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OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING THE MISSISSIPPI

# WATER, ART & ECOLOGY



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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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## Contact Us

Open Rivers  
Institute for Advanced Study  
University of Minnesota  
Northrop  
84 Church Street SE  
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Telephone: (612) 626-5054  
Fax: (612) 625-8583  
E-mail: [openrvrs@umn.edu](mailto:openrvrs@umn.edu)  
Web Site: <http://openrivers.umn.edu>

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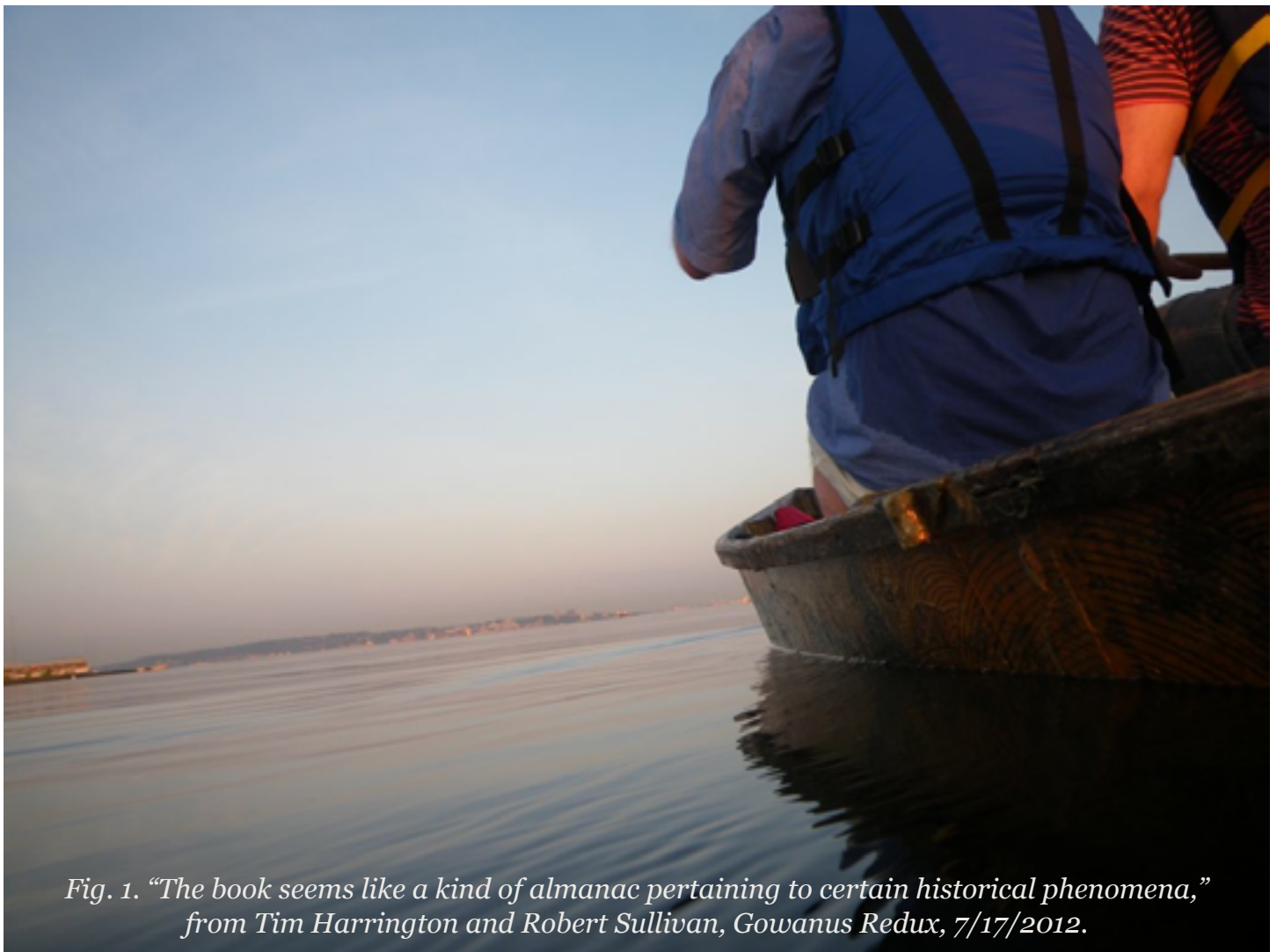
FEATURE

