TRIGGER

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Trigger #7
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OCEAN

FOMU

Cover image:
Day old Pacific and Atlantic cannonball jellyfish ephyrae (baby jellyfish) ready to swim away and find a new home **©Travis Brandwood**

While the Atlantic cannonball jellyfish is common and well known along American beaches, the blue pacific cannonball jellyfish had, until recently, maintained an almost mythical status. Despite being brilliantly blue, few photos of this species existed as it is native to areas that are harsh and difficult to reach. Even though it is now wildly cultivated in public and private aquariums, the blue Pacific cannonball jellyfish is still awaiting a formal scientific name.

OF SALT AND STEEL:

Fiepke van Niel & Nienke Coers

TOWARDS A FLUID TYPOLOGY OF THE PORT CITY

Fiepke van Niel
While enjoying bodies of water as a recreational swimmer, whether it be a midnight swim in the canals of my home town Dordrecht or a morning swim between the orchards of Amelisweerd, I regularly meditate on my connection to water. For my grandparents, who worked and lived on an inland shipping vessel, rivers became a site of labour but also of connection. By reaching other worlds beyond their own frame of reference and by making friends, the fluidity of water fostered their sense of community. I carry a dream of following their footsteps by living on a house boat in order to be as close to water as I can.

Nienke Coers
Despite a shellfish allergy, several embarrassing attempts at water sports, and a lingering fear of vast bodies of water, I remain deeply drawn to the ocean and the movements—material, political, and emotional—that unfold across it. My father was born in the Indonesian port city of Semarang before crossing the sea to the Netherlands in the 1960s. I now live and work in Rotterdam, another port city equally shaped by tides, arrivals, and departures. It seems that, despite my best efforts to remain safely on shore, the sea has always had the final word.

Throughout history, port cities have served as crucibles of socio-economic and cultural formation across and beyond national borders. Just about anyone can easily summon narratives of economic prosperity and technological innovation in support of globalisation, with port cities like Rotterdam, Shanghai, and Hamburg accommodating expansive and highly sophisticated infrastructures of maritime trade. At the same time, we're all familiar with narratives that feature ports across the Global South as pivotal—if violently exploited—nodes in Europe's excessively profitable colonial enterprises.

But anyone who's lived in, passed through, fled from, or arrived to a port city intuitively knows that many more perspectives could be at stake. For some, the port city becomes a final stop after a long journey—a new, bustling home where cultures and customs take root. For others, it's a site of displacement, with gentrification tearing through social structures built over generations of urban development, migration, and labour. For still others, it's a site of political possibility, where solidarities exceed the limits of the nation-state—like in September 2025, when dockworkers in Genoa announced they were prepared to strike and 'block all of Europe' if contact was lost with the Global Sumud Flotilla sailing towards Gaza amid Israel's intensified genocide against Palestine.[1] For many, the port city is simply a place of work—the port as employer—whether through the formal rhythms of dock work and maritime trade or through the informal and often criminal economies that thrive in its shadows. For all, the port city isn't just a place but a presence, a living entity you can touch, hear, smell, taste, run from, or surrender to.

Because the port city resists fixed definition while shaping the conditions of life at every scale, it also resists straightforward representation. We therefore ask: What kinds of image practices does the port city produce, and what forms of visibility does it permit, obscure, or refuse? The works gathered here don't simply document the port as an object to be seen; they engage with its thresholds of legibility and confront the uneven regimes of visibility produced under logistical capitalism. Drawing on approaches such as migration, urban studies, sensory research, and colonial history, together these projects take the port city on its own terms: a porous space, defined by water rather than land, built on movement rather than permanence,

1
Polly Smythe, 'Italian Dockworkers Threaten to "Shut Down All of Europe" If Gaza Aid Flotilla Is Blocked', *Novara Media*, 2 September 2025, https://novaramedia.com/2025/09/02/italian-dockworkers-threaten-to-shut-down-all-of-europe-if-gaza-aid-flotilla-is-blocked/.

2
Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* (Richter Verlag, 1995), https://fadingthe-aesthetic.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/fish_story.pdf.

3
Lila Bullen-Smith, *Spume*, 3D design, forthcoming.

4
Esther Leslie, 'Fog, Froth and Foam: Insubstantial Matters in Substantive Atmospheres', in *UNSPECIFIED* (Archive Press, 2021), https://www.archive-books.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/EstherLeslie.pdf.

5
Zahra Malkani, *Noorani Metal Sound* (London: Auto Italia, 27 March 2026-21 June 2026), https://autoitaliasouth-east.org/projects/noorani-metal-sound/.

