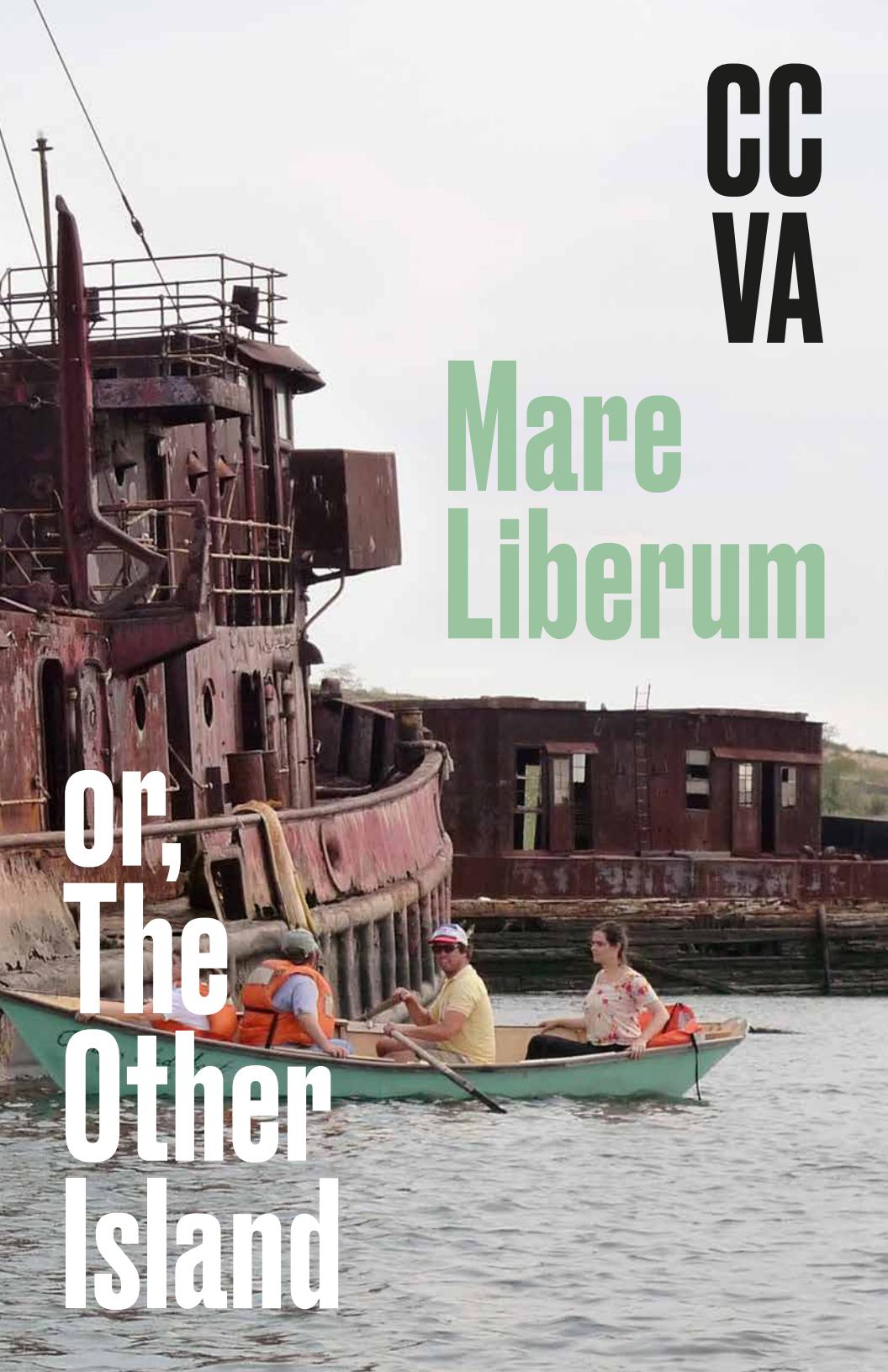


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Mare
Liberum

or,
The
Other
Island



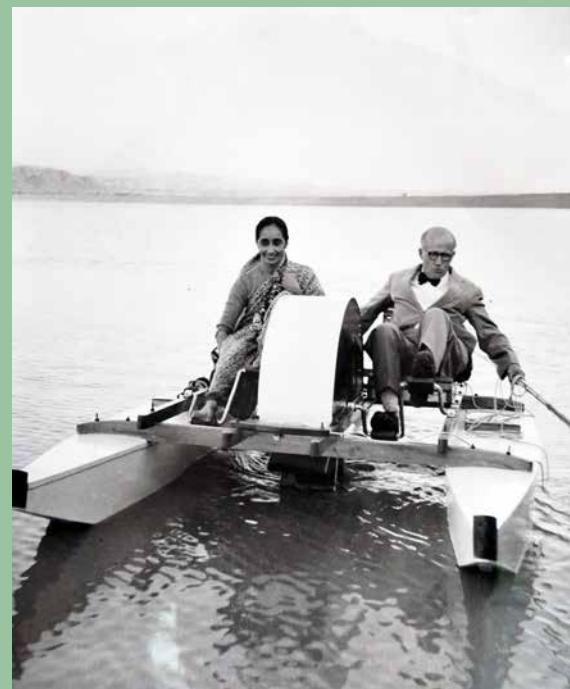


There is a photograph, taken around 1950, of Le Corbusier and his cousin Pierre Jeanneret in a pedal boat on Sukhna Lake in Chandigarh, India. It is a compelling image of the renowned architect and the designer, both in fancy dress, on a visibly makeshift vessel as they prepare to voyage across the lake. The two men look confident and relaxed. Jeanneret is lounging as if seated on a living room armchair of his own design. Another photograph, evidently taken the same day, shows Jeanneret on the same pontoon boat, this time with an unidentified man who is also in a suit. And still a third photograph shows Jeanneret, again seemingly at the helm, accompanied by a woman dressed in beautiful Indian fashion. She, too, looks cheerful, smiling. The reason for these photographs is unclear, the history of the boat and why these individuals are on it uncertain. As far as we know, these are the only photographs of the boat. There are no

plans and no drawings, even though the reclined wood seating resembles slightly later designs by Jeanneret. The scenes, however, are endearing. They are playful, as if Le Corbusier, Jeanneret, and the crew just discovered a new fangled plaything—watercraft.

The photographs are a departure point for Mare Liberum's multi-pronged exhibition and research residency at Carpenter Center entitled *or, The Other Island*. Based in Brooklyn—specifically, Gowanus, an industrial area with a history connected to water—the collective Mare Liberum, or “The Free Seas,” uses exhibitions, workshops, installations, publications, talks, and river voyages to guide inquiries into the precarious environmental conditions and histories of waterways in urban centers. Their residency and exhibition transforms the architecture by Le Corbusier into a locus of activity, including a series of boatbuilding workshops with the public. Boatbuilding is the primary point of entry for their work, with past projects drawing on design sources ranging from large-scale, ocean-crossing raft assemblages associated with refugee boats from Senegal and Cuba, to