

The Art of Ocean Research: Artistic Inquiry and Ways of Seeing Oceanic Life

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Abstract

This thematic issue explores the possibilities offered by the optics of artistic production for gaining a better understanding of the social, ecological, and political dimensions of oceanic life. It argues that such inquiry can enhance epistemic plurality by accommodating underrepresented perceptions, experiences, and interpretations in research processes. Art has always played an important role in depicting and exploring the manifold dynamics of the oceans and has contributed to a better understanding of human relationships with these environments. When employed as an autonomous mode of knowledge production and guided by specific research questions, artistic practice can intervene in hegemonic canons and bring to light previously unexplored aspects of human engagement with the seas. This thematic issue addresses these developments through a series of complementary contributions that employ participatory, interventionist, analytical, and poetic methods to examine the interface between ocean and society and outline an emerging repertoire of artistic research approaches that shed new light on life in and around the oceans.

Keywords

art; artistic research; collective knowledge production; creativity; media; ocean studies; participation; representation; visualisation

1. Artistic Research and the Oceanic Turn

Oceans are commonly perceived as unstable entities constantly changing in appearance due to fluctuating water levels, clarity, and surface currents. Unlike marine species, humans are unable to access oceans for

longer periods of time without the aid of technical devices such as floats, vessels, and submersibles. Humanity's land-bound nature has often been reflected in the portrayal of oceans as wild and in need of taming. Throughout the centuries, artistic works have given visual form to the human struggle with the ocean's raw and unpredictable forces. There is a long tradition of artistic practices that depict such attempts to tame this mysterious quantity and integrate its elusive dynamics into broader areas of inquiry. Such artistic practices approach oceans as territory (geography), as materiality (physicality), and as ecology (system). This plurality of perspectives is evident across a wide range of artistic works: from classical maritime imagery to William Turner's paintings of slave ships and whalers, from impressionist seascapes to new media installations engaging with oceanic environments.

The task of mapping and representing oceans and their transformations has long been at the heart of marine research, not least because Western mythology has long framed oceans and ocean life as a trope of the unseeable and hence, unknowable. In recent years, amidst global transformations and an awakening scholarly interest in "disorderly entities" (Helmreich, 2023), "hyperobjects" (Morton, 2013), and "watery embodiment" (Neimanis, 2017), new imaginaries of ocean life have emerged. These developments coincide with a rise in artistic research that has gained significant traction over the last two decades. Theorising different kinds of mobilities across biotic, political and (post)colonial boundaries, as well as critical, eco-feminist ontologies of the sea, the oceanic turn in the humanities and social sciences (Deloughrey, 2016), in particular, has unleashed a wave of artistic research that aims to forge new ways of seeing marine life. As Borgdorff (2012, p. 148) has pointed out with regard to artistic knowledge production: "works of art and artistic practices are not self-contained; they are situated and embedded." This embeddedness positions art both as an agentic sphere of practice within ongoing processes of cultural, social, and economic transformation and as an independent form of knowledge production distinct from other research traditions. Combining these dual capacities of research in and through art practice, the Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research, a policy paper developed by major players currently active in the field of artistic research in Europe, has sought to define this confluence of aesthetic experience, creative practice, artistic production, and reflective engagement as "epistemic inquiry directed towards increasing knowledge, insight, understanding and skills" (Society for Artistic Research, 2020, p. 1). Like all research traditions, artistic research is the subject of ongoing debates concerning its institutions, methodologies, forms, and objectives. Yet in practice, it often thrives in transdisciplinary settings, where its emerging set of approaches is combined with methods developed in other research traditions.

