

SEPTEMBER 9 - OCTOBER 28, 2017
TWENTY-THREE DAYS AT SEA, CHAPTER TWO

MICHAEL DREBERT
LILI HUSTON-HERTERICH
REBECCA MOSS
SIKARNT SKOOLISARIYAPORN

CURATED BY KIMBERLY PHILLIPS

The term “emergent” is an anchor point in Access Gallery’s reason for being: our mandate asserts that the organization exists to support “emergent” practices. On the surface of things, this means that we work with early-career artists, but historic definitions of the term offer a far more compelling frame for my understanding of what we do. Centuries ago, that which was “emergent” referred to something rising out of a surrounding medium and unexpectedly coming into view. As such, its sudden presence demanded immediate attention. At Access we spend a great deal of time thinking about how to create the conditions that might allow for such emergence. Through what medium must a set of ideas, issues, or forms pass, in order to arrest attention?

Twenty-Three Days at Sea is one such effort to address these questions. Organized by Access Gallery in partnership with the Burrard Arts Foundation and the Contemporary Art Gallery, it is at once an unconventional travelling artist residency, a two-year curatorial initiative, and a critical consideration of the ocean as an emergent space. This program offers selected visual artists passage aboard container ships sailing from Vancouver to Shanghai. Crossing the Pacific Ocean on a freighter takes approximately 23 days, during which time we consider the artists to be “in residence” aboard the vessel. The residents are charged with generating a new body of work in response to the voyage, and with creating a logbook that stands as a record of their crossing.

The idea for this residency project was provoked in part by the fact that Access Gallery is a small, publicly-funded organization based in a city whose notorious real estate market renders the spatial demands of a traditional residency exceedingly difficult to realize. Because we lacked the capacity to host artists on Vancouver’s *terra firma* for any meaningful length of time, one might say (cynically or otherwise) that we cast our thinking out to sea. But far more importantly, Twenty-Three Days at Sea offered the opportunity to ask an important set of questions relevant to our own socio-political coordinates in a major port city on the Pacific Rim: How can art responsibly bring visibility to systems within which we are implicated, but which we neither see clearly nor fully understand? How might this residency draw attention to and query romanticism about the role of the artist as “witness”? What is the role of artist residencies in today’s increasingly peripatetic and globalized art world? What does risk mean in artistic practice today?

Though it impacts every aspect of contemporary life, the global shipping industry (here as everywhere) is nearly invisible. Historic ports—once inextricable from city life—have now been replaced by vast container terminals far removed from urban centres. The phenomenon of containerization itself has abstracted and concealed the visual (and olfactory) cacophony of freighted goods. Thus in many ways the sea, as the late artist Allan Sekula famously stated, has become a “forgotten space.”¹ By embedding artists within the system of global sea-borne freight, and offering them the opportunity to consider and respond to it, we proposed a means through which to render that system—and its spaces—visible.

The exhibition Twenty-Three Days at Sea, Chapter Two presents new bodies of work by the residency’s second series of four artists—Michael Drebert, Lili Huston-Herterich, Rebecca Moss and Sikarnt Skoolisariyaporn—produced in response to their respective weeks spent on the open sea in 2016-17. Their works on exhibition do not directly convey their experiences on the container vessels. Rather, through sculpture, sound, and video, they query the complexity of witnessing, explore the currency of labour and song aboard ship, examine the Bergsonian comedy of the global system of seaborne freight, and meditate on the sea as a space of compressed (and perpetually repeating) spacetime.

Michael Drebert’s artistic practice is founded on an intense curi-

osity about the natural world. Potentiality figures strongly in his work, an integral part of which is to bear witness: to simply be in the physical and material presence of particular geographies, plants, or animals. Shortly before his departure, Drebert learned that the purple varnish clam (*Nuttalia obscurata*), a familiar sight along northwest coast shorelines and recognizable for its distinctive lavender-coloured inner shell, was in fact a very recent arrival there. Native to the shoreline of eastern China, Taiwan, and Japan, the clams were first observed in Vancouver in the early 1990s, having been transported accidentally in the ballast water of container ships travelling from Asia. Interestingly, scientists are not yet classifying the purple varnish clam as an invasive species on Vancouver beaches, because (so far at least) it appears to co-exist quite amicably with other organisms (it buries deeper than co-occurring species and uses different feeding modes). Drebert had been gathering purple varnish clam shells from local beaches for a number of years, and decided that his collection should accompany him on his voyage across the Pacific. The residency then became an opportunity to reconnect these clams to their former homeland. As his vessel passed through their native waters, the artist methodically released the shells overboard, beginning off the coast of Japan and ending with the last remaining clam shell thrown from the ship in the harbour of Ningbo, as Drebert disembarked the ship.