single-user boats made of paper inspired by a forgotten nineteenth-century technology, to kayaks produced with locally sourced bamboo and repurposed vinyl museum banners. For the exhibition at the Carpenter Center, Mare Liberum hosts a series of workshops for building small punts, a flat-bottom boat with a square bow typically used to transport cargo. The punt is a workboat.

The title of the exhibition is taken from the French writer Michel Tournier’s novel *Friday, or, The Other Island* (1967), a retelling of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson*



Crusoe (1719)—the intervening 200-plus years of their publication witnessed a shift in the West’s attitude toward nature. In Tournier’s novel, written at the height of a late-Modernist ethos (the same moment that produced the Carpenter Center), unlike in Defoe’s original story, Crusoe vacillates between “civilization” (even though miles from it) and an absolute return to a state of nature. In reading Tournier’s version through our current mindset, fixated on rising sea levels, forced migration of island nations, and ocean acidification, something about our understanding of agency in the natural landscape has again shifted. The human footprint is indelibly recorded on this planet. And while islands reckon with the future imaginary in the face of our climate crisis, prompting reflection on historical modes of utopian speculation,

we are coming to terms with the fact there is literally no “other island” to which we might imagine an escape. Humans have irreversibly impacted the Earth’s ecosystems—the Anthropocene is now. *or, The Other Island* considers these scenarios in a multi-valiant program and exhibition oriented around discussions of local water ecosystems, pollution, neglect, and sea levels in relation to the City of Boston and its low-lying neighborhoods and waterways, including the Charles, Mystic, and Chelsea rivers. The work of Mare Liberum manifests through a combination of improvisation, attention to creative and functional design, collaborative skill-sharing, and spontaneity. And, not unlike the feeling observed in the archival photographs of Jeanneret and his mates on Sukhna Lake, they, too, enjoy and value being together.

