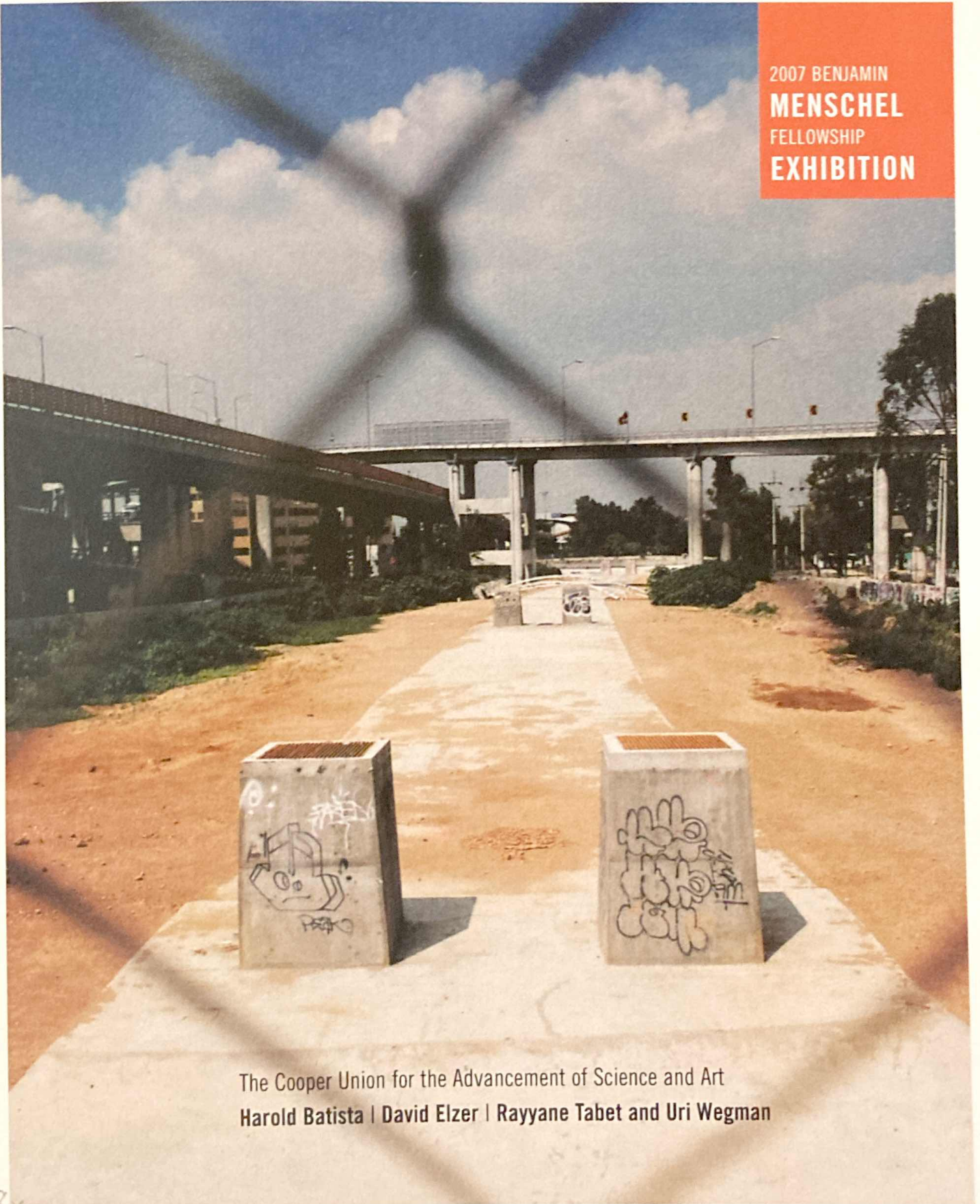


2007 BENJAMIN
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EXHIBITION



The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art
Harold Batista | David Elzer | Rayyane Tabet and Uri Wegman

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The Cooper Union
for the Advancement of Science and Art

