

Aug – Nov

2018

Projection Series #11

An Oceanic Feeling



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An Oceanic Feeling
4 Aug – 18 Nov 2018

This programme may potentially trigger seizures for people with photosensitive epilepsy. Viewer discretion is advised.

Curated by Erika Balsom
Essay by Erika Balsom
Catalogue edited by Paul Brobbel
Series commissioned by Paul Brobbel

Presented in association with the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery's publication
An Oceanic Feeling: Cinema and the Sea.

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Govett-Brewster
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Aotearoa New Zealand

Principal Funder



Exhibition Partners





The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery/Len Lye Centre's state-of-the-art 62-seat cinema encourages audiences to experience the films of Len Lye and the wider world of local and international cinema. We welcome you to see historical experimental film, contemporary artists' moving image and regular film festival programming. At the heart of the Len Lye Centre's cinema programme is the Projection Series, our regular film programme surveying the landscape of historical and contemporary fine art filmmaking.

An Oceanic Feeling is presented through a series of one-off screenings in the Len Lye Centre cinema with three works selected as a showcase in Gallery 1 and the mezzanine. Please visit govetttbrewster.com for full details of films in this programme.

Gallery 1 & Mezzanine

Sat 4 Aug – Sun Nov 18

G. Anthony Svatek, *.TV*, 2017

Filipa César and Louis Henderson,
Sunstone, 2017

Maddie Leach, *The World Leaving*, 2003

Screening in the Len Lye Centre Cinema

Sat 4 Aug | 1 pm

Philip Scheffner, *Havarie*, 2016.

Supported by Goethe-Institut NZ

Sat 8 Sep | 1 pm

Introduced by exhibition curator Erika Balsom
Francisco Rodriguez, *Una Luna de Hierro*, 2017
Rebecca Meyers, *Blue Mantle*, 2010

Sat 29 Sep | 1 pm

Peggy Ahwesh, *The Blackest Sea*, 2016
Mati Diop, *Atlantiques*, 2009
The Otolith Group, *Hydra Decapita*, 2010

Sat 6 Oct | 1 pm

Noël Burch and Allan Sekula,
The Forgotten Space, 2012

Sat 20 Oct | 1 pm

CAMP, *From Gulf to Gulf to Gulf*, 2013

Sat 10 Nov | 1 pm

G. Anthony Svatek, *.TV*, 2017
Filipa César and Louis Henderson,
Sunstone, 2017

Special Auckland screening and book launch

introduced by Erika Balsom

Sat 9 Sep | 3 – 4.30 pm

Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery

G. Anthony Svatek, *.TV*, 2017
Filipa César and Louis Henderson,
Sunstone, 2017

In association with Circuit:

Artist Film and Video Aotearoa

Foreword

Paul Brobbel Senior Curator and Len Lye Curator,
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery

Projection Series #11: An Oceanic Feeling represents the culmination of various strands of the Govett-Brewster's programme. As our third Creative New Zealand International Film Curator in Residence, Erika Balsom has been commissioned to produce the most spacious Projection Series to date, presenting 11 films in the Len Lye Centre Cinema, expanding into the Govett-Brewster's galleries and with screenings at partner venues beyond New Plymouth. Balsom's contemporary film series accompanies the publication of the first in our STATEMENTS series of commissioned essays, *An Oceanic Feeling: Cinema and the Sea*. The new publication is Balsom's larger study of the oceanic within modern and contemporary cinema.



