

On Water's Edge



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The global sales figures for noise-cancelling headphones amounted to at least \$5 billion in 2022 and are estimated to double within a decade. “Silence is now big business,” it has been written in response.¹ But the point of such devices is of course not simply to mute auditory distractions and curate meditative islands of quietude. The desire for noise control, instead, indexes much larger constellations: a critical urge to manage and fully design our auditory environments, extract listeners from a world of unwanted sounds, and recast that world on our own terms as a more hospitable world. Surely, available products rarely succeed in shutting out extraneous disturbances and discomforts altogether. What they bring to the fore, however, is a profound need for reliable infrastructures that secure conditions for the possibility of immersive experience, for protective enclosures that tone down unwanted interferences and allow us to yield to what resonates with our wants and wishes. As a technology that neutralizes incoming sound waves with counter-phase waves, noise-cancellation devices at heart promise us to leave a world we fear, resent, or find overwhelming, and exchange it for another world that’s more accepting and accommodating—a world of song and voice in whose echoes and reverberations we can safely bathe.

The Latin “immerger” entered English in the 17th century, a verb meant to describe acts of dipping one thing into another, of plunging what’s solid into something liquid. Priests immersed the young in rivers and ponds to launch their lives as true believers; they delivered bodies from themselves to name them anew and prepare them for higher callings. The modern usage of the verb “immerse” retains the old reference to transformative encounters with fluid substances: immersive images wash over our senses and transport us to imaginary elsewhere, immersive surround sounds in state-of-the-art cinemas flood our audition and make a film’s projection appear more real than reality. To be immersed into something is to experience a certain dissolution of the body’s or mind’s limits, a process of entanglement between us and what is not us that suspends existing demands for autonomy, agency, and self-determination. Immersion halts the workings of ceaseless willfulness and self-consciousness; it invites us to go with the flow, to get carried away, because it defers the gravity and the constraints of the everyday, the need to mark borders and claim identities, the mandate to be someone and inhabit definite positions. Immersion

This essay is deeply indebted to Francesco Casetti’s *Screening Fears: On Protective Media* (New York, Zone Books, 2023). Though I take Casetti’s thoughts about what he calls the projection/protection complex in a different direction, his trenchant exploration of mediated enclosures and architectures of recast reality profoundly inspired the writing of the following pages.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/aug/28/noise-cancelling-headphones-risks-concerns>.

transforms precisely because it relaxes the burdens of being, be they physical or psychology, and—temporarily—features becoming as the primary engine of what it means to be alive. In states of immersion, whether we bathe in oceans of images or waves of sound, everything assumes the status of a verb, becomes fluid, assumes the elemental qualities of water.

Over the last years, a steady current of academic writing has embraced water's immersive qualities—a reorientation toward the oceanic—as laboratories to recalibrate dominant notions of ontology, epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics. In these accounts, water carries untapped potentials to decenter stubbornly anthropogenic views of the world and prepare humans for more symbiotic encounters with the non-human or the more-than-human world. In *Wild Blue Media*, Melody Jue reenvisions our position on planet Earth from the perspective of a scuba diver: of bodies floating under the ocean's surface, emancipated from both the pressures of gravity and the rigidities of bi-pedal verticalism.² Oceanic immersion, Jue proposes, teaches the art and ethics of buoyancy. It simultaneously reveals and challenges the terrestrial and gravitational biases that undergird most of the West's ideas of progress and modernity as much as the repertoires of instinctive positions, embodied habits, and figures of thought. As both a material and an imaginative space of submersion, the ocean affords human subjects to interface with their environments less with their ears and eyes, and more with their lungs and the apparatuses that enable breathing in liquid surroundings. And in this, the experience of scuba diving has the capacity not only to expand what we take for granted about media, networks, and storage devices, but to estrange readers and writers from the terrestrial strictures of desks, libraries, and lecture halls. Oceanic immersion opens our minds to entirely new—but perhaps also very old—forms of knowing and engaging with the world.