Harold Batista

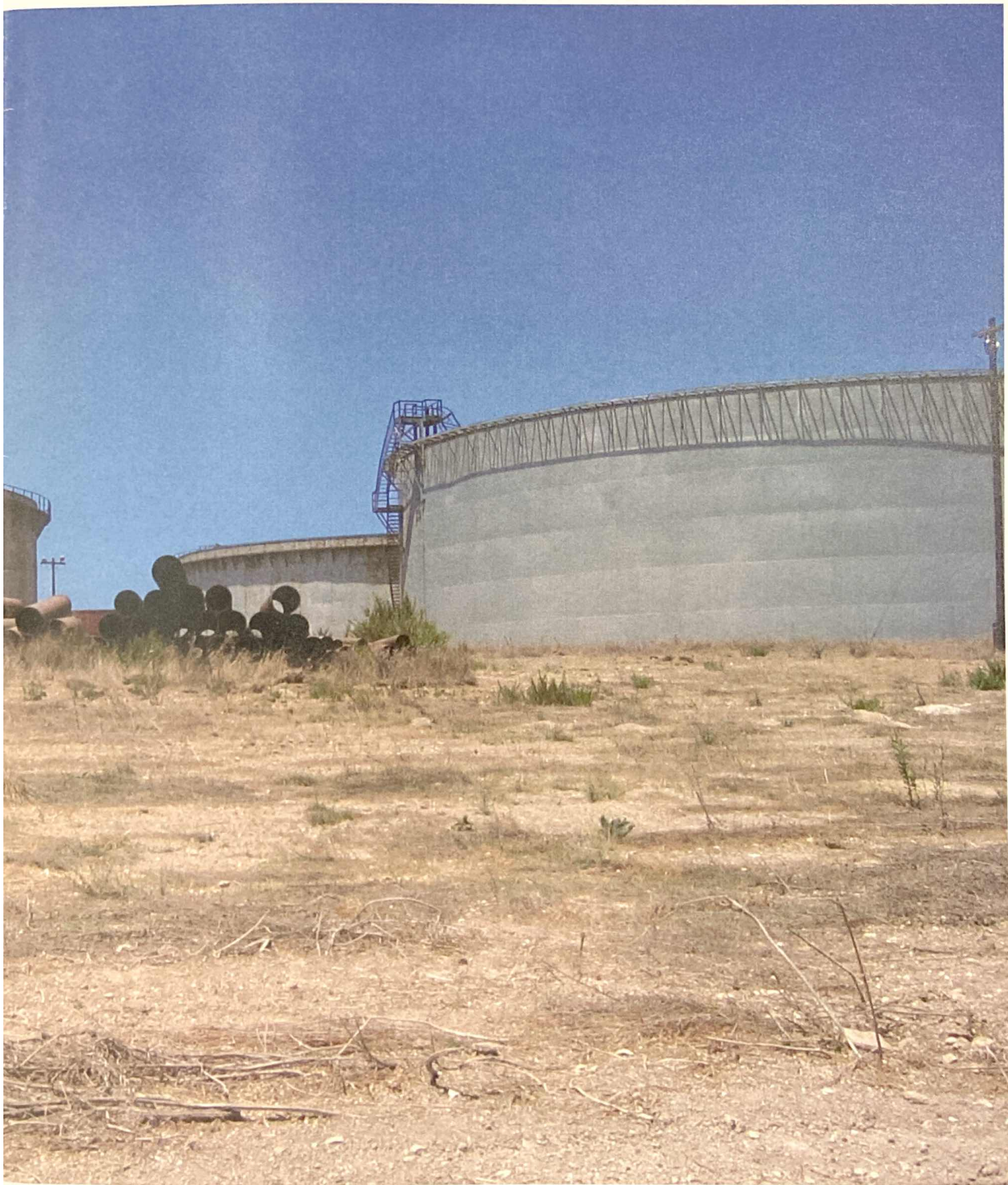
David Elzer

Rayyane Tabet and Uri Wegman

The Benjamin Menschel Fellowship Program to support creative inquiry was endowed by a grant given to The Cooper Union by the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation in 1994 to support work in the fields of art, architecture, design, and engineering. This generous grant was intended to provide funding to exceptional students who propose scholarly, independent projects that will in some way provide a culmination to their educational endeavors at The Cooper Union. It is the hope of the Goldsmith Foundation that students designated as Benjamin Menschel Fellows will be encouraged by their awards to complete bodies of artwork, develop scientific protocols, or otherwise further their intellectual investigations in a manner that will provide inspiration and illumination to the community as a whole.