# RE-IMAGINING THE RIVER: THE TRANSFORMATION OF NEW YORK'S WATERWAYS IN MARIE LORENZ'S *TIDE AND CURRENT TAXI*.

By Meredith Davis

**“When you find a network of forgotten public space, it opens the entire city.”  
Marie Lorenz (Horvitz 2010)**

For more than ten years, artist Marie Lorenz has been creating a work of art called the *Tide and Current Taxi*. For this project, Lorenz transports one to four passengers along the



*Fig. 1. “The book seems like a kind of almanac pertaining to certain historical phenomena,”  
from Tim Harrington and Robert Sullivan, Gowanus Redux, 7/17/2012.*

myriad waterways of New York City (and occasionally other destinations) in a small boat made by the artist. Using oars, paddles and, most importantly, the push and pull of the water itself, Lorenz and her passengers have drifted and paddled the rivers, inlets, bays, estuaries, creeks, and canals of what has aptly been called New York's "6th Borough." Lorenz photographs each taxi ride and posts these photographs and her accompanying text on the *Tide and Current Taxi website*, where viewers may virtually stow away on well over one hundred trips. Boat passengers and website viewers alike have explored creeks, bays, and various corners of the harbor; paddled or scrolled past islands created by decades of dumping, boat graveyards, and sites of waterfront "revitalization."

Alongside the ephemeral experiences that Lorenz and her passengers created, an increasingly rich archive of experiences and conversations is preserved in the photo journals that Lorenz shares on the *Tide and Current Taxi* website. Lorenz presents each journey as a story of shared experiences of the water and shoreline intermingled with musings, chance occurrences, and imaginings. Even for those who might not ever get to take a ride in Lorenz' little boat, the *Tide and Current Taxi* photo journal allows us,

## River as Palimpsest

Historically, rivers are closely connected to human settlement and the trade and commerce that settlement inevitably engenders. Any geographer, historian, or mariner will tell you: look at any of the great ancient cities and you will see that they are built around a harbor, and most often along a navigable river. Rivers move boats and boats move cargo and facilitate trade; trade and concomitant forms of cultural exchange together build civilization. The advent of steam navigation in the nineteenth century made the waterways into rationalized and speedy highways, but

alongside the taxi passengers, to re-conceptualize our relationship to urban waterways as we share in the adventures of others, seeing what they saw, listening to their conversations. The result is a vision of waterways as social spaces and sites where a new kind of landscape aesthetic that captures and even celebrates the messy ways that human beings are inextricably connected to (rather than masters of) the natural and unnatural things with which we share our world.

The *Tide and Current Taxi* performs a number of important transformations. First, it converts the mostly commercial spaces of the urban waterways into a social setting, one where gift exchange replaces capitalist exchange. Second, the Taxi reimagines the experience of landscape as a collaborative, multi-sensory activity instead of one that centers around the individual, preferably isolated, viewer. Third, both the social aspect of the project and the specific imagery of the photo journals challenge the aesthetics of landscape, rejecting untouched "wilderness" or pristine nature in favor of the real (and ubiquitous) urban spaces of New York. Finally, Lorenz invites us to reimagine these spaces as vibrant, dynamic, and living, but as inevitably bound up with human history.

almost as quickly, the development of railroads transformed the human relationship to rivers once again, as waterways were no longer the primary movers of people and goods (Burrows and Wallace 1999). Industrialization brought with it tourism and rivers became tourist sites as well as ready sources of water to aid in industrial processes (Gassan 2008). The *Tide and Current Taxi* heightens our awareness of each of these versions of the urban waterway: a commercial and industrial artery; a peripheral space; and an

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aestheticized landscape, meant to inspire and invigorate.