In *Waves of Knowing: A Seascape Epistemology*, Hawai'ian scholar Karin Amimoto Ingersoll remains mostly above the ocean's water as she explores indigenous ideas and practices of surfing, and yet she advocates a reorientation that—like Jue's—no longer privileges land over water, the vertical over the horizontal, but instead understands ocean, wind, and human navigation as interconnected systems, as a meshwork of passageways that enfolds one element into the other.³ Surfing, for the Kānaka Maoli, is a way of being and staying with the ocean, and Ingersoll is adamant about claiming and reclaiming surfing as a local practice, a way of knowing the sea that has resisted two centuries of colonialism, militarism, and tourism. She has little patience with the relentless circuits of international surfing competitions and the privileged

² Melody Jue, *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

³ Karin Amimoto Ingersoll, *Waves of Knowing: A Seascape Epistemology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

breathlessly chasing the thrill of big waves, even if they present their efforts as being in sync with the forces of nature. For her, surfing is as much a spiritual as a physical practice, an art of knowing the world that deeply resonates with native cosmologies. The ocean's waters at once center and decenter. Oceanic people know how to attune their bodies to constant movement and fluctuation. Their world isn't one of boundaries, walls, and properties, but of relationality, symbiosis, co-making, transspecies communication, and immersive co-dependency. As water's movement and life transcends the binarisms between linear and circular time, culture and nature, it makes us think of human bodies and minds as no more and no less than mere crossroads within much larger dynamics.

Seascape thinking, as it dips into the absorptive energy of liquids, deheroizes notions of human agency and unbridled self-determination whose unchecked use have largely fueled extractivist approaches to the non-human and elemental world, past and present. In its praise of the anti-gravitational power of immersive experiences, it at once echoes and transcends what modern headphone subjects pursue inside their bubble of sweeping, largely undisturbed soundscapes. Noise cancellation promises oceanic sensations of sound within tightly sealed technological enclosures. It spares individuals painful exposures to the disturbing soundscapes of the present world by offering them different interactions within the safe, mediated, and more hospitable environment of their auditory devices. It cuts out noisy interferences in favor of a world in which we can welcome interference—the seemingly boundless dissolution of structuring borders between inside and outside, between the material and the immaterial, between mind and matter—as a way of staying with the world without suffering its intolerable burdens, of bathing in protected waters. While seascape epistemologists may entertain similar ideas about the need to dissolve the hardened boundaries of modern subjectivity and tap into transformative power of resonant experience, they certainly beg to differ from headphone ontologists when it comes to questions of enclosures, media, and mediation. The ocean, for Jue or Ingersoll, figures as a medium in its own right, an elemental medium; it neither needs mediated representation nor technological enclosure to afford its immersive powers; it in fact questions the very hierarchical logic of containment—between nature and culture, land and water, body and technology—that energizes noise cancellation's own version of immersion. The ocean's water is a verb, not because we want it to be so and engineer it as such, but because it precedes and transcends the power of wanting, of willfulness, of human intervention. In the world of Jue's scuba diver and Ingersoll's indigenous surfer, headphone divers are little more than another variant of extractivism—of what *xwélmexw* (Stó:lō/Skwah) scholar Dylan Robinson critiques as “hungry listening.”⁴

⁴ Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

II

Human-induced climate change causes desertification as much as seawater rise, prolonged droughts as much as devastating floods. North American aquifers are receding dramatically due to unregulated drilling of wells, while Maldivians flee their archipelago because rising ocean levels at once swamp their land and exhaust drinkable water resources. No matter where you look, anthropogenic extractivism has largely depleted the Holocene's welcoming hospitality and created planetary emergencies under which most people come to live with either too much or too little water, or in some regions with both at once. Such conditions necessitate populations worldwide to recalibrate their relation to the promises and threats of immersive experiences, in both literal and metaphorical terms. Water, like good listening, turns out to be an ever more precarious element. There is a huge need to prop up new enclosures, not just in coastal areas, to keep inundation at bay and control its threatening flows, while in other areas water's disappearance transforms the transformative power of submersion into a rare luxury good, an embattled commodity that now requires the very mediation, technology, and enclosure it once meant to transcend. To live (and to die) in the Anthropocene means to live (and to die) on water's edge—to adjust the infrastructures of human life and sociality to a state of water being on edge.

