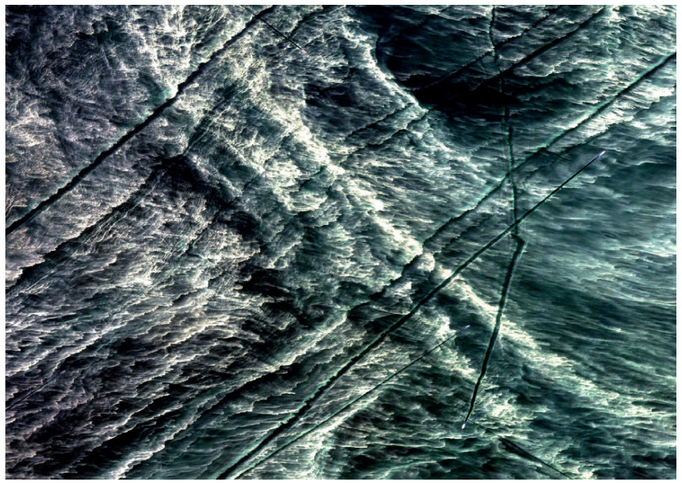
Essay: Art and climate share one crucial trait: rapid change. Might the oceans presage the shape of art to come?
by Carson Chan

New Wave

Josh Kline, *Domestic Fragility Meltdown* (detail), 2019, powder-coated steel frame, epoxy resin, stainless steel, heating panels, soy wax, pigment, plastic bucket, liner, 97×100×100 cm. Courtesy: the artist and 47 Canal, New York; photograph: Joerg Lohse

To survive our rising oceans – of information, of dread – we must learn to read water.

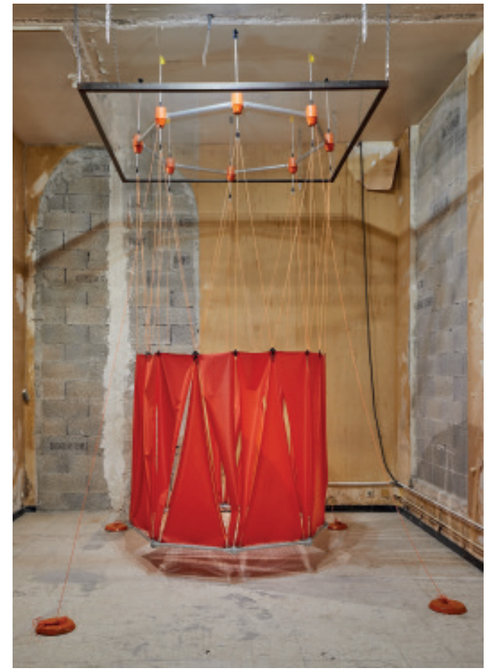


Territorial Agency, *Oceans in Transformation*, 2019, ESA Sentinel-2 data.
Courtesy: © Territorial Agency and TBA21–Academy

In *Liquid Modernity* (2000), philosopher Zygmunt Bauman characterized the 21st century as marked by the dissolution of the ideological superstructures that long organized and dominated the Western world. 'Fluids', he wrote, 'neither fix space nor bind time. Fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it.' To dwell in change means to shed fixed axioms, a phenomenon we see readily in the way categories like gender, sexuality and race have become more self-defined, and structures of domination – white supremacy, patriarchy and speciesism – are actively being dismantled.

It is hard not to see the anthropogenic environmental crisis as the theoretical object at the centre of a liquid modernity. The mass migration of climate refugees, vast shifts in climatic zones and rising ocean levels redrawing coastlines force us to relinquish habits, reconsider assumptions and respond to an environment that is increasingly hostile to human survival. For Bauman, 'change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only certainty. A hundred years ago, "to be modern" meant to chase "the final state of perfection" – now it means an infinity of improvement, with no "final state" in sight and none desired.'[1]

