

Feature

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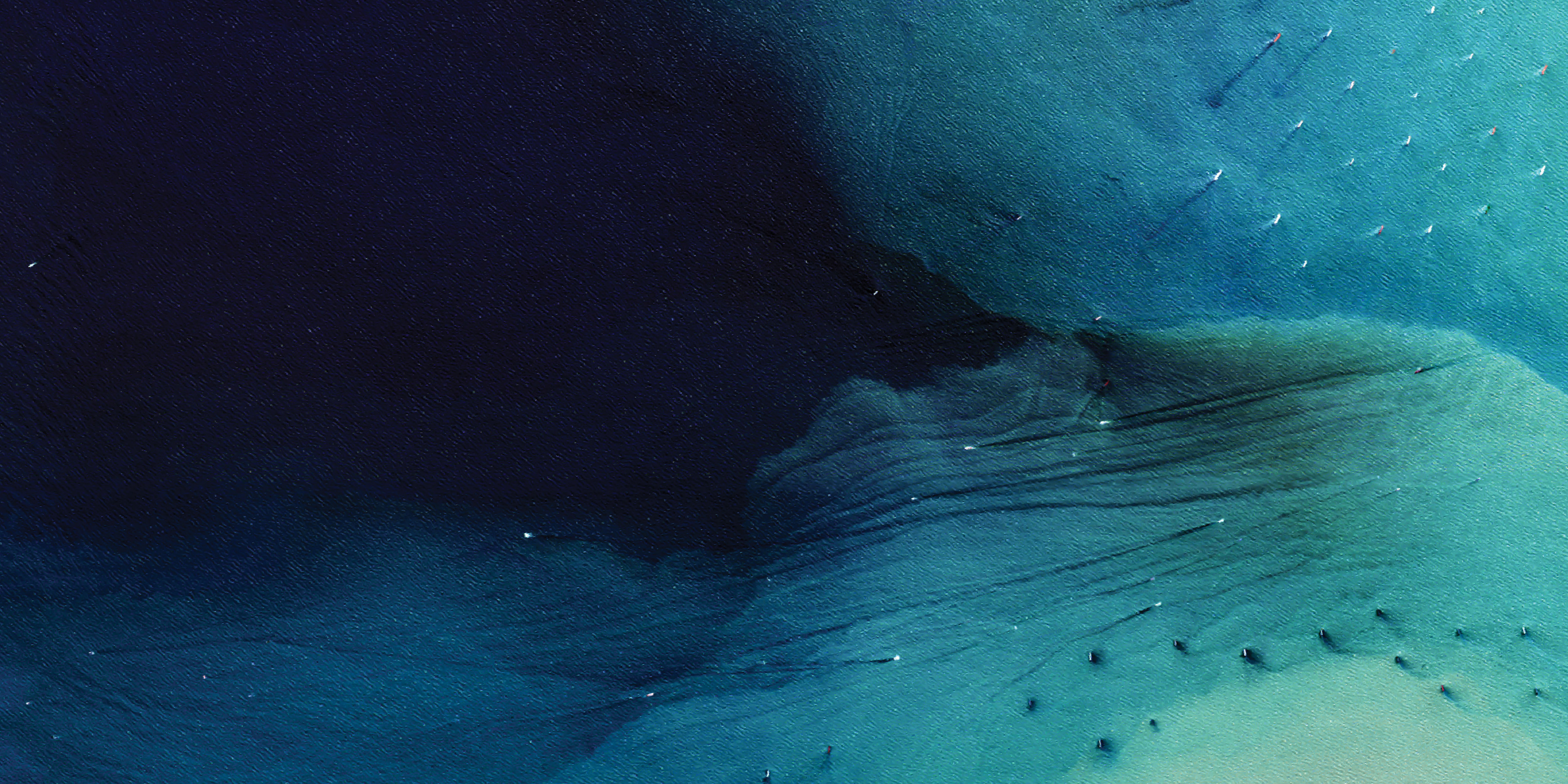
the Ocean

