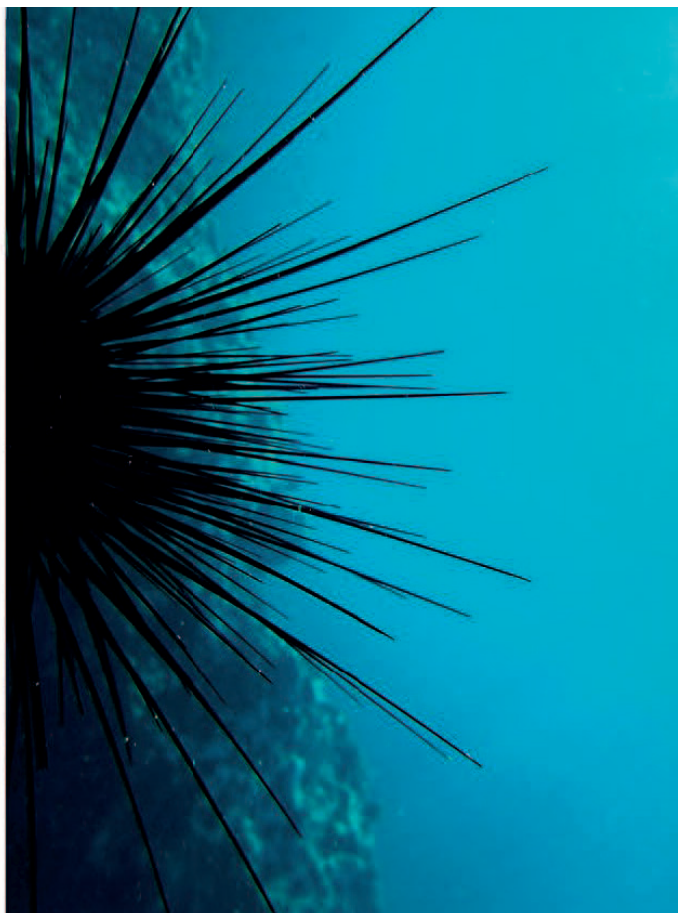




PERSPECTIVES OCÉANIQUES

Caroline Ha Thuc

L'océan est au cœur de toutes les attentions. La troisième Conférence des Nations Unies sur l'Océan (UNOC) se tient du 9 au 13 juin à Nice tandis que la France a fait de 2025 « L'année de la mer ». Une riche programmation artistique et culturelle ponctue cette année. Caroline Ha Thuc participe à cette actualité avec l'ouvrage *The Ocean Manifesto*(1) qui, sous sa direction, présente les travaux de 77 artistes. Pour artpress, elle revient sur le changement de perspective sur le monde auquel contribuent les artistes qui s'intéressent à l'océan.



Oceanic Perspectives

Caroline Ha Thuc

The ocean is the focus of much attention. The third United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC) is being held from June 9th to 13th in Nice, while France has declared 2025 the “Year of the Sea.” The year will be punctuated by a rich programme of artistic and cultural events. Caroline Ha Thuc is taking part in these events with *The Ocean Manifesto* (1), a book she has orchestrated featuring the work of 77 artists. For artpress, she talks about the change in perspective on the world to which artists interested in the ocean are contributing.

In recent years, a growing number of new concepts have emerged in the lexicon of social sciences: aquatocene, hydrocene, blue humanities and ecocriticism, dialectics of tides, liquid ontology... This aquatic repertoire stems from two converging intellectual movements: on the one hand, the need to renew our critical tools in a new context of deco-

lonisation and climate crisis, urging us to explore alternative ways of being in the world at every level of society; on the other, the growing awareness of the ocean’s role as a climate regulator and a source of oxygen and life. Long overlooked, perceived as a mere backdrop—undifferentiated and inexhaustible—it now emerges as a singular and fragile entity, governed by its own agency with which humans must (re)learn to interact (2). The oceanic perspective therefore involves rethinking our cognitive categories, no longer from the standpoint of solid ground and a fixed point, but from that of the sea—fluid, shifting, decentralised—implying its own temporality and dynamic forces. It is worth noting, however, that these so-called new concepts in the Western social sciences have long formed the basis of the relationship between humans and their environment in other parts of the world. Even in the West, they often overlap with existing concepts,

such as phenomenology, which they seek to enrich and apply to new relationships with living beings. Regardless, they offer powerful methodological tools for artists who adopt them to explore the possibilities of decentring thought and embracing a kind of liquid existentialism.