Lorenz easily toggles from one way of experiencing the river to another, producing a complex and layered portrait of the urban waterway that embraces the many pasts that lay upon one another like a palimpsest. *Tide and Current Taxi* combines physical, historical, economic, and cultural geography, while also paying attention to our present, lived experiences. For example, in 2013 Lorenz organized 14 trips around the theme of mapping and mapmaking. The *Taxi* website records one excursion from that year with artist Lisa Sigal in a photo journal entry titled *Freedom*

*and Captivity*. The journal consists of 62 photographs of the trip, each accompanied by text written by Lorenz. The text that Lorenz writes and pairs with each photo journal is not a series of captions, but a narrative that works in tandem with the images. These texts share snippets of conversation, ideas, details about the water or wind that affect the trip and that may not be visible in the photographs, and other information that adds to the narrative. In addition, the text helps to set the pace and the tone of each trip, often conveying a sense that as the boat drifts, so do conversations, thoughts, and perceptions.



Fig. 2. “Also, the whole thing seemed to be listing, ever so slightly, to the starboard side,” from *Freedom/Captivity* with Lisa Sigal, 9/5/2013.

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Lorenz and Sigal set out to observe the Vernon Bain Correctional Facility, an 800-bed jail barge that is moored in the Bronx and, because of a strong wind and current, they stop on North Brother Island nearby. North Brother Island has many pasts, but is probably most famous for the hospital that once stood there, where Typhoid Mary was detained for the last 20 years of her life (Seitz and Miller 2001, 211–228). The photographs of Lorenz and Sigal’s journey capture many minute and particular details of their own specific trip, such as the fact that the prison barge “seemed to be listing to one side” (Fig 2). But

Lorenz also documents her conversation with Sigal, in which they consider how water can be used to separate people from one another as well as to facilitate connection. “Both a road and a barrier,” Lorenz writes (Figs 3-4).



*Fig. 3. “We talked about how water is used as a barrier, psychological as well as practical,” from Freedom/Captivity with Lisa Sigal, 9/5/2013.*

# Give and Take

This journey, like so many of those taken as part of the *Tide and Current Taxi*, explores more than the physical geography of an urban waterway, freely ranging from the biological to the phenomenological, social, and historical. Lorenz and her passengers drift from one topic to another, seamlessly and with abandon. The common thread is built in, since the passengers are all literally in the same boat. On another 2015

taxi ride, passenger and writer Catherine Despont asks Lorenz, “Do you have good conversations when you are out in the boat?” and Lorenz writes, “The best, I said. I think because we are all facing the same direction” (Fig 5).

This comment steers us toward one of the most important aspects of the *Tide and Current Taxi*, which is the intimate and unavoidably social



*Fig. 4. “Rikers Island, North Brother Island, and the prison barge, have all been used at one time or another as a place to keep people away from other people,” from Freedom/Captivity with Lisa Sigal, 9/5/2013.*



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character of the project. Typically a ferry or taxi service is a commercial pursuit: the taxi operator picks up passengers, and for a fee, brings them to a specified destination. Perhaps the most famous ferryman of New York harbor was the young Cornelius Vanderbilt, “robber baron” and billionaire, who ferried passengers from his native Staten Island to Manhattan as a teenager. Vanderbilt was hardly a pioneer—small wooden rowboats transported freight and passengers from the deepest parts of the New York Harbor to shore, or from one shore to another for centuries, just as similarly modest boats continue to serve passengers and commercial enterprise all around the world. The key difference between these

ferries or taxis and the *Tide and Current Taxi* is, of course, that Marie Lorenz offers her rides for free, and that hardly any of her passengers are trying to get from point A to point B. The journey itself is the destination.

Although itineraries are often determined by the passenger, or by passenger and artist together, it is Lorenz who offers the ride, and the passenger who accepts the gift of the ride. Thus the relationship between Lorenz and her passengers is not an economic one, and the trip becomes collaborative. Passengers reciprocate by sharing expertise, insights, ideas, and experiences. From evolutionary biologists to historians,



Fig. 5. “Do you have good conversations when you are out in the boat, asked Catherine,” from *Photography with Susannah Ray and Catherine Despont*, 7/3/2015.

