

The Dark Water She Adores

By Shana Chandra

on breathing with water and with others
in conversation with artist sarah cameron sunde



*She wants me / to refold myself / into my own life. / And, bending close, //
as we all dream of doing, / she rows with her white arms / through the dark water / which she adores.*

— from ‘Moon and Water’ by Mary Oliver

It began with a simple idea of immersion. In 2013, artist Sarah Cameron Sunde walked into a bay in Maine and stood still to let the water lap over her for a full tidal cycle until it reached the base of her neck and receded back into the bay. It was an act of vulnerability and a surrender to the ocean’s power that she felt in the wake of Hurricane Sandy’s devastation of her home city of New York. Since then, Sunde’s performance, *36.5 / A Durational Performance with the Sea*, has grown, as her immersion has covered five iterations in three different countries so far. By immersing herself into the seas of different communities around the world, the language of her performance has become more layered with each tidal cycle. It is at once a piece of activism, a ritual, an homage, a question, and a conversation starter about the vital element that connects us to our intuition, to each other, and to our world—the place we come from and the space we are custodians of.

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Shana Chandra: Where did you grow up, and what was your relationship with the environment like as a child?

Sarah Cameron Sunde: I grew up in California, in the Bay Area, and some of my fondest memories of my childhood [are] being outdoors in the Sierra Nevada mountains. We would go up to [Lake] Tahoe a lot, especially in the winter. My Dad is Norwegian, so my brother and I were on skis at age two. And then we would go backpacking and camping a lot in the summers, so I guess that was my strongest connection to the environment. I was always interested in things that were dealing with the environment. I went to a very alternative elementary school where we had a farm and we all took care of the animals. But being outdoors was always an important aspect for me, even though it was suburban. California is amazing because the access to nature is so close. We were on the peninsula of the Bay Area, so the coast is right there, and you can get to the ocean and the mountains really easily.

But when I went to college, I wanted to work at a national park. I was majoring in theatre, but I decided that my summer had to be somewhere outdoors, and I ended up working at Glacier National Park, where I was cleaning rooms during the daytime. We would finish early, so I could go hiking every day, and I would come back and perform at the cabaret at night, so I had this magical summer. Every time I had a couple of days off, I would go on a longer backpacking trip. This was the summer after my freshman year of college, and I remember saying to myself, ‘Okay, I know I’m going to go to New York and work as an artist there, and if I’m unhappy or don’t feel like I’m getting anywhere after five years, I will go to the middle of nowhere and be a park ranger.’ In my head, that was my plan.

What was your relationship like to water, growing up?

I don’t think I had a super strong relationship with water. I swam, I liked the ocean and going to the beach, but I was never a kid that had to go in the water. The water in the Bay Area is really cold. It’s not warm water. I had a couple of friends, though, that no matter what the temperature of the water, they would take off their clothes and run towards the water whenever we went to the beach. But that wasn’t me. I’ve never been fond of cold water.

So how did water become part of your practice?

Water didn’t really come into my practice until I was an adult, and now it’s a huge part of it. My husband, Edgar, is Dutch, and he’s a water engineer, and I remember him coming to New York and saying, ‘Oh my gosh, New York is so vulnerable. Sometime, there’s going to be a big storm, and New York is not protected from the water.’ This was news to me. I never had really thought about that. New York seemed totally invincible and of course always changing and a space where things would come and go. But I never thought it was vulnerable. Really ... I started to learn about water because of him. We got married in 2012, and when Hurricane Sandy happened that year, I realised what he was talking about. I see how vulnerable we are, and based on my understanding from him, I really had this reckoning where I thought, *Oh, New York may disappear in my lifetime; we may have to abandon the city.* Intellectually, we all know that cities disappear and civilisations fade from history, but the idea that [it] could actually happen to my city blew my mind. I felt it in my body, that potential for drastic change in my lifetime. I couldn’t get that image of New York sinking out of my head, and at the time I was working on another piece about the struggle of an artist to survive in the city. So, I had this image that was replaying in my mind often of an artist running around New York City, trying to make ends meet, and then of the city slowly sinking beneath our feet. And the artist is not noticing.

