



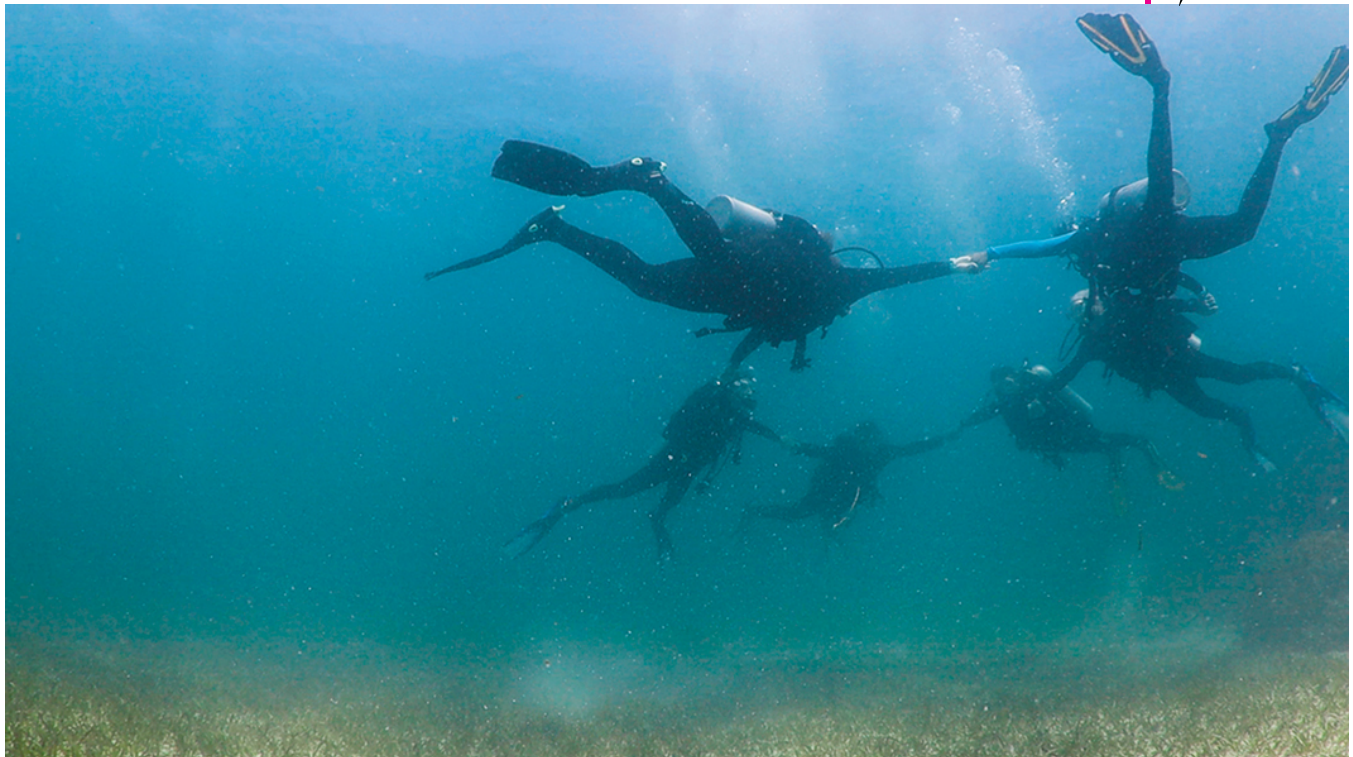
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ON SITE

DEEP BREATHING

Annie Dell’Aria on “Meditation Ocean”



Meditation Ocean Constellation, M.O. Turtlegrass Meadow, 2023, six-channel HD video, color, sound, 67 minutes. Photo: Hope Ginsburg.