Bauman's idea of liquid modernity gets to the core of once-routine acts, which now seem to evade our grasp: history, description, even storytelling itself. Objects dissolve into what Timothy Morton calls 'hyperobjects' – things like the climate or ocean plastic, so expansive and dispersed in time and space as to elude easy imaging.[2] How, for instance, do you tell the story of an iPhone or a hurricane named Sandy? Where do you start? Where do you stop? Beneath every object's surface is an interlace of networks shifting against the forces of our values, transactions, correspondences, standards, laws and so on. Our digital abundance has produced visual epistemologies of new oceanic depths. Objects have become clickholes of unfolding information, an unending chain of references that make the object at once more defined and less bounded. Looking at something, even intently, no longer tells you much about it. For architect Keller Easterling, the hyperconnected condition of the contemporary world is not one that can be described effectively or efficiently through conventional narratives. As she argues in her book *Extrastatecraft* (2014), it can only be apprehended as if 'looking at the surface of water'. Like seasoned sailors, we can only understand the hidden temperament of the



Peter Fend, *Plateforme Pétrolière Offshore / Offshore Oil Rig*, 1993, installation view, Manifesta 13, Marseille, 2020. Courtesy: the artist, Collection FRAC Poitou-Charentes, Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin, Essex Street, New York, and Cabinet Gallery, London; photograph: © Jean-Christophe Lett/Manifesta 13, Marseille

ocean by reading its surface for its disposition. To survive our rising oceans – of information, of dread – we must learn to read water.

Water's disposition for depth, complexity and boundless fluidity, as well as its proximity to questions of mortality, has made it a potent motif in contemporary art. I think of Pamela Rosenkranz's 2015 Swiss pavilion at the Venice Biennale, *Our Product*, which was partly filled with an opaque pink liquid, meant to evoke the colour of northern-European flesh tones; John Akomfrah's three-channel video *Vertigo Sea* (2015) with its fever-dream panoramic scenes of breaching whales, enslaved people thrown overboard on the Middle Passage and swirls of crimson blood mixing into the sea; and Pope.L's *Flint Water Project* (2017), for which the artist bottled, signed and editioned the Michigan city's contaminated drinking water, enjoining an environmental and racial-justice issue with artistic discourse. Consider Olga Balema's amorphous, clear plastic bags bulging with brown-tinged liquid on the brink of bursting and pouring out across the floor into the cracks (*Threat to Civilization*, 2015). Or Julius von Bismarck's corroded high-sea buoy bobbing and swaying from the ceiling, reproducing its motion in the Atlantic with the help of motors and transforming the exhibition space into an underwater realm (*Die Mimik der Tethys*, The Expressions of Tethys, 2019). Water enables artists to fill spaces completely, to exceed conditions of comfort, to inhabit positions that flow from one to another. Water compels a theory of apprehending the world that is fluid and boundless, where everything solid is at risk of dissolving into tiny floating particles. A substance that humans cannot live without, water is also something we cannot survive in (without technological aid) for more than the length of a breath.

The present leaks into the future in Peter Fend's *La Mer et Marseille / The Sea and Marseille* (2020). Conceived for Manifesta 13 in Marseille, Fend's multi-part work analyzes the coastal saltwater systems connected to the city and proposes less ecologically disruptive alternatives. Fend imagines the accumulated nutrients in the Étang de Berre lagoon feeding biomass generators and algae biofilters cleaning up the sewage discharged into Cortiou cove. A liquid, nonlinear discourse, art, for Fend, erodes the bureaucratic barriers to ecological improvements.

What if art institutions became liquid? What if they were conduits to a perpetual flow of matter? Places that

Olga Balema, *Threat to Civilization 6* and *Threat to Civilization 2*, 2015, installation view, Croy Nielsen, Vienna. Courtesy: the artist and Croy Nielsen, Vienna; photograph: Joachim Schulz