Front cover:
David Elzer, El Gran Canal, primary drainage outlet in Mexico City
Right: Rayyane Tabet, Tank farm at the Sidon Terminal, 2007



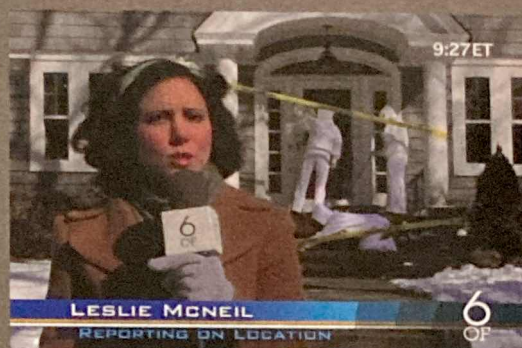
HAROLD BATISTA

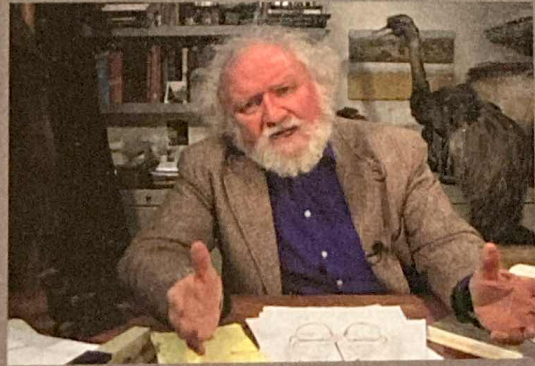
OF FEATHERS

LIFE BORN OF STORIES AND BEDROOMS

The Victorian children's allegory of storks delivering babies attracted me as a subject for a film for a number of reasons. Originally, the allegory served to eliminate heterosexual intercourse as a necessary feature of procreation. Effectively, however, it functioned as a complete substitute for sex, that is, unless a child had already opened his or her parents' door at an inopportune moment. Victorian era mores dictated that there had to be some way to avoid the task of explaining sex to children; this story met that need.

Yet, if I wanted to use this story, I had to concede that my audience would most likely understand, and accept, sex. However, not all hope was lost. Instead, the stork story would enable me to create a fictional world where it was impossible for sex to serve any aim except pleasure. It seems that most ideas about what constitutes normative sex have stemmed from a desire to buttress sexual pleasure with the utility of procreation. Without the buttress of utility, ideas about normative sex would be associated exclusively with subjective preferences. Sex would then lose the significance that was attached to it when it bore the responsibility for the furtherance of our race. As a result, forms of intercourse become reflections





of preference—which, it must be acknowledged, will differ from person to person. So in a sense, I saw my adaptation of the allegory not as a way to eliminate sex, but rather as a way to eliminate the value that is automatically attributed to procreative intercourse.

With that said, the elimination of value does not always follow from the elimination of the thing to which it was attributed. In order for the stork story to work, there would still need to be the production of infants; I was attracted to this particular allegory because it allowed for the creation of babies to be that of yet another domestic product.

By its very nature, the space of an allegory permits one to take refuge from the demands of truth. In this allegorical space, it made sense that procreation would be an issue for storks to debate, and we humans would be fooling ourselves if we thought we had any say in the matter. If allegory was to be the vehicle for the loosening of ideas about normative sex, it would be dependent on its ability to create a space separate from the real world in which these ideas originated.

