

Meditation Ocean

Hope Ginsburg interviewed by Noah Simblist

This conversation was recorded on August 28, 2024. It has been edited for length and clarity.

Noah Simblist *Meditation Ocean* addresses the representation of ecological impact and was presented in the context of an academic museum, The Wexner Center, last year. It also addresses education on several levels, including the ways that it seeks to educate a viewer through the video installations about particular ecologies and the challenges that they're facing, but also because you incorporated education so directly into the project. But before we get to *Meditation Ocean*, can I first ask you about some earlier initiatives like *Sponge*? How did *Sponge* come to be and how do you feel like it connected to education?

Hope Ginsburg *Sponge* was quite literally a knowledge-exchange project. That

was its intention from the outset. It originated when I was in graduate school at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and I was thinking about intervening productively into existing systems. That thinking came directly out of environmental work I was doing within the textile industry. The model of environmental intervention within industry was something I was inspired to apply in an educational context—what would it be like to make a school within a school? I proposed *Sponge* for the Independent Activities Period, the January term at MIT that encourages flexible models for learning. My “school within a school” was inspired by the sea sponge. I learned a lot about sponges doing this project.

The original idea was all about immersion. It was about how, even in my own art practice, I could not only take in information as a sponge absorbs water but also filter it and put it back out there in a way

that catalyzed exchange, which is also what sponges do with nutrients. The original idea was a workshop model that would scramble disciplines and also flip hierarchies between experts and learners. Every participant in a *Sponge* workshop was both an expert and a learner. There was a model of taking in what the “curriculum” offered but then teaching something back to the rest of the group at the end, which, in the case of the first workshop, was on the fourth day.

NS You also applied this model elsewhere, right?

HG Yes, absolutely. I started the project with the knowledge that if you put a sponge in a blender, every little bit will grow up into an adult sponge. The idea was that *Sponge* would be replicable. There were a few workshops while I was in grad school. When I moved to Richmond to teach at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), I was invited to make a *Sponge* exhibition for which I programmed three weekend-long workshops. The first was “Feltmaking”; the second was “Water & Sound”; the third was called “Meta-Sponge” and it was quite explicitly about mixing disciplines. It included a curator, a biodynamic farmer, and so on. But this exhibition was also about making the space that would house these workshops. So there was still an interest in immersion, to get spongy about it, and installation. This exhibition led to the Sponge HQ, which was a space in the Anderson gallery at VCU that lasted six years. Sponge HQ was meant to be an interdisciplinary blender planted at a university, the way a sponge plants itself on a marine reef. And it was meant to do all of the filtering and collaborating. As I learned more about sponges by making this project,

I found that sponges are known to be the first multicellular organism, which makes them a model of collectivity or collaboration. The Sponge HQ was meant to be a collaborative space.

NS On the one hand, you were choosing the sponge as a metaphor for flattening hierarchies. You begin by creating a school within a school as a student, then you have this job as a professor and are given an opportunity to embed this project within a different educational institution. As those things shifted did *Sponge* also shift?

HG There are many ways to answer that question. I continued to play with the question of hierarchy. For example, the first semester-long iteration of a sponge project was called *Colablalab*. I registered as a student at VCU, and I signed up for a biology lecture and lab. And then all of the students in *Colablalab* took the same biology lecture and lab. So the class took a class; and our class, which was an eight-credit constellation, responded to this new knowledge. On the other hand, there was a strong vector of participation in *Sponge*; it was collaborative but also participatory. The distinction I’m making is that when it was in participation mode, I took on a little bit of leadership. For example, if an opportunity came to me to make an exhibition like at the 9th Mercosul Biennial in Puerto Alegre, Brazil, then I could begin to imagine how the students and I might respond to such an invitation together. In a situation like that, I might take the lead, but then the students would be supported by class credit or artwork credit or school funding.

NS I’m glad that you introduced this notion of participation. Another way to

think beyond the standard student-teacher relationship is in terms of leadership, opportunities, and facilitation. I also hear research implied in that process, like how you were researching sponges. And you're inviting other people to come along with you on that journey.

HG A catalyzing impulse for my own work is learning. And I think that art making has been a way of focusing and sustaining attention. There's also a social impulse to learn collectively with others, to receive, interpret, transmit, or exchange with others. So, in terms of research, maybe a pragmatic learning-by-doing ethos saturates the work. I also think that art can broaden what we mean by research, and, if so, I am swimming in that pool.