From this image, how did 36.5 come about?

Nine months after Sandy happened, I was doing an artist’s residency up in Maine, and it was on this bay of water that was really beautiful. I was shocked because the tidal shift there was ten and a half feet, so the water changed the environment so completely. At low tide, it was this mudflat, and at high tide, it [was] this big, beautiful bay of water. And I kept on thinking that they only show you pictures of Maine when the water is at high tide; you never see these low tide pictures. I could not stop watching it. There was something about the way it would look different every time you looked out the window, and I would just sit by the water and watch it change over the course of time. There was one day—it was a Monday—and I was watching the tide come in slowly over the water, and there was this big rock out there. Just over half an hour, I watched this big boulder get

swallowed. It was this real aha moment for me of that being a person out there and getting covered and sinking and getting swallowed by the water, and I thought, *I have to make this image.* I was wondering who I could get to stand there for a full tidal cycle, and I went through all my friends and colleagues and realised no one was going to do it. And I thought, *I’m here now; it’s going to be hard to get here again,* so I just made this decision that I would do it three days later.

So, it came together very quickly, without a lot of preparation, and I honestly had no idea if I was able to stay there [in the water]. I had people helping, and we devised all these plans. I told the fire department in this small little town in Maine that I was doing this dangerous thing. I didn’t want to risk my life, but I knew it was going to be hard, so we did everything we could to try and make it work. Crazy, the water was really cold, and I definitely wasn’t wearing the right gear, but I managed to stay there the whole time, thanks to the support of the other artists who were there watching me. It was really low-key, tech-wise. We had a camera that got set up, but it wasn’t even a time lapse. I have nine photos that remain that survived from the documentation of that.

Was there a pivotal moment for you when you were out there in that first performance?

A couple of important things happened. It was so cold and so uncomfortable, but I was trying to be deeply in my centres and take it all in. I remember very distinctly watching the moon rise later, up above the trees and into the sky, and considering how the moon was pulling the water where I was and how the moon is controlling the forces in the water all over the world. There was one moment where I looked down at the current, and I was with that for a while, and then I looked up and the moon had moved an inch from my perspective, and I thought, *How did I miss this moment?* It was that overwhelming thing that you can’t possibly take it all in; there was so much to witness and observe and to sense and to feel. That was really powerful for me. And then realising that this drop of water that is touching my skin has been here for so long and will be here for so long, and it could have been on the tip of New Zealand at some point. Besides the moon just pulling us, we are all actually connected through the water. So, this question that I am asking about climate change and sea level rise is how it impacts and affects my city—me individually—[but also] how it affects people all over the world. There was a question about this small, individual action in relationship to the rest of the world. That has really become, for me, my core question: looking at that parallel between the struggle of an individual to survive on a daily basis and the struggle for humanity to survive in the face of sea level rise and climate change.

When did you start entertaining the idea of becoming an artist?

I never questioned that I was an artist in some way. I was very focused on music and performance when I was growing up; I was singing and playing piano, and [I] studied theatre from a young age. I ended up going to UCLA to study theatre, and in my junior year when I was abroad in England, I turned into a director. Just creating from that perspective in England, the education that I got there in terms of theatre traditions was very European-based—the director creating something from scratch—which was very mind-opening for me. After I graduated from UCLA, I went back to England to direct a performance with a colleague and then moved to New York. I don’t remember questioning it. At some point in high school, I told my friend that I’d move to New York and that never changed.

For the first ten years of my career in New York, I was really hustling as a theatre director and did really well and had some amazing opportunities. But around 2010, my practice started moving towards the visual arts perspective. The theatre world that I had landed in was heavy and was text-based, and I realised that was not where I was supposed to be for my sensibilities. I’m very visual. I had this realisation that I needed to push my work in a different direction, so that’s when I moved to live art collaborations with artists of different disciplines. From there, I formed this collective called Lydian Junction, which was me as a director with an actor, a dancer, a video artist, and a composer. We would make wild, crazy stuff that was a balance between really choreographed precision and improvised impulses and actions. It began as an experiment and became a practice that we really engaged in, and that’s the group I was working with when I was focusing on

survival as an artist. For me, the work of Lydian Junction really led me to the work for *36.5*.