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urban planners, painters, anthropologists, and photographers, her passengers share their unique perspectives, and these shape the voyages. In interviews and her photo journal, Lorenz makes clear that she considers her passengers to be the guides and experts on their shared voyages. In a 2010 interview, she explains, “One of my favorite trips was with the writer Samantha Hunt, who had just published a book about Nicola Tesla (semi fictional). The last scene was set on Barren Island, so we paddled around the island and she told me about the different things she had imagined took place there. It was perfect, floating along in this imaginary space” (Horvitz 2010). At some points in the photo journals, we can see that

Lorenz’s job is not just to shepherd the boat from place to place and back again, but also to socially and aesthetically respond to her passengers. Lorenz takes cues from them and the physical setting about what to notice, think, or imagine, and she shares those perceptions and imaginings with us via the website.

Passengers on the *Tide and Current Taxi* not only shape the trip and return Lorenz’ act of generosity with the ideas or views they share, they also reciprocate in concrete ways, and these tiny gifts are regularly celebrated in the photo journals of the *Taxi*. Images and text describe a wonderful sandwich or special cookie brought and shared



Fig. 6. “Sarah brought ‘Stroopwafel’ from the Netherlands,” from *Tidal Cycles with Sarah Cameron Sunde and Kara Hearn*, 6/26/2015.

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by a passenger (Fig 6). These details celebrate the dynamics of gift giving, noted by anthropologist Marcel Mauss, among others: rather than a finite, self-contained event, a gift generates another and sets in motion a chain of social interactions (Mauss 1990, 65). In an essay on contemporary art and generosity, Ted Purves writes, “In a capital economy, an overarching system of absolute value (monetary systems) is assumed, so that exchanges have no left over relations when they are finished. If you get a donkey for a day’s work, it is because both of them were valued to be the same in monetary terms. The transaction is over, and you can move on to the next one. In a gift economy, transactions are never really over,

because each one produces more reciprocal ties (Purves 2005, 43). Curator and writer Mary Jane Jacobs has also noted that many recent artists have deployed generosity as a tool through which they may transform the role of “audience member” for a work of art into one that is more active, and allowing the audience member to co-produce the work of art, to bring their own knowledge, ideas, and feelings to the experience (Jacob 2005, 5). This spirit of collaboration is specifically and consciously represented in the photographic representation of the experience of each voyage that Lorenz produces and shares. One of the ways through which Lorenz visually communicates the social nature of the experience is by including



*Fig. 7. “He told stories of explorations that he and his friends have taken,” from Steve Duncan: Urban Explorer, 6/19/2008.*

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her passengers prominently in so many of the photographs taken on each trip. In these, we see passengers and the landscape around them together. For Lorenz and the photographs' viewers, the experience of the journey is not solitary; we experience the surroundings alongside others who are also there, seeing it too (Figs 7-8). These photographs prevent us from divorcing the "view" from the conditions in which that landscape has been experienced, that is, from aboard a small, floating wooden boat and in the company of others.

This determinedly *social* experience of place is quite a departure, I'd argue, from the Romantic

ideal of how we should experience the outdoors, best personified perhaps, by Henry David Thoreau or the landscape painter Thomas Cole, who in his *Essay on American Scenery* praised solitude in nature as a restorative state which not only heightened awareness and perception, but also offered spiritual nourishment (Cole 1836). While European and American Romantics of the nineteenth century celebrated untouched places, whether Thoreau's Maine Woods or Cole's Catskills, Lorenz highlights places that are right amidst, and a part of, the urban fabric, deeply connected to human history, and shaped by human activity as well as other forces (Fig. 9).



Fig. 8. "The current swept us north into Spuyten Duyvil," from *The One Borough Ramble with Amanda Huron* 9/9/2007.

