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**Calder Harben, *Bodies of Water***

January 6<sup>th</sup> - February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017

*"We're trying to keep plastics from coming into the ocean.  
Once they're in the ocean there's very little you can do,"*

– Max Liboiron, *scholar and activist*

*"Water comes from the sky and the highest place  
yet it never wilfully rises above anything  
it will always take the lowest path in its humility.  
Yet of all the elements, it is the most powerful,"*

- Adopted July 31, 2014  
*Okanagan Nation Annual  
General Assembly  
Spaxomin, Syilx Territory*

Amisiguapua'q. Elasugwet. A'sugwesugwigij. Asoqomasugwet. Gesigawitg.  
Getapa'q. Esamqwat. Gjigapa'n. Gta'n. Jipu'ji'j. Lampo'q. Lapaltnewel.  
Magatgwig.

Water is an ancient realm. Water intervenes and connects. Water is movement and history. Water holds and protects. Water releases and bombards. Water is ecology and future. Water traumatizes and witnesses. Water silences. Water resolves. Water is absent and violent. Water survives. Water is wound and healer. Water speaks.

The politics of water, and the politics of embodiment – social, cultural, and gendered constructions of inhabiting a body –are inextricably linked. Artist Calder Harben continues a global conversation about water, and expands this dialogue with their exhibition, *Bodies of Water*. Harben invites visitors to the exhibition to absorb the ocean, to listen, and embody the depths of the Mediterranean Sea off the east coast of Sicily. Working with a hydrophone recording, a special microphone created to record underwater sound from OBSEA Ocean Observatory that is lowered 2000 meters into the ocean's underbelly, Harben distorts live sound waves and sonically documents the ocean and its inhabitants 24 hours a day, 7 days a week through a subwoofer.

Through OBSEA's collection of interpretive and scientific data charting salinity levels, temperatures, currents, tides and audio/seismic data, Harben brings the ocean in a sound installation, which is almost a private soundscape, into the context of a city, a public gallery space, and questions what is sound. How do we listen? What do we hear? What do we choose to tune out? What can't we absorb? How do our bodies listen? What can we trace inside and outside ourselves? How do we react to the memory of water? What is the sound of water? What do we absorb from sound if we can't hear it?

But first, we need to listen, and hear the water. Its been speaking to us, and through us for centuries.

Ocean noise pollution isn't romantic; it's raw violence. Imagine thousands and thousands of container ships, boats and bodies being carried across water. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), over 350,000 refugees and migrants have crossed the Mediterranean Sea fleeing their lives, and taking their hopes and fears in unsafe boats through horrifying conditions. Bodies above and creatures below water can't tune out the sound of refuge.

Harben believes listening is an act of embodiment, a gesture of political and ecological relationship<sup>1</sup>. As we listen, we connect to an emotional space, which reorients our mode of hearing.

*Bodies of Water* requires deep listening as means of communing with the sonic depths of ancient waters, yet these sounds are almost inaudible, silent even. Harben asks us to metaphorically enter the ocean and pay witness, encouraging us to listen deeply with our bodies, our spirits, our beings, perhaps even commune with our ancestors, and essentially become water.

Harben's work requires us to take off our proverbial wetsuits, and dive in – to absorb oceanic vibrations through our pores, to get drunk on listening, and hydrate ourselves.

As I am writing this essay, news has broken that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, an American federal agency, will not grant easement to cross Lake Oahe for the proposed four-state \$3.8 billion Dakota Access Pipeline<sup>2</sup> (*The Toronto Star*) – thanks to the water protectors at Standing Rock Sioux Reservation – and is currently seeking alternative routes. The project has been temporarily stopped.

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<sup>1</sup> Calder Harben, email exchange with the artist, July 2016.

<sup>2</sup> James MacPherson. "Dakota Access pipeline protesters staying to find out what Trump will do" *The Star*, December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2016/12/05/dakota-access-pipeline-protesters-vow-to-stay-following-major-victory.html>

This victory is massive, a political and ecological shift. I am breathing an oceanic sigh of relief, bowing to the territory, and a nation of Indigenous relations, and offering deep gratitude to thousands of water protectors at Standing Rock who left their families and territories, and bravely stood – even after being arrested, pepper sprayed, struck by rubber bullets and concussion canons<sup>3</sup> (*The Washington Post*) – and suffered trying to protect the water. In Harben's *Bodies of Water*, the ocean is omnipresent, and commands urgency.

Every water protector knows: water is life. We have nothing without water. We are nothing without water.

This isn't about one territory. This is about all *Bodies of Water*. Standing Rock represents all oceans, rivers, lakes, ponds, waterfalls, glaciers, icecaps and passageways.

In reflecting on Harben's *Bodies of Water*, I am honouring the ancestors and all my relations who fought to protect water, generation by generation, and paying witness to this essential work, recognizing our roles as critical thinkers, artists, and global citizens to protect, and listen to every body of water – our oceans, seas, rivers, lakes, icebergs and waterfalls. To hear each other. It's our only medicine.

We are not separate from water. What happens 2,000 meters below the ocean off the coast of Sicily affects all of us on Turtle Island. Every particle of garbage in the ocean carries through our bodies. Water is borderless.

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<sup>3</sup> Steve Hale. "The police crackdown on pipeline protesters in North Dakota" *The Washington Post*, November 23, 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-watch/wp/2016/11/23/the-police-crackdown-on-pipeline-protesters-in-north-dakota/?utm\\_term=.fdb1154418a8](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-watch/wp/2016/11/23/the-police-crackdown-on-pipeline-protesters-in-north-dakota/?utm_term=.fdb1154418a8)

Harben's *Bodies of Water* asks us to question our relationship to water, to listen, and take into consideration our embodiment, and bodies beyond ours. As we listen to the water we begin the process of hearing, and in this form a bond of protection for our internal and external oceans, and each other – every lake, river, and waterfall. Every single body of water needs protection. Every single body deserves protection.

*Bodies of Waters* invites us to listen, to witness, and react – to return to the water, the very existence of us all.

Wela'liq water protectors. Wela'lin.

We are made of oceans. We are made of inaudible waterways. We are volatile undercurrents. We are upstream. We are replenishing downstream. We are rushing rivers. We are winding waterfalls. We are overflowing lakes. We are wayward waterways. We are wild swimmers. We are liquid ceremony. We are vapour. We are unnamable fluidity. We are pollution in the sea. We are languages of saliva. We are bodies of water.

-- Shannon Webb-Campbell, *poet and member of Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation*

The artist acknowledges the support of the Ontario Arts Council for this exhibition



*Bodies of Water* is part of the Toronto Design Offsite Festival 2017



Presented by Keilhauer

