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ENVIRONMENTAL ART FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

In the spring of 2016, there was a conversation brewing in New York City within a community of artists who make work on, in, and with the water. As artists were increasingly turning to bodies of water as a site and/or a material, there was an acknowledged need to frame this practice as a movement.

Artist and urban interventionist Eve Mosher formed an online group of “urban water-makers” and invited colleagues to share resources. Artist Nancy Nowacek suggested the need for a biennial. We all saw a strong need for multidisciplinary thinking and cross-sector collaboration.

At the same time, New Georges, the downtown theater company where I was Deputy Artistic Director (2001–2017), was beginning to plan a production at 3LD Art & Technology Center focusing on the global water crisis. The theater artists creating the play wanted their project to speak within a larger context. I saw an opportunity to bring these works into conversation with each other: visual art and theatrical performance in the same space; artists in dialogue with scientists, urban planners, and other practitioners—all addressing the increasingly urgent topic of water. New Georges was brave enough to let me run with the idea, and we jumped into the planning process of creating a large-scale interdisciplinary event that became an inaugural triennial, *Works on Water: 26 Days of Art and Theater*, in June 2017.

The *Works on Water* curatorial team formed organically. We are all cultural producers with big vision: Nancy and Eve are both solidly rooted in the visual arts community and have many years of experience working with New York City’s waterways. My own artwork lives at the intersection of visual art and performance, and Hurricane Sandy had turned me toward the sea. Clarinda Mac Low and Katie Pearl both have strong histories of making socially engaged performance work. Emily Blumenfeld offers an art-historical perspective and comes with extensive experience curating and producing public art.

In the fall of 2016, a few of us formed a working group through the School of Apocalypse at Pioneer Works to interrogate our intuitive sense of what we had started to call “Works on Water” or “Water Art.” We wondered: who else was making work on, in, or with the water? How could we frame our emerging practices for a wider public? Over the course of three months, we collected over 200 projects that defined themselves as Water Art. We theorized, debated, and narrowed the scope by mapping (both geographically and relationally) the projects that fit our criteria:

The work must meet BOTH of the following conditions:

1. The work self-defines, first and foremost, as art.
2. A body (or bodies) of water is central to the work’s concept.

Additionally, the work recognizes that water is alive and dynamic, and therefore experiential rather than representational. It must meet at least ONE of the following conditions:

1. If object-based, a body of water (and/or its shorelines) is used as MATERIAL in the physical production of the work.
2. If time-based, a body of water and/or its shorelines is the SITE for the work, functioning as a “stage” and/or a central “character” that embodies the temporality and/or spatiality of the work.

Underlying these criteria is the idea that Water Art is a direct descendant of Land Art. Just as artists in the late 1960s and early 70s

were responding to a new awareness of the environment by getting out of cities to make large-scale works with the earth, artists today are responding to the new reality of climate change and ecological threat by getting out of buildings to make works in collaboration with the water.

Robert Smithson advocated “for an art that takes into account the direct effect of the elements as they exist from day to day apart from representation.”¹ Today, water artists are creating live artworks that do just that: we investigate scale and duration in site-specific locations, putting our bodies in direct relationship to the water, often in urban areas, with a goal of connecting to local communities. These commitments place water art in conversation with Land Art, Performance Art, and socially-engaged public art. But while the monumental interventions of land artists marked the earth, shaping it for generations to come, the large-scale conceptual works of water artists acknowledge urgency in the time-scale. The execution of the works is more ephemeral—happening over the course of a day or a month or an hour, often shifting human consciousness around the water on a person-to-person scale.

3LD Art & Technology Center occupies a large space in downtown Manhattan on the site of a former parking lot owned by the MTA. It is located on the west side of Greenwich Street, just south of Rector. In the 1600s, this was the shoreline where land met the sea. When Hurricane Sandy hit New York City in 2012, much of this area was once again underwater. At the intersection of New York’s past, present, and future, this was a perfect space to situate these artworks in June 2017.

Studio A at 3LD is 4,500 square-feet of raw concrete. It is a flexible space that artists can configure to serve their projects. As we designed the exhibition and performance space for *Works on Water*, there were two major concerns. We wanted to place the visual art and the theater in conversation with one another, so we had to devise a method of transitioning between exhibition and performance in a matter of minutes. To unify the space, we covered the entire floor in raw particle board, where two artists painted a sprawling, minimalist map of the waterways with tendrils connecting all the works. Then we choreographed a smooth transition, so the entire exhibition could go from dormant to awake and vice versa in a matter of minutes.

From a curatorial perspective, the major challenge was how to exhibit each of these large-scale, site-based, socially-engaged artworks indoors in a way that retained their dynamic nature. Indoor exhibitions that involve public art often consist of documentation of the original artwork. We wanted to challenge this norm and instead create “portals into the complexity of the work as it exists outdoors,” as artist-curator Clarinda Mac Low suggested. We challenged the artists to translate their work into an experiential gallery space that was constantly in flux, just like water.

Over the course of twenty-six days, we exhibited ten commissioned artworks; produced twelve expeditions to works in the field, from Coney Island Creek to Newtown Creek to South Cove; convened ten conversations with the community; worked side-by-side with New Georges as they developed the world-premiere of a new play; and hosted four workshops of work-in-development by resident artists at New Georges. We also launched the Power of Ten, a workshop platform pairing artists and scientists, and held several parties and other pop-up events. The space was activated constantly.

In recent years, there have been several exhibitions focused on water, including *Current: LA Water*, the 2016 Los Angeles public art biennial that featured many socially-engaged, site-specific works, and *Radical Seafaring*, a widely-acclaimed 2016 exhibition at the Parish Museum in Water Mill, NY, featuring many boat-based works. The curator of *Radical Seafaring*, Andrea Grover, acknowledged a palpable shift in the art world, calling it an “offshore movement.” The *Works on Water* triennial differentiates itself from these exhibitions by being artist-driven and organized. *Works on Water* artists are defining this emerging field through rigorous individual practices and framing it collectively. Making work “on, in, and with the water” refers to prioritizing the depth of engagement between the human body and the environment.

Across a wide range of fields, including biology, technology, philosophy, political theory, and eco-criticism, contemporary theorists such as Una Chaudhuri, Jane Bennett, Stacy Alaimo, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and Timothy Morton, are decentering the human. Instead, they present a worldview that considers other species and objects as equals, advocating for direct collaboration with them.

Collaborating with the water means acknowledging our smallness, letting go of control, trusting the weather, and practicing patience. It also means being in our bodies and remaining open to the experience. Unlike Land Art and other, earlier movements, Water Art is distinct for the number of women working in this field. Engaging with water as a collaborator, rather than from a position of dominance, water artists open possibilities for a feminist discourse that prioritizes interdependence and community over individuality.

This catalogue will serve as a historical record of what we made together in June 2017. Art historian Charlotte Eyerman offers a broad historical

context for the exhibition, and Nicole Miller of *Underwater New York* frames her experience of the month-long event as a “heterotopia.” I am grateful to New Georges, 3LD Art & Technology Center, Guerilla Science, and Arts Brookfield for their game spirit and partnership and humbled by the brilliance of my artist-curator colleagues. Like all Water Art, collaboration is the key.

In the summer and fall of 2018, we will occupy House 5B in Nolan Park on Governors Island, together with *Underwater New York*, our collaborators on this catalogue. Our plan is to keep building a global community of diverse practitioners working with the water, to incubate new projects, and to work towards the next triennial in 2020.

1. Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1996) 155.