

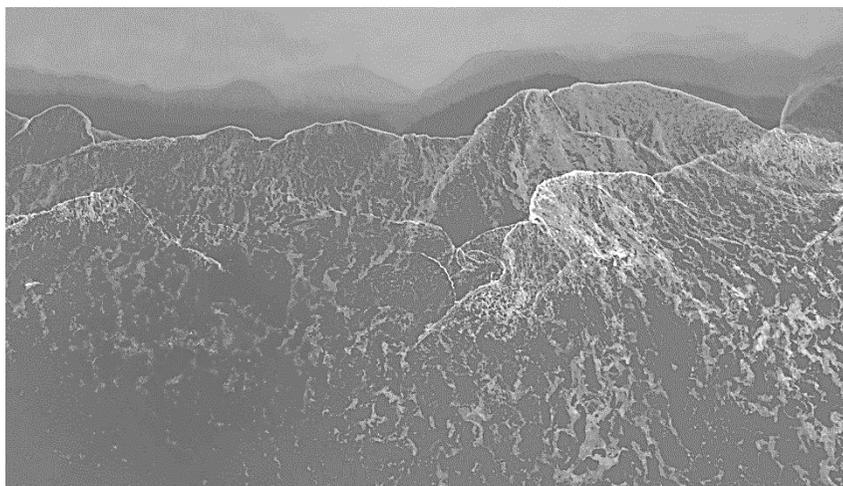
Ephemeral Coast

Visualizing Coastal Climate Change

Edited by

Celina Jeffery

University of Ottawa



Series on the History of Art



VERNON PRESS

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I am especially grateful to the authors and artists of this edited anthology who have battled covid-restrictions, child-care, teaching online, artistic careers, all the while working on their individual contributions to this volume.

I would also like to pay respect to and gratitude to the Algonquin people, who are the traditional guardians of the land upon which I live in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. I acknowledge their longstanding relationship with this territory, which remains unceded.

Foreword by David Rothenberg

This morning I took a walk down to the coast. Ten minutes down the street, I came to the edge of what some call a river that flows both ways, and others claim is a fjord. There stood a man with a telescope watching for migrating birds. “Some days I see nothing, other days a few thousand fly by. I write down what I see.”

Every day at the coast is different. And the water’s edge never stays the same. “What I like about it is that you’re right here in the moment. No past, no future, no to-do list, achievements. Nature just happens. It’s always good to live like that... sometimes.”

I agree with him. In fact it was just what I was thinking on the walk down in the incipient Spring sunlight. When in doubt... go outside. With all our devastation and destruction, intentional or otherwise, nature endures now and will still endure in the moment long after humanity’s run is done.

That’s why I always return to learn from nature, to try to respond to its immediacy even though I know whatever I make will pale beside the original model.

Aristotle was wrong. Humanity does *not* exist to finish what nature started. Nature never needed us but, unfortunately, we are here. So then he is also right—if we are to survive, and to live on this planet gracefully, then we must learn to imitate nature in its manner of operation, to work more like nature works and less like our artificially intelligent minds.

I leave the bird watcher and walk North along the coast. The town park is all fenced off, the site of a massive remediation scheme. You see, its coastline is collapsing due to the unexpectedly rapid water rise. The ramparts are crumbling, after two ‘500-year’ floods in one decade. No one was ready for this but of course we knew it was going to happen. To keep the coast from being ephemeral, it is being solidly rebuilt. It’s the least we can do.

Celina Jeffery’s expansive *Ephemeral Coast* project has brought her clear curatorial vision to exhibitions, events, and travels all over the planet, creatively exploring the fragility and resilience of our changing coastlines. She has a knack for picking the most interesting artists, the most interesting projects, and the most provocative ways of presenting them to a global public.

This book is a parallel presentation of all the work she has done in the curatorial field, and I hope it will inspire all of you to combine the wisdom of immediacy with an inspiration to act, to improve, and to celebrate the world

around us so humanity may live up to the great changes we need to face in the decades to come. It's up to no one else but us.

David Rothenberg
Cold Spring, New York
March 2022

Introduction

Celina Jeffery

University of Ottawa

Ephemeral Coast: Visualizing Coastal Climate Change considers the ways that art can offer a means through which to discover, analyze, re-imagine and re-frame emotive discourses about the ecological and cultural transformations of the coastline. This edited anthology takes ephemerality as its central conceptual framework and presents a series of essays to create interconnections between environmental and social considerations of the coast, a succession of embodied creative practices, and shifting regional geographic identities. As a conceptual rubric, 'ephemeral coast' acts as a kind of framing device, which recognizes the turbulence of the ocean's edge in the contemporary, or what Philip E. Steinberg calls the ocean's 'radical indeterminacy'.¹

Comparative in scope, the essays engender creative strategies for understanding new and uncertain coastal ecologies and the loss, expulsion or destruction of their associated cultures, habitats, species, and ecosystems. The ephemeral is negotiated by the authors as a possible theoretical, methodological, and experiential proposition. The book presents a series of specific case studies of artistic practices and creative strategies that seek to capture the rewriting of cartographic maps that are being reshaped by rising seas, coastal flooding, erosion, and catastrophic weather induced by climate change. These complementary visual studies consider the fracturing of the map's edge as both uneven and uncertain, affecting already vulnerable populations differently, and how being at the water's edge may become associated with concepts of 'inundation'² and of disposability, lived and felt locally and in the everyday. The anthology also looks at the historical, mnemonic, and contemporary transitional conditions of 'conflicted' coastal spaces in which empire, modernity and globalization press on coastal erosion and incursions, proliferate it with trivial plastics, pollution and disposable attitudes and bring vulnerable communities into uncertain futures. Here, the ephemeral coast is a place of hauntings but also of potential disruption and resistance, situating vibrance and turbulence as an aesthetic and ontological space, where visual stories and artistic practice are possible ways to think through and experience the incomprehensibility of disappearance and inundation. Tiffany Lethabo King's concept of the shoal as an ecotone, a liminal space of difficult passage, an interruption, and an interpretive frame is important here.³