Drebert’s exhibition work *Purple Shells* unfolds in two durational movements, each intrinsic to the other. *Movement #1 (returning)* describes the acts first of gathering (both the shells themselves and knowledge about the organisms) and then of “the light repatriation of their bones”² while aboard the ship. *Movement #2 (cleaning)* follows Drebert’s return from the residency voyage. It refuses to manifest within the space of the gallery but rather loops back to the transplanted clams’ newly adopted habitat. For the duration of the exhibition, the artist will make daily visits to the beaches where he first collected the purple varnish clam shells. His action will be one of simple reciprocity and, in service to the clams, he will clean the beaches of human-generated trash that threatens their existence.

Huston-Herterich’s multi-disciplinary practice is research-based and materials-driven. Whether working with textiles, ceramic, metal, florist’s foam, cameraless photography or sound, her work responds to specific spaces and the people who inhabit them. She is interested in shared experiences of space—both public and private—and the ways that personal and collective knowledge is transferred, recorded, and preserved through oral, auditory, and visual modes of communication. *For A two-top set for one (with a fragmented view)*, Huston-Herterich recreates the form of a long wooden screen that stood in the ship’s mess hall, partitioning dining from leisure spaces. Underscoring the rigid hierarchies aboard the vessel, the screen in practice also tended to separate areas habituated by the Filipino crew from those of the French officers. Huston-Herterich’s screen is relieved of its rigidity however, as it is rendered from found fabric, specifically cotton T-shirts-turned-grease rags used to lubricate the ship’s massive engine room workings. Huston-Herterich often works with found garments because of what they share with the body. Rips and stains become registers of labour, movement, and contact. These textiles however, betray themselves as indices of global capitalism: produced as fast fashion by underpaid workers in Asian garment factories, they are shipped aboard container vessels to distributors around the world, only to return to the ships as deadstock, picked over by seamen and cut into rags to then play a second role in the maintenance of that same system.

Similarly, Huston-Herterich’s durational sound *Borrowed Time* reflects upon her observation of the role music plays as a cultural currency in the seamen’s isolated lives. While working aboard container vessels, shuttling the world’s raw materials and commodity objects the world over, sailors spend between nine and twelve months at sea at a time. In this environment, they are utterly untethered from family, friends, and the social worlds propelled by internet connectivity. For Huston-Herterich, the crew’s nightly karaoke performances, frequent conversational references to “top 40” songs, and sharing of digital music files seemed to offer a means through which to demonstrate their “currentness” to one another, and ward off feelings of oblivion or irrelevance. It might also, she suggests, provide a crucial tether to a world otherwise

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Established as an artist-run centre in 1991, Access Gallery is platform for emergent and experimental art practices. We enable critical conversations and risk taking through new configurations of audience, artists, and community.



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only experienced in lag: the promise of a way back into life on land. Rebecca Moss' voyage across the North Pacific on the MV Hanjin Geneva was rather exceptional: seven days into the crossing, Hanjin Shipping—the seventh largest shipping company in the world—filed for receivership. The company's assets were frozen, and ports blocked access to its fleet of container ships, leaving over 100 vessels—including the Geneva with its captain, crew, three passengers, and thousands of tonnes of cargo—suddenly without destination. These events inaugurated one of the largest economic disasters the shipping industry had ever seen, foreshadowed by a persistent decline in worldwide trade, overcapacity and slackening demand. In the end, however, Moss and her fellow passengers were able to disembark in Tokyo on Sept 17, 2017, just two days after the ship had been originally scheduled to make port in Shanghai.

As strange and disorienting as the situation was, Moss' artistic practice seemed almost uncannily prepared for it. Her work is grounded in a Bergsonian examination of the comedic and the absurd, and aims to highlight friction between mechanical, human-produced systems and the natural world into which they are inserted. Prior to her participation in *Twenty-Three Days at Sea*, these concerns would most often manifest in short video vignettes that record the artist staging slapstick gestures, which aim to expose or disrupt naturalized conventions (such as the figure of the heroic male wanderer) and ideological frameworks. Aboard the Hanjin Geneva however, Moss did not have to contrive an action: it unfolded before her, and she simply kept her camera recording. *International Waters*, the resulting 22 minute single channel video *de facto* narrated by fellow passenger John (a 70 year old self-described adventurer and memoirist³) registers as a stinging—and highly comic—critique of the hyper-masculinist system in which she found herself, captured at the very moment that system is rendered impotent.