Consequently, I did not want the storks' views to be totally detached from real concerns about reproduction. If the allegory used completely arbitrary ideas for procreation, it would totally detach the viewer from the ideas of procreation with which he or she may be familiar. While I did appreciate what seemed like allegory's ability to set someone drifting from the shores of certainty, I acknowledged that there must

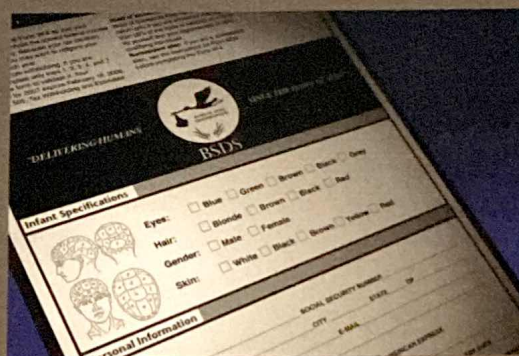
“...it made sense that procreation would be an issue for storks to debate, and we humans would be fooling ourselves if we thought we had any say in the matter.”

be an anchor to keep him or her from floating away forever. I just wanted to create a space—which I hoped would be provided by allegory—that would have enough separation for the viewer to feel less familiar, or, in a sense, become reacquainted, with the ideas.

Ultimately, however, I became unsatisfied with allegory as a tool for creating this space. My understanding was that an allegory is a world of ulterior logic that is inhabited by caricatures of our own logic. These caricatures take what is familiar and flatten them into a few qualities that are then distorted and magnified. Yet, how often have we seen our ideas masked behind a caricature in an allegory? This question does not seem absurd, and an answer not hard to produce, which points out a major problem with the strategy of allegories altogether, specifically, the ability to identify one's own views as those that are being caricatured. What is this distance that the allegory is creating that is supposed to have an affect on me, precisely by my ability to re-examine my ideas from a different perspective, while simultaneously claiming

that perspective to be one that I have held all along? As it turns out, allegorical space is self-collapsing, and because of this, I am now skeptical about what can be gained from this space with its caricatures that require identification by the viewer in order to function. What seemed like a way to create a space for generative criticism now seems to be nothing more than a distraction.

As I understand it, allegory proclaims itself as a space of difference that nonetheless needs to be understood as familiar, if only in order to appreciate how different it is. This inherent self-contradiction of allegory ultimately became something I could not ignore. The failure of allegory makes apparent its genitors' very inabilities that called for the creation of allegory in the first place. *Of Feathers* traces allegory's manic indecisiveness as it tries to decide what it wants to be—unexpected hero or honest failure.



DAVID ELZER

MEXICO CITY

On a Benjamin Menschel fellowship, I studied Mexico City's relationship to the water in its landscape. The city is built in the bottom of a giant bowl on a plain that was once occupied by a chain of rain-fed lakes. Because of the unusual siting of the city, problems of both drainage and fresh water supply have plagued it since its founding by the Aztecs in the 14th century. The extensive infrastructure built to drain the rainwater from the basin has interrupted the natural recharge of the aquifer that provides most of the city's drinking water, causing the urban landscape to compress and subside, with the end result that the city is in real danger of running out of water. I went there this summer to draw and photograph spaces that speak of Mexico City's relationship to its aquatic environment.

Early on, I spent much of my time in the historic center, one of the neighborhoods that has experienced the greatest amount of land subsidence. The numerous skewed buildings communicate on a visceral level the slow sinking of the city, and the place had a magnetic effect on me as a result, particularly the Colegio de las Vizcainas. Over the past four centuries this monolithic two-story building has acquired an incredible flowing gesture as the ground beneath it has subsided unevenly. I visited it frequently, making sketches and documenting it through photography.

“Because of the unusual siting of the city, problems of both drainage and fresh water supply have plagued it since its founding by the Aztecs in the 14th century.”