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Lorenz and her passengers explore these places from a very different perspective. They do not stand apart, taking in a view from a promontory, or gazing out at a watery scene from *terra firma*. From the *Taxi*, everything around is immediate, *near, around* or *below*. The surroundings observed—water, shoreline—are inseparable from the passengers’ own experiences, floating, rocking, and swaying on that same water. And so the relationship between passengers and place is also one of give and take, as each impacts the other. While those of us who experience these journeys in the photographic journals that memorialize

them don’t feel, smell, or taste the places visited, the photographs and captions regularly remind us that these voyages are multisensory, describing sounds, smells, and tactile sensation.



Fig. 9. “we saw Manhattan in the morning light,” from *Total Lunar Eclipse with Melissa Brown, Erinn Fierst, Brian Dunn, and Birgit Rathsmann*, 8/28/2007.

# Unexpected Responses

The *Tide and Current Taxi* often visits sites such as landfills, the industrial waterfront, and canals, perhaps because we can see human and natural forces interacting with one another so vividly in these places. One of the most significant qualities of this project is the way in which it invites viewers to see such places anew. An example of this can be found in the photo narratives of the many taxi rides taken over the past decade through the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn. The Gowanus is a man-made canal in the middle of the currently

residential area of south Brooklyn, New York. Heavily polluted, the canal was designated a federal Superfund site in 2010. Dug between 1853 and 1874 in a low-lying area where the small Gowanus creek ran through New York Harbor's saltwater estuary, the canal played a significant role in the industrial development of the area in the late nineteenth century (Alexiou 2015, 8-9). As the areas around the canal have gentrified over the last two decades, however, the canal itself has become a source of an array of feelings, from



*Fig. 10. "I asked Josiah what he would do with the canal if the whole thing were up to him," from Josiah McElheny and Anne Daems, 11/24/2009.*

disgust to fascination. Lorenz has visited the canal with several passengers over the last decade, from fellow artists to writers and scientists. Her images of the canal evoke a wide and confusing range of reactions, and it seems that the artist's attraction to this site has to do with the way one might come into contact, in quick succession, with a bloated dead rat, a large healthy blue-claw crab, an iconic silo reflected in the still water, and a wrecked boat, half-submerged. These encountered objects do not evoke the responses one might expect. For example, we feel horror at the sight of the large crab, or the heron, making its way in the canal, silently pleading with it to

“Go somewhere else!” Nature intermingles with pollution and filth without any qualms, even if we find the muck of our own making monstrous or uninhabitable. Conversely, many of the journals for the Gowanus trips include photographs where the still and stagnant water of the canal strikingly reflects the colorful shapes of the rusted bulkheads, silos, colorful cement factories, cranes, sheds, and drawbridges that line the shores (Fig. 10). These images of a post-industrial waterfront and Superfund site are classically beautiful and poised. Lorenz even manages to capture the compelling ways in which a permanent oil slick that glistens on the surface of one section of the



*Fig. 11. “iridescent residue from the manufactured gas plants that contaminated this place for years,” from Evolution with Eben Kirksey and Latasha Wright, 7/4/2015.*

Gowanus can be as appealing as an oil painting on canvas (Fig. 11).

The *Tide and Current Taxi* regularly presents us with these kinds of dissonances. We experience visual pleasure at the colors, shapes, and forms seen in the photographs, but also horror as we stare at toxic coal tar residue floating on water or heaps of garbage washed upon the shore. Sometimes the transition from experiencing beauty to revulsion is swift; other times, less so. But most trips along the urban waterways of the New York area include a fair variety of experiences, and even this heterogeneity is a bit

dizzying at times. Lorenz and her passengers encounter an urban landscape that is both beautiful and revolting. Biologist Latasha Wright and anthropologist/ecologist Eben Kirksey, for example, are described as “equal parts fascinated, grossed out” on a trip on the Gowanus, and Lorenz offers many photographs showing us how deeply revolting the canal can be (Fig 12). While exploring a hundred-year-old landfill in Jamaica Bay recently torn open by Hurricane Sandy, Lorenz took pictures of the trash that are visually striking, but she also recalls through her text that, “As we picked through the debris with sticks, I fought back a wave of revulsion. There was



Fig. 12. “The boom has done a good job of catching some coal tar churned up by the new flushing tunnel,” from *Evolution with Eben Kirksey and Latasha Wright*, 7/4/2015.



