

Art Review

The Works on Water Triennial Puts Commitment Over Spectacle

The show's third iteration drifts between deep time, environmental urgency, and immersive aesthetic gestures.



Louis Bury September 8, 2025



Installation view of Sarah Cameron Sunde, "36.5 / A Durational Performance with the Sea" (2013–22) (all photos Louis Bury/*Hyperallergic*)

A group show on an island a boat ride away from Manhattan is unlikely to attract the same attention as **flashier happenings on the city's busy fall art calendar**, yet their work is no less deserving of it. The **Works on Water (WoW) Triennial** at the Arts Center at Governors Island, now in its third iteration, has been led since 2017 by a resourceful group of artists and curators (Emily Blumenfeld, Carolyn Hall, sTo Len, Clarinda Mac Low, Nancy Nowacek, and Sarah Cameron Sunde, at present). The collective remains oriented toward humble grassroots projects,

such as performance artist Nora Almeida's and videographer iki nakagawa's **collaborative multimedia explorations of Brooklyn's Coney Island Creek.**

This and other projects are compelling in their own right, but what stands out about their 2025 triennial is how many artists, and even artworks, have returned from the first two editions. This apparent repetitiveness may seem strange given that many bi- and triennials aspire to be cultural status updates. But WoW's willingness to revisit projects indicates that it values art for its depth and persistence rather than how it sets or fits trends.

That commendable commitment is evident in "Walking the Edge" (2020–25), a preliminary version of which appeared in the previous WoW triennial and which here appears as a dense grid of shoreline photographs. The photos document an ambitious durational feat: From May to October 2025, in collaboration with Culture Push and NYC's Department of City Planning, WoW **members are leading walks covering the city's entire 520 miles of coastline.**



Installation view of Elizabeth Velazquez, "Calling Forth The Waters that Surround Us" (2025)

Video documentation of Sarah Cameron Sunde's "36.5 / A Durational Performance with the Sea" (2013–22) — in which the artist and local participants stand in coastal waters for one full tidal cycle at sites around the world — also makes a repeat appearance. Sunde's performance, oriented toward deep time, patiently bears witness to the accelerating rate of sea level rise. The horizon-

long Great Lakes vistas in Jana Harper's short video, "Song for Water" (2025), likewise operate in a pensive, almost oracular, register.

It's not surprising that Water Art, as WoW calls it, would take the long view of things, given the philosophical depth associated with its subject. But this triennial's design emphasizes contemplative aesthetic gestures over the nitty-gritty logistics of its community projects, from sTo Len's 30-foot-long *gomitaku* — a Japanese portmanteau meaning "trash impression" — mono print that undulates across the gallery like an elegant serpent ("Impressions for Coastal Constellation Alignment: Potomac River, Virginia," 2020), to the floor-to-ceiling netting and cotton *saris* that Elizabeth Velazquez and Monica Jahan Bose use, respectively, to demarcate circular spaces ("Calling Forth The Waters That Surround Us" and "Darchira River," both 2025).

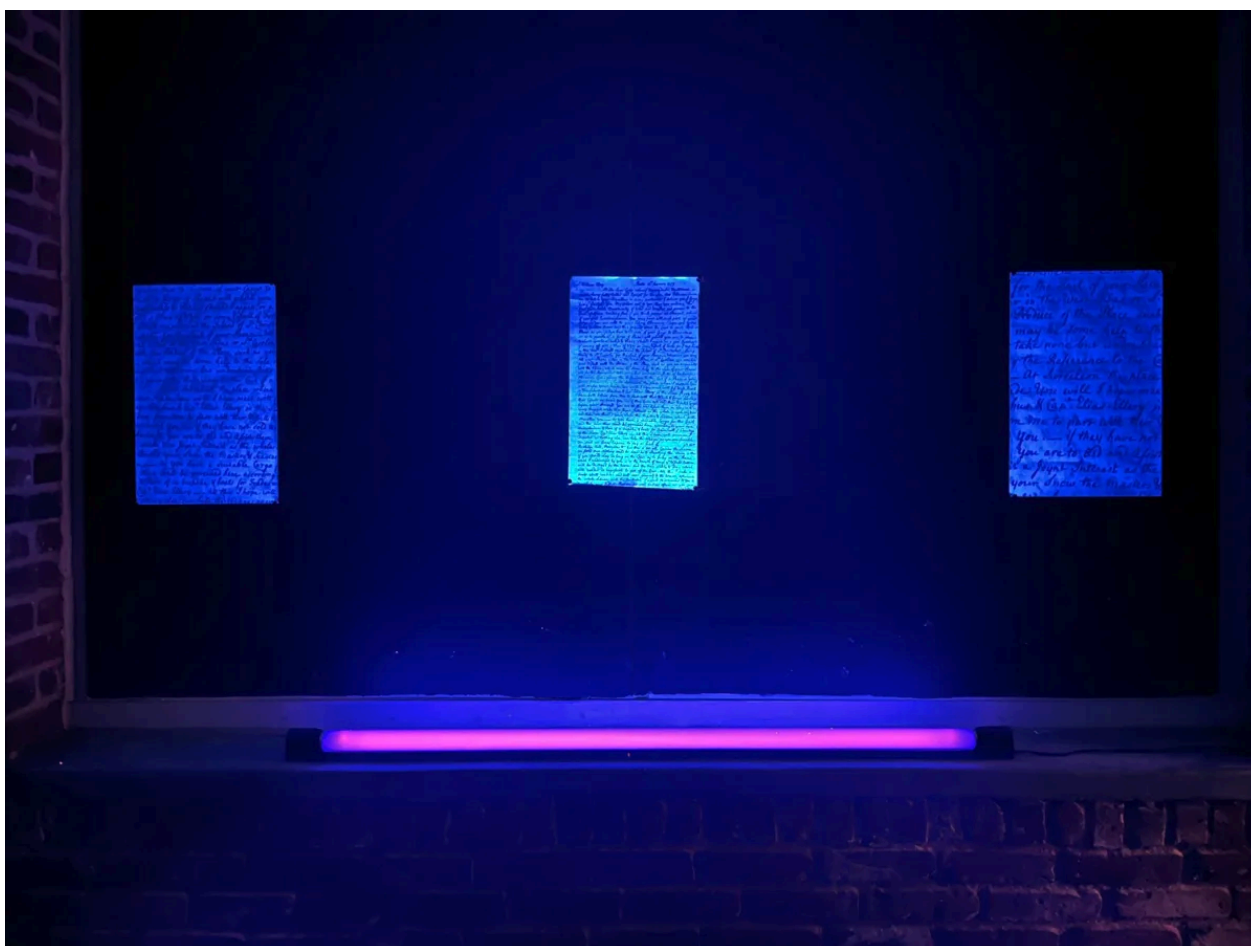
However counterintuitive emphasizing aesthetics over logistics might sound, it constitutes an effective solution to the problem of how to translate public and social practice art into a gallery setting. The triennial — especially the moody basement gallery suffused with a scent by perfume maker Frank Bloem ("Zeelucht (A Perfume from Forty Smells of the North Sea)," 2021) — reminded me of the dramatic installation environments in this summer's inaugural **Sky High Farm biennial**, an eco-minded Hudson Valley show. But whereas the Sky High installations evince showmanship, WoW's installations evince introspection. Nobody in the group has given up on doing the work — quite the contrary — but there's an ambient sense that, given what has and hasn't changed in the world since 2017, progress's horizon might be further off than one would hope.