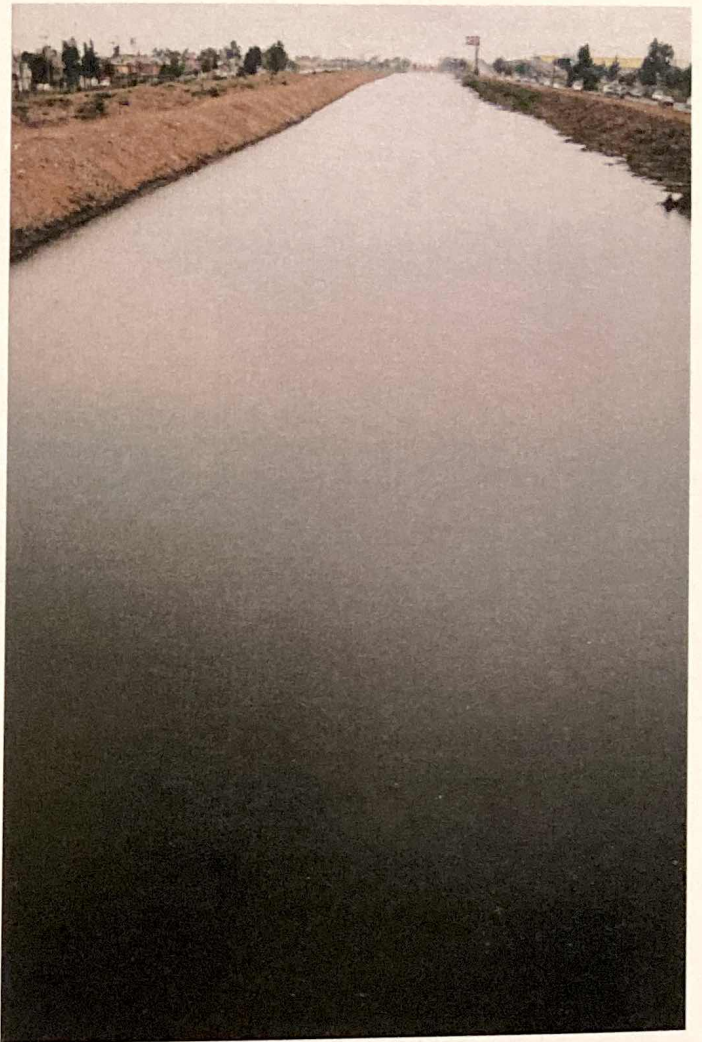
I also spent many days traversing the city, trying to follow its numerous drainage canals as far as I could. I wanted to see them in all their various stages of having been placed underground and transformed from the foul-smelling and toxic “Rios Negros” (“Black Rivers”) into another road or highway that snakes through the city, silently and invisibly draining the water from it. Another place I visited was Xochimilco, a town in the southern part of the city. It is known for its Chinampas, which are remnant irrigation canals dug by the Aztecs around which a town has grown over the centuries. For two days I paddled around the numerous canals with my friend Alberto, seeing how people have built in this kind of environment. I met a biologist there who told me that these remnant canals are the sole surviving habitat of the Axolotl, a bizarre species of salamander that exists only in the Valley of Mexico.



Backyard facing a canal, Xochimilco

Whenever I sit and look at all the photographs and drawings I made on my trip, I'm struck by how still the water is in all of the photographs. In researching the long history of drainage projects in the valley, I found that they all implied a heroic conquest of water. Yet, centuries of building drainage infrastructure has been barely enough to keep the city's head above water, so to speak. Often, when I brushed my teeth in my hotel, dirty water would back fill slowly from the drain and then disappear again just as inexplicably. The toilets barely flush because there is not enough pressure to evacuate the bowl. Water is everywhere in Mexico City. It sits; it backs up; it lurks below the surface and it comes out of unexpected places. People have built canals and levees to contain it, but it is always there, about to spill over the edge and always present just below the surface of the ground.