6
Sem Langendijk, *Haven* (The Eriskay Connection, 2022).

7
Arka Sinha, *What Is Left, What Is Dead* (Arka Sinha, 2025-ongoing), https://arkasinha.com/what-is-left-what-is-dead.

8
Hira Nabi, dir., *All That Perishes at the Edge of Land* (Hira Nabi and Till Passow, 2019).

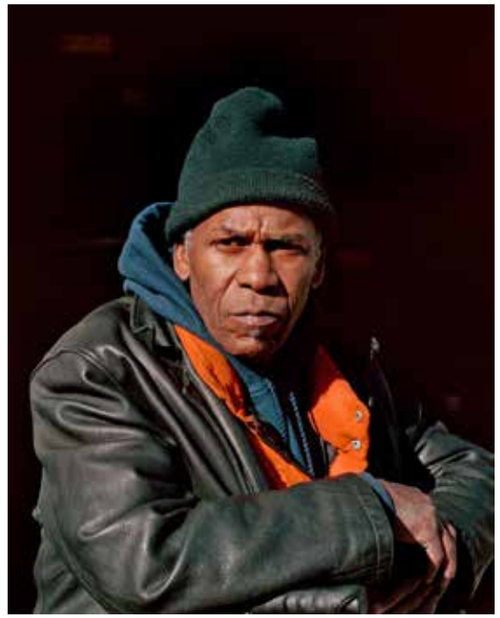


Arka Sinha, Details from Bau Nr. 216 Norasia Pearl (1986), from the series *What is Left, What is Dead*, 2025. Experiments with found technical drawings of chemical tankers, contaminated soil and pinhole cameras made from ship waste.



Lila Bullen-Smith, *Metabolic Rifts*, 2025. Installation view as part of Veranderende Vergezichten, Kunstcentrum De Ploeg, Wehe-Den Hoorn, The Netherlands. Courtesy of the artist.
Sculpture with silver, tin, cement, seasponge, squid ink, bladderwrack tincture, aromachemichals (geosmin, anisole, 3,4-Xylenol, habanolide, algenone SP).

Since *Spume* is a project still in progress, *Metabolic Rifts* acts as a placeholder to illustrate Lila Bullen-Smith's continuous research and work on archives of air. Metabolic Rifts consists of a pomander, referencing its use by Dutch fishermen throughout history to protect themselves against toxic air. Here, Bullen-Smith uses the pomander to facilitate an embodied encounter with the air and landscape of the fishing port of Lauwersoog, while simultaneously researching contemporary 'bad airs' in ports - the invisible infrastructures of digital capitalism.





Sem Langendijk, *Haven*, 2022.



Sem Langendijk, *Haven*, 2022.

where corporeal, cultural, urban, and political identities emerge, collapse, intersect, clash, and co-exist. The stakes of this reframing are immediate: as, across the world, the nation-state is proving an increasingly inadequate—and for many, actively harmful—container for political life, cultural identity, and human movement, there's a pressing need for new spatial and conceptual frameworks through which to understand collective identity and governance.

Rather than presenting the port city as a series of discrete layers, this article approaches it as a living organism composed of overlapping movements, rhythms, and relations. The practices assembled here unfold like waves: distinct in form, intensity, and direction, yet all emerging from and returning to the same body of water. Each project does more than represent a particular dimension of the port city—it activates a different mode of sensing, accessing, and rendering visible what the port itself often conceals. Moving between maritime infrastructures and intimate urban experiences, these works trace the social, political, material, and affective currents that continuously shape and reshape port life. Yet this movement doesn't resolve into a coherent map. Any attempt to construct a typology of the port city inevitably produces frictions, omissions, and forms of loss. Rather than acting as a system of classification, typology here functions as a method for tracing relations across scales, experiences, and forms of knowledge, peeling back the idea of the port as a fixed geography and revealing its dense and shifting entanglement: a myriad continuously composed through movement.

I *Invisible currents*

Due to the constant flow of materials and goods in ports, the presence of resources isn't merely established through residue or waste; rather, cargo traffic also constitutes a heavily sensorial experience by leaving its traces in smell and taste. As Allen Sekula discussed in *Fish Story*,[2] historically, ports were providers of a sensorial translation of the global economy. Transported goods and their vessels could be seen, smelled, and heard, reflecting the level of the wealth of nation-states and making worldwide trade sensible. Due to the shift towards containerisation, ports increasingly become abstract areas with vessels transporting anonymous goods.