Sikarnt Skoolisariyaporn's artistic practice cuts across the mediums of moving image, performance, text, and installation, and explores notions of human and non-human history embedded in geological spacetime: the history of mankind as remembered by the earth and its landscape. She has a persistent interest in the landscape of the sea, particularly as a "seascape" reveals itself only in the fourth dimension of time. In its constant shifting through the rolling waves and wind, she suggests, the ocean might suggest a new way to understand and approach history, spatiality, and the disastrousness of our political and climatological present. There is perhaps no better image to describe our neoliberal present, she argues, than a mass of alienated labourers and consumer products—at once material and monetary—floating precariously in the middle of the sea.

Skoolisariyaporn's time at sea resulted in two intertwined works, a performance titled *Object without Shadow*, which reconsiders a ritual she remembers practicing with her Thai Chinese family on the seventh month of Chinese calendar, the period when it is believed that ghosts are able to make a momentary reappearance from the afterlife, and the single channel video *Unexploded Ordnance*. For Skoolisariyaporn, the repetitive surroundings of the ship during her Pacific crossing (the seamen's daily schedules, the endless expanse of ocean) had the effect of unpinning her from the rational(ized) world on land, plunging the artist into a strange dreamscape, where time folded and spectres appeared. Both Skoolisariyaporn's performance and her video consider the myriad ghosts produced under capitalism, and conjures a relationship between the North Pacific Ocean in the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, as a theatre for both colonialism and neoliberalism. What if the ocean, she asks, is not the timeless space we presume, but the very basin of time? What if the sea was in fact a theatre of history, one wherein the horror of humankind's many exploitations repeatedly play out, sink into obscurity, and traumatically return to haunt us in shadow form, revealing all that modern history has rendered ghostly?

Kimberly Phillips, curator.

NOTES

¹Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* (Germany: Richter Verlag, 1995), 54.

²Michael Drebert, in conversation with the author, Friday September 1, 2017.

³John Linnemeier is the author of *How an Average Man Lived an Adventurous Life* (USA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

LIST OF WORKS

MICHAEL DREBERT

Purple Shells, movement #1 (returning), 2017
dimensions variable

Purple Shells, movement #2 (cleaning), 2017
dimensions variable

LILI HUSTON-HERTERICH

Borrowed Time, 2017
two channel sound
03:53:00

A two-top set for one (with a fragmented view), 2017
engine rags used on CMA CGM Fidelio during Pacific Ocean crossing in late June 2017
247 x 182 centimetres

REBECCA MOSS

International Waters, 2017
single channel video with sound
00:22:00

SIKARNT SKOOLISARIYAPORN

Unexploded Ordnance, 2017
single channel video with sound
00:26:00

Object without Shadow, 2017
performance
corner of Keefer and Columbia Streets, Vancouver,
September 9, 2017, 8:00 PM

BIOGRAPHIES

MICHAEL DREBERT lives and works in Vancouver. He holds a BFA from Emily Carr University (2006) and an MFA from the University of Victoria (2010).

LILI HUSTON-HERTERICH obtained a BFA in Visual Arts and New Media from York University (2010) and is currently based in Rotterdam, where she is completing an MFA at Piet Zwart Institute.

REBECCA MOSS holds a BA in Painting from the Camberwell College of Arts (2013), and is currently an MA candidate in Sculpture at the Royal College of Art. She lives and works in London, UK.

SIKARNT SKOOLISARIYAPORN studied at the Kunstakademie in Dusseldorf (2013), holds a BA from Kingston University in London, UK (2012), and an MA in Fine Art from Goldsmiths at the University of London (2015). She lives and works between Dusseldorf and Bangkok.

EVENTS

OPENING RECEPTION AND PUBLICATION LAUNCH
Friday, September 8, 2017, 7:00 PM
*exhibition walkthrough with artists and curator at 7:15 PM

SIKARNT SKOOLISARIYAPORN: OBJECT WITHOUT SHADOW
SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2017, 8:00 PM

Performance at the Chinese War Memorial, corner of Keefer and Columbia Streets. *Produced in collaboration with the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver*

Twenty-Three Days at Sea: A Travelling Artist Residency is an Access Gallery initiative, produced in partnership with the Burrard Arts Foundation and the Contemporary Art Gallery. The project is supported by the Hamber Foundation; partial sponsorship of the sea voyages was graciously offered by Reederei NSB. Crucial assistance in Asia was overseen by China Residencies, and at the Port of Vancouver by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union. Access is grateful for the ongoing support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the British Columbia government through the BC Arts Council and BC Gaming, the City of Vancouver, and our donors, members, and volunteers.