With a bit of searching, I was able to find the most compelling spaces that speak about Mexico City's idiosyncratic relationship to its hidden aquatic environment. I see these relationships as having architectural potential. For example, in Mexico City, the skewed and sinking buildings speak about the reduced volume of groundwater. While I was there, I wondered how one might take advantage of this condition and design an urban project whose space and tectonic relationships change with the rising and falling of the water table. I have tried to articulate and develop this idea and others in model form as complements to my photographs and drawings. Now, in my fifth year in the School of Architecture, as I develop and refine my thesis project, I am researching similar themes to those I studied in Mexico City on a Benjamin Menschel fellowship, which served as a valuable foundation for my current work.



The drainage canal Rio de Los Remedios, "River of the Remedies"



Xochimilco

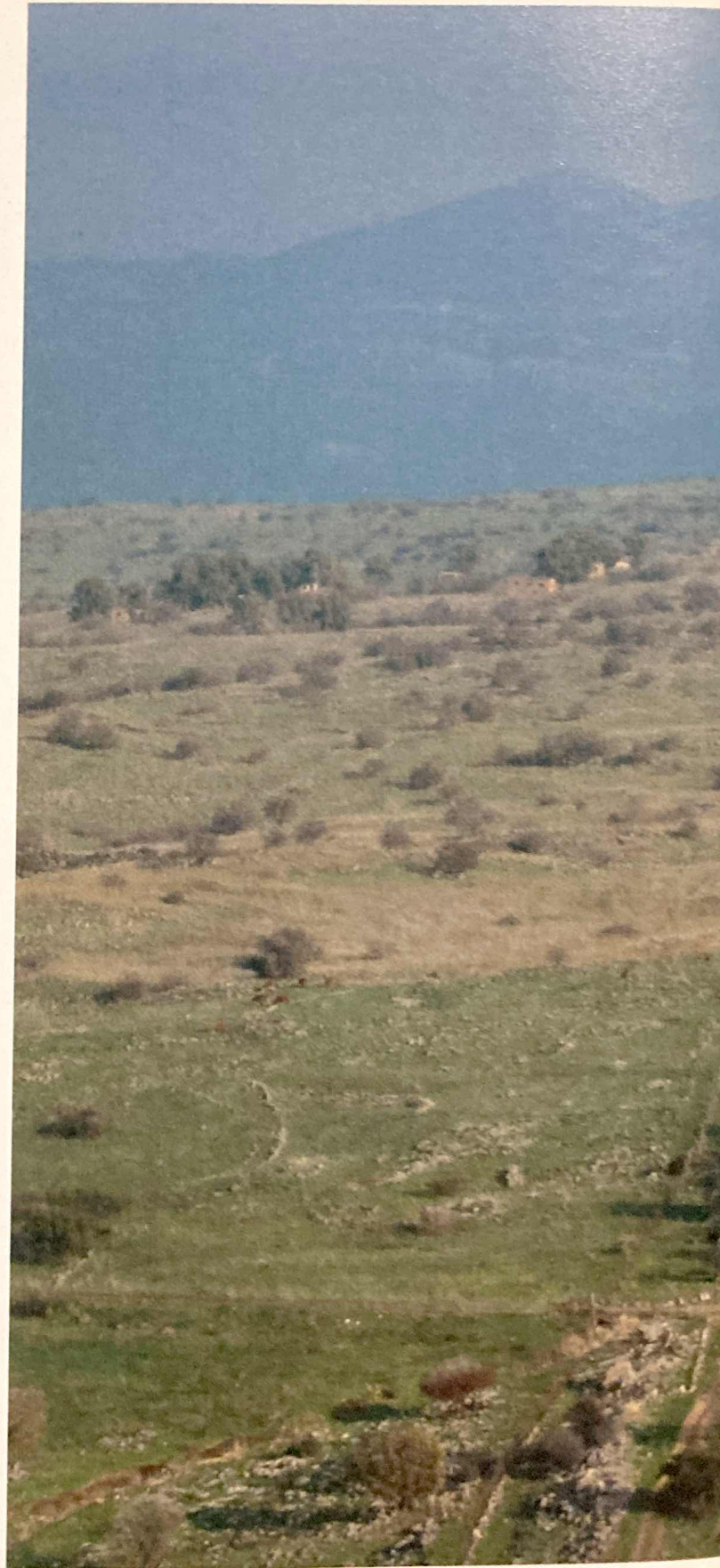
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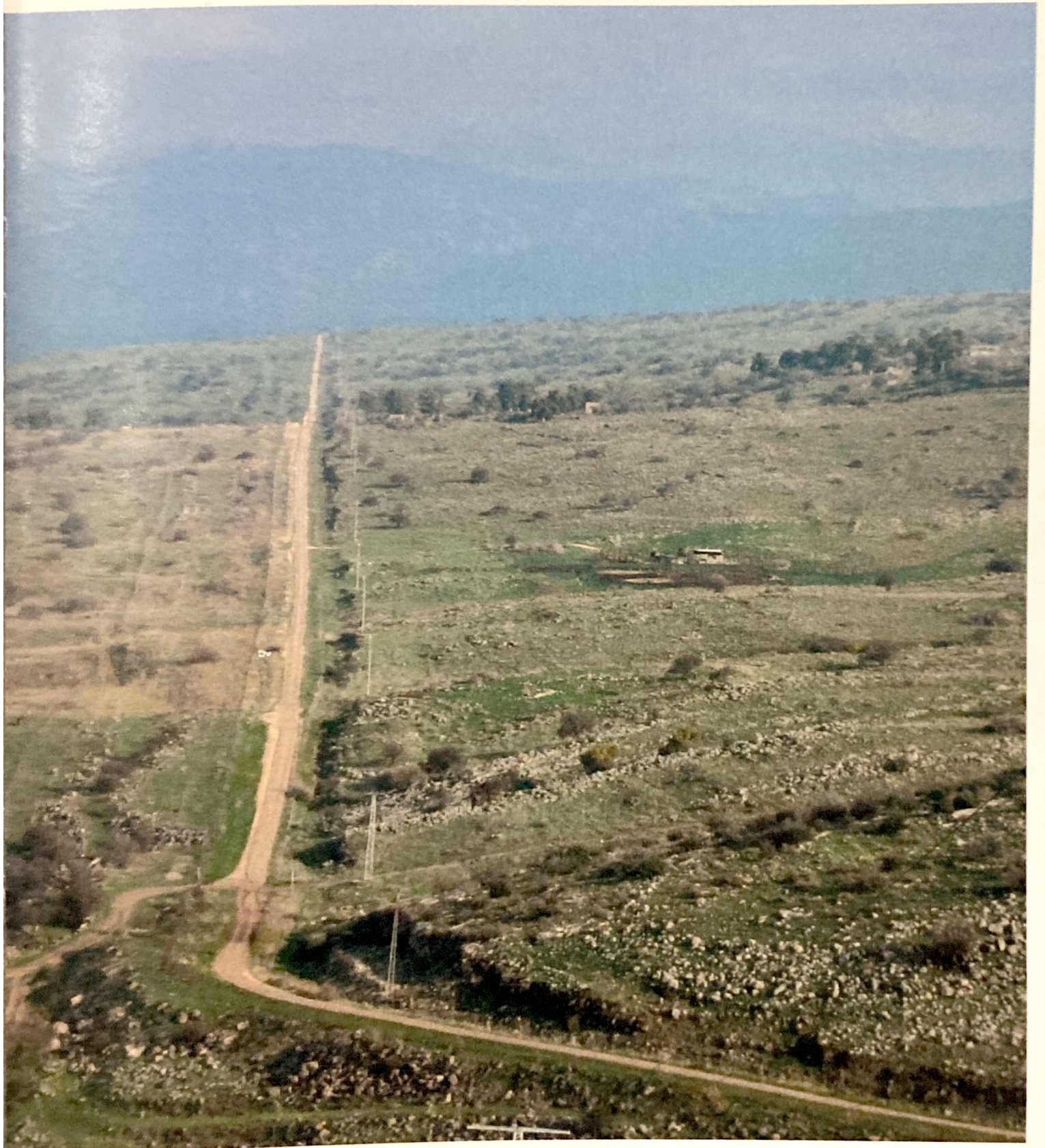
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THE TRANS-ARABIAN PIPELINE REVISITED

The conclusion of the Second World War marked the replacement of coal-based energy sources with global dependency on oil. Since the oil discoveries in the Middle East in the late 1920s, a number of reconnaissance missions had been operating in the Persian Gulf, attracting the interest of the United States government. As a result, the private joint venture ARAMCO (Arab American Oil Company) was founded to secure the US oil reserves in the Gulf region.

