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Book Review: *Transformative Currents: Art and Action in the Pacific Ocean,* edited by Cassandra Coblentz

Abstract
Book review: Cassandra Coblentz, editor, Transformative Currents: Art and Action in the Pacific Ocean*. X Artists' Books and Oceanside Museum of Art, 2024. ISBN: 9798990698581. 176 pages, illustrations (chiefly color), maps. Hardcover, US$45.*

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Transformative Currents: Art and Action in the Pacific Ocean was published to accompany the exhibition of the same name that showed at three venues in Southern California from August 17, 2024, to February 9, 2025.[1] The book includes short essays on each of the artists featured in the exhibition, longer thematic essays by the curatorial team and select scholars, and short excerpts from a symposium that took place at the Orange County Museum of Art in Costa Mesa, California in conjunction with the exhibition. The publication demonstrates the extensive research that went into the exhibition—an aspect of curatorial practice that is often less visible to audiences—and offers an excellent glimpse into the dialogues, partnerships, and research agendas that characterize many recent exhibitions that take an interdisciplinary approach to social justice, environmental issues, and contemporary art.

The acknowledgments and introductory essay by lead curator Cassandra Coblentz situate the project in this larger context, citing the exhibition and publication *Tidalectics: Imagining an Oceanic Worldview through Art and Science* (curated and edited by Stefanie Hessler) as one inspiration (11), along with the work of climate scientists, community organizers, and environmental studies scholars whom Coblentz met in the lead-up to the project. She specifically notes the influential work of Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, Rachel Carson, and Kamau Brathwaite for their thinking on tides and currents as metaphors for the fluid connections across oceanic time and space (19). Riffing on these ideas, Coblentz identifies four

"currents" to serve as an organizing framework for the exhibition: research methodologies, reciprocity and responsibility with the more-than-human, community collaboration to produce action, and "futuring" as a verb that brings past practices into the present and speculative future. These currents are briefly explored in special inserts throughout the book that capture moments from the symposium. Some of the longer essays exemplify them as well, however they become much more concrete in the latter half of the book when the specific artworks are discussed. One exception is the fourth current, futuring, which remains too abstract throughout the book—save for one artist's project (Marcos Lutyens's *Platform Theta*, 2024, which imagines future uses for decommissioned oil rigs).

Assistant curator Ziying Duan contributes an essay that outlines the first current, focusing on the art-research methodology that characterizes much of the work selected for the exhibition. As Duan demonstrates, the curatorial team was drawn to projects that work *with* communities, rather than make art *about* them. While Duan's essay mostly discusses artists who did not appear in the exhibition, an emphasis on collaborative research is apparent in the short essays about each artist at the end of the book. For instance, Irwan Ahmett & Tita Salina's installation grew out of their long-term collaboration with fishing communities in Jakarta (69); Jake and Martha Atienza (as the collective DAKOgamay) featured footage of youth groups in Bantayan Islands, Philippines, whom they support through their organization GOODLand (77); and Alex Monteith and Maree Sheehan collaborated with Te Kāhui o Taranaki Takutai Kaitiaki (coastal custodians from Taranaki Iwi in Aotearoa New Zealand) to make their video about aquatic life choked by polluted estuaries on the Taranaki coast (135).

Throughout the text and artworks, there is an emphasis on coastal communities—understandable given the project's focus on the ocean rather than inland freshwater issues that also plague the region. The project is unabashedly coming from a Southern California perspective, and I appreciated the publication's insistence that "the Pacific Ocean" *includes* places in California, South and Central America, and Alaska. Assistant curator Aaron Katzeman offers a refreshing and much-needed discussion of the way California should be considered the "Eastern Pacific" rather than the "edge of Western Civilization" (25).[2] His argument could be further reinforced with the fact that San Diego, Los Angeles, and the Bay Area are home to a large Pacific Islander diaspora, as well as the legacy of a now-legendary cohort of Pacific thinkers who emerged from UC Santa Cruz's History of Consciousness program.[3]

Julie Decker's excerpted remarks from the symposium, which discuss the ocean's central role for Tlingit communities in Alaska, further push a hemispheric

approach to what is included in the cultural region called "the Pacific" (or "Oceania," "Moana," etc.) (128). Artworks in the exhibition that advocate for an expansive definition of "the Pacific" include Enrique Ramírez's project about the impact of large-scale salmon farming on the glacial coastline of Patagonia, Chile, as well as the projects by Ana Andrade and Fran Siegel that deal with coastal ecosystems across the US–Mexico border. These examples reinforce what Coblentz asserts in the introduction: the Pacific Ocean is "a shared space" that necessitates looking "beyond historically enforced cultural barriers" and "across cultures not often considered in relation to one another" (19).