could not easily hold their shape? Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (TBA21) is a multi-nodal organization founded by Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza in 2002. Initially a funding body to support artists and architects while amassing a private collection, the foundation has now become a globally dispersed ocean conservancy that deploys artistic discourse as a means to create new knowledge about the water world. Having left its exhibition space in Vienna's Augarten in 2017, TBA21 opened Ocean Space, a 'new planetary centre for catalyzing ocean literacy, research and advocacy through the arts', in Venice in 2019. Since 2011, TBA21 has been organizing maritime expeditions across the globe. Curators, artists, musicians, educators, writers, marine scientists and Thyssen-Bornemisza herself have set sail on various vessels, engaging in transdisciplinary discussion along the way. A group including art collective Superflex journeyed to Fiji in the late autumn of 2014; curator Ute Meta Bauer led groups to Papua New Guinea in 2015 and French Polynesia the year after. The social and ecological health of the ocean, according to TBA21's website, was a common theme on these voyages. Curator Chus Martínez, one of the expedition leaders, also heads the Art Institute at the FHNW Academy of Arts and Design in Basel. There, inspired by her work with TBA21, she has initiated a series of seminars and conferences called 'Art Is the Ocean', 'which examines the role of artists in the conception of a new experience of nature'.

Martínez, TBA21 director Markus Reymann and e-flux editor Julieta Aranda recently co-edited an issue of *e-flux journal* (October 2020) that takes the ocean as a conceptual figure to address 'the possibility of a new world, of a political philosophy capable of reopening a debate on justice, freedom and public space'. In her own essay in the issue, 'Gathering Sea I Am!', Martínez argues that the ocean, and nature at large, is not merely an allegory for a new way of perceiving (per Easterling), nor a metaphor for the dissolving axioms of the past century (per Bauman), but a set of 'new conditions of space, politics, action, gender, race and interspecies relations'. For Martínez, the rising interest in nature amongst artists and art professionals is not about nature itself. Describing art museums and private collections as participants in a history dependent on oppressive social structures and ideas of citizenship that are currently undergoing radical change, Martínez suggests that nature offers the 'very

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Josh Kline, *Representative Government* (detail), 2019, Potomac River mud, epoxy, silicone epoxy, Plexiglas tank, powder-coated steel frame, vacuformed plastic, digital prints on vinyl, reservoir tank, pump, fan, ocean water, silicone moulds, freezer, 127×33×153 cm. Courtesy: the artist and 47 Canal, New York; photograph: Joerg Lohse

possibility of a rebirth outside the frame of history'. She continues: 'We might be so radical as to posit that to say "ocean" is, today, to say "art" – art without the burden of institutional life, without the ideological twists of cultural politics, art as a practice that belongs to artists, art facing the urgency of socializing with all who care about life.'

Here, the aquatic world is understood as being outside the historical reach of a corrupt, polluting and unjust humanity. Equated with art, the ocean is viewed by Martínez as a means to 'reprogramme our senses' and as a source of 'potential for transforming the future of architecture, of communications, of gender entanglement, of economy, of art'. Indeed, the image of the ocean Martínez relies on – the boundless, sublime abyss that exists beyond the reach of history – is itself a product of human imagination. In other words, the narrative of the watery, non-human world is still firmly within humanity's historical continuum. The sea, like art, is also burdened with the 'ideological twists of cultural politics'. Though much of the planet's ocean remains unexplored and unmapped, it is not a mythical place – it has not escaped humanity's manipulation. Submarine communication cables enmesh the ocean floor; military sonars sweep across the seas. A 2019 exploration found single-use plastic trash littered across the bottom of the Mariana Trench, the deepest place in the ocean, some 10,994 metres below the surface. Candy wrappers, plastic utensils and, potentially, a new species of deep-sea creature counted among the finds of this submersible expedition to the abyss. The ocean is as much a deep repository for nonhuman imagination as it is a receptacle for the plastic memorials of human output. If the 'ocean' is 'art', then so are the 5.25 trillion pieces of plastic drifting amidst the plankton, choking the whales, starving the fish by filling up their stomachs. In the same issue of *e-flux journal*, Aranda and anthropologist Eben Kirksey gave voice to a plastic bag in their lexicon entry for 'Circulation'. It's the sea-voyaging antihero of Ramin Bahrani's 2009 film, *Plastic Bag*. Aranda and Kirksey recall a scene where the bag is sitting on a beach. Voiced by Werner Herzog, the bag sighs: 'No one needs me here anymore, not even my maker.' Like TBA21's seafaring travellers, the bag sought communion; like Martínez, it wanted to be reborn. After a treacherous odyssey, the bag 'sings' as it reaches its home in the Great Pacific garbage patch: 'And I was born again / I learned to use the currents of the water / I made it to the vortex. I was with my own

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Lena Maria Thüring, *Gardien de la paix (GPX)* (Peacekeeper, GPX), 2011, video still. Courtesy: the artist and TBA21–Academy

kind. We covered an area the size of a small continent. We were free and happy. I loved going in circles. In circles. In circles.'