What it takes to reconstruct and warrant equitable balances between water's simultaneous dearth and overabundance is a political question whose transnational complexity so far exceeds the negotiating power of existing institutions. It is therefore to the realm of the contemporary arts that we often must turn to engage with different models of how to live with (and without) water, to explore possible alternatives to the hubris of bi-pedal terrestrialism, and to think through the promises and perils of transformative immersion. Water is, without doubt, now a big topic in the arts. Though much of this engagement remains tied to land-based studios, galleries, museums, and distribution channels, many artists, photographers, filmmakers, and sound artists—unlike their hesitant political counterparts—do not shy away from leading audiences to or even beyond the edges of water today. In this, they often offer intriguing insights about the role of the immersive, of bathing in oceanic experiences, in times of too much or of too little water. At their best, they ask tough questions not only about what it means to resonate with ever-more inhospitable environments, but also about art's continued ability to recast fearsome realities within the protective enclosure of aesthetic experience

and media technology, and all this not in favor of simply escaping the real, but of probing alternate entanglements with our changing world that transcend resource-oriented extractivism and recognize the verb-form, the fluidity, of all matter.



In *Über Wasser: Menschen und gelbe Kanister* (On Water: People and Yellow Cans, 2007), Austrian filmmaker Udo Maurer takes the viewer to three different places around the globe at which people's lives are deeply interwoven with water and its threatening overabundance, its painful disappearance, or its increasing commodification: Bangladesh, Kazakhstan, and Kenya. The film's second act takes place in and around Aralsk, once a buzzing port city and fishing hub at the shores of the Aral Sea, now mostly a deserted desert town caused by historic irrigation projects that redirected the lake's waters. A faint echo of its former splendor, Aralsk resembles a cinematic ghost town. Remaining inhabitants wander aimlessly across empty streets or stare into the far, buildings crumble everywhere, kids play soccer on dusty pitches and what now appears as wasted land. T. S. Eliot comes to mind: "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, / You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, / And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, / And the dry stone no sound of water."⁵

In one of the film's most moving scenes, we follow an elderly citizen of Aralsk as he roams between the rusted hulls of old fishing and cargo boats, now sadly stranded on dry ground [figure 1]. The horizon is flat and relentless. A few camels amble through this maritime cemetery, in search for food. After the man points his walking stick at all the different boats and names their names, he suddenly shows up on deck of one of the vessels. "Here we are standing on my ship," he intones, a captain set free from his former mission. He moves both arms in wide circles, his body bends slightly forward and backward, dynamically one might want to say, against all odds of age and melancholy. Old Soviet medals dangle from his chest. His grey beard and eyebrows echo the color of the sky. "The spray hits us from all sides, we float along and while away the time eating and drinking. The sea is rough. The waves pound against the ship. The seagulls glide by. They screech. They dive down, they snatch fish, fills their beaks, and fly on. . . . It was very special, this Aral Sea."

⁵ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (New York: Vintage Classics, 2021) Kindle edition.



Figure 1. : Udo Maurer, *Über Wasser: Menschen und gelbe Kanister* (On Water: People and Yellow Cans, 2007). Screenshots. Courtesy of the artist.

It's hard to tell whether the old captain's words are meant to approach song or not. His body, so much is sure, still reverberates with the undulations of the sea, remains tuned to the waves and winds as they had once enfolded captain and ship. The fish are of course gone, so are the birds, so the hungry seagulls, and so the majestic pelicans. But the world isn't entirely mute yet. It stills sounds and resounds. And not all images are entirely broken. Yet as the soil increasingly turns into crusty salt, the creatures of the sea have lost their once rich habitat, and the remnants of the now distant lake distribute ever-more pollutants into the wider region, any song in Maurer's devastating Kazakhstan is primarily about the absence of song: a mere trickle of sound that no longer elevates the heart or enables the voice to gush beyond the body's confines. The film's German title affords at least three different English translations: on water, about water, above water. In the mouth of the old Kazakh, all of these three meaning collapse into less than one.

Maurer's *On Water* pictures Aralsk as being arrested in a state of permanent catastrophe. The future here no longer appears to have a future, the past solely persists as ruin, and the present affords little shelter from the disasters of desertification. Water's absence has caused life to come to a standstill, so much so that even people's wells of pain and fear have almost entirely dried

up. No one appears lonelier than Aralsk's remaining residents. Disentangled from the resonant tissues, the binding forces, the interferential and immersive dynamics of the Aral Sea, they have altogether lost what is needed to connect to their respective environment. This is a landscape of the undead. Human life on Mars, pace Elon Musk's fever dreams, couldn't be much different.