Louis Lumière, *A Boat Leaving the Harbour*, 1895

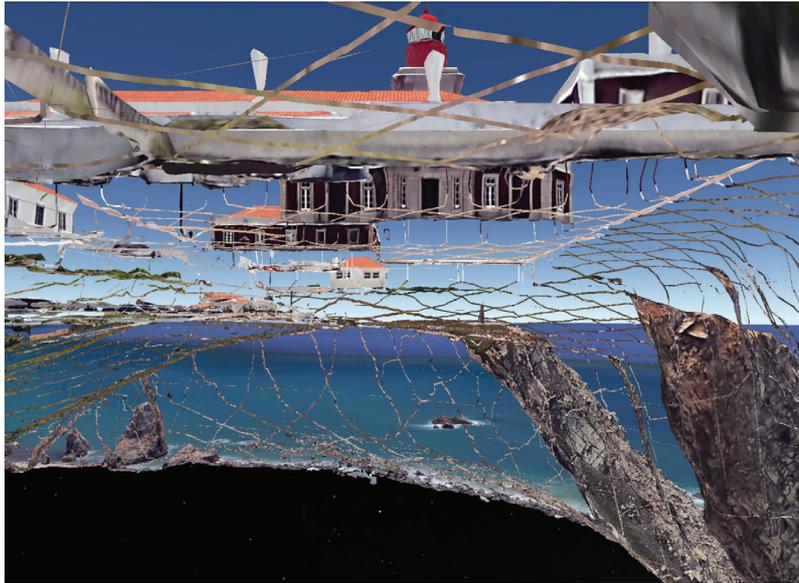
An Oceanic Feeling

Erika Balsom
Govett-Brewster International Film Curator in Residence, 2017

What is oceanic feeling? For Sigmund Freud, it is the sensation of an unbreakable bond between oneself and the outside world. Rather than an assertion of mastery over the world as a standing reserve to be instrumentalised by human will, oceanic feeling is a quasi-sublime state in which the integrity of the self is lost, or at least compromised, in a sense of limitlessness, unboundedness, and interconnectedness. Freud describes it as something akin to an acknowledgement he finds in a line from Christian Grabbe's play *Hannibal*: 'Out of this world, I cannot fall'.

This Projection Series takes Freud's maritime metaphor literally, returning this 'feeling of indissoluble connection, of belonging inseparably to the external world as a whole' to its aquatic origins. Across 11 recent works by artists from the Americas, Europe, India, and Aotearoa New Zealand that confront what Herman Melville called the 'masterless ocean', the programme probes what it means to belong to the whole of a world in our time of ecological, humanitarian and political emergency.

To leave terra firma and delve into the liquid flux of oceanic feeling is to undertake a radical reorientation of perspective. Out of this world we cannot fall: this statement may be true, but it seldom happens today that we dwell on its ramifications, even as moments of violence and catastrophe perhaps capable of forcing such a reckoning seem to accumulate faster and faster. Too often we neglect to attend to our constitutive interdependence and mutual vulnerability. Whether in the realm of ecology, economy, or sociality, fantasies of autonomy and mastery proliferate. Self-sufficiency is a cornerstone of neoliberal ideology. Pushing back against this paradigm, a heightened attunement to the ethical possibilities of the interconnectedness proper to oceanic feeling might offer a way to live less damaged lives in the age of what many term the Anthropocene – a time when anthropogenic changes to the environment and climate can no longer be ignored and colonial epistemologies remain in need of undoing.



This programme follows literary scholar Hester Blum in his suggestion that we must approach the sea not merely as theme, but affirm that ‘in its geophysical, historical and imaginative properties, the sea instead provides a new epistemology—a new dimension—for thinking about surfaces, depths, and the extra-terrestrial dimensions of planetary resources and relations’. This can entail a break with engrained ideas. In his 1957 book *Mythologies*, for instance, Roland Barthes casts the ocean as a blank space, a traceless void that paralyses the production of meaning. Its salty expanse will never quench the semiotician’s thirst for signs: ‘In a single day, how many really nonsignifying fields do we cross? Very few, sometimes none. Here I am, before the sea; it is true that it bears no message. But on the beach, what material for semiology! Flags, slogans, signals, signboards, clothes, suntan even, which are so many messages to me’. Certainly, Barthes’ differentiation between the vibrant bustle of the shoreline and the muteness of the ocean immediately resonates. We live our lives on land, with the sea often figuring as, to borrow the title of Allan Sekula and Noël Burch’s 2010 film, a ‘forgotten space’. It appears inhuman, eternal, beyond history. In the seemingly endless waves, in what looks like a great emptiness, no stable markers of culture offer themselves to the gaze. But if we leave the realm of what is immediately visible to a beach-dwelling tourist, is it indeed true that the sea bears no message?



The history of cinema suggests otherwise. From Louis Lumière’s *A Boat Leaving the Harbour* (*Barque sortant du port*, 1895), the ocean has been a mutable but consistent presence in filmmaking. In classical Hollywood, the sea of adventure loomed large, with the ocean most often figuring as a romantic space of intrigue. Beyond this, however, a wealth of approaches emerges, whether it is Jean Painlevé’s surrealist fascination with underwater creatures, Noriaki Tsuchimoto’s documentaries of mercury poisoning in Minamata Bay, Kidlat Tahimik’s revisionist anticolonial history of global circumnavigation, or Agnès Varda’s depiction of the struggle between tradition and modernity in a small fishing village. In the artists’ moving image practices featured in this programme—all dating to the last 15 years, with the majority produced in the last two—this longstanding inquiry extends and expands, as the ocean offers a way of approaching urgent questions of climate change, illegalised migration, histories of slavery and colonialism, and the global circulation of goods, images and people.