Artist Lila Bullen-Smith investigates air as an archive in industrialised port landscapes in her project *Spume*.[3] She engages with micro-histories and researches hyper-local contexts in the Netherlands, including Elburg, the Port of Amsterdam, the NDSM Wharf in Amsterdam, the Port of Rotterdam, and Vlieland. It's exactly the loss of the sensory experience of trade activities in ports that Sekula talks of to which Bullen-Smith connects her artistic practice. Building on Esther Leslie's idea of the 'fog of computing', which refers to the invisible infrastructures inherent in digital capitalism, Bullen-Smith looks at the way in which industries have become imperceptible.[4] Data centres, wind energy, and submarine fibre-optic cables are all vital elements for the functioning of contemporary ports. Hidden below sea, concealed behind inaccessible structures, or permanently invisible, their quintessential role in the operation and economy of ports is ungraspable. Their structures and locations block access to the understanding of the flow of capital in ports. Although Bullen-Smith's practice doesn't root itself in photographic documentation, by archival and sensorial research, fieldwork, and metal casting, she aims to capture these imperceivable flows and facilitate embodied encounters.

II *Voices across waters*

Like Bullen-Smith, Zahra Malkani, too, approaches the port and its industrial infrastructures through sensorial registers, using sound as a method to trace ecological and spiritual resistance across Pakistan's heavily exploited coastal and delta regions. For her first major UK solo exhibition, *Noorani Metal Sound*,[5] presented at Auto Italia in London, Malkani draws on years of field recordings, archival research, and conversations gathered throughout the Indus River Delta. Through a sculptural installation, cassettes, field notes, and a moving image work, the exhibition maps the oral and sonic traditions of lament, devotion, kinship, and protest that have emerged in response to the ecological devastation of the region produced by colonial and contemporary systems of extraction. As Malkani, who grew up in the coastal city of Karachi, Pakistan, notes, the Indus River Delta has been profoundly damaged by dams, ports, and sand mining, yet its inhabitants have drawn from these processes to generate enduring forms of resistance rooted in poetry, music, mysticism, and collective memory.









Hira Nabi, *All That Perishes At The Edge Of Land*, 2019.



Zahra Malkani, *The Wanderers Taught me Longing, The Mystics Taught me Lament*, 2026. Installation view as part of *Noorani Metal Sound*, 2026, Auto Italia, London, UK. Courtesy the artist and Auto Italia. Photographer: Jack Elliot Edwards.

the ocean is entranced
the tide is mysterious
and the boat is steered by Allah
the boat is steered by Allah

the sky is above, the sea is below
ocean, we are your itinerant guests
khizr is our divine guide
and the boat is steered by Allah
the boat is steered by Allah

the ocean is entranced
the poet is awe-struck
and a poem is revealed:
the boat is steered by Allah
the boat is steered by Allah

Darya Maste / The Ocean is Entranced, Ghazal by Qadir Baksh Baloch, translated from Balochi to English by Zahra Malkani

Refusing the clean separation of voice, environment, and event, the recordings remain intentionally porous: songs dissolve into conversations and prayers into laughter while crying children, animal calls, and overlapping voices become just as much parts of the composition. In this way, Malkani resists reducing sacred and living traditions into isolated aesthetic objects. Instead, sound becomes a relational and embodied archive through which the port and delta can be understood not simply as sites of logistical extraction but also as environments shaped by deeply entangled histories of political struggle, spirituality, and intimate forms of belonging to land and water, relations that are at once material, lived, and sacred.

III *Ports without anchors*

Whereas Bullen-Smith and Malkani both attend to the invisible and sensorial dimensions of port infrastructures, tracing the atmospheric, spiritual, and ecological worlds obscured by contemporary regimes of extraction and logistics, Sem Langendijk's *Haven* traces a parallel transformation unfolding at the port's edge: the gradual disappearance of the social worlds that once surrounded and sustained it.[6] In this long-term research project, Langendijk documents the conversion of former docklands into sites of large-scale waterfront redevelopment, focusing on the displacements produced by gentrification in post-industrial port cities across Europe and the United States. Rooted in his own upbringing in Amsterdam's western harbour district among workers, artists, and squatters, *Haven* emerges from the experience of witnessing a once-familiar environment slowly become unrecognisable.