IV

The world of Ursula Biemann's fifteen-minute video *Subatlantic* (2015) offers a flipside of the Kazakhstan chapter of Maurer's *On Water*.⁶ In this film, the Swiss artist, author, and video essayist envisions a fictional (and not-so-fictional) future in which a largely ice-free Arctic and Antarctic have submerged many of today's land-based human infrastructures [figure 2]. While we see images of floating icebergs, glacial meltwater, cascading water streams, and dispersed chunks of ice from below and above the ocean's surface, the film's voiceover tells a curious tale about a future oceanographer whose laboratory had to be relocated due to the unstable conditions of polar caps. To pursue her research under conditions of accelerated warming and melting, she learns how to attune

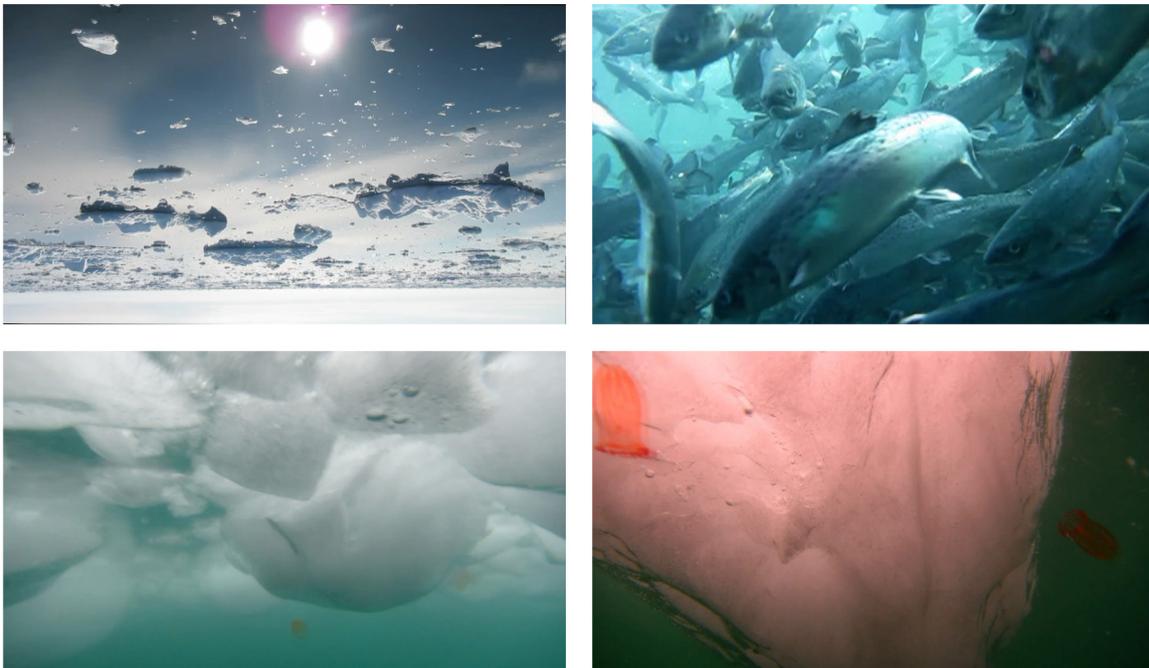


Figure 2: Ursula Biemann, *Subatlantic* (2015). Screenshots. Courtesy of the artist.

⁶ For an extended analysis of Biemann's work, see Lisa E. Bloom, *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023) 153-164.

her perception and breathing to that of fish and underwater microbes—to what she calls the intelligence of the sea. Her life becomes increasingly aquatic and amphibian, immersed in the ocean at almost all times. One of her primary objects of study is the gradual release of microorganisms, set free due to human-induced melting after having been trapped in polar ice layers for more than 400,000 years. Primeval creatures experience their resurrection, we learn, they enjoy a second chance precisely because human creatures destroyed their own conditions of life and flooded their own existence.

