

PATTISON OUTDOOR BILLBOARDS PUBLIC ART PROJECT

SIGNALS IN THE SEA

Christina Battle
Eshrat Erfanian
Susan Schuppli

April 3–30

Curated by Jayne Wilkinson

Sited on 7 billboards along the Arbutus Greenway,
between Fir St and Burrard St (between 5th and
6th Ave), Vancouver

and 4 billboards at the corner of Quebec St and 5th Ave,
Vancouver



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Curator Jayne Wilkinson delivers a talk as part of
the Capture Speaker Series on Tue. Apr. 9 at 6 pm at
Inform Interiors (see p. 112) and hosts a DIM Cinema
event on Wed. Apr 10 at 7:30 pm (see p. 120).

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Susan Schuppli, *Disaster Film*,
2019, installation mock-up

From the shore, the sea is a horizon. From the sea, the shore is a distant line.

Both perspectives construct oceanic space from the imaginary of what is below the surface and beyond sight. For citizens of previous centuries, mapping the oceans meant drawing lines around infinite expanses and filling them with imagined monsters and mythic creatures. Our oceans are not so different, except that mythic beings have been replaced by non-human sentience of other kinds. The contemporary ocean is full of sensing devices, data streams, fibre-optic networks and powerful deep-sea submersibles. But this infrastructure rarely comes into public view. When it does, it looks much like we might expect—wires, cables, submarines. It's difficult to connect these objects of the network with the sublime imagery the ocean still conjures.

For this multi-site project, I invited three artists, whose work is informed by the intersection of environmentalism and digital technologies of seeing, sensing, and communication, to produce site-specific work for a series of outdoor billboards in Vancouver. *Signals in the Sea* is a project about the tensions between human vision (or what we see at the surface) and non-human vision (or what we know about a depth). It is about how we might sense environments beyond an exclusively visual realm and about how our relationship with, and proximity to, the ocean might be a way of situating ourselves in the environmentally fraught present. Here the sea becomes a symbol, or signal, for the distances between humans and our non-human kin.

With different aesthetic approaches, artists Eshrat Erfanian, Susan Schuppli, and Christina Battle each find in the sea and its surfaces a metaphor for the concealment (or containment) of information. Vancouver is a city where everyone desires to see something—ocean, mountains, sky—from where they are, and the Pacific shoreline creates the economic value of “the view.” But how can we know about what exists beyond our sightlines, about what exists at a distance? Even as remote-sensing technologies are refined and adapted, giving us precise information about the deepest, coldest, deadliest parts of the sea, those spaces remain largely inaccessible to us. Humans can't survive underwater, after all.

Eshrat Erfanian presents two horizons on opposite sides of a single billboard. On one side, the expanse of the sea's surface unfolds in ripples before us. Delicate letters placed along the horizon, where the sea and sky meet, spell out a fact of contemporary life: there is no place to run to. It is an evocative phrase, and seems fatalistic at first. Does it suggest the plight of global refugees and the climate change crises that have forced many to run, fleeing



homes that have become (politically, ethically, environmentally) unliveable? At one time, the sea was a signifier of escape, since what existed beyond its great horizon was largely unknown. The edges of our world are no longer invisible—the limits are mapped, and the resources and requirements of life are in increasingly short supply. The horizon was once a signal from the future, a place to run toward, but is no longer.

On the flip side, the horizon is continually unfolding in a kaleidoscopic, even psychedelic image. Using the same refracted blue light as the ocean's surface, Erfanian's second image is computer-generated, automatic. The optical illusion of an endless, repeating pattern points us outside our own borders, reminding us of ways to sense what is beyond the frame of our singular vision. It is a rendering with no edge, no beginning, no end; it confronts the viewer by positioning them in the same way a horizon does, by making the experience of viewership both subjective and universal. Perhaps reminiscent of the way one can become lost when looking at the sea, here the surface of photographic representation is shattered. Here, the horizon is in us.