To reach the Western European oil market from Saudi Arabia, a tanker ship had to travel for nine days, passing through three different straits, Hormuz, Bab el Mandeb, and Suez, that fell within the boundaries of rising national powers held by the weakened British Empire. Recognizing these geopolitical obstacles, in 1946, ARAMCO established the Trans-Arabian Pipeline Company (TAPline), a joint venture among four of the major American oil companies: Esso (New Jersey), Mobil (New Jersey), Chevron (California), and Texaco (Texas). The purpose of the new company was to build and maintain a crude-oil pipeline connecting Saudi Arabia to the Mediterranean. By December 1946, the pipeline plans were completed; a year later, in November 1947, the shipment of pipes from Delaware began.





Uri Wegman, View of the TAP-line road, 2007

“Though designed as an autonomous, utilitarian tool, the TAPline was never merely a passive player in the politically charged environment it happened to traverse”.

Initially intended to terminate in Haifa, the 1947 United Nations partition resolution of Palestine forced ARAMCO to redirect the line's endpoint to Sidon, in southern Lebanon. In September 1950, a final weld completed the pipeline. On November 10, 1950, oil reached the Sidon refinery. On December 2, 1950, the first tanker was loaded.

The pipeline actively operated for 33 years, enduring the political turmoil of the region and the ensuing series of takeovers, sabotages, and wars. In June 1967, after the Six Days war, Israel occupied the Golan Heights and gained control of the pipeline segment traversing now-occupied Syrian land.

The reopening and expansion of the Suez Canal in 1975 enabled the supertanker to emerge as a cheaper, safer means of oil transportation, eclipsing TAPline's advantage and, consequently, its profits. The outbreak of civil war in Lebanon followed by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 thwarted all efforts to maintain the pipeline, resulting in its permanent closure in December 1983. In 1984, the pipeline section crossing the Golan Heights was sold to the State of Israel. That same year, the pipeline section crossing Lebanon was parceled out into private property, and the Sidon Terminal was sold to the Lebanese Government.

Though designed as an autonomous, utilitarian tool, the TAPline was never merely a passive player in the politically charged environment it happened to traverse. In fact, the line's meaning and function were frequently transformed by monumental historical events, including economic reforms, wars, social disruptions, and shifting geophysical conditions. Our project focuses on the small-scale registration of these events on the pipeline and the repercussions of the line's role as a site for spatial generation.

In the original drawings, portions of the pipeline were demarcated using only the kilometer intervals as labels for the surrounding territories, displacing historical place-names. The resulting imposed linear nomenclature had the effect of diminishing the individualized, local significance of the segments of the line and, along with this, the embedded cultural heritage. During the heyday of its use and the years since its closure, a series of transformations, reactions, and adaptations have reshaped the line. The premise of our research was to find and document the traces of these different stories and events by “reading” the impressions they have left behind on the pipe's surface and surroundings over the past 62 years.

The scope of our study concentrates on the 100-kilometer section of the pipeline that crosses through the Golan Heights and Lebanon, a section that has gone through a particularly intensive series of transformations and events in response to the turbulent history of the region. Since its initial conception and construction, the line has fragmented into distinct, independent spaces. This project is an attempt to re-assemble these pieces and to examine them as part of a larger historical, political, and cultural landscape.



The construction of the Zahrani Terminal in 1949–1950. Courtesy of Nazih Cheikr



General view of Sidon Terminal in 1950. The white line coming from the hill on the right is where the pipe line is buried. Courtesy of Nazih Cheikr



View from the Golan Heights looking towards Lebanon. Courtesy of Yehuda Wegman

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