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something scary about digging into this hundred year old trash.” (Fig 13).

Lorenz intentionally creates dissonance between the visual image and text in several instances. At one point in her 2015 Gowanus taxi ride with Eben Kirksey and Latasha Wright, she describes Kirksey’s research on frogs. Kirksey is trying to learn why those that live in industrialized areas are dying out less dramatically than those in less polluted places. Under a photograph of the grey industrial shoreline, some abandoned silos, a rusty boat, and some cranes, she tells us, “I imagined a frog enjoying the site of all this industrial

decay as much as I do.” Moments later, Lorenz asks the scientists if there is more life in the city above the water or below, and they begin to list off the many things living in each realm. Below a photograph of the Gowanus cement plant, its sheds, silos, and conveyors reflected in still, seemingly lifeless water, Lorenz quotes the scientists listing the species living in the water: “Cnidarians, mollusks, amphipods, decapods, nematode worms, polychaete worms, annelid worms, nematode worms.” The dissonance between the seemingly inert scene represented in the photograph and this extensive list of vibrant living things initially seems comical, but it also



*Fig. 13. “There was something scary about digging into this hundred-year-old trash,” from Treasure Map, with Essye Klempler and Beverly Acha, 9/6/2013.*

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invites us to reimagine the places we may have assumed to be devoid of “nature” as teeming with life. Lorenz encourages us to imagine these tiny species dancing and swimming beneath the hulking shapes of buildings in the photograph (Fig 14). Similar contrasts are created in the narrative of a trip up the Coney Island Creek with photographer Susannah Ray and writer Catherine Despont. Ray has been photographing the shorelines of New York since Hurricane Sandy for her project, *A Further Shore*, which focuses on New York’s waterways as spaces of rejuvenation and revelation. In the narrative, one image stands

out. In it, Lorenz shows us a fenced-off, stagnant patch of water facing a blank billboard. A small island of Styrofoam, plastic soda bottles, and a raft of unidentifiable, brownish debris floats in the center of this water. The caption to the photograph, “”This is where I always wanted to be! She said,” is startling, horrific. Ray’s exclamation makes more sense in the narrative, where we learn that this spot is one she had frequently seen and photographed from the roadway above. And yet the dissonance between emotion and image that is found in this image/text pairing is still



*Fig. 14. “nematode worms, polychaete worms, annelid worms – those all look like worms to us but they are radically different,” from Evolution with Eben Kirksey and Latasha Wright, 7/4/2015.*

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funny, disconcerting, and challenging. How could this be where she wanted to be? (Fig 15)

The muck and the revulsion that we, alongside Lorenz and her fellow travellers, feel at the sight of it prompts us to ask: Is this project simply a confrontation with our own version of Frankenstein's monster, an aberration of our own making, an unnatural, monstrous place that can only be met with disgust and the desire to flee? I think not. In fact, I think that the photo narrative offers another kind of reaction, one where imagination coexists with a real fascination with what is present here and now, with the materiality of

coal tar, of glassy or milky green water, hills of gravel. Real journeys through the urban wilderness must, after all, confront what is really there.

As I have already suggested, the art historical landscape conventions that took shape in the United States in the early part of the nineteenth century celebrate hard-to-reach places as Eden-like. Yet scholarship reminds us that those pristine landscapes were themselves fictional (Myers 1995, Harris and Pickman 1996). For example, the iconic works of the Hudson River School painters portray the Hudson River as wild, but these paintings were made after the



*Fig. 15. "this is where I always wanted to be!" she said," from Photography with Susannah Ray and Catherine Despont, 7/3/2015.*

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Erie Canal had turned the river into a busy thoroughway, accessible not only to painters, but also to westward-going immigrants, commerce, and tourism (Ferber 2009). We see few signs of the industry that dotted the shores of the Hudson in those nineteenth-century paintings, and as William Cronon has suggested, this bias for the “untouched” landscape, over those in which human interaction with the physical environment is obvious, persists to this day (Cronon 1996). Lorenz and her taxi passengers do not seek out such places; they instead explore a buried garbage pile in the middle of a city’s waterways, a desolate and mucky canal, a boat graveyard,

or a forgotten beach alongside a highway. These are the mundane, overlooked environments that urban dwellers typically ignore or rush past.