We want to believe this fantasy—that the sea is a space that never ends—but in less than a century, humans have made quick work of the ocean's life systems, allowing corporate interests to intervene. In 2010, a massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, caused by the explosion of a deep-water drilling rig owned and operated by British Petroleum (BP), released a continuous stream of crude oil into the gulf, causing a miles-wide oil slick. Even as BP tried to control the media access to the site, the mixing oil and water became a slick surface that was visible from above. At the shoreline, the eventual reach of the spill decimated marine life by covering everything in glossy black goo; the three-month long continual release of oil thousands of feet below was visible online through livestream. Susan Schuppli's *Disaster Film* (2019) adapts her ongoing research into the material evidence of the BP oil spill, as well as environmental “accidents” more broadly. The billboard series interprets the various visualities of surfaces and depths, suggesting the multiple sites of an unfolding disaster: the underwater plume where oil gushed, the mixing of oil and water at the

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Eshrat Erfanian, *no place to run to*, 2019



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Christina Battle, *the view from here*, 2019

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sea's surface, and the aerial view from above, where the oil became a rainbow pattern of refracted light. Critically, these images are not representations of the spill itself (which was a spectacular media event on its own) but are computer-generated simulations that intervene into the material context of investigation, and into the idea of the ocean as evidence.

Taken in sequence, they form a kind of "oil film"—the technical name for an oil spill—that spreads out across four billboards. The slick surface aesthetics of both oil and CGI point to the difficult beauty of matter out of place. The fear of an earth that is unruly and unstoppable, even with the most masterful of human engineering, is what the BP event signifies. But despite its destruction, it hasn't changed the number of rigs in the gulf nor the intensity with which oil-producing countries, Canada included, are pushing extraction farther and farther offshore. Our ability to represent such spaces, under heavy surveillance and protected by corporate power, might fall to the very materials we attempt to understand. Schuppli writes that we have entered "a new geo-photo-graphic era in which planetary systems have been transformed into vast photosensitive arrays that are registering and recording the rapid transformations induced by modern industrialization and its contaminating processes."¹ By combining materials-based research with media, Schuppli's work demonstrates the toxic in-between spaces of oil and water, of surfaces and depths, and of process and production.

Christina Battle's images are the most directly related to their installation sites, demarcating a presence and immediacy connected to the oceanic and digital economies that serve Vancouver. In this new commission, *the view from here* (2019), Battle asks viewers and passers-by to think about the digital infrastructure and networks that are obscured by the surfaces of the sea. Even as ships fill the harbour and fibre-optic cables line the ocean floor, it is easy to ignore these economies in favour of the ocean's romance. By combining Google Earth-sourced

imagery from the specific installation sites, contour lines suggesting varied underwater depths, and lifeforms from an alien world, Battle creates a kind of feedback loop of visual regimes. The Twitter-length poetic texts prompt viewers to ask how they sense, feel, and understand proximity to water. As complex image composites, produced with recourse to satellite imaging and mapping technologies, they remind us that the sea is literally a medium for sending and receiving signals and that it teems with contradictory messages. Environmental art historian T. J. Demos points out that in the visual culture of the Anthropocene (our current, human-defined geological epoch), a notable shift has occurred from photography to high-resolution satellite imagery and remote-sensing technology, scaled to global, even interplanetary measurement. Today, photography consists primarily of images that are automatic and constructed, not mimetic and indexical—Battle's collages tread in this terrain. Representation does not take the form of a single image, but is instead situated somewhere in the littoral space of an urban shore, within a technosphere that extends from the deepest parts of the ocean to the highest paths of atmospheric satellites.

In a 2012 interview, technology theorist Paul Virilio described standing on land and gazing out at the surface of the sea as though looking upon "the marine infinite, the place where the three elements of the biosphere connect: the atmosphere, the end of the lithosphere and the beginning of the hydrosphere. The three limits [are] in short, an extraordinary place."² We can't see these points of connection, but, like the connective tissues of our watery human bodies, the oceans are a kind of network medium—the space that carries the signal, that thing that permits transmission. The ocean has long fascinated us perhaps because, despite the newest technologies and most comprehensive remote sensing and scanning, and even despite its vital importance in climate change discourse, there is still much about oceanic space that remains an impossibility.

¹
Susan Schuppli, "Slick Images: The Photogenic Politics of Oil," in *Allegory of the Cave Painting*, ed. Mihnea Mirca and Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei (Milan: Mousse, 2015), 431.

²
Paul Virilio and Jean-Louis Viroleau, "The Littoral as Final Frontier," *Animal Shelter*, no. 2 (Spring 2012), 60.