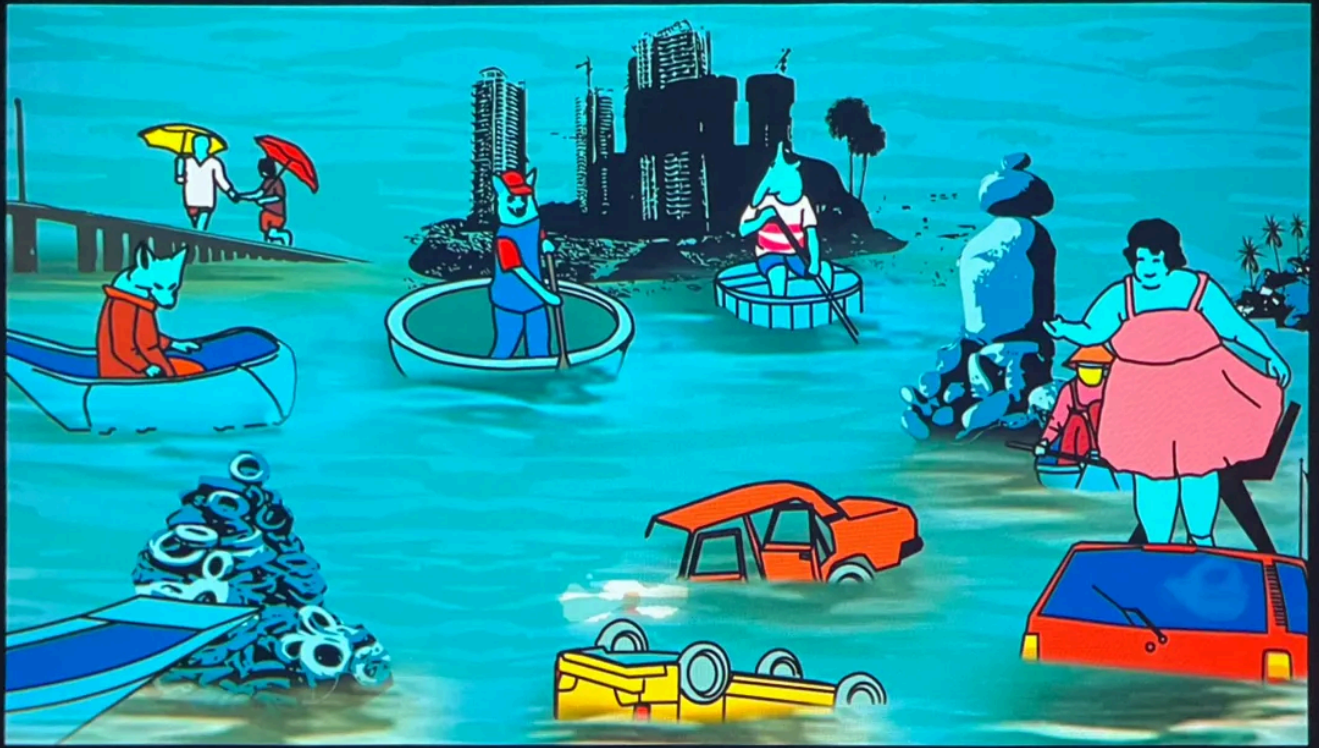
Detail view of Works on Water, "Walking the Edge" (2020–25)



Installation view of sTo Len, "Impressions for Coastal Constellation Alignment: Potomac River, Virginia" (2020)



Installation view of Art Jones, "dissolving/removing" (2025)



Installation view of Marina Zurkow, "Slurb" (2009), video



Jana Harper, "Song for the Water" (2025)

The Works on Water 2025 Triennial *continues at the Arts Center of Governors Island (110 Andes Road, Manhattan) through October 26. The exhibition was curated by Emily Blumenfeld and Kendal Henry with the Works on Water team (Carolyn Hall, sTo Len, Clarinda Mac Low, Nancy Nowacek, and Sarah Cameron Sunde).*