ACROSS SIX CINEMA SCREENS, divers sporting goggles, flippers, and oxygen tanks kneel on the ocean floor or hover cross-legged just above it. In the popular imagination, aquanauts in scuba gear are adventurers, latter-day explorers of the planet's last frontier in the spirit of Jacques Cousteau. But in *M.O. Turtlegrass Meadow*, 2023, a six-channel video installation currently on view at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, they are unsettlingly inactive, more interested in contemplation than discovery. Captured in static long shots, the divers' breath bubbles up toward the surface in a hypnotic rhythm; their bodies gently sway with the surge of the water; their hair moves with the seagrass. At times, we see only undersea fish and flora in observant close-up, moving with the same gentle flow. A tonal score produced by isolating and looping notes sung by human voices gives melodic contour to the diegetic sounds of gurgling water, crackling coral, mechanical regulators, and human breath emanating from each screen. Circular teal cushions and a gray carpeted floor beckon viewers to linger. Once they're seated, their breathing slows and unconsciously mimics the sway of the underwater life-forms; screens stretch up from the ground and transport them to the ocean floor. From a speaker set into the wall, a soft voice intones, "Orient yourself to the present moment, bringing focus to your place in this world . . . take a breath and bring awareness to the body." A posted QR code leads to eight other meditation scripts, available as sound or text, that touch upon marine biology, ocean minerals, speculative futures, and creation myths.

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The Wexner exhibition, "Meditation Ocean," curated by Jennifer Lange, is the first production of an ongoing project conceived and directed by Hope Ginsburg and credited to the Meditation Ocean Constellation, an evolving collaboration of artists, musicians (the score is by Joshua Quarles), divers, poets, writers, filmmakers, scientists, and others. Ginsburg has explored underwater ecologies and mindfulness through a collaborative artistic practice for years. *Land Dive Team*, 2014–20, a series of terrestrial and amphibious

meditations and performances staged in places like the Bay of Fundy and a sebkha (salt flat) in Qatar, stemmed from the unsettling image of people in scuba suits breathing from oxygen tanks on land and developed into a collaborative and sincere form of meditation.

In October 2021, members of the constellation traveled to Alina's Reef in Florida's Biscayne National Park for a four-day shoot. The eight-person dive team included Ginsburg, director of photography Matt Flowers, professional divers, and members of Diving with a Purpose, a maritime-archaeology organization that preserves and interprets submerged heritage, with a focus on the African diaspora. On-screen, these adventurers halt their quest for the wreckage of the *Guerrero*—a Spanish ship that sank off the coast of Florida in 1827, drowning forty-one of the hundreds of enslaved people onboard—and instead are simply co-present with that tragic history, one another, and the many species that call the water home. Commissioned texts by poet Anaïs Duplan and scholar Melody Jue contextualize and theorize the project's aquatic milieu, complementing the multidisciplinary meditation scripts and mindfulness programming coinciding with the exhibition. The collaborators leverage many kinds of expertise and knowledge, but the installation does not overwhelm the viewer with data and research, rewarding both the casual spectator and the engaged reader who follows the project's deep dives. Deftly edited by Alexis McCrimmon, the multiple channels subtly mesh through the employment of blurred frames called "shimmers," which smooth cuts between five-to-ten-minute dive sequences, and an arrangement of screens that creates a panoramic arched triptych on one gallery wall and a more architectural configuration on another. The experience is at once shared and personal (what media theorist Giuliana Bruno calls "public intimacy"), transporting and grounding. Sound and image plunge viewers into an underwater coastal meadow but also remind them of their terrestrial bodies through meditation prompts and the strangeness of the divers' bubbling and mechanically assisted respiration.

Some critics of contemporary art map immersive video and social practice onto opposite ends of a spectrum of viewer activation—one passive and spectacular, the other participatory and de-skilled. *M.O. Turtlegrass Meadow* challenges such schemata by folding high production values and cinematic enchantment into an expansive educational and participatory project that contemplates urgent crises through the lens of what might be called a pneumatic politics. From the protest chants of "I can't breathe" that recall racist

police murders to the debates over masking and public responsibility to the wildfire ash that has become a new form of weather, the past three years have amplified how our access to air is neither mundane nor universal. Amid our doomscrolling, reminders to stop and breathe have been commodified by mindfulness apps and self-help culture and cinematic pleasures cast as mere escapism. Against such trends, Meditation Ocean Constellation's lush, meditative cinema and interplay of research and reflection solicit a calming pause, one that is structured not by the logic of walling out the world but by the potential of finding ways to be mindful, co-present, and buoyant within it.

"Meditation Ocean" is on view through July 9 at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio.

Annie Dell'Aria is an associate professor of art history at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and the author of The Moving Image as Public Art: Sidewalk Spectators and Modes of Enchantment (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

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