The *Tide and Current Taxi* creates a transformational experience, changing our perceptions of the city. These transformations can be understood in terms of what French theorist Guy Debord (a thinker who has been central to Lorenz’ practice) has called the strategy of *détournement* – a turning of something against, or away from, its accepted uses. *Détournement*, said Debord, is “not a negation of Style, but a style of negation” in which values are reversed, overturned, or turned



*Fig. 16 “And the waves and wakes held us against the pier” from Victoria Mayer – Traveler, 8/9/2008”*

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against the structures they support in order to create new opportunities, new avenues for resistance or reconstruction of perception (Debord 1994, 144–146). In reconceiving the taxi ride as a gift that is freely given, Lorenz not only alters the relationship between herself and others in the boat, but also reimagines the waterway itself as a public place available for new kinds of awareness. When Lorenz and her passengers marvel at a pile of trash, an oil slick, an island formed out of garbage, a boat graveyard, or a site of industrial contamination and record the effects that these sites have on their senses, their imaginations, or their sense of the city, they practice a kind of *détournement* where the Romantic approach to “landscape” is both negated and at the same time

grafted on to the kinds of urban sites, smells, and sounds that Romanticism elided. As witnesses to these small voyages, we who follow the comings and goings of the Tide and Current Taxi are transformed, too. We may become curious about garbage, where it goes, and how it interacts with forces in the environment, what might choose to grow on it, or what it might show us about the tides.



*Fig. 17. “The waves and ferry wake heaped up under the Brooklyn Bridge,” from Unexpected Adventure with Michael Taussig, Lan Tuazon and Dave Denz, 7/11/2015.*

# Float

Perhaps I should have started this essay by talking about floating, drifting, and bobbing along, since this aspect of the project is, perhaps, its most fundamental condition, because the most basic collaboration of all is between artist and passengers and the material that conveys them, the water. There is no motor on the *Tide and Current Taxi*. It moves from point to point using only human power and the powerful forces of the wind and water. The dynamic movement of the water is generated by the tides, by wind, and by the topography, including natural formations as well as the dredging of channels, the depositing of trash and of other obstacles. Piers, large boats, and other structures also create water conditions providing obstacles for the *Taxi*. Together these forces make the water a volatile three-dimensional space rather than a placid surface. A small boat floating in that volume is dramatically pushed and pulled, carried along in unpredictable ways. (Fig 16)

When she moved to New York, Lorenz was immediately impressed by the highly dynamic and intertwined currents that surround Lower Manhattan. It is this system of currents that made the tip of Manhattan a natural meeting place for peoples centuries ago, who could harness those tides to travel from places as far away as Canarsie, Sandy Hook, or Long Island. Knowledge of the currents takes time, and requires attentive observation, but in the *Tide and Current Taxi*, such knowledge is not used to gain mastery over the physical environment, but rather to collaborate with it. Planning trips around tides and the currents means collaboration with the ocean, the moon, and the wind. It means getting up too early, or setting out late. And it means that often, you don't get where you want to go, or you travel further than you intend. With this mode of travel, the scheduled rationalization of river transportation that has been

in place since the advent of the steam engine is replaced by the rhythm of ebb tide and flood tide, as the "driver" of the boat relinquishes agency and becomes a passenger, carried along by the force of the water and wind as much if not more than by human effort.