NS That's a great transition into your project *Land Dive Team*. What was it and how did it come about?

HG In *Land Dive Team* projects—which are live events, performances, or videos—a group of people meditates with scuba gear on land in a site that can be interpreted environmentally. For example in the video *Land Dive Team: Bay of Fundy*, three other divers and I meditated on the Fundy shoreline as its tide—which has the distinction of being the highest on the planet—rose on our bodies until we disappeared below. Another example took place in a formerly remediated wetland in the mud, allowing viewers to ask, what are these divers doing there? What if the water rises? In the case of a desert, the question might be, was this an ocean? Will this be an ocean? So again, a group of people meditating in scuba gear on land as a way of provoking questions about sites specifically related to the environment.

But to back up a little bit, I got there because of my interest in sponges. I learned to scuba dive so that I could see them alive on the reef. I attended an artist residency after I'd been working on the *Sponge* project for eight years. I was thinking more autobiographically and wanted to see what my work would do if I took a step back from *Sponge*. I was thinking in particular of an accident that I'd had in which I broke my sternum and a bone in my spine. I imagined making an underwater video reenacting that accident with scuba divers. And an image popped into my head of people meditating on land with scuba gear. So I invited my fellow residents to join me in a meditation with scuba gear. What happened was remarkable. Rather than just being a video production, it was actually quite an effective meditation. What I mean when I say *meditation* is practicing awareness of the present moment and meeting whatever is arising without judgement. The breath can be an anchor for finding the present moment because it's always there. So, when we were meditating with scuba gear, the meditation—that practice of returning to the breath every time the mind wanders—was augmented by the technology of the gear. Every inhale and exhale were amplified by the presence of the regulator in the mouth, by the weight of the gear. We were put right in our bodies and made aware of the other bodies breathing alongside us because of the soundscape.

After that first *Land Dive Team* practice in Florida, I realized that I was right back into a collective learning experience. I had to orient the participants in the “land dive” to the scuba gear, deliver an introduction to mindfulness practice, and then we had a collective experience. So, the original idea for the underwater video took a

backseat and my attention shifted to the potentials of the *Land Dive Team*. It became an iterative project the way *Sponge* was. If *Sponge* was a series of workshops, events, classes, and hands-on making that was ten years in its expression, *Land Dive Team* was sixteen “land dives” in a variety of sites internationally from 2014 until 2021.

NS I hear you saying that facilitation became its own form of learning. This notion of participation, going from the individual to the communal, produced a specific experience of breathing that could be connected to mindfulness. What was the learning experience of breathing together?

HG I often learn about a project as I’m making it. By breathing together slowly my personal meditation practice deepened. It toggles back and forth between the individual and the collective. This is a new idea, so I’m working it out with you. When I began making the *Land Dive Team* projects, the role of meditation was to settle an individual anxiety about climate change and work with the regulation of the nervous system to be able to sustain attention to the climate crisis. What I learned is how settling into that place of awareness allows our individual being, our self, to start to dissolve. That is where that sense of interconnection entered the work for the first time. Learning with *Land Dive Team* deepened my own meditation practice and led to some of these deeper investigations of collectivity.

NS When I teach a class about contemporary art at VCU, I often show images of *Land Dive Team* together with *Flooded McDonald’s* (2009) by Superflex. For viewers who encounter this and your work in a museum or gallery space, they are seeing

an image of a potential future, of rising sea levels. There’s something absurd about a group of people in scuba gear meditating on land, right?

HG: Absolutely, the project began with a kind of survivalist absurdity, asking “What peril is lurking for these divers?”

NS This is a good moment to transition into *Meditation Ocean*. Can you introduce us to the project?

HG *Meditation Ocean* is an accessible indoor ocean in the form of a video installation where viewers can have the experience of breathing with wildlife on the seabed, joined by divers that enter the scene to breathe with them. The first iteration of *Meditation Ocean* is also a platform for programming and reaching the public both within the ocean and in the field.

NS So then the question, who is *Meditation Ocean*? comes up because *Land Dive Team* implied a certain relationship between individuals and collectivity. And I think you’ve been very deliberate in *Meditation Ocean* being a kind of collective.