In Biemann's video, human-induced climate change unintentionally transforms the future into a place, not of triumphant geo-reengineering, but of immersive entanglement and symbiotic co-evolution. Geological deep time mingles with human time. What is perhaps most remarkable about Biemann's work is how her narrative grants non-human beings temporal standing and agential powers that question the traditional domains of human self-determination: any claim to freeze time in order to stop planetary transformations for the human good might violate the claims of microorganism awaiting their second lives after millennia of glacial capture. Progressive immersion is our future, like it or not. And in adjusting and retraining the human sensorium for a future life of being under water at almost all times, we not only seek to adapt to what is needed for our own survival, we in fact make good on what anthropogenic ideas of progress have done to the planet and its diverse species and the non-human. *Subatlantic's* perhaps most provocative lesson from envisioning a future of submersion is therefore this: to praise the pluralistic temporalities and vibrant conjugations of water in all its different elemental states and shapes, and in so doing to move beyond the violence of Western, colonial, and extractive concepts of progressive time. As Biemann's scientist attunes her organs to that of a changed and changing world, water in all its overabundance and boundlessness teaches her to liquify traditional boundaries between the natural and the cultural, overcome her terrestrial biases, and embrace the life aquatic as a life of symbiotic co-evolution with the elemental. Water, she comes to realize, isn't the feared other of us, but brings to view the inevitable entanglement of all things living, the other in us.

Biemann's future world is void of screens and enclosures holding water at bay. Adapt or drown for good. Evolve or retreat from worldliness altogether. Respect the long-repressed rights and claims of other aquatic beings, the more-than-human, or go extinct. True to Jacques Cousteau's famous 1956 diving documentary, *The Silent World*, this world no longer seems to afford much language; it is largely void of sound, void of words that may connect remaining humanoids with each other. In some sense, it is as lonely as Maurer's Kazakhstan. Biemann's

subatlantic is not a place to break out in song, at least not the kind of song humans once sang with land or stable ground under their feet. Transspecies communication, through channels still unknown, trumps over the resounding words of human languages.

It is tempting to think of Biemann's aquatic future as one that no longer offers what previous human generations considered their comforts. This world has nothing that seems to allow them to lean back and let go, to relax from the daily challenge of direct exposure to reality, to exonerate hassling environments, cease ceaseless self-management and instead relish more playful, lighter ways of engaging with alternate realities. But then again, what we and what these future humans might understand as "comfort" deserves second thought. Architectural historian Sigfried Gideon, in his ground-breaking *Mechanization Takes Command*, reminded his readers that the Latin origin of "comfort" emphasizes structures that strengthen and support individuals in their daily encounters with taxing realities.⁷ Comforts aren't about escape or withdrawal, not about merely giving body and mind breaks whose lures and pleasures could potentially weaken the subject. Instead, they are about preparing body and mind to flourish in face, not in spite, of the order of the day. True comforts are generative, not luxurious holidays from the real; they ease things, not for the sake of easiness as such, but to make our daily encounter with our environments lighter.

Biemann's absorbed scientist eschews the comforts of couches and cinemas, heat pumps and air conditioners, reading lamps and baristas. But we couldn't be more wrong than to think of this world's silence, as experienced by the film's at once solitary and totally immersed explorer, as comfort-less. Freed from the burdens of gravity and terrestriality, she is as light as humanoids can be. She needs no breaks from reality because she, all surrounded by water, no longer encounters reality as something antagonistic or her own life as something requiring constant self-management. Whatever she has done to adapt and co-evolve has moved her beyond any want for support and strengthening. Her world is comfortable in its own right, precisely because she has learned the art of not so seeing it as "her" world anymore. On some level, she doesn't really "encounter" this world—the subatlantic—at all. She is always already in and part of it; she has absorbed and been absorbed by, has become and is, the moving water that is all round here. She is all verb.

⁷ Sigfried Gideon, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (1948; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). Gideon's use of the notion of conform has been discussed in illuminating detail in Casetti's *Screening Fears*, 99-102.

V

For the time being, though, whether you consider *Subatlantic*'s reparative vision of aquatic immersion utopian or dystopian, our's remains a world of change that reserves ever-more elusive comforts to ever-fewer communities of privilege and exclusion. The annual ritual of COPs does very little to ensure that "we" manage a world of catastrophic downpours and droughts, sea level rise and desertification as if we all sat in one boat. Your deluge, the West tells the Global South, isn't ours; your scarcity of water, the wealthy explain to the impoverished, isn't for us to fix. To bathe or not to bathe in water is a question of power, inequity, and politics as never before.