I was really craving to learn more about performance from a visual art perspective, so I went back to school and did an MFA in digital and interdisciplinary digital art practice. That was in 2014 and after *36.5* started, but [it] was really helpful to me because it gave me that grounding and the ability to frame the work from a visual art perspective and [to] feel that I could own that. Without that training, I would've been hesitant to claim that. The biggest thing that came out of that was the decision to make the *36.5* video work become an autonomous work of art that is equally [as] important as the performance. Each work consists of the performance and the video work, as opposed to the video just being documentation.

How has your background as a theatre director informed your art?

I think of myself as an artist who is working at the intersection of performance art, video art, and public art. I know that I'm a performance artist in this moment, but I don't anticipate making a lot more work like this after this series is done ... because I don't actually like to perform. This piece has required me to put my own body into that space, and I'm happy to do that because that's what the work needs me to do. So, it's really conceptual for me, and the conceptual is a key thing. Part of that concept is that it requires my body in the sea. It's the game-changer project for me. It's very interesting to me, actually, when I consider my relationship to my career as a director, because I have a couple of actors and performers that I worked with [who] laugh because I always ask people to use their bodies. I have one friend who laughs and says, 'You made me do some crazy shit, but the fact that you're doing this, you're hardcore because you will actually do it.'

There's a lot of politics around what power and hierarchy happens in the theatre, and I think that dynamic between director and performer can be challenging. So, in some ways, this for me was about putting myself in the space of real, true vulnerability as a performer, even though I don't like to be the person [being] watched. But then, I did it the first time, and it needs to stay being my body as I go through this series.

You have to be uncomfortable because that's the point of the piece.

Exactly. The struggle, the discomfort is a big theme and point of the work. We have to be uncomfortable. Change is not comfortable. We actually have to accept our discomfort, find a way to move through it, and come out on the other side as stronger, more thoughtful, more sensitive people. We live in a time where there are too many comforts; there is so much comfort that is unnecessary. We take for granted so much of how we exist right now.

I think that comfort can be distracting. It takes you away. If you are uncomfortable, then you have something to focus on and something to learn from.

Yes, that's life. For other species, life is not all peachy. I think there's a problem because those comforts are what is hurting the planet. And our disassociation from nature and from water and the elements is really problematic in this moment in time.

What are the other catalysts that have informed your work?

I've connected with a lot of other artists who are making work on or with the water. In 2017, I had a space where I ended up being able to curate and invite a bunch of other artists to show work that was all based on water, and this comes out of this recognition that more and more artists are taking to the water post-Sandy. Also that there's this growing awareness of the environment. There's a palpable shift with the amount of people that are talking about sea level rise now versus in 2013. Most people didn't have that in their daily consciousness. Now, I feel that with our current administration, there's so much more activism.

I, along with some of my fellow artists, we're trying to make a case that art is taking to the water in response to ecological change in a similar way to land art in the 1960s and early 1970s when they were getting outside of the city and going and making work outside with the earth. This is our parallel moment. I have co-founded an organisation called Works on Water that is trying to frame [this] as a movement that's happening right now in the US and also around the world. [and] that community is definitely informing the

work. Because we noticed there were a lot of people talking about and thinking about the same things. But now, of course, it [also] informs the way that the project moves forward.

When I was in the Netherlands and working with a visual arts curator, he gave me feedback, which was that I know how to create an event in space. That is my medium. I'm always thinking about the audience in some way. So, this piece has grown really slowly, but there's a couple of elements, a performance of hand signals, that the public is invited to participate in, and that changes with each location.

How has having the public participating in your work enriched it?

There's the musical element. In San Francisco, it began with a saxophonist. It's all about who I meet and who connects with the piece, and it's all about joining in. He was a caretaker of a house nearby where I was performing. I heard he played the saxophone, and I said that I had this image—when the hand signals were telling me the time—of a saxophone popping up at different parts of the bay and playing. He was noncommittal, but then he showed up for that first moment when I walked into the water. I didn't know if he was going to stick around, but then I heard him [play] halfway through, around high tide. I didn't know where he was, but I could hear him somewhere in the distance, and then [at] around 9 p.m. that night, just before going into the last hour, I was really cold and starting to get really depressed, and I noticed that most people on the shore had gone. There had been a steady flow [of spectators] all day, but it was getting really late, and there were only a few people there. And then I heard him somewhere in the distance. I heard him play, and I thought, *John is still with me; I can do this*. Then lots of people came back, and he played for the final five minutes when I walked out of the water.