HG Absolutely. I have the honor of channeling *Meditation Ocean*, and the first iteration, *M.O. Turtlegrass Meadow*, on behalf of the Meditation Ocean Constellation, an expansive ecosystem of artists, curators, writers, musicians, meditators, divers, and scientists. The first instance of the Meditation Ocean Constellation comprised about fifty people who made the project happen. And that’s not including all of the beings on the reef.

NS So, what was its first iteration?

HG As I mentioned, it was called *M.O. Turtlegrass Meadow*. The project was filmed during a four-day underwater meditation retreat in Biscayne National Park in the Florida Keys. The resulting six-channel video installation was installed as an exhibition at the Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio. The score included ten commissioned guided meditations that played in the space, which also could be accessed outside of the exhibition. A series of public programs held by the Learning & Public Practice department at the Wexner Center and produced in collaboration with the Film/Video Studio Program, engaged high-school students, scientists in Columbus, and a university student group called Art & Resilience. It was an ecosystem on many levels: the makers, the participants, and the various departments at the institution with which I collaborated.

NS The presenting organization is an academic museum. Similar to a project that's tied to learning as a student at MIT, or as a professor at VCU, here you're embedding this project in a venue whose mission is to serve both the university and a general public. I imagine that some of those ecosystem nodes implicitly were tied to that mission.

HG *Meditation Ocean* came up through the Film/Video Studio, which is a post-production studio at the Wexner Center that filmmakers and artists move through to make their films. I had the opportunity to work with editor Mike Olenick on the *Land Dive Team: Bay of Fundy* video at the studio in 2016. Then I got really interested in the underwater coral farming that my collaborator and videographer Matt Flowers was doing on St. Croix. And so Matt Flowers, Joshua Quarles—who

did the sound for the *Land Dive Team* projects and *Meditation Ocean*—and I made a multichannel video installation about coral restoration called *Swirling*. We edited that video with Alexis McCrimmon two years later in 2018 at the Film/Video Studio. In many ways, *Meditation Ocean* is a synthesis of *Sponge*, *Land Dive Team*, and *Swirling*. *Sponge* was a pedagogical space. *Land Dive Team* was embodied learning explicitly connected to an environment. For *Swirling*, to show viewers on land this underwater coral farming process, we wound up making a video installation. *Sponge* HQ closed in 2016, and, in the back of my mind, I was working through ideas for a new pedagogical space and a new space for environmental exchange. *Meditation Ocean* represents the notion of inverting the *Land Dive Team* and putting a group of actual divers on the seabed to breathe with the video's viewers instead of having participants schlep scuba gear to a given site. It occurred to me that this could be the new iteration of this idea, a new way to host environmental pedagogical work. All to say that *Meditation Ocean* was, in many ways, born at the Wexner Center in the Film/Video Studio in conversation with Alexis, Matt, Josh, and Jennifer Lange, who is the director of the Film/Video Studio Program and also the producer of *Meditation Ocean*.

NS So, how do you think the Wexner, as an academic *museum*, helped to support this work? One aspect of an academic mission is teaching and another is supporting research.

HG Yes, and knowledge production, which, in our field, is the production of artworks.

NS Museums often are thought of as presenting institutions: commissioned works are most often presented in an exhibition. New acquisitions are presented as a part of a collection. But this Film/Video program allowed you to research, to generate knowledge, to develop an artwork without necessarily presenting it at that institution. Some inherent learning existed within that without necessarily having to present it. That came later, right?

HG Absolutely. 100 percent yes to all of that.

NS So once the Wexner began discussing presenting the work, that introduced other questions about the engagement with the public and educational programming. Tell us about that.

HG As the opportunity to present *Meditation Ocean* at the Wexner emerged, more entities at the Wexner Center came online. The Exhibitions team became an important partner with Film/Video and Learning & Public Practice. It was a very collaborative project.

NS Were there specific conversations about engaging particular publics? How did you engage the undergraduate population? How did you engage the public of Columbus?