Stein Henningsen's *The Boat*, a video and installation exhibited in different versions since 2019, offers a glimpse of where things are heading if we —"we"— when trying to renegotiate our relation to water, fail to renegotiate the fabrics of human societies as well [figure 3]. What we initially see in Henningsen's video is this: an icy landscape. What we hear: the ominous sounds of wind sweeping across the ice. Then, the Svalbard-based artist, filmmaker, and activist invites us to follow the figure of a man as he pushes a wooden boat step by step across the polar ice. The camera remains static, untouched by the man's lateral and rather puzzling exertion. His breath can be heard loudly, as if we perceived the world through the membrane of his solitary body, permeating the



Figure 3: Stein Henningsen, *The Boat* (2019). Screenshots. Courtesy of the artist.

otherwise deserted landscape with rather oppressive rhythms and resonances. After a good two minutes, after the man finally manages to maneuver the boat beyond the right frame of the image and thus out of our view, Henningsen offers the first cut. For more than a minute we now see the action from behind, watching man and boat slowly approaching the horizon. After another cut, the remaining minutes of the video will show open water with a blue glacial edge in the background. Boat and man move into the picture from the left. Although menacing flames rise from the boat's stern, we see him row his vessel with impressive calm and steadiness. Sounds of crackling fire underline the danger in which the man seems to find himself, even if it does not seem to disturb his efforts. The contrast between the orange of the flames and the blue of the ice and water could not be greater, a drop in color temperature as wondrous as it is shocking, frightening. Henningsen's framing will change a few times during the film's final minutes, allowing the viewer to get closer to the precarious events in the Arctic Ocean, before the camera will let the man and his burning boat quietly leave the picture, withholding any image of the inevitable demise of the burning boat and its intrepid captain.

Henningsen's *The Boat* deliberately asks more questions than it answers. Is *The Boat* primarily concerned with showing global warming as a reckless game with fire and heat, resulting in foreseeable human self-destruction through drowning? Or does it advocate attitudes of resilience and climate resignation, perhaps even suggesting serenity as the most adequate reaction to human-induced apocalypse?

Art is art because it defies the idea of keys that may unlock singular answers to pressing problems. What is remarkable about Henningsen's work in fact are its unresolved and unresolvable tensions, in particular those between the rhythm of strained breathing, the unsteady crackling of the fire, the apparent silence of the ice, and the gentle currents of the seawater. Whatever we see in this film is somewhat at odds with what we sense: the sound of heavy breathing—similar to the acoustic bubble of headphones—pulls us right into the man's body at risk, absorbs us into his sensing of an inhospitable world, whereas the film's images, the camera's unrelenting immobility and detached framing, keep the viewer at a safe distance, in the dry and warm, far, far away. As a result, viewers of *The Boat* will find themselves simultaneously inside and outside the action on display, immersed and expelled, terrified and not by the drama that unfolds in front of their eyes—and hence, increasingly unable to identify the skin of the bubble, the surface of the screen, that may separate the real and the represented. As the man's wheezing extends an immersive echo chamber of vulnerability, the sight of his steady rowing progressively emerges less as a quasi-Herzogian attempt to conquer the useless⁸ than as an enactment of

⁸ Werner Herzog, *Conquest of the Useless: Reflections from the Making of Fitzcarraldo*, trans. Krishna Winston (New York: Ecco, 2010).

the uselessness of modern choreographies of conquest and appropriation. He is utterly alone and yet he isn't. We look at his drama from the bubble of our remote locations, yet we are also right there with him. In his boat. Next to the fire that offers warmth amid the arctic landscape, but that will eventually sink his vessel. For now, we still enjoy the boat's enclosure with him, its safety, its relative comfort, but our eyes at the same time tell us, make us recognize, that none of this will last for long, let alone forever. That gravity will prevail over buoyancy. That inundation—a bathing in deadly waters—is imminent. That our media, our fragile arks of separation, comfort, and protection, in the end might fail to defend us against our self-made sinking. And that we, in all this, are all in one boat after all even if “we,” for so many bad reasons of inequity, privilege, and hierarchy, continue to pretend that we aren't.