I'm intrigued by Martínez's suggestion that the ocean can offer a new, yet-to-be-determined condition for apprehending the world – the 'substance of life' – but unconvinced that humans can, or should, adopt a position outside of history and from a 'nonhuman-centred perspective'. Do we have the right? Besides, aren't humans, as biological beings, part of nature? Or, at the very least, part of the nature of our design? Instead, I'd like to think about Aranda and Kirksey's speaking, singing, seafaring, circulating plastic bag as a model for thinking that is self-conscious of humanity's role in constructing and giving voice to the very world we construct and observe – including nature. We are all Herzog, and the singing bag is everything under our gaze.

In 2019, I went to see Josh Kline's exhibition, 'Climate Change: Part One', at 47 Canal in New York. In many ways, it was a show about containment, about holding back the stuff that threatens to spill over and leak out. Melting wax models of buildings sat in a number of drainage tables, like the ones used by butchers or hydroponic gardeners; doors made from an unlikely composite of sand, kelp and nylon flags segregated one part of the exhibition from another; doll-house tableaux of domestic settings and office scenes – arranged within glass beakers and submerged in a clear medium – were displayed inside a fume hood as if to protect viewers from the poison of banality. The exhibition featured three aquariums, each containing a scale model of a city connected in some way to water. In one, titled *Representative Government* (2019), landmarks and monuments of state power from around the world – the United Nations complex in New York, the Reichstag building in Berlin, the White House in Washington, D.C., St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow – made from Potomac River mud, sat atop a satellite image of Washington. The tank contained a cross section of the capitol, just south of the National Mall, around the Jefferson Memorial island. Looming next to the buildings were miniature icebergs, their slow yet inevitable liquification threatening the entire project of international power. It's a caricature of Bauman's liquid modernity and the dissolution of superstructures seen through the peril of rising seas. In Kline's rendering, water will dissolve our seats of power, returning them to the flowing river as tiny particles of dirt.

Julius von Bismarck, *Die Mimik der Tethys* (The Expressions of Tethys), 2019, installation view, Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Courtesy: the artist, alexander levy, Berlin, and Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf

Viewed from the side, the island in *Representative Government* comprised the tip of an underwater mountain. Where the Jefferson Memorial would have been, Kline located the United Nations complex. On that same site, President John F. Kennedy's administration had planned what would have been the biggest public aquarium in the world. Designed by the Eames Office, together with Roche-Dinkeloo architects, the National Fisheries Center and Aquarium would have housed aquatic ecosystems from across the planet, drawing millions of visitors a year to marvel at America's ability to contain the world's oceans in a building. The rhetorical claim is clear: at the geographic centre of the country's capital would be a monument to American imperial ambition, as far-reaching and inescapable as the ocean itself. The drawings were completed, the exhibits were designed, the budget was secured; curators, marine biologists and administrative staff were all-but-hired before President Richard Nixon scrapped the entire project in the final years of his presidency.

If water compels a theory of apprehending the boundless world, Kline's aquarium – and the unbuilt aquarium at its centre – suggest that our aim for limitlessness itself, particularly amidst a climate crisis, also has its bounds. The rising water that is already submerging cities around the world is floodwater of humanity's own making. Returning to Martínez's claim that 'to say "ocean" is to say "art"', it is not 'art without the burden of institutional life' that is evoked in this semantic switch but, like Kline's works, it is art that is conscious of how humanity built institutions in service of their own dissolution. Like morning fog, it is art that dwells in the beauty and tragedy of its own vanishing **END**

1 Zygmunt Bauman, 'Foreword to the 2012 Edition', *Liquid Modernity*, 2012, Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden, p. viii

2 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, 2013, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

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