This expansive and interconnected vision of the Pacific becomes clearer in the artist features, where similar ecological issues are addressed in different locations, demonstrating how extractive "currents" flow from one place to the next. A great example is the *Kai-Hai* project (2021–ongoing) by Tiare Ribeaux and Qianqian Ye, which consists of digital and 3D-printed models of various goddess/goddexx figures that give form to East Asian and Polynesian stories of environmental change. By connecting these "transpacific stories, oral histories, legends, and folkore," Katzeman explains in his exegesis, *Kai-Hai* "generate[s] new possibilities for oceanic cultural connection" (143).

By destabilizing the discursive, geopolitical barriers that imperial powers have violently imposed on the Pacific region—resulting in the perceived separation between Oceania and the Western coasts of North and South America—this volume participates in a justice-oriented approach to ecological issues. Histories of environmental racism lurk in the background of much of this book, coming to the fore in two invited essays. Angela Mooney D'Arcy and Charles Sepulveda's contribution is a reprint of their 2021 essay "The Oil Spill in California Lends Urgency to Demand for Indigenous Land Stewards," first printed in *Truthout*.[4] The opinion piece situates the 2021 oil spill by Amplify Energy off the coast of Orange County, California, within a longer history of environmental injustice against Acjachemen and Tongva peoples. Citing recent conservation projects announced by California Governor Gavin Newsom (such as the 30x30 Initiative and the Native Ancestral Lands Policy),[5] the authors demand that land rematriation must be part of *any* climate action plan (47).

The second invited essay, by environmental humanities scholar Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, also implicates violent histories of extraction, pollution, and militarism in current ecological crises, but does so through a more theoretical exploration of an "oceanic imaginary": "an ontological becoming in which we shed our individualism and anthropocentrism and engage with our more-than-human relatives" (52). Centering the notion of embodiment, DeLoughrey discusses how

Pacific-based artists and writers remind us that the material, metaphorical, and multi-scalar embodiment through which this engagement with the nonhuman occurs goes both ways: "the ocean is not just contained in our human blood," as Teresia Teaiwa once said, or as the Tongan artist Lingikoni Vaka'uta visualizes in their painting *No'o 'Anga* (1999), but "human extractivism and pollution are rendering the ocean itself as anthropogenic" (53). In a "fluid exchange" with oceanic life, radiation and toxic waste is not only polluting the ocean—it is also polluting human and nonhuman bodies (58). DeLoughrey points out that artists such as Ralph Hotere and Brett Graham remind us that not all bodies are equal or visible in this notion of embodiment, however. DeLoughrey's analysis of Hotere's *Black Rainbow* (1986) and Graham's *Bravo Bikini* (1996) focuses on the way darkness and lightness are used as commentary on how US nuclear testing ruptured oceanic space and time, obscuring and "whiting out" the violence against Indigenous bodies and lands (including the nonhuman) (54–55). DeLoughrey brings this context into conversation with more recent threats including the dumping of DDT, a toxic water-insoluble insecticide, off California's southern coast and deep-sea mining in the Clarion-Cipperton Zone. Responding to such issues, artists such as Rebeca Méndez and Hefrani Barnes "creat[e] an undersea imaginary centered on stewardship, the sacred, and imagining the sea around and in us" (59).

DeLoughrey's essay elaborates the second "current" swirling through the exhibition—reciprocity with the more-than-human—but also demonstrates, like Duan's contribution, that critical artistic approaches to ecological violence in the Pacific Ocean expand beyond the works in this exhibition. For this reason, the volume will remain useful as these issues, art practices, and actions are increasingly urgent.

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Notes

[1] Part of Getty's PST ART: *Art and Science Collide* initiative, *Transformative Currents* showed at three Southern California venues: Oceanside Museum of Art in Oceanside; Orange County Museum of Art, Costa Mesa; and Crystal Cove Conservancy, Newport Beach. See "Past Exhibition: *Transformative Currents: Art and Action in the Pacific Ocean*," *PST ART*, https://pst.art/en/exhibitions/transformative-currents-art-and-action-in-the-pacific-ocean. For more information about the exhibition see Aaron Katzeman, this volume.

[2] Katzeman's essay is reproduced in this volume (pp. 35–47).

[3] See Vicente M. Diaz and J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, "Native Pacific Cultural Studies on the Edge," *The Contemporary Pacific* 13, no. 2 (2001): 315–42; and James Clifford and Stacy L. Kamehiro, "From the Edge through the Vā: Introduction to 'Pacific Island Worlds: Oceanic Dis/Positions,'" *Pacific Arts*, 22, no. 1 (2022): 4–19.

[4] Charles Sepulveda and Angela Mooney D'Arcy, "The Oil Spill in California Lends Urgency to Demand for Indigenous Land Stewards," *Truthout*, October 17, 2021. https://truthout.org/articles/the-oil-spill-in-california-lends-urgency-to-demand-for-indigenous-land-stewards/.

[5] For more on the 30x30 California initiative, see https://www.californianature.ca.gov/. California's Native American Ancestral Lands Policy of September, 2020 can be found at https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/9.25.20-Native-Ancestral-Lands-Policy.pdf.