VI

And then there is Abi Palmer, as shown in Anna Ulrikke Andersen's 2021 short film *On Being and Bathing* [figure 4]. Afflicted by the effects of Ehler-Danlos Syndrome, Palmer retreats into a small inflatable tub each day to ease the muscle and joint pain, the throbbing of ligaments and tissues, and energize her creativity as a writer and poet. Gravity, for her, is agony. Immersion and liquidity offer relief, a temporary suspension of everyday aches and challenges, granted by an enclosure that in her council flat in South London is meant to keep water in rather than out.

Andersen's film taps into a long history of art depicting bathtubs as sites of artistic creativity, experimentation, intimacy, and transformation.⁹ It is difficult not to think of Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson playing his guitar in an old tub in *The Visitors* (2012) to lament the losses of a broken marriage: “There are stars exploding around you,

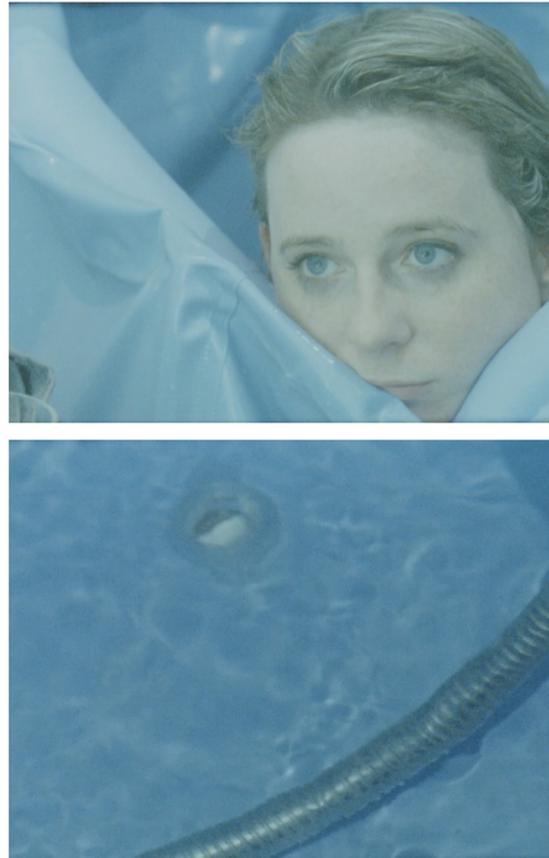


Figure 4: Anna Ulrikke Andersen, *On Being and Bathing* (2021). Screenshots. Courtesy of the artist.

⁹ Lutz Koepnick, *Resonant Matter: Sound, Art, and the Promise of Hospitality* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021) 83-106.

and there is nothing you can do.” Or of Don Herro’s tub series, shot between the 1970s and 1990s, featuring New York celebrities in uniquely private settings. Or of Lee Miller placing herself in Hitler’s bathtub in Munich to mark the end of World War II, recognizing that no future will ever be able to wash away the civilizational break of Nazi genocidal policies.

But despite the temptation of pursuing hundreds of possible art historical allusions and references, Andersen’s camera and framing remain utterly focused on Palmer and the microcosm of immersive water she has built for herself to keep going, day by day. The image refuses shots from the distance. Whatever you see is a detail, a fragment, a close-up too close for the viewer to “grasp” the image as a whole. Everything exceeds the tightness of the frame, pushes against its defining power, resists being categorized as this or that. Meanwhile, Andersen’s tender and intermittent piano soundtrack does what it can not to wash over our perception. It is delicate, always right at the brink of silence. It offers an enclosure of its own sort: instead of drawing attention to itself, it supports our attention to prolonged moments of absent sound.

Gravity, for the author of *Sanatorium*, is agony, being and bathing in water a daily act of respite and survival. Of shedding the nouns and becoming verb. “I started to wonder,” Palmer ruminates half-way through the film, “if I could possibly resemble water, force myself to resemble water and become more fluid.” But soon she came to realize, with devastation, even with horror, that her desire to be water herself could never be fulfilled: even in states of full immersion, some bone would always protest, some joint continue to shriek in pain. “The idea that I couldn’t be water, and that I would never dissolve no matter how much time I spent in water, will never fully merge with water, became really painful to me.”