So, it's sort of this combination of serendipity and connecting as well as planning it, but also letting go of control. That's one thing that is also hard for me because I'm used to controlling what happens, but that's what this is about for me too. I can plan all I want, but once the piece starts, I can't control everything, so I have to trust that whoever is on the shore is going to help and execute. What I notice is that people do; they always want to make it go well, and it always turns out differently than according to plan, but that's the beauty of it. There're problems, but we survive.

You use the metaphor of the rising sea of the artistic struggle as well. Artists can be engulfed by their work at times—sometimes suffocated or even drowned by it. But also, the tide going back out again, it reveals who they are and aids in their resilience. I'm drawn to the image you described before, of Manhattan sinking and the artist within it running around hustling, hustling. Can you tell me anything more about this?

When I first had the idea, I thought somebody must have done this before me. I can't be the first person in the world, the first artist, who's tried to do this. But then I really looked around, and [while there are] definitely references, I couldn't find anyone who's actually done it before. There are statues that are with the tide, but nothing living, and for me, it's about that living person. The reason why I wear the red dress is that the image is about people who aren't ready for it, who are not expecting the water to rise.

It's interesting what you say about the water going back down and something new being revealed, because I've had people who are hardcore environmentalists say, 'Why don't you get out [of the water] at high tide?' [But] the point is that it's rising and we're all going to die. But I do have hope that we as a people [will] figure out how to survive. It's going to be really hard, and that's the struggle. But I really do have hope that we will get through it and we will be changed because of that. I like to look at the micro and the macro and think about things in the long term. I find comfort in this idea that what I find challenging right now, humans throughout time have felt challenged in similar or maybe much more difficult ways, and we as a people, we're just little parts of a bigger whole. If we can consider ourselves and our experience in a way that can help inform communities as the world looks at this issue... I really believe if everybody stood in the water with me for a while that actually it would be a game changer. We would figure it out. When you just stand still ... and you feel the water shift, you can't help but take it all in.

When I was in the Netherlands, I had three older men come to me. And they

all said to me on three separate occasions that they were changed [by] that experience of standing with me and they didn't expect to be changed. So, I believe [in] that experience—and making it a bodily experience as opposed to an intellectual experience is so key. There's so much intellectual discourse about these challenges, but I also think we need to feel it in our bodies in a way, especially in urban environments and cities because we're not thinking about that. That act of embodiment and considering it with your senses and not with your brain is really key.

It's our source of connection. We can all have different ideas, but we all have bodies, and to be able to feel it viscerally, that is a source of connection between people. It's so interesting that when we do go into the water, we're so busy swimming or moving about. What is it like to stand in the sea for a full tidal cycle? How does it affect you physically, how do you prepare for it, and how has it changed within each of these iterations?

Physically, it is challenging. What I've learnt is that it sounds like it's an amazing feat and it does take a lot of effort on my part, but it's important to note that I'm not a fan of cold water, [so] if I can do it, anyone can do it. At the beginning, it's hard because of gravity—just standing for that amount of time. But when the water comes, because of the salt, it makes me buoyant. So it's actually a relief when the water first comes because there's the weight not on my legs anymore. Then, as it goes up to my neck, it starts to get cold, so the discomfort comes [in] being cold for the rest of the time. But I have also learnt how to breathe in different ways through it.

The most important preparation for me is spending time with that water before I actually do it. I won't ever do a long stand [beforehand], but I'll spend an hour or two in the water or on the shore, just watching. I have to really figure out where I [will] stand, and my getting to know the water is actually more important [than] getting to know the charts because once I start to understand how it functions, then I can better estimate where I need to be so that it can go up to my neck. I learnt that especially in the Netherlands because I was working with an engineer, so I had the most support. I had very clear predictions of exactly what was going to happen, but it turned out to be sort of wrong, and you realise that all of those predictions are predictions. Trusting my knowledge of the water is actually way more important. Understanding that, actually, I can get to know the water in a real way, and I can understand it better than science, which codifies it in a different way.

