



# BARTLEBY REVIEW

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Crazy To Go To Sea ..... Kendra Sullivan

## **Mare Liberum and 350.org**

*'Seachange: We All Live Downstream'*

Hudson River, East River,  
Harlem River, and Hudson River  
New York, NY  
Through Sept 21

*"Why is almost every robust healthy boy with a robust healthy soul in him, at some time or other crazy to go to sea?" - Herman Melville, Moby-Dick*

Let's take as a given that knowing is creative, participatory—that one must go to sea to know the "world-as-larger-than-me."

Let's also take as a given that all human activity is inscribed within a non-human topology, more-or-less continuously deforming and unfolding in response to pressures building on a political, geological, and celestial scale. And that knowledge of this topological matter is built discursively via bodily contact with environmental conditions.

In *Kant After Duchamp*, Thierry de Duve states, "in the depth of matter lies a language." He is referring to pure color and a tube of paint, but might it stand to reason that in the depth of these topologies language is being produced?

On the river, the rhythm of water in flow is felt as an instance of instability seeking form. The fragility, finitude, and contingency of figure and ground are set in stark relief on a slippery width of earth in liquid state. On the river with *SeaChange*, I begin to mount evidence toward a theory of the environment as writing-act.

Art collective *Mare Liberum* and climate justice group *350.org* is *SeaChange: we all live downstream*. Together, they choreographed an adventure-polemic against socially injurious modes of ecological exploitation.

The crew built a fleet of paper canoes and traveled in them for 3 weeks down the Hudson River – seat of the Hudson River School, a retinal response to industrialization, a return to nature, and an approach the sublime. Idealists, they failed to change the material conditions of post-industrial life. Romantics, they managed to perform an alternative consciousness. Is this societally useful? Insert Kristeva, who urges “the structuring need of ideality.”

*Seachange* is premised on: 1) the water is a commons, a marginal polis underutilized by the people; 2) the water is rising; 3) anybody can build a boat.

*I navigate now without authority. Turn, great sun,  
Your disc upon me  
I set out now  
In a box upon the sea.  
— Charles Olson, The Maximus Poems*

A sequence of stretched, bent, and abandoned itineraries, the trip is analog to a future myth, where the human family depends upon the dogged upkeep of a fleet of fragile crafts. Maybe not so futuristic. This

year, it is (conservatively) estimated that 2,500 political refugees and migrants were drowned at sea. Experimenting in nomadology—in rootlessness, self-sovereignty, and driftwork—the artists construct micro-societal infrastructures from scratch, seeking out perceptual experience as a means to secure intimacy with nature in our city, on our river.

Let’s take as a given that the movements of a river approximate the shape of time, and its true shape is a non-chronological network of living narratives not guaranteed eternal retelling. Just let’s.

After dinner, Osiris is tricked into a box his brother Seth built. The box is nailed shut and set adrift on the Nile. Isis hunts the length of the river for the rumor of her lover. She finds him interred within a pillar hewn from a tree grown around the box that holds his dead body, but while she sleeps Seth cuts the King into pieces and scatters them across Egypt. In her renewed grief, Isis metaphorically reconnects – through the arc of her search on the Nile in a papyrus boat – his stray bits, burying each discreet part and marking the spot with a shrine. For all her magic, Osiris remains unalive.

Her aim was not to alter the past but to live with the future. *SeaChange* asks: What might a reparative traveler look like?

*“In the weeping women and exiles that wander through her poems..., [Susan] Howe confronts the cannibal cosmos – the cruelty of becoming, or world-as-process – for which there is no remedy.”  
- Miriam Nichols, Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside*

**Kendra Sullivan**