Water, in Andersen’s film, is at once precious and precarious. It requires enclosures, framing devices, media, and technologies—the polyurethane tub, the deliberate operations of the camera, the careful editing of written words and sound—to do its promised work of immersion. But all things told Palmer’s enclosures never fully live up to their promise of redeeming the body from itself and what’s around it, from the pains of gravity, the bones’ distress. Somehow, some aspects of terrestrial troubles will always permeate the very bubble that is meant to protect the bather from the outside and thus even amplify her pain. You can’t force yourself to become fluid and be water. You will never succeed in entirely cancelling the world. The bubble’s plastic skin, like the skin of movie screens, art gallery walls, and noise-cancelling headphones, always remains more of a membrane than an impermeable fixture. No comfort, no enclosure, is ever complete or entirely reliable. No noun ever fully dissolves into a verb.

And this is where Andersen's Palmer meets the curious protagonists of Maurer's *On Water*, Biemann's *Subatlantic*, and Henningsen's *The Boat*. Palmer knows of the old Kazak's desire for water, for being on and amid the sea, not simply to connect to the elements, but in connecting with the elements to transcend the pains of feeling arrested in time and space. She desires a present in which the amphibian, buoyant life of Biemann's scientist could become the order of the day, and yet recognizes that such a life is not in reach. And, like Henningsen's intrepid traveler, she knows all too well that none of our enclosures will ever be good enough to protect us from the burden of reality, whether their partitions are meant to shelter us from or enable the forces of immersion, whether they keep us from drowning or invite us to merge with the oceanic.

The quiet beauty of Andersen's film lies in the filmmaker's unconditional dedication to her subject, her decision to attend to Palmer's life and disability in all its minute, non-metaphorical, and incommensurable particularity. Palmer is neither a former Kazak captain, a futuristic diver, or a heroic rower holding on to his boat at all costs. Palmer, in Andersen's film, is simply Palmer. Unapologetically. Boldly. And quietly, gently.

And yet, in our times of ever-dramatic climate crises, Palmer's way of coping with her disability—her ongoing efforts to attune herself to water and attune water to her ailing bones—sharply illuminates what it means to live with either too much or too little water. The wish to bathe and become fluid might be one of the most intimate things one may desire. In a world of anthropogenic droughts and inundations, however, this desire has become one of the most political ones you can imagine. No matter what enclosure we build to move into the future, we reiterated the same logic that got us here if we believed in being able to construct entirely self-contained environments—bubbles—that delivered us from our agonizing, our inhospitable world for good. Precisely in showing us the radical uniqueness of Palmer's daily life, *On Being and Bathing* positions the disabled writer as a paragon against which we can and should measure our own mostly inept attempts to retune a world in which nothing about water and our zones of comfort can be taken for granted anymore.

“I am struck by this idea of immersion as a primarily aural and sonic act of political resistance against the technologies that reinforce our insulated worlds. Following this line of thought across contemporary texts and art as they engage the possibilities of a post-anthropogenic world, Koepnick’s study of what different states of immersion mean as a way of being in the world is a most compelling proposal for grappling with the current issues afflicting our times.

Since sound plays such an important role throughout the essay, how might a sonic engages of the moving image work that Koepnick analyses afford a more capacious understanding of how the visuals operate on the level of concept and affect (aside from Henningsen’s *The Boat* where this is most strongly addressed)?”

- Pauline Shongov, participant of *Metode* (2024), vol. 2 ‘Being, Bathing and Beyond’

“To become fluid is to assume a status of a verb in a world of immersion that is not anathema to comfort, but is one with our watery otherness. In states of immersion, whether we bathe in oceans of images or waves of sound, everything assumes the status of a verb, becomes fluid, assumes the elemental qualities of water. How we can and should measure our own mostly inept attempts to retune a world in which nothing about water and our zones of comfort can be taken for granted anymore.

How can we finally become fluid, or do we have to wait for an apocalypse?”

- Jeremy Sharma, participant of *Metode* (2024), vol. 2 ‘Being, Bathing and Beyond’

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