Left: Filipa César and Louis Henderson, *Sunstone*, 2017

Right: Francisco Rodriguez, *Una luna de hierro*
(*A Moon Made of Iron*), 2017

In the great magnitude of the oceans—which cover more than 70 percent of the Earth’s surface and are on average 3.5 kilometres deep—resides a vast and fluid archive traversing nature and culture. It is an archive of horror, wreckage, survival, and beauty within which histories of capitalist accumulation and still-reverberating traumas flow alongside the captivating wonders of marine environments and the romance of the waves. To reprise and revise Barthes, then: here I am, before the sea, before its myriad cinematic representations, and it is true that it bears many messages—messages of fantasy and necessity, exploit and exploitation, tradition and modernity, life and death.

Why turn to the moving image to delve into oceanic feeling? Unlike the written word or the painted image, it is a medium that possesses an ‘indissoluble connection’ to physical reality, registering its changing traces in time through the nonhuman automatism of the camera. The lens-based image belongs, to echo Freud, ‘inseparably to the external world’, as the product of a triangular encounter between technology, aesthetic intentionality, and a phenomenal referent. Out of this world, it cannot fall. When works in the programme use computer animation, they do so in dialogue, whether implicitly or explicitly, with this vocation of recording. Even if photochemical and digital apparatuses depend on the use of minerals mined terrestrially—silver, copper, coltan—in this avowed dependence, in this bond, the moving image is oceanic.

An Oceanic Feeling explores the sea’s role in forging connections between people, between communities, and between the human and nonhuman. It refuses the arrogance of mastery to see what affinities, responsibilities, and solidarities emerge from the watery depths. Taken together, these works wager that the deeply mythologised site of the ocean can activate forms of relationality that prompt one to think beyond the individual, beyond a singular territory, and beyond the binary between nature and culture.

In ‘Our Sea of Islands’ Tongan anthropologist Epeli Hau’ofa proposes that the idea of Oceania as a series of confined, tiny islands is an imperial construct, one predated by a more holistic perspective that understood the ocean as an inhabited place uniting a large exchange community. Expanding Hau’ofa’s proposal to a global scale, this programme turns to diverse artistic practices to ask: what if the ocean does not divide us, but connects us? What politics, what ethics, would follow?



Peggy Ahwesh, *The Blackest Sea*, 2016
G. Anthony Svatek, *.TV*, 2017



Peggy Ahwesh
The Blackest Sea 2016

10 min., digital video
colour and sound, exempt

The Blackest Sea takes Peggy Ahwesh's longstanding interest in found footage into the age of the internet and the Anthropocene, transforming animated news clips produced by the Taiwanese company TomoNews into an eerie indictment of contemporary existence. Accompanied by the melancholic grandeur of Ellis B. Kohs' *Passacaglia for Organ and Strings*, water is contaminated, schools of fish float dead to the surface, and boats of migrants capsize at sea. Recognisable images of recent atrocities reappear as digital animations drained of specificity, as Ahwesh calls out the airbrushing of reality, questioning the cute digestibility of that which should sear our minds and stick in our throats.

Courtesy of EAI



CAMP
From Gulf to Gulf to Gulf
2016

90 min., digital video
colour and sound, exempt

In this project of collective documentation, merchant sailors from the Gulf of Kutch in India travel across the Arabian Sea to the Persian Gulf and beyond, transporting all manner of goods. Working with footage collected over a four-year period, CAMP weave together their own HD video with images made by the sailors using mobile phone cameras and camcorders. These heterogeneous textures—from crisp clarity to painterly pixilation—combine with Bollywood and religious songs chosen by the sailors to form a compilation film displaying at once a palpable intimacy and a grand scope, forming a testimony to the maritime proletariat.

Courtesy of the artists



**Filipa César and
Louis Henderson**
Sunstone 2017

35 min., digital video
colour and sound, exempt

Sunstone is at once a portrait of Roque Pina, the lighthouse keeper at Cabo da Roca, Portugal, and something much broader: an exploration of the optical metaphors of Enlightenment rationality through two lens-based technologies—the lighthouse and the film camera—at a time when they are being displaced by the algorithmic forms of GPS and CGI, respectively. The lighthouse becomes a figure for an ambivalent history of colonial discovery and orientation, as César and Henderson layer computer renderings over 16mm film, reflecting on the role of each within larger epistemic shifts.

Courtesy of SPECTRE



Mati Diop
Atlantiques 2009

16 min., digital video
colour and sound, exempt

Young men discuss journeying to Europe by pirogue, speaking of the journey in the past tense, even though they are still in Africa. Does the crossing lie ahead or behind, in reality or fantasy? Beginning and ending with dreams tied to the sea, this penumbral film breaks time's arrow, pleating at its centre when a death is reported but not seen. At a time when cameras are everywhere, capturing bare life and mass death on the shores of Fortress Europe, Mati Diop turns away from any spectacle of suffering, finding in fiction and obliquity means of confronting an ongoing humanitarian catastrophe.

