Brandon Poole
Blind Pilotage

Brandon Poole, *Dry Dwellers of Eternity (Carla's Island)*, 2020. 16mm, film still. Courtesy of the artist.

'There used to be no house, hardly a room, in which someone had not once died […] Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death', wrote Walter Benjamin. These people are, he continues, the 'dry dwellers of eternity'.[1] Brandon Poole redeploys this phrase in the title of two related works that meditate on the contemporary soul of water, and the vessels that carry it.

One of these, *Dry Dwellers of Eternity (Carla's Island)*, is a 16mm film loop projection Poole has created sampling the first computer generated animation of ocean waves. The brightly hued scene was originally created on a Cray 1 supercomputer by Dr. Nelson Max of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (the institution that 'stewards' the US nuclear deterrent); it is known as *Carla's Island* (1981)—after Max's wife. Featuring crystal-blue waves that roll in from a horizon (beyond said island) toward the viewer's perspectival position onshore, it is visually simple and not without meditative appeal. Despite the manifest crudeness of its wave pattern, the ocean's surface flickers under digital sunlight as it rolls towards the viewer, an effect which we can only imagine was even more captivating upon its debut four decades ago.

Installed on the opposite wall of the gallery, another projection, *Dry Dwellers of Eternity (Offshore Operations Simulator)*, sets the retro character of the first projection into stark relief with its clean, contemporary video aesthetic. Documenting a maritime navigation scenario, it was filmed within a ship simulator at Memorial University's Center for Marine Simulation—and features a highly realistic animated ocean, which, instead of islands, laps at the base of a pair of icebergs, echoing

the topography of *Carla's Island*. Convincing and entirely bespoke, registering the current power of motion graphics, the churning waves and overcast sky were generated by a computational engine that applied weather parameters set by the artist. Moving according to sophisticated physics, the water presented here comprises a *state-of-the-art* substitute for the real thing.

Situated between these two aquatic polarities, in the middle of the gallery swings a vintage ship's oil-lamp gimbal—listing and swaying as if registering the passage of an unseen vessel. In fact this modified readymade, entitled *The Far Splendour of the Yara Birkeland*, is operated by a kinetic mechanism that recreates the spatial movement of a virtual passage of the world's first autonomous ship—the Yara Birkeland– as it travels along its designated route inside the digital world of the marine simulator.

While offering viewers a genealogy of leading water simulations past and present (including the gimbal's more physical naturalism), the affect of *Blind Pilotage* pushes water away. The editing sequence of the *Offshore Operations Simulator* video signals this distancing. The footage cycles through clips that feature the (virtual) sea, filling the whole frame; that same sea, viewed from the mock bridge; and, finally, the exterior of the simulation vessel—a moving box-room mounted on pneumatic stilts. The cumulative implication of these three perspectives is that of telescoping control over our encounter with the ocean—command that facilitates shipping and marine industries by keeping direct exposure *at bay* (a coastal idiom being apposite). At this stage it is worth noting that the artist, an avid sailor, once

suffered a traumatic capsize, an experience he sought, unsuccessfully, to re-enact inside the simulator—itself designed to train captains how to avoid the very real risk of capsizing a container ship while raising anchor.[3] The need for psychic control over bodily exposure to the watery element, however, is just the tip of the iceberg. Beyond the human frame, the issue of *reduced exposure* also has relevant economic and political dimensions.

Financial capital stands to profit from a certain level of hazard—a sweet spot. The wager (and thus profit) is tied to successful management of the margin of uncertainty.[4] It is not irrelevant that the early insurance industry stemmed from underwriting maritime enterprise. The Operations Simulator is a tool for reckoning how much risk can be taken in navigation, but its economic purpose is to manage capital risk by producing better captains. As the specter of the autonomous Yara Birkeland appears on the horizon, things are about to change: abandoning a human crew does away with all the uncertainties associated with their piloting the vessel—the ship's, bridge, the true home of the mariner, eradicated.

At this point one might hazard the significance of Benjamin's 'dry dwellers of eternity' passage within Poole's project. Originally ventured in an essay on the fate of storytelling in modernity, it is a cryptic remark, but one whose implication can be approached through the metaphysical import of desiccation—for the image of water is deep, especially when it is deployed in absentia. It was Heraclitus who claimed that the soul arises 'out of water'. Such would appear to paint an *arid forever* as being without spirit. Earlier, in the same fragment, the philosopher states that 'for souls it is death
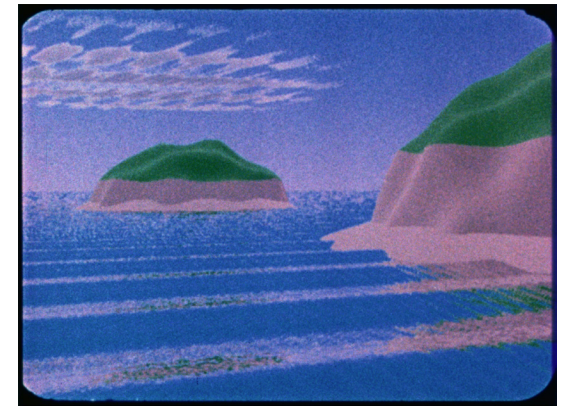
to become water'. In this case, dry dwelling would appear to be a matter of a parched soul, *haunting* by way of undeath. Simulators and autonomous ships make possible rooms untouched by death. Ships at sea without a crew, and without a pilot, cannot contain it— precisely because they do not contain life. Such vessels navigate a different kind of oblivion. Charting a course through a simulated sea, the ghost of the worker abides; the ghost of the *sailor as labourer*. But this labour is not only economic. For as long as there have been stories about the sea, the sailor has labored with soul. Among the first of all recorded sea stories, *The Odyssey* stands as a signal example. It is just such epic narratives that Benjamin casts as endangered by modernity.[5] In light of Poole's work, we observe that automation eventually eliminates the human and their perceptual needs—ultimately even the very image of water. This may be the *blind* pilotage of the exhibition's title. It also seems to stand for the loss of Odysseus and every sailor who might have followed him—on the deck of the Yara, amid waves of code. Today, these mariners do not need to return to a partner or wife, be they Penelope or Carla, who stand for land. Their love is untethered, adrift. Abyss.

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1 Walter Benjamin, *The Storytellers*, Section X.
2 Noting paradoxically the discordant echoes of US testing at Bikini Atoll, in the figure of a tropical island (re) constituted, so to speak, by an atomic project.
3 Whereas some survivors of trauma practice extreme aversion, other seek exposure therapy. Pursuing a psycho-biographical inquiry here suggests a bit of both.
4 In this, there is a curious parallel with the aesthetic of the sublime, which requires just enough distance.
5 Benjamin's *The Storytellers* makes general reference to the works of Homer.