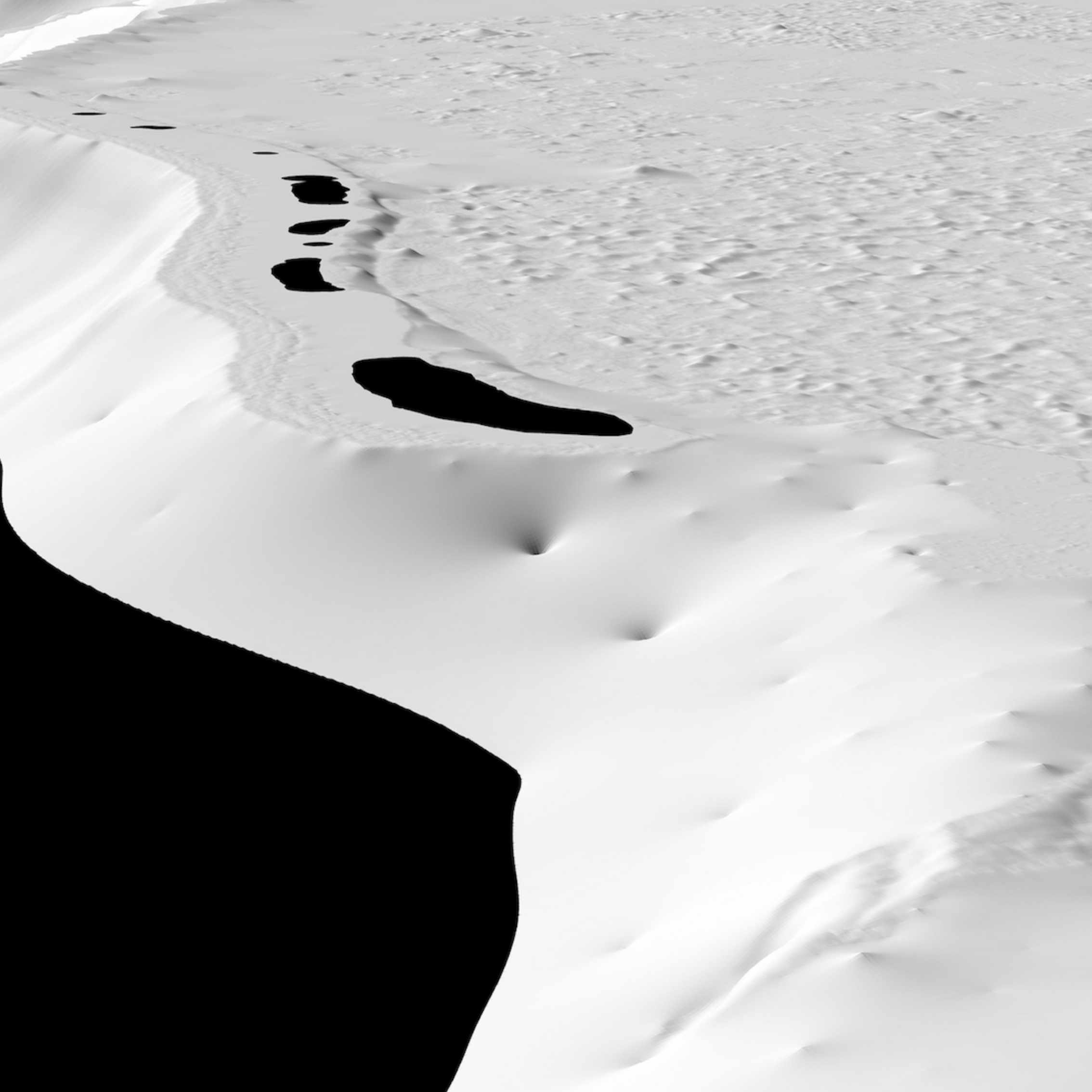
Be an

Art Space?

Opposite page:
Territorial Agency: Oceans in
Transformation commissioned by
TBA21-Academy
Anthropocene traces in the Pacific
Ocean: fishing and trans-shipment
data near the Nazca-Desventuradas
Marine Park off of the coast of Chile.
© Territorial Agency

The Ocean is a living entity with a multitude of voices, a cultural ecosystem to instigate intersectional and collaborative research, artistic production, and new forms of knowledge. In ten years of working across the globe, finding allies, and building networks from Iceland to the Caribbean, the Sea of Cortez to Fiji, Singapore, and beyond, TBA21-Academy has addressed the question of the ocean as an artistic practice, ultimately with Ocean Space, a planetary center for exhibitions, research, and public programs.





• Dear Ocean Enthusiasts (and those who are yet to be won),
Please meet TBA21–Academy, a contemporary art organization founded as an arm of Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary ten years ago as a cultural ecosystem where ideas and concepts are seeded, tended to, and shared. I invite you to join us on a journey of way-finding, where ways are not only paths charted across territory but also ways of thinking with, experiencing, and imagining, going hand in hand with worldmaking and storytelling.

We, the team of TBA21–Academy, have dedicated our work to fostering a deeper relationship to the Ocean through the lens of art to inspire care and action. We acknowledge the Ocean as a living entity with a multitude of voices. We are committed to listening to and learning from these voices and to creating spaces for these voices to be heard in layered ways full of the possibilities of storytelling, where audiences are invited to sense, view, listen, and learn.

It is important to emphasize the intersectionality of our work, since it is becoming growingly evident that environmentalism and social justice are inextricably linked. The work we do is process-oriented, long-term, and collaborative, bringing together artists, Indigenous practitioners, scientists, legal experts, and many others and linking the spheres of art, science, policy, conservation, and education. I believe that for the radical measures necessary to slow down the climate crisis, we need cultural responses that would inspire communities of care and concern just as much as we need political buy-in for meaningful impact and change.

In ten years of working across the globe, making friends, finding allies, and building networks from Iceland to the Caribbean, the Sea of Cortez to Fiji, Singapore, and beyond, TBA21–Academy grew from a project under the wings of its mother institution, TBA21, into the exploratory soul and research body of the foundation. Throughout this time, we experienced the Ocean as an incredibly fractured space, where questions of ownership, national security, and the proprietary information of commercial enterprises or research initiatives often conceal the horizon. We even found ocean conservation to be highly competitive, with a limited access to funding only available to few organizations, which makes large-scale alliances for a positive change tremendously difficult. To open the field and to create and offer a shared platform rather than engage in competition, we developed the digital initiative Ocean-Archive.org in an attempt to bring together the multitude of voices and stories, connecting those striving to nurture and protect the Ocean to those wanting to listen to these stories, to learn from them and engage with them. Designed to be an educational, collaborative and storytelling tool, free and accessible to all, Ocean