Since the seminal project *Solid Sea* by the collective Multiplicity—presented at Documenta 11 in Kassel in 2002—which explored the intersecting yet disconnected routes of tourists, migrants, seafarers, and others, there has been a steady growth of artistic research seeking to visualise the complexities of life in, on, and around oceans. This growing engagement is reflected in the development of numerous new PhD programmes in artistic research around the world—sometimes offered jointly by art institutions and universities of the social sciences or humanities—in which oceanic research plays an important role. The significance of this development is evident in initiatives such as Forensic Oceanography, a collaborative project between Lorenzo Pezzani and Charles Heller, which developed out of forensic architecture, the human rights-oriented research agency based at Goldsmiths, University of London. Another notable example is Ocean Space, an initiative launched and directed by TBA21-Academy. Through its high-profile exhibition programme in Venice, Ocean Space offers a collaborative platform for oceanic imagination and activism. Among its landmark shows is *Oceans in Transformation* (presented in 2021), an expensive

multi-screen installation by Territorial Agency (Ann-Sofi Rönnskog and John Palmesino) focusing on the integration of science, architecture, and art in the analysis of planetary changes.

This thematic issue seeks to chart the new perspectives artistic research can contribute to the evolving discourse on oceans and society by tracking the breadth and scope of key works and practices in this field, while also identifying potential new avenues opened up by current research. This does not imply any claim to an exhaustive analysis of contemporary artistic research into oceanic life. The aim here is rather to advance current discussions around the complexities of oceanic life today and to engage with the possibilities that different approaches within artistic research are opening up within these debates.

2. Approaches in Artistic Research and Contributions to this Thematic Issue

The articles presented in this thematic issue examine current societal, ecological, and political issues that shape life in and around the oceans, and highlight different aspects of artistic research that distinguish this approach from other research traditions. Taken together, the texts delineate a field of interventions within the existing canon of marine research, drawing attention to the novel perspectives and principles that artistic research is bringing to bear on the study of the oceans.

2.1. *Concepts Emerging in and Through Art Practice*

At the core of Mörténböck's article "Ocean as Metaphor and Embodiment" is a close dialogue with art practices and their political agency. Drawing on the spectacular data-driven artistic practice of Refik Anadol, this article questions the uncritical instrumentalisation of figurative terms and metaphors commonly associated with the ocean's currents, particularly notions of fluidity and liquefaction. These metaphors, Mörténböck argues, are mobilised as leitmotifs in contemporary discourses of social transformation to soothe pervasive feelings of instability, insecurity, and loss of control that have emerged in response to an ongoing fragmentation of social cohesion. The article challenges such eye-pleasing artistic approaches by foregrounding the work of artists such as Liam Young, Ursula Biemann, and the Otolith Group, whose practices insist on the necessity of embodiment and material presence. These artists situate societal transformation within oceanic environments fractured by the historical and material forces of planetary ecological crises, colonial extractivism, and cultural imperialism.

2.2. *Aesthetic Interventions in Existing Narratives and Imaginaries*

One of the ways in which artistic research generates new forms of knowledge about marine habitats is by intervening in the imaginaries that guide our perception of the oceans and our interactions with them. Mooshammer's text "Decolonising Ocean Matter" questions the validity of the vision of the high seas as one of the most symbolically laden forms of global commons. He traces how the long tradition of colonial displacement and exploitation has turned oceans into a perpetual frontier—an arena contested by numerous interests, all of which violently interfere with marine ecologies in pursuit of power and control. He argues that contemporary practices of marine resource extraction are often disguised as scientific endeavours in the service of humanity in order to distract from what are in fact neo-colonial aspirations. Challenging such possessive, anthropocentric investments in oceanic territories, he uses the example of the long-term collaborative art project *World of Matter* (2011–2016) to show how artistic research can not only produce

knowledge about exploitative processes, but also, often in collaboration with local communities, generate decolonial narratives and imaginaries that point the way towards alternative futures.