To me, there's a strong ritualistic aspect of *36.5*: the repetitiveness of action, the homage to the natural world, the immersion in the sea. Is there an element of ritual for you when you perform this piece?

In relationship to breathing, I started remembering how you see the water rise over my body but you kind of see it go up and down, and when it laps on the shore, it is definitely breathing. That was a big realisation for me. The breath of the water and me breathing with the water—this idea of being in partnership with the water and breathing with the water feels like a big part of the ritual.

The other thing that struck me was that I'm not a person of routine at all. I rebel against routine, and I'm always fascinated by people who are very strict with routine. [So,] playing in my mind in 2013 [were] these questions about daily routines in relation to the struggle of an artist. One of the things I was so struck by is people [who] live their lives based on the moon, not on the sun. Because people who live by the water, who live by the tides, like the fisherman, people who are that deeply connected to the water, they are planning their day on the cycle of the moon, not the sun. And I realised I was meant to be one of those people because it's different every day. It's a whole other arm of meaning for me in the project. It's about letting the ritual come, based on other elements, not the ones we are told have to be at play when you do something. It's about finding my own way of relating to repeated action. In some ways, maybe, this is for me the crazy power that I've created: this ritual for myself, based on the rules that I've set up, and that I have to do this because I said I would do these six versions around the world after I did the first three in the US. That is my ritual, and I have committed myself to doing it ... and I will do it in whatever form it takes.

When you're in the water, does one sense often take over? Do you succumb to that sense, or are you actively concentrating on another?

I have memories of going, *There's something very interesting going on over there; watch that*, but trying to also pay attention to what the current is [doing] on my body over here. It's fun. I will go through a cycle of the different senses, and I play a little game with myself where I try to be aware of them all. But then I also let it all go.

The other thing that I'm actively doing, both when I'm out there but also in the preparation phase, is ... [engaging] in this long-term thinking. I'm thinking about it in relation to what has happened in this space: what has been here, and how have things changed, and what will be here in the future, and thinking way beyond—ten thousand years—what will this space be like?

Trying to access the DNA of the land.

Yes, and the water. And accept that it is changing, it's always changing, and everything is temporary. That's a big theme for me. By engaging in those ideas in this project, it definitely affects everything that I do in my life. That's my intuition. I feel like the project has become a touchpoint for me in terms of what my beliefs are and how I function in the world.

Where is your favourite place to watch the ocean?

Wherever I am. If I have [to choose] one place, I think about the ocean that I was connected to when I was little, which is at Half Moon Bay on the Northern Californian coast. Those beaches have cliffs and there's lots of waves and cold, cold water. If I picture any place [where I'm] watching the ocean, that's where I am. That deep memory of growing up.

I wouldn't say that I always make an effort to go watch the ocean. But one of the things that happened to me since I started this project is that I try to be aware of it when I'm in my apartment in New York. I actually started this other offshoot project that I want to come back to, but I'm really interested in this idea that we can train ourselves to be much more in tune with the tidal shifts, and that if we were to do that, then we would all be more respectful and it would change our experience of the world. I did a little experiment last year where I was trying to track the tides and schedule my life based on the tides. So I was tracking it with an app on my phone. It was really interesting because I'd lose track of the time, but then often I'd check and wonder where we were in the cycle, and it would often be either at high tide or low tide. I have a dream that I'll be able to time myself so that I'll always know.

What is your favourite sound during your performance?

I really love hearing but not hearing conversations happening on the shore. Another big realisation I had in the Netherlands was that I had this moment where I had all of these conversations happening but I couldn't hear what they were saying, and I wanted to hear what they were talking about. And then I realised that I'm not supposed to know what they're talking about. I'm creating this image so that other people talk to each other. That's my role here. Creating an image and a visual and a happening that allows other people to be in conversation with each other about it. Of all the sounds of just being with the water lapping slowly, knowing that people are talking to each other is probably my favourite sound.

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