Through documentary photography and personal testimony, Langendijk captures the quiet violence of urban transformation. His images linger on seemingly mundane scenes, temporary structures, improvised interiors, abandoned lots, residual traces of communal life. Rather than foregrounding spectacular moments of demolition, *Haven* attends to the slower, often imperceptible processes through which histories of labour, migration, and everyday co-existence are gradually erased from the urban fabric. In this way, Langendijk reveals how the port city—historically a porous zone of encounter shaped by migration, labour, and informal modes of living—is increasingly transformed through gentrification into a controlled environment oriented towards consumption and capital accumulation. The changing portscape thus parallels the changing urban landscape: as ports themselves become increasingly abstracted through containerisation and logistical automation, the surrounding neighbourhoods become detached from the histories of labour and maritime life that produced them.

IV *Neither here nor there*

In *What the Sea Holds*, Tanya Traboulsi photographs fishermen and their daily routines along the Beirut coastline. Yet the work ultimately turns less on the sea itself than on its adjacent city and—similar to what Langendijk did in *Haven*—the artist's shifting relationship to it. Having left Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War and later returned, Traboulsi approaches the city through a condition shaped by distance, rupture, affection, and continual reconstruction. This sense of instability extends beyond personal memory, remaining inseparable from Lebanon's ongoing political precarity and, specifically, the Israeli/US violence that continues to shape the region today.

From the water, this distance becomes palpable. In Traboulsi's photographs, the Beirut portscape appears simultaneously near and unreachable, hovering on the horizon as both intimate and estranged. Rather than treating the sea as a backdrop to urban life in port cities, Traboulsi approaches it as a spatial and emotional condition that reshapes perception, memory, and ideas of home and belonging. The sea becomes a threshold through which the city is experienced differently: suspended, fragmented, and perpetually in flux. Aboard the fishers' boats, a state of in-betweenness emerges, neither fully anchored to land nor entirely detached from it. Everyday life unfolds according to rhythms defined as much by waiting as by labour. Boundaries begin to blur between movement and stillness, intimacy and distance, presence and absence, producing a fragile spatial condition in which life, like the port city itself, persists somewhere between departure and return, never fully settling into either.





Tanya Traboulsi,
***What the Sea Holds*,**
2026.

As alive and ever shifting as the port may be, it's important to ask what comes after. After docking port to port, where do ships go to die? As Arka Sinha and Hira Nabi demonstrate, the afterlife of maritime hubs isn't defined solely by decay but also by the complex forms of labour, survival, and ecological transformation that continue in the wake of global trade.

Besides the fact that merchant vessels are part of an economic infrastructure that brings trade and labour opportunities to port cities, they can additionally cause ecological erosion throughout the port and its surroundings, both in the ocean and on land. Ecological erosion through extensive maritime trade doesn't limit itself to the actual process of trade; it also continues during the afterlife of a maritime vessel, as Sinha shows in his project *What Is Left, What Is Dead*.[7] It explores the once burgeoning industrial hub Alang, in Gujarat, India, during its stage of decay and decline. Alang transitioned from being a core actor in India's industrial expansion into a ship-breaking town. In *What Is Left, What Is Dead*, Sinha follows the material traces of the harmful process of ship breaking by researching substances in both ocean and soil. He aims to underscore the everlasting material impact on ecology, and he does so by transforming found waste into pinhole cameras and using toxic waste for chemical drawings, thus photographically emphasising and fixating the presence of the material in Alang.

Hira Nabi's docufiction film *All That Perishes at the Edge of Land* follows workers who travel across Pakistan to the ship-breaking yards of Gadani in search of employment, imagining a dialogue with the decommissioned container ship they're dismantling.[8] Through slow and quiet shots, the conversation moves between dreams, homesickness, and the violence embedded in dismantling vessels once central to global circulation. As workers recall the homes and families they left behind, their days blur together under conditions in which danger and death remain ever present. Rather than depict ship breaking simply as industrial decline, Nabi reveals it as the afterlife of global trade itself, exposing how ecological damage, toxic waste, and labour exploitation are displaced onto vulnerable coastal regions and migrant workers.

Trigger is a publication for reflection on photography, initiated by FOMU.

'Ocean' is Trigger's seventh thematical issue in print. Revisit Trigger #1 (Impact), #2 (Uncertainty), #3 (Care), #4 (Together), #5 (Energy), #6 (Assemblies) and more on www.trigger-mag.be — supported and developed by FOMU.
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Trigger #7 ——— Ocean ——— This edition explores what happens when photography meets the ocean—and when the ocean itself becomes a way of rethinking how we see, know and make images. Bringing artists, scientists and writers into dialogue, the book moves from deep waters to shores, ports and surface worlds, exploring marine life, underwater vision, infrastructures, memory, migration and ecological change. Four currents— Drift, Turbidity, Trace and Weave—invite different ways through this layered, interconnected ocean of images and ideas.

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