or, The Other Island



Mare Liberum has published thirteen broadsheets as part of various projects since 2007. They also produced a broadsheet for the exhibition and residency at the Carpenter Center. Distributed

On the border of art

James Voorhies

freely and available online, the publications are a result of research on the historical, social, and environmental circumstances connected to sites or contexts where their projects occur. The broadsheets often include detailed instructions for building a boat or other means of encouraging direct encounters with waterways. The collective's first publication was produced for the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York, in 2008 for an exhibition about precarity and marginality. It has instructions for making a dory, a lightweight boat traditionally used for fishing, along with facsimiles of archival newspaper articles from the nineteenth and early-twentieth century about enterprising and perilous lives spent on the water. The articles range from chronicles of itinerant river squatters in New York, to individuals who spent days adrift at sea after the 1915 sinking of the RMS Lusitania, to the festive launching of a luxurious houseboat. For a 2012 exhibition at the Antique Boat Museum on the St. Lawrence River in Clayton, New York, the collective was asked

to construct a new craft inspired by the Museum's holdings. The broadsheet published for this exhibition provides readers with instruction on how to make a paper skiff, special know-how that Mare Liberum acquired from historical research, discussions with the Museum's master builders, and many experiments with materials, all inspired by the nineteenth-century paper forms and inventions of the pioneering paper boat maker Elisha Waters of Troy, New York. Mare Liberum subsequently rowed their paper boat 160 miles up the St. Lawrence River from Troy to Montreal.

It is one thing to collect ideas, compile sources, and synthesize findings as part of creating a work of art. That is called research. Indeed, "artistic research" (as it is frequently referred to today) has been essential to the practices of many artists for decades. It is another thing, however, to use the immediate context of a site or a circumstance to perform research in real time as an integrated element of a given project or exhibition. Over the past eight years, Mare Liberum has given more attention to channeling local knowledge about places and people into making their work and, in fact, as their work. *or, The Other Island* is a good example, and the strategy is detectable in two distinct ways. First, the lunchtime talks. The collective has organized short, one-hour public conversations with a selection of Harvard University figures (e.g., professors, editors, librarians) whose fields, publications, or overall experiences overlap with Mare Liberum's research interests into the intersections of the built and natural environments, near Boston and on a global scale. In a series of independent public talks, these

experts from disciplines outside or on the periphery of art respond to questions posed by the collective, which then guides informal conversations for the public good and for the good of Mare Liberum's research.

Secondly, the residency is capped by a voyage on the Mystic River with boats built during the collective's time at the Carpenter Center. Members of the public who built the boats or engaged with the program are encouraged to take part. Over the course of preparing for this exhibition, the collective connected with numerous local organizations, such as the Mystic River Watershed Association and Chelsea Collaborative. These organizations do not regularly intersect with art or the university. But their vast knowledge base and experiences correspond with Mare Liberum's investigations into water conditions on the Mystic (and other bodies of water that resemble its history of industry and neglect). The trip down the river includes periodic stops orchestrated by the collective where individuals from organizations with particular knowledge of the area address the voyaging public about the waterway's social and environmental conditions. The trip provides the public with an experience on the water where the river becomes an *in situ* learning site. This activity is simultaneously a public program and public research. It is the work, and it also contributes to the production of a future broadsheet and subsequent projects.

The research and pedagogical apparatuses of Mare Liberum's practice spring from an insatiable curiosity about places and social circumstances that coalesces into an experimental system of

knowledge production. But where is the art? One might say their practice is at the border of art. It has to be because it doesn't look like art. It doesn't act like art. The collective inhabits a familiar and age-old form of boatbuilding, which promises introductory skills for building a boat. It's quite obvious, and obviously not art. But add into this mix the constellation of expanded interests, participants, and activities and Mare Liberum's overall practice refuses a fixed identity or easy classification. The inability to determine exactly what the work of art is puts it on the border of art, potentially offering the public the kind of aesthetic engagement with art that changes our perspective. Indeed, anyone who engages repeatedly with this program experiences something more than and beyond boatbuilding.