HG Under the leadership of Dionne Custer Edwards, Learning & Public Practice already had a robust educational program. When I came in as the artist/director of this collaborative project, I needed to understand how to engage with the systems and communities that were already in place. There were many conversations about

who at Ohio State might be interesting to engage. The Byrd Polar and Climate Research Center became a partner as well as the Schiermeier Olentangy River Wetland Research Park, because I came with the notion that we were going to connect the Midwestern ecosystem of Columbus, Ohio with the far-flung location of Biscayne National Park in the Florida Keys. How do we learn about what's affecting local waters, what research is already on site, and how do we build a porous enough container for all of these ideas that the public can move through? We all wanted this ocean to be accessible and to touch on the guiding principles of the project, which were connections between individual and community wellbeing, human and more-than-human wellbeing, and also connections between the environmental and the social. We knew that everyone would come to the ocean with a different set of associations. We intended to make it accommodating. We also recognized that people might have fear or trauma around the ocean. A great deal of care and sensitivity was put into building programs that could meet people where they were.

NS With *Land Dive Team* you were talking about the feelings that one might have about rising sea levels and the way that you modulate, mediate, or prepare for those feelings. That aspect of this work relates to ways of thinking about climate change and the way that people deal with—let's call it—environmental activism or navigating climate justice. One way to look at climate change is to look at the facts: rising temperatures, rising sea levels. Another way is affective: a sense of fear or anxiety in relation to what the data implies. The way that feelings are mediated in relation to information reminds me of a pedagogical space. With

this installation at the Wexner, and even in earlier projects, how did you think about the ways that learning functions within environmental activism and how you as an artist can invite a public to engage with this subject?

HG One proposal of this project is that we get our bodies back into the mix, get our felt-sense back into the mix. We're living in a very mental, above-the-neck, Western scientific culture. The data comes in through science, and that's very important. But one of many root causes of climate change, of the environmental catastrophe, is that we're cut off from our bodies, from our ability to feel connection to other people, to other species, to landscapes. We're unable to perceive the signals that our individual and collective bodies are sending up for us with great alarm. One of the informal pedagogies of *Meditation Ocean* is to start with a felt sense experience.

NS I wonder how you get a population that is in a landlocked location to think about this far-away space of the Florida Keys. Maybe *Meditation Ocean* is provocative by locating one space in another space.

HG Starting with the notion that wonder and awe are at the root of altruism,¹ a

¹ The belief that awe and curiosity inspired by the natural world could motivate action on its behalf has been a driving force in Ginsburg's work. For the original research on the connection between awe and altruism, see P.K. Piff, P. Dietze, M. Feinberg, D. M. Stancato, and D. Keltner, "Awe, the small self, and prosocial behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 108, no. 6 (2015), 883–899. For further reading, see Dacher Keltner, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life* (Penguin Press, 2023).

question is, how can you shift people's perception long enough for them to meet, get curious about, and connect with a site that they may not understand? Especially when such a connection may move viewers to

engage with ocean justice. A pedagogical artwork does not need to literally transmit information. There are many ways to do that in the mix of the project's materials, like a site statement that looks at the social implications of Biscayne National Park and the Florida Keys, like writings in the gallery guide, like the content that moves through the guided meditation scripts that can be heard in the gallery. So, one can transmit the data or scientific research that supports a learning experience, but viewers are invited to take in their experience as it arises for them. I mean, I'm laughing at the idea of a meditation project that says: you will have this experience and leave with this specific new understanding.

NS You're laughing at it because it sounds absurd, right?

HG Right. Folks could approach *M.O. Turtlegrass Meadow* in many ways. And they did. There were many comfortable circular cushions of different heights and sizes all over the floor, and people built pillow forts and chilled all day. People started to use it as a meeting space or a workspace. At one point, a really provocative speaker was coming to campus, and a group of students and faculty held a counter-protest in the form of a workshop that took place in the installation. So you could come into that space and through the ambient score—which had reef sounds and musical elements made from synthesizing the human voice—experience the shifting light, the subtle movement of what was taking place in the videos, with no expectations. You could also sit down on a cushion and “dial in” a guided meditation on headphones or through a wall speaker and practice meditation more formally. This spectrum of informal to formal

meditation practice is analogous to the range of ways knowledge is transmitted in the project, from openly inviting curiosity to sharing very specific information about the site in the Florida Keys.