The shore as “an edge, a boundary, a transitional zone,” argues American nature writer, John A. Murray, lends itself eloquently to the aesthetic realm of the imaginary.⁴ Tidal seas at the water’s edge, framed by the temporal horizon, has given rise to a plethora of aesthetic attitudes often underscored by the potential feelings of fear through immersion; and it is arguably this sense of unending permeability and rupture between land and sea that makes the coast so rich for artistic engagement. This ‘edge of the sea’ is famously described by marine biologist, nature writer and activist, Rachel Carson, as a ‘magical zone’, a dual, fertile and productive space, which has given rise to resilient and enriching exchanges between territory and unbounded aqueous ecosystems, community and biological life of the ocean.⁵ Muscongus Bay, on the coast of Maine, became a particular point of inspiration for her investigation of the littoral zone in *The Edge of the Sea* (1955); it was also a source of inspiration for her burgeoning engagement with conservation.⁶ For Carson, the shore is a place of deep time, “where the drama of life played its first scene on earth and perhaps even its prelude”⁷ and is constantly morphing, merging, blending, and as she states, there is no finality or permanency, but is a place in which “man is an uneasy trespasser.”⁸

Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker’s *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas* (2013), is a compendium of essays, prose and maps about New Orleans’ shifting and disappearing coastal culture and geography, ‘the colossal erosion of recent times’, in which land and water permeate with such veracity that former cartographic demarcations are fruitless.⁹ The myriad of gas and oil incursions in the critical ecological habitat of the bayous and wetlands of southeast Louisiana, which is home to Indigenous delta clans¹⁰, is partly responsible for the disappearance of the ‘buffer’ wetlands that break hurricanes.¹¹ The catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, combined with the Exxon Mobil oil spill of 2010, the largest oil spill in US history, which covered 2000 km of the Gulf of Mexico, became shocking signifiers of the violence of ‘anthropogenic drivers’ upon underprivileged and marginalized communities in particular. Solnit also cautions against the lack of focus on the long-term consequences of such environmental catastrophes,¹² which continue to erode and inundate the Gulf Coast and create instability for its communities. Monique Verdin, an Indigenous Houma (Ouma) storyteller and artist, writes that her home is ‘disappearing’ into the Gulf at an aggressive speed: “an acre of land is lost from our shores, with 50 to 60 percent of all loss occurring within the Barataria-Terre-bonne estuary” in which many of her ancestral peoples live.¹³ Similarly in 2016, the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe of Isle de Jean Charles, a community near New Orleans, was given ‘climate refugee’ status, the first of its kind in the USA, due to the disappearance of the bayous.¹⁴ The *bayou*, a Choctaw word meaning ‘slow moving stream’, is being subsumed by the salt waters of the ocean, as described by Elizabeth Rush, author of *Rising Dispatches from the New American Shore*

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Contributors

Catherine Bonier is an Assistant Professor at the Azrieli School of Architecture & Urbanism at Carleton University in Ottawa. Her research draws on the history of cities to imagine urban futures, using water and infrastructure as central threads to situate an ethical, critical perspective. Her past positions in construction management, mental health counseling, and video game design contribute to her focus on the conflicting effects of technologies on the creation and protection of just, healthy cities and environments. Catherine is co-director and co-founder of the Carleton Urban Research Lab (<https://c-url.ca/>) with Professor Ozayr Saloojee. C-url engages in collaborative interdisciplinary research, teaching, and design centered on three themes — water, cities, and equity.

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Diana Heise's practice engages filmmaking, photography, writing, performance, and social practice. Her work has been exhibited in galleries and festivals internationally, including the Brooklyn Museum, the Film Anthology Archives, Oriel Myrddin Gallery, Cantor Art Center, Institut Français de Maurice, and the Des Moines Art Center, among others. She is a recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship in the Creative and Performing Arts, a Performance Art Fund Grant from the Franklin Furnace Inc. as well as a Presidential Fellowship at the American University in Cairo. She has participated in residencies at the Vermont Studio Center, the Visual Art Center of New Jersey, Open Wabi and the Wassaic Project. She has spoken about her work at venues such as the Parsons School of Art and Design, Stanford University, and the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art. She holds an MFA in Photography, Video and Related Media from the School of Visual Arts in New York, NYC, and a BA in Art History from Vassar College. She is Professor and Chair of the Photography and Filmmaking Department at the Kansas City Art Institute.

Celina Jeffery is an Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Ottawa, Canada. Recent publications include *Ephemeral Coast* (2015), *The Artist as Curator* (2015), the 'Junk Ocean' issue of *Drain: A Journal of Contemporary Art and Culture* (January 2016) and the 'Towards a Blue Humanity' issue of *Symploke* (2019) co-edited with Ian Buchanan. She is the founder of *Ephemeral Coast*

www.ephemeralcoast.com, a SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) funded, curatorial research project (2015–2019). She has curated exhibitions internationally which explore the visual cultures of climate change.

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visual cultures of resistance and refusal from Palestine to Turtle Island, amplifying practices of transnational Indigenous solidarities from the perspective of critical racial and decolonial theory. Sherena has curated and co-organized exhibitions that address the politics and aesthetics of surveillance, oceanic degradation, and the militarization and materialization of nation-state borders between the Global North and the Global South. She holds an M.A. in Art History, Visual Art, and Theory from the University of British Columbia (2018) and a B.A. in the History and Theory of Art from the University of Ottawa (2016).

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