So, something that does not look like art at the onset may well turn out to have a greater impact than something that does look like art. In any case, for these purposes (and in the context of this short essay), as one takes to the water and paddles down the river, one might reflect on the sensual experience of building a boat with newly acquired knowledge of materials, and glide across the water's glassy surface with only human energy and muscle powering the watercraft. In so doing, one may begin to possess an unfamiliar satisfaction with knowing how the thing is made. Yes, in a digital age when we are utterly removed from the knowledge of how anything actually works, this direct awareness of the analog can be surprisingly fantastic, potentially providing a bit of understanding and reflection upon our relationship to the physical world. And that is, after all, what art does.





Residency + Exhibition

Sep 1–27, 2015

In Residence

Sep 1–11

Curated by

James Voorhies

Programs

Public Boatbuilding Workshops

Level 3, Sert Gallery + Terrace
Sep 3–10, 10 am–5 pm
(closed Labor Day weekend)

On Water: Lunchtime Talks

Level 3, Sert Gallery + Terrace
Sep 8–10, 12 pm

Artists Talk with Mare Liberum and Max Liboiron + Exhibition Reception

Level 3, Sert Gallery + Terrace
Fri, Sep 11, 5:30 pm

Public Launch and Voyage

Mystic and Chelsea rivers
Sat, Sep 12, 9:30 am–4 pm
(register online at carpenter.center)

Works

Workshop, 2015. Participatory boat building workshop held over 12-day residency at the Carpenter Center.

Pédalo (Jeanneret), 2015. Plywood, NYC watertower cedar, steel, screws.

Voyage, 2015. Participatory research trip on the Mystic River. Mystic River Watershed Association, Public Lab, Chelsea Collaborative, Marsh Radio Island.

On Water, 2015. A series of lunchtime talks about water and waterways.

Broadsheet (Or, The Other Island), 2015. Newsprint, ink. Edition of 1000.

Punt, 2015. Plywood, pine, house paint, construction adhesive, screws, handmade oars. Edition of 6.

Dory (Elizabeth Rush), 2012. Plywood, pine, house paint, construction adhesive, screws, canvas tops.

Paper Skiff (Le Massicot), 2012. Kraft paper, waterproof wood glue, epoxy, gorilla tape, screws, steam bent oak and cedar, antique fittings.

Fountain, 2015. Feed tubing, pump-end fittings, flow valve, valve fittings, dispenser, dispenser fittings return line, overflow tubing, 30 gallon cistern, low level cutoff switch, filter/screen, control box, circuit breaker, terminal blocks, din rail, caulking, Teflon tape, latching relay, bilge pumps, bilge buckets, PVC pipe, 30 gallons of water.

Photography Credits

Mare Liberum expedition to Tugboat Graveyard with Marie Lorenz and Flux Factory, 2011. New York. Courtesy Mare Liberum.

Photograph of Pierre Jeanneret and Le Corbusier in pedal boat in Chandigarh, India c.1951–70. Original photograph by Suresh Sharma. Courtesy Fonds Pierre Jeanneret Collection, Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, Gift of Jacqueline Jeanneret.

Photograph of Pierre Jeanneret with Mrs. P. L. Varma in pedal boat in Chandigarh, India c. 1951–1970. Original photograph by Suresh Sharma. Courtesy Fonds Pierre Jeanneret Collection, Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, Gift of Jacqueline Jeanneret.

Mare Liberum dory with the Lusty Jam Cracker Collective, 2010. Susquehanna River. Courtesy Mare Liberum.

Mare Liberum building Le Massicot (Paper Skiff), 2012. Antique Boat Museum, Clayton, New York. Courtesy Mare Liberum.

Launching a Mare Liberum Dory, 2013. Lamar Dodd School of Art, University of Georgia, Athens. Courtesy Mare Liberum.

In order of appearance.



**Mare Liberum
or, The Other Island**
Sep 1–27, 2015

Gallery Hours 12–7 pm, Wed–Sun
All activities free and open
to the public

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for the Visual Arts**
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Mission

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University is dedicated to the synthesis of art, design, and education through the exhibition of existing works and production of new commissions. In addition to a site for exhibition and public events, CCVA is home to the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies and Harvard Film Archive. At CCVA, visual literacy, knowledge production, contemporary art, and critical inquiry seamlessly meet, ultimately enriching the creative and intellectual lives of our audiences. The Carpenter Center is the only building in North America designed by Swiss-born architect Le Corbusier.

Program

The Carpenter Center fosters meaningful engagement among artists, art, and our audiences. Choreographing exhibitions, lectures, residencies, publications, performances, screenings, and informal gatherings, CCVA brings people, ideas, and objects together in generative ways that provide unparalleled experiences with contemporary art.