NS We talked about expanding the notion of what an educational space could be, how an artwork can function as a pedagogical framework, and, through that, how it can expand the definition of pedagogy itself. Pedagogy doesn't necessarily lead to certain outcomes like the acquiring of information or skills. But similarly, we were talking about how change is driven by a narrative of justice.

HG There's a helpful arc articulated by those working to address climate change: denier, acceptor, supporter, activist. You're conjuring justice, and I want to return to that, but there's an interesting side question here about the relationship between activism and meditation, which is a practice of being and stillness. One useful way of thinking about the relationship between

meditation and activism is the discernment of right action.

2 Ginsburg cites the role of the artist as "public amateur" and more thoughts on learning in public as defined and articulated by Claire Pentecost, as an inspiration in her practice. See Claire Pentecost, "Beyond Face," *Continental Drift* 15 (May 2008).

3 While researching *Meditation Ocean*, Ginsburg participated in the Mind & Life Institute's 2021 Summer Research Institute, "The Mind, the Human-Earth Connection, and the Climate Crisis." The conference presentations are now an accessible online course. Ginsburg credits this program for deepening her understanding of the root causes of the climate crisis, specifically Dekila Chungyalpa's presentation "Don't Look Down: How to Build Bridges with Unlikely Allies."

NS What do you mean by that?

HG By right action, I mean, how can we act in the world in a way that does not add to aggression or escalate a problem? What is the right action? And this is a moment-to-moment question,

right? Action can be motivated by anger. Sometimes that's productive. Sometimes it may introduce harm. What I mean by meditating to train in right action is that one who has practiced meditative awareness gets a lot of intuitive information to help discern the right action in a given moment. It's interesting to unpack the relationship between a mindfulness practice and activism, because, in a way, the mindfulness practice is meant to decrease activation. You might say that through meditation, we learn when and how to act.

NS I hear you saying that you're trying, through your practice, to see how meditation and activism—which might seem to have nothing to do with one another—may actually be related.

HG Yes, but it's also important for me to say that I am learning. I am not a meditation scholar or a scholar of Buddhism, although what I'm referencing and learning about is Buddhist practice and specifically Vipassana, or Insight, meditation, in the Theravada tradition. I'm also not a scholar of climate policy or climate justice. I come to these spaces as a learner, and I hope that I'm transmitting these ideas with the appropriate humility. I think what artistic practice allows us to do is make these juxtapositions as a kind of public amateur.² In these projects, I learn in public with other people.

I think the question on the table is to do with meditation and climate justice.³ I want to get back to this notion of the separate self and how harmful it is because I think it is so intrinsically tied to climate and climate justice. "I am a single being. I know and love a small group of certain other beings, and I want resources for myself and for these other beings that I love." Right?

That sense of separateness and hoarding is partly about making resources and knowledge unavailable to other people. This is where root causes of the climate crisis—like globalization, neoliberalism, and colonization—come in, these acquisitive, grasping impulses that are colonial and supremacist. I'm referencing white supremacy, male supremacy, human supremacy. These are the justice issues bound up in climate, as communities of color, marginalized communities, and communities with fewer economic resources are bearing the brunt of the climate crisis.

NS You've talked about empathy for other species, paying attention to species other than our own. That interspecies awareness is important in relation to the conversation about a community in Ohio thinking about a community in Florida—and the awareness of what is similar and different between us. And that questions around climate justice have to do with the many factors that mean some people are more directly affected by the climate crisis than others. And there's also this simple idea that you were talking about with *Land Dive Team*: that there's one's individual experience, one's own breath, the breath of the person next to you, and the collective breath providing an easy way to move between the individual and the communal. But structural inequities make it difficult to move between contexts. I'm curious how you think about creating an opportunity to meditate on those differences. How do you account for different publics from a diversity of backgrounds encountering one artwork, one installation, one program? Some people may recognize something really clearly, other people may need it translated.

HG You make an ocean. This is a nod to the ocean and a thanks to the ocean. What space is capacious enough to hold it all, to allow all things to move through it? You make a sponge—in Latin, the *Phylum Porifera*—all pores, no inside or outside, no separate self. Everything that arises moves through. I think that what is proposed here are porous, vast, multivalent spaces that are full and layered and more than human.

More information about Meditation Ocean, including collaborator credits, related publications, images, sound, and guided meditation scripts, can be found at meditationocean.com.