port Said. The older one, smaller and impossible to broaden due to the city of Port Said, which was built around it, and the newer one, a couple of kilometres away, made for bigger bulk carriers. I took the ferry across the canal and started to walk towards the second entrance. The sun burning on my head, I walked along some salt evaporation ponds and passed by a military training area. The road took me out of town. Far away I could see a big wall, behind it the bridge of a carrier. When I came closer, I realised that the wall went along the canal for way longer than my feet would carry me in this heat. I started climbing up the wall to sneak a peek but was seen by some army security guy and yelled at. Disappointed, I headed back.

Port Said turned out to be a very normal town. Not much happening. The only reason for its existence is the canal. Some stranger on the street desperately wanted to sell me weed, cocaine or a 'good time' with one of his ladies. I walked on and enjoyed the sunset on the beach. There were no tourists at all. The little beach shacks were blasting their loud music out onto the sea and the staff were watching their cell phones. I ate dinner in an Italian restaurant. It used to be famous for serving the sailors passing through.

One of the local tourist attractions is a plinth, without a statue on top. The architect Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi had designed a statue of an Egyptian woman holding up a torch to greet the ships entering the Suez Canal. But that statue was never commissioned. Bartholdi later realised a newer version of the statue on a small island in the New York harbour.

Fig. 1: Jürgen Baumann, Egypt, Valley of the Kings, 2018



Fig. 2: Jürgen Baumann, Egypt, Abu Simbel at Lake Nasser, 2018



Fig. 3: Jürgen Baumann, Egypt, Excavation site near Sakkara pyramid, 2018



Fig. 4: Jürgen Baumann, Egypt, Luxor, 2018



Fig. 5: Jürgen Baumann, Egypt, Salt lakes in Port Said, 2018

