PRESS RELEASE

WHAT PLANTS WERE CALLED BEFORE THEY HAD A NAME

Uriel Orlow

Curated by Marco Scotini

November 4, 2017 – March 18, 2018

On Saturday November 4th, within the context of Artissima, PAV Parco Arte Vivente will be presenting What Plants Were Called Before They Had A Name, a one-person exhibition by Uriel Orlow. Curated by Marco Scotini, the exhibition brings the artist back to Italy after his solo show Made / Unmade, held at the Castello di Rivoli in 2015.

Uriel Orlow's exhibition sits within a frame of research that PAV has been dedicated to explore within the (post-) colonial context, focusing on mechanisms of Western oppression and indigenous resistance strategies as well as the series of effects they produce under the domain of today’s corporate capitalism. This focus is exemplified by the exhibitions Vegetation As a Political Agent (2014) and La Macchina Estrattiva (2017) now followed by Uriel Orlow’s body of work coming out of his long term investigation into the South African context.

Foucault states that “the theory of natural history cannot be disassociated from that of language”. Knowledge of beings cannot be separated from the possibility of representing them in a system of names. In any given culture, giving a name to things means dominating them, just as, in law, the juridical act of nominating is the exclusive prerogative of the subject who has the power to do this. If the attribution of a name, which is never a neutral gesture, conceals endemically coercive aspects, these become much more evident in those cases where the object of the denomination already possesses a name. The original name thus becomes a battle field, an area of conflict between the culture that generated it and the agents wanting to remove it from history.

European colonialism was both preceded and accompanied by important botanical expeditions. The intent was to explore and classify the new lands and their natural resources, thereby paving the way for occupation and exploitation. This exhibition’s title, What Plants Were Called Before They Had A Name, cites the eponymous sound installation, an oral glossary of autochthonous vegetation that lists their indigenous names in a dozen South African languages. The work tackles the mechanisms of subordination that led colonialists to rename the local flora, assimilating it into Linnaeus’s System.

As a whole, the corpus of the exhibited works stems from research carried out by Uriel Orlow in Europe and South Africa: through films, photographs, installations and sound, the artist proposes the idea of the botanical world as a stage for complex and articulated political dynamics.

Just as in his previous Unmade Film, Orlow again proposes a sort of exploded narration whose fragments, despite their individual autonomy, gravitate around a central nucleus that reveals the complex network of relationships between the various elements in the exhibition. In order to understand
this, in the video *The Crown Against Mafavuke*, Orlow leads us inside the courtrooms of the Palace of Justice in Pretoria where, in 1940, Mafavuke Ngcobo, a traditional healer (*inyanga*) was put on trial, accused by the white establishment of “nontraditional behavior”: Mafavuke’s *muthi* remedies contained local herbs, some Indian remedies plus – and here lies the controversial element – western ingredients and patented medicines. The film explores the ideological and commercial confrontation between two different yet interconnected medical traditions, and their use of plants, with slippages across gender and race further questioning notions of purity and origination.

In the complex mosaic outlined by Orlow, the narration of the past finds its counterpart in the present within the dynamics of the post-colonial context. In a sequel, entitled *Imbizo ka Mafavuke*, light is thrown onto the expropriation strategies typical of multinational corporations, shedding light onto how the contemporary economy continues the exploitation of natural resources begun in the colonial period.

As part of the initiatives prepared for examining the exhibition in depth, PAV **Educational and Training Activities** propose PATCHWALKING, that highlights the specific nature of the various territories. PAV’s own territory, with its stratifications, from an agricultural smallholding to an industrial site and then an art park, preserves the memory of time and the individuals that have passed through it. Migrations and movements produce a continuous contamination between the local and the global so that geographies and cultures are redistributed and changed according to criteria of hybridization, adaptability and encounter. In the workshop, beginning with the symbolic value of the land that each person is invited to bring from their place of provenance, and through the use of colored pigments, a collective composition is produced in which the material experience with the earth generates an organic map made of traces and trajectories.

Booking is required for participation in the activities.
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**Uriel Orlow** lives and works between London and Lisbon. Orlow’s practice is research-based, process-oriented and multi-disciplinary including film, photography, drawing and sound. He is known for single screen film works, 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 has been exhibited in various international contexts. Amongst his solo exhibitions, we note those hosted by: Park Saint Léger, Pougués-les-Eaux; The Showroom, London; the Castello di Rivoli, Turin; and Depo, Istanbul, while his most important participation in international group exhibitions include: the 54th Venice Biennale, the Sharjah Biennial 13, 7th Moscow Biennial, Manifesta 9, as at galleries and museums including Tate Britain, the Whitechapel Gallery, ICA and Gasworks (London); Palais de Tokyo, Maison Populaire, and Bétonsalon (Paris), Kunsthaus Zürich, Charles Scott Gallery, Vancouver and many others. Orlow is associate professor at the University of Westminster, London and teaches at the University of the Arts, Zurich.

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