2.3. Participatory Action and Collective Knowledge Production

Various forms of civic participation in artistic research processes are the focus of the articles “From Riverbank to Ocean: Involving Young Generations With Their Territory Through Artistic Practices” by Ana Clara Roberti, Kim von Schönfeld, and Rui Monteiro and “Komuna Maro: Artistic Research as Collective Knowledge Production in a Capitalocene Seascape” by Ana Jeinic. For Roberti, Schönfeld, and Monteiro, artistic research is a way of providing schoolchildren with a platform to engage meaningfully with the natural and cultural water heritage of their surroundings. They describe how they worked with school classes in Portugal’s northern coastal regions to explore the significance of proximity to the sea and the role of water in everyday life. The authors contend that the use of different artistic formats, such as new digital media, illustration, wood construction, plastic arts, and painting, played an important role in supporting participation processes and stimulating creative interventions. Intergenerational workshops, in which participants shared their own images, texts, and poems with others, facilitated dialogue, participants’ connections to the environment, and helped contextualise local social, economic, and ecological challenges. Based on the artworks, documents, and materials that emerged in this process, the article concludes that this creative approach has led to greater awareness and appreciation of endangered heritage and created a holistic basis for younger generations to care for their environments. Art as a means of collective knowledge production plays a similarly important role in Ana Jeinic’s analyses of contested marine and coastal environments. Her article engages with networks of marine communities, technologies, and infrastructures in the northern Adriatic and focuses on epistemic and methodological approaches developed in the artistic research project Komuna Maro, which means “common sea” in Esperanto (2023–2027). This project employs three symbolic “levels of perception”—the atmospheric, the littoral, and the submarine—which are interwoven in the production of experimental cartographies. These maps are intertwined with crowdsourced online maps, satellite data, and diverse artistic research approaches, including art photography and videography, communication design, and multimedia installation, to make visible hidden structures and dynamics within maritime ecosystems. The article describes how, in this process, participants from groups as diverse as fishermen, activists, policymakers, and planners act as informants, interlocutors, and co-creators in the formation of a critical atlas of the northern Adriatic.

2.4. Community Entanglement, Civic Engagement, and World Building

Examining the intersection of natural catastrophe, post-disaster development and artistic representation in coastal regions subject to ongoing threat, Hakan Topal’s contribution to this issue moves away from a direct involvement of local communities in the research process in order to critically reflect on the tension between affirming and unsettling the notion of community—a space in which the political force and ethical urgency of artistic practice can be situated. Topal deals with the complex vulnerabilities and entanglements of communities in areas impacted by natural disasters and focuses on the quiet, intimate, and slow responses of those living through aftermaths, which are often overshadowed by the monumental gestures of rapid reconstruction and technological mastery inherent in post-disaster coastal fortifications. Drawing on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and extensive on-site research in Miyagi Prefecture after the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, he examines how the subdued sentiments and voices of local communities

can be given space in artistic engagement that aims at revealing the “unseen” and “unspoken” aspects of the disaster.

2.5. Poetry, Fiction, and Art Writing

The final article by Ayesha Hameed and Jol Thoms takes the form of a poetic examination of issues of loss, grief, and ecological collapse rooted in a visit to Lamu, an island just off the coast of Kenya that once served as a key port within the Indian Ocean trade network. The text expresses feelings of bodily, haptic connection to the smell, sound, textures, shapes, and colours of marine and terrestrial matter and its entanglement with layers of mournful personal, ecological, and political history. Echoing artistic (research) practices such as fictioning (Burrows & O’Sullivan, 2019)—an experimental practice in which new forms of existence are created or anticipated through performances, diagrams, or assemblages—Hameed and Thoms use their composition of short texts and photographs to create space for alternative ways of experiencing and understanding marine regions. Their work makes visible new connections between lived experiences, material practices, planetary change, the shelter of political consensus, and the burden of impending oceanic collapse.

3. Making the Currents of Artistic Research Tangible

The artistic investigations presented in this thematic issue contribute to charting new paths for research at the intersection of ocean and society that seeks to adopt previously overlooked, neglected, or suppressed perspectives and engage more accurately, inclusively, and sustainably with pressing contemporary issues. The effects of the currents set in motion by artistic research are already being felt in many forums, both within and outside the academic world, not least in transdisciplinary discussions addressing the environmental changes driven by ocean degradation. The narrative and dialogical dimensions of artistic research play a crucial role in illuminating the social aspects of marine research and promoting its transdisciplinary relevance and political impact.

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Conflict of Interests

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