Courtesy of Le Fresnoy



Philip Scheffner
Havarie 2016

93 min., digital video
colour and sound, exempt

From the deck of a Mediterranean cruise ship, a man sees a raft in distress with 13 people on board and makes a video using his mobile phone. Extending the low-definition textures of this 3:36-minute YouTube clip to last some 90 minutes and combining it with a multi-voiced soundtrack that relays fragmentary narratives of migration and seafaring, *Havarie* sets its viewer adrift in a meditative time of witnessing. With a German title that translates at once as 'average' and as 'accident', Philip Scheffner recruits abstraction and duration to clear a space for an encounter with humanitarian emergency that refuses the image-repertoire of migration all too familiar today.

Courtesy of the Goethe-Institut NZ



Maddie Leach
The World Leaving 2003

12 min., digital video
colour and sound, exempt

A single take filmed from Queen's Wharf in Wellington, *The World Leaving* bids farewell to the cruise ship *The World* as it departs the shore. Maddie Leach evokes the deceptive simplicity of *A Boat Leaving the Harbour* (1895), but in place of the small rowboat that appears in Louis Lumière's film she captures the largest private residential ship on the planet—a substitution of great allegorical power. This dilated remake of one of the very first films is nothing less than a portrait of the 21st century, of its obsession with luxury, scale, and global mobility, and of the lies it tells itself about them.

Courtesy of the artist



Rebecca Meyers
Blue Mantle 2010

34 min., 16mm
colour and sound, exempt

Filled with hypnotic images of the empty ocean, Rebecca Meyers' meditative 16mm film exquisitely renders the textures, colours, and all-over movements of the waves. But as Herman Melville wrote in *Moby Dick*, 'When beholding the tranquil beautiful and brilliancy of the ocean's skin, one forgets the tiger heart that pants beneath it'. Meyers reminds us, putting sublime visions of natural expanse into dialogue with quotations and representations that attest to the ocean's rich history in a cultural repertoire of signs, as if its seeming void were but a cloak for its imaginative wealth, a screen for its projection of dreams and nightmares.

Courtesy of the artist



The Otolith Group

Hydra Decapita 2010

31 min., digital video

colour and sound, exempt

In *Hydra Decapita*, the dehumanisation of chattel slavery metamorphoses into a speculative space of posthuman possibility, as the artists draw upon the mythos of the 1990s Detroit techno group Drexciya, who imagined that the unborn children of drowned pregnant slaves would mutate and be able to live underwater. Images of the ocean's surface, references to J.M.W. Turner's *The Slave Ship*, and the work of an invented transcriber who listens for 'silent voices' resonate together, creating a constellation that is at once a requiem and a reparative fiction that looks forward to a future of more liveable lives.

Courtesy of LUX

Francisco Rodriguez

Una Luna de Hierro (*A Moon Made of Iron*) 2017

29 min., digital video

colour and sound, exempt

A Moon Made of Iron opens with the poetry of Xu Lizhi, a worker at the Foxconn electronics factory in Shenzhen who committed suicide in 2014 at the age of 24, and then cuts to the waters of Patagonia. The sea appears placid, but it is in fact a sea of desperation, horrendous working conditions, and bodies overboard in liquid graves. Moving between the local and the global, Francisco Rodriguez inhabits the rippling wake of dead Chinese workers who attempted to flee their squid-fishing boat off the Chilean coast, far from the first for whom a long maritime voyage was one of no return.

Courtesy of Le Fresnoy

Allan Sekula and Noël Burch

The Forgotten Space 2010

112 min., digital video

colour and sound, exempt

Allan Sekula and Noël Burch undertake an expansive and essayistic investigation of global capital through an unassuming mid-century invention: the shipping container. This innovation revolutionised the transport of goods by sea, dramatically increasing volume, decreasing costs, and reshaping the world economy. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the filmmakers travel across the oceans, interviewing diverse individuals who have little in common save for the fact that their lives have been touched in some way by the 'floating warehouses' that allow factories to become 'ship-like' and relocate overseas in search of cheap labour.

Courtesy of Doc.Eye Film

G. Anthony Svatek

.TV 2017

22 min., digital video

colour and sound, exempt

.TV sees climate change and the global circulation of data converge in Tuvalu, the small Pacific nation particularly vulnerable to rising water levels. G. Anthony Svatek crosscuts between landscape images of the island sourced from YouTube and digital devices in unknown locations playing videos hosted on websites ending in .tv, a national domain name that constitutes big business for Tuvalu's government owing to its evocation of television. A voiceover frames the film's images as relics of the past, narrating from a future time when Tuvalu has vanished beneath the ocean. A dystopian fable for a warming planet, told by travelling through the undersea cables that make the internet possible.

Courtesy of the artist