A GESTURE OF EMANCIPATION

To embrace the oceanic perspective is already to enter the water—to dive into the sea, to float, to sink, to discover new fields of force acting upon the body. What remains of a human being once immersed in the ocean? This is one of the questions posed by Nadia Huggins, who dives daily in Saint Vincent, in the Caribbean, where she lives. This gesture is first and foremost one of emancipation: by altering physical properties, water dissolves the social, historical and gendered identity of the individual. The sea thus becomes a space for potential

encounters with the non-human, beyond any ontology or hierarchy. The series *Transformations* (2014-16) shows the artist underwater, face-to-face with marine creatures—sea urchins or coral. The photographic diptychs express her attempts at dialogue, though the encounter is never one of fusion: the edges of the frames symbolically signal this distance, particularly due to the limits of the human body. The experience nonetheless opens up more porous understandings of the individual. For Huggins, this immersion is also a way to engage with Caribbean his ded from African and Indian slaves, now seeking identity. As a place of mixing and the origin of life, the sea is a space where all kinds of bodies may be reborn.

Taking the ocean as a starting point also means moving away from a territorial, and thus national, conception of the world. This is the power of Epeli Hau'ofa's thought, which has inspired many artists. With his famous phrase "we are the ocean," the Fijian writer conceives of the Polynesian archipelago as an ocean of islands connected by the sea, rather than a set of isolated islets (3). In-visible links then emerge—submerged continents, diasporic kinships. Scientists once imagined a lost continent, Lemuria, to explain



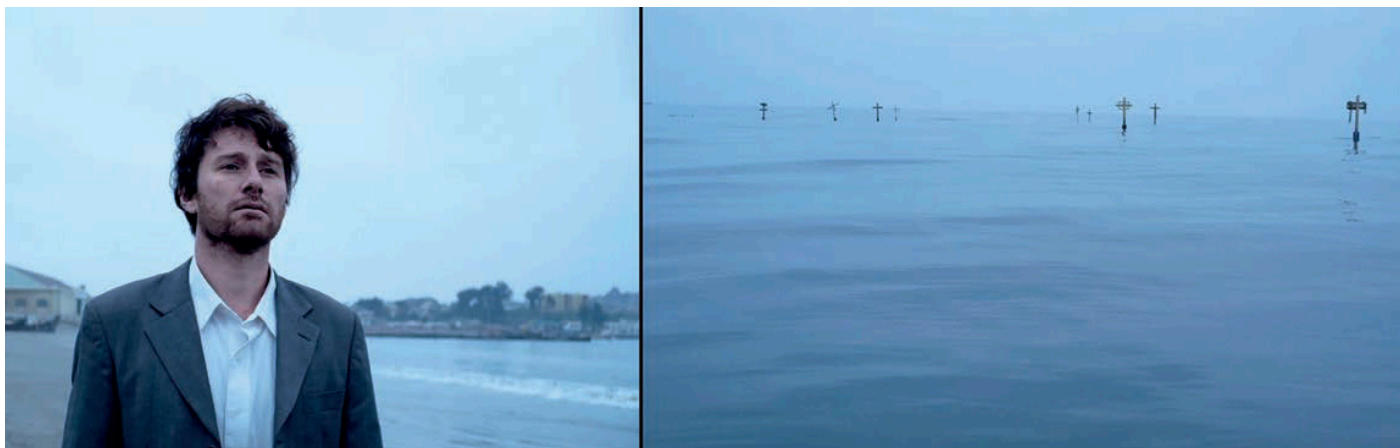
the presence of lemurs from Madagascar to Malaysia. Magalie Grondin draws inspiration from these connections to envision a shared origin for the peoples of the Indian Ocean, both from Asia and East Africa. The Réunionese artist particularly traces recurring myths and beliefs across these cultures, such as the mermaid who offers women care and protection. In the large charcoal drawing *Femmes aux ouïes* (2024), we see these figures, nude, moving gracefully through a fluid aquatic world. Their gills extend like antennae and intertwine, forming underwater networks that connect visible and invisible realms, as well as populations separated by geography. The sea allows us to imagine new forms of roots—born of a long history—not tied to any fixed territory but to cultures in motion. Likewise, one can retrace colonial

routes to the Americas by following legends of Mami Wata, the seductive and ambivalent sea spirit, featured in the work of Haitian painter Shneider Léon Hilaire and many West African artists.

SPACE AND TIME

The ocean is a singular mass that circulates and connects all nations, following its own logic of flow—shaped by winds, currents, and undersea topography. Plankton and marine creatures follow these migratory paths, invisible to us. Kristina Pulejkova studied the route of the European eel, which swims 6,000 kilometres twice—from the Sargasso Sea in the Atlantic to the sources of European rivers. In *Wedding Journey* (2019), the Macedonian artist presents a series of interactive installations inviting the





audience to sense and move like an eel. A VR video, projections of dancing bodies mimicking the eel's serpentine twists, and recordings of ragged breathing are all ways to establish a connection between humans and this endangered species. By highlighting its migratory cycle, Pulejkova also reveals the transnational interconnectivity of marine species routes, and the cascading ecological impacts: first blocked by European dams, the eel then struggles to return to its spawning grounds due to shifts in the Gulf Stream and hormonal disruptions caused by pollution. Beyond coastal zones, the ocean is a shared space for all nations. Its waters mix, its inhabitants and our waste migrate: the concept of borders is powerless against such liquidity. And yet this space, which covers 70% of the planet, remains vastly under-explored. Many artists question the political and legal status of the high seas, whose uniqueness invites creativity. With *Forkonomy* (since 2020), Tzu-Tung Lee and Winnie Soon propose a collective and participatory governance of the South China Sea: after debating the price in workshops, participants can purchase one millilitre of sea water as an NFT, in exchange for shared responsibility over its management. Who can own the sea, ask the artists, in a time of maritime conflict—and how might we invent a new commons? This space is not only spatial, but also temporal: the ocean churns the past and constantly redistributes it. Often linked to memory and seen as a form of archive, water retains history even as it ero-

des it. Tides regularly bring back the debris of the past—both updating and erasing their traces. Time is no longer linear: there is no beginning or end, but a cyclical movement of ongoing transformation. Drowned bodies resurface and wash ashore, as in the work of Chilean artist **Enrique Ramírez**. His trilogy *Brisas, Los durmientes, and Las tres memorias* (2023) recalls those murdered under Pinochet's dictatorship, whose bodies were thrown into the sea from helicopters, weighed down by railway tracks. The protagonist's body, in the film, is that of a sleepwalker wandering dazed along the shore and through historic sites in Santiago, his clothes soaked as if he himself had just emerged from the sea.

In Saint Martin, in the Caribbean, Deborah Jack draws on this metaphor of the tide to explore the contemporary relevance of Paul Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic, referring to the transatlantic displacement of slaves to Western colonies. The notion of cumulative renewal enables the artist to connect the cultural history of these exiled, blended populations to present-day ecological disasters and extractivist policies. Her series *Drawn by Water* (2018-19) explores the friction of these perspectives through fragmented and punctured views of the island's landscape. Like the intertidal zone (the coastal area between the extremes of the tide), places and temporalities interweave and overlap, resisting any linear narrative or geographic segmentation.

LEARNING TO LISTEN

In reality, the ocean remains largely unknown. How can we forge connections with the invisible? This is a central question for artists who seek to communicate empathy through their practice. As we have seen, Pulejkova embraces technology as a sensitive means of envisioning otherness. Yet the use of technology can also be seen as a barrier, preventing genuine contact with the marine world. This is why, for example, Nadia Huggins dives without equipment. In her films, Ursula Biemann questions this reliance on technology to probe the unknown. In the video *Acoustic Ocean* (2018), a fictional researcher uses a hydrophone to record under-water sounds inaudible to the human ear. This technology becomes, in her words, an extension of herself. Yet the knowledge it yields still collides with the complexity of oceanic reality and the persistence of an anthropocentric perspective. While Western science may be a powerful tool for pushing the boundaries of known worlds, it remains limited in forging relationships with non-human beings. The poetic form of Biemann's films and the sensory flow of her images offer pathways to reinventing our ways of knowing and decentring our gaze.

To embrace the oceanic perspective is in-deed to acknowledge the agency of the ocean as a living space to which we must learn to listen. How can we let the sea speak?

De haut en bas *from top*: **Enrique Ramírez**. *Los durmientes*. 2023. Vidéo. (Court. l'artiste). **Deborah Jack**. *Drawn by Water*: *Sea Drawings in Three Acts*. 2018-19. Act One: Weight/Wait on the Water. Vidéo. (Court. l'artiste)

In Karachi, Naiza Khan has long studied the interactions between the port city, the coastal landscape, and the ocean—whose presence is increasingly felt through massive floods. Her drawings depict these waves of construction and destruction, the precariousness of infrastructure and communities. Despite sandbag walls, the city is quickly submerged. In the video *Mapping Water* (2023), we see her at work, sketching topo-graphic maps in watercolour. The colours are washed out, and the excess water gradually drowns the lines and contours. Through this simple gesture, the Pakistani artist gives a voice back to the ocean and invites us, in a certain way, to accept its chaotic dynamic rather than to resist it in vain. With a few exceptions, the decentring brought about by the oceanic perspective continues to place the human at the centre of the issues being addressed. This is un-surprising, as it is ultimately impossible to truly adopt the ocean's point of view. Nonetheless, for artists, the aquatic repertoire remains a rich reservoir of images and concepts, enabling them to express and delve into the contradictions, uncertainties, and complexities of our time, while constructively exploring new ways of coexisting with the living world.

1 JBE Books, 336 p., 35 euros. Published (in English) thanks to the Metis Fund of the Agence française de développement.
2 On the invisibilisation of the ocean, see in particular Hélène Artaud, *Immersion*, Les empê-
cheurs de penser en rond, 2023.

3 Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean*, University of Hawaii Press, 2008. Caroline Ha Thuc is a French author, researcher and curator based in Hong Kong, specialising in contemporary Asian art.

Caroline Ha Thuc is a French author, researcher and curator based in Hong Kong, specialising in contemporary Asian art.