

KIMBERLY PHILLIPS / On pelagic* space: a projection (part one)

* *pelagic*: from GR *pelagos*, of or pertaining to the open sea

In the prologue to his essay “The Beach (A Fantasy),” Michael Taussig posits writing as a physical symptom, one which might manifest in place of a fantasy so potent as to require repression from conscious thought¹ (249). The notion of writing as a physical symptom—as an *acting out* (or into) space, as a sensuous (and anxious?) *filling in*—resonates with me. It offers a possible explanation for how writing functions within my own curatorial practice, particularly in relation to projects that have not yet come to pass and thus remain in the realm of the fantastical, “a montage of sight and sound,” (Freud 239) as in the one I attempt to describe below.

This project took shape as an unusual artist residency titled *Twenty-Three Days at Sea*, developed for Access Gallery, the artist-run centre at which I serve as Director/Curator. Established in 1991 and located in Vancouver’s Chinatown, Access exists to support the work of artists at an early point in their careers, as well as those whose practices have taken a decidedly experimental turn. In December 2014, in partnership with Burrard Arts Foundation and Contraste Agence d’art, we announced the launch of this new program. As our international Call for Submissions stated, *Twenty-Three Days at Sea* would offer selected emergent and experimental visual artists passage aboard cargo ships sailing from Vancouver to Shanghai. Crossing the Pacific Ocean on a freighter takes approximately twenty-three days, during which time artists would be considered “in residence” aboard the vessel. Our stated aim was for the selected artists to maintain a log for the duration of their crossing, and to generate a new body of work in response to the voyage, which would then be exhibited before audiences at Access in the following months.

There are many hundreds of residency programs worldwide. The more conventional of these provide artists with living quarters and work space, financial support, and frequently the opportunity to engage with colleagues while creating new work around a specific thematic or set of ideas. But residencies might also offer other resources, such as the possibility of engaging with distinctive or challenging environments. There are residencies on hiking trails and in hammocks, in backyard sheds,

1 My sincere thanks to Elisa Ferrari for bringing this article to my attention.

distilleries, and on tall ships and shrimp boats.² *Twenty-Three Days at Sea* follows this “aberrant” turn in contemporary artist residency programs, in that it imposes specific conditions and constraints (the strictures of the port; the solitude of the freighter cabin; the expanse of the open sea) that will in turn shape artists’ ideas and work. It offers the opportunity to integrate critical and creative practices into a new set of parameters, and the potential of challenging, or perhaps even uprooting, established routines, activities, and assumptions. At its base, *Twenty-Three Days at Sea* asks artists to question what constitutes creative space, and to consider how time is experienced over a highly charged, yet largely invisible, spatial trajectory.

The practice of artists “going away” to seek out new experiences and unfettered space, free from society’s restraints, is nearly as old as the notion of the modern artist itself. As early as the 1870s, members of the West’s artistic avant-garde travelled to sites either geographically (quaint coastal fishing villages, the colonized tropics) or psychologically (brothels, sanatoria, nudist colonies) far from the metropole and the stultification of polite bourgeois society. These artists—who might well be understood as the earliest practitioners of cultural tourism—longed to access some deep well-spring of “authentic” creativity dulled by modern industrialized life. Today, those concerned with the ethical engagement of artists in the communities they visit, and critical of the spreading ecological footprint of our contemporary art world, question whether the artist is ever more than a tourist during a residency. *Twenty-Three Days at Sea* concerns itself with these questions, by quite literally embedding artists within the system of global sea-borne freight, upon which the conduct of contemporary life is utterly dependent.

Of course, the decision to offer emergent artists this particular opportunity to “go away” was motivated in part by the fact that ours is a small, publicly-funded, non-profit organization based in a city whose prohibitive real estate market renders the spatial demands of a traditional residency unrealizable. Unable to host artists on Vancouver’s *terra firma* for any meaningful length of time, one might say that we cast our thinking out to sea in the direction of Asia.³ But far more importantly, *Twenty-Three Days at Sea* offered us the opportunity to ask a set of questions relevant to our own socio-political coordinates in a major port city on the eastern edge of the Pacific Rim, the place that literary theorist Christopher Bracken has so eloquently described as the end of the

2 See *C Magazine*, Issue 119 (Autumn 2013), the focus of which was artist residencies.

3 Opposite the usual directional flow of both emigrants and capital, as it seems.

West, as “Europe’s geographical and conceptual limit . . . it’s outer edge, the westernmost border of the West. . . .” (6).⁴

In this way, *Twenty-Three Days at Sea* attempts to acknowledge that our experience of the contemporary world is “less that of a long life developing through time,” to quote Michel Foucault, and more “a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein” (22). Space, in our epoch, he suggests, “takes for us the form of relations among sites” (22). Indeed, transnational capital is no longer focused on a single urban centre: “there is no longer ‘a city’ at the centre of the system, but rather a fluctuating web of connections between metropolitan regions and exploitable peripheries” (Sekula 48). But while the cosmopolitanism of air travel and the internet’s supposed pervasiveness fuel the perception of instantaneous global connectivity, the vast majority of materials and commodity objects move about the world by sea, at a rate not far accelerated beyond that achieved in the first quarter of last century (50). At the same time, the old ports, previously embedded in city life, have now been replaced by vast container terminals on industrial wharves far from urban centres, and containerization itself has served to abstract and conceal the visual cacophony of freighted goods from view.⁵ As ports have steadily retreated from metropolitan consciousness, the sea has become a forgotten—or more precisely a disavowed—space. Artist and writer Allan Sekula stresses as such in his formidable bookwork, *Fish Story*:

The metropolitan gaze no longer falls upon the waterfront, and a cognitive blankness follows. Thus despite increasing international mercantile dependence on ocean transport, and despite advances in oceanography and marine biology, the sea is in many respects less comprehensible to today’s elites than it was before 1945, in the nineteenth century, or even during the Enlightenment. (54)

That which is disavowed can be filled with the montage of fantasy, Freud reminds. My desire was to create a program that might “stir up” the sediment of these fantasies, activate the invisibles at play within them, and temporarily render their contradictory

4 Bracken continues: “Newly tacked to the edge of the edge of North America, the port of Vancouver marked the point where Europe comes to its end and gives way to something called ‘Asia.’ But just when it has arrived at its limit and begins to rub against the borders of the ‘East,’ the West folds back to find that even at its end it is still contiguous with itself” (8).

5 The world’s first purpose-built container ship, incidentally, made its inaugural sailing from the Port of North Vancouver to Skagway, Alaska, in November, 1955.

relations visible—no, traversable—by artists. The response to our Call for Submissions was overwhelming. By deadline we had received nearly 900 proposals submitted by artists from as far afield as Sevastopol, Lahore, Sao Paolo, and St. Petersburg. It was immediately clear that what we had initiated was not simply an artist residency, but a powerful framework through which to address the complexity of our contemporary condition. The sea may have been forgotten, but the cargo ship—sailing across a vast and “empty” space of the sea, nearly always invisible to those on shore—seemed to offer artists a near bottomless vessel for the imagination, for narrative, and for cultural critique.

Elsewhere I have written that increasingly, I approach my curatorial practice through the lexicon of choreography: the act of arranging relations between bodies, matter, and ideas in time and space.⁶ While the act of arrangement is itself conscious and considered, the results can never be fully anticipated. The setting-in-motion of these bodies and matter within particular temporal and socio-political coordinates always produces its own set of vital forces. It enables new patterns and relations to come into existence or reveal themselves as recognizable, where previously they were not. With *Twenty-Three Days at Sea*, the moving parts of this dance expand exponentially to encompass the entire compendium of experience and imaginings about the ocean Magellan deemed *Pacifico*: paradise, shipwreck, whaling, and war; sinking islands and nuclear waste; the North Pacific Gyre and the Mariana Trench; the anguish of asylum seekers, of hurricane survivors; exploration and exploit. What might it mean to send a series of artists to rough up the previously “forgotten” and fantasized space of the Pacific? What dense web of responses might manifest from this entirely simple, yet profoundly complex, voyage? For the present moment, only my writing fills this pelagic space as I wait, in anticipation, for others to embark.

The inaugural four artists selected for participation in Twenty-Three Days at Sea—Nour Bishouty, of Beirut, Lebanon; Christopher Boyne, of Montreal; Elisa Ferrari, of Vancouver; and Amaara Raheem, of Melbourne, Australia—will depart for Shanghai on separate voyages on the MV Hanjin Ottawa throughout the coming months of summer 2015.

6 See Kimberly Phillips, “Patterns/Spadework,” *Unsuitable as an Institution: The Tenacity of Access Gallery*, ed. Kimberly Phillips (Vancouver: Access Gallery, 2014), 6–10. My definition of choreography is drawn from Michael Klein, Steve Valk and Jeffrey Gormly, *Book of Recommendations: Choreography as an Aesthetics of Change* (Limerick, Ireland: Daghdha Dance Company, 2008).

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