This aspect of the *Tide and Current Taxi* is very much present in the photo journal, where the artist constantly tells us not only about the water conditions and how the water is moving the boat, but also about the somewhat precarious situations she and her passengers often find themselves in while being pushed and pulled round by a powerful water system (Fig. 17). While Lorenz and her passengers do use paddles, they use them in cooperation with the tides of the Harbor, which are some of the strongest on earth. As Lorenz has explained, "In the New York Harbor the tide can travel up to 6 knots, which is an incredible amount of power for a small boat. In some places, at some times of day, traveling with the tidal current is equivalent to having a small outboard motor" (Horvitz 2010). When tides, wind, and current are harnessed, the collaborative spirit is extended to the environment, and some human agency is relinquished.

In interviews and writings, Lorenz explains that much of her early work was inspired by her interest in floating. Lorenz has always considered floating to be a perceptually heightened state; when we float, whether as swimmers or passengers in a boat, our point of view is altered by the rise and fall of the water, by the very fact that the water supports us. And in a small boat, everyone is acutely aware that they are floating *together*. One person's movement tips the entire boat a few degrees in one direction or the other; the way the boat sits in the water is determined by the *us* inside and our total weight.

The significance of Lorenz’s project is that it enacts, in an open-ended, distinctly social way, a model of being in the physical environment that is sensory and embodied. In terms of aesthetics, such an experience might be termed phenomenological, with phenomenology being an approach to both consciousness and perception that emphasizes the temporal, embodied, and sensory aspects of experience. Due to its distinctly social and interactive qualities, *The Tide and Current Taxi* enacts what we might call a social phenomenology of the urban environment. Agency, intention, and therefore possession (or subjugation) of the environment are replaced with a collaborative conception of human interaction with the environment. Lorenz’s taxi rides are not voyages of conquest and ownership, whether of territory or even of knowledge, empirically gathered and taxonomically categorized. Rather these are voyages that allow us to appreciate the “vibrant matter” that political theorist Jane Bennett, another important influence on Lorenz, writes about. Lorenz has stated about the current, “I guess I love the way it organizes the junk, how it gets distributed. There will be 10 drinking straws. But they all end up in this one area. The water just sorted it out. Logs, basketballs—100 feet away there is glass, ceramics. It forms a natural topography—it is really dramatic because there is so much garbage. The water is making this tableau for you” (Lorenz 2015). Bennett has praised authors who “can direct sensory, linguistic and imaginative attention toward a material vitality” in our midst (Bennett 2010, 17). But Bennett

calls on us to do more than merely notice our material reality; she calls for us to become aware of the extent to which the material world *shapes* reality. Rather than a full denial of our own agency, Bennett suggests that as we become more aware of the “living, throbbing confederations” of forces that shape our physical reality, we come to appreciate a “spectrum of agentic capacities” that reach well beyond the human. Tides, crabs, plastic flotsam, and wafting odors play their roles, too (Bennett 2010, 23, 30).

On board the *Tide and Current Taxi*, a wide range of responses to the environment pass from one passenger to another. Some of what is shared has the solidity of “information,” but often it is the ideas, emotions, and sensations that carry most weight in the narratives that Lorenz presents. “I’m taking pictures the whole time – thinking of the story of the trip,” says Lorenz. In the development of that story, the artist says, the governing question is almost always, “How did it [the trip] change our perspective?” (Lorenz 2015).

As I’ve argued in this essay, the “perspective” that Lorenz mentions is more than just a view, but a social and phenomenological experience that provides opportunities for the exchange of ideas, flights of imagination, feelings of revulsion, wonder, embarrassment, self-doubt, gratitude, admiration, camaraderie. Lorenz manages to reorient our perception, challenging us to see the miraculous beauty of light on an oil spill, the hidden riches inside forgotten islands of junk.

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*All photographs are from the “Tide and Current Taxi” by Marie Lorenz and reproduced by permission of the artist.*

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## About the Author

Meredith Davis is an associate professor of art history at Ramapo College of New Jersey, with a focus on American art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In her teaching, she brings an interdisciplinary, place-based approach to the study of the humanities. She has taught courses on New Jersey and the Hudson River, and has directed an NEH-funded summer workshop, "The Hudson River in the Nineteenth Century and the Modernization of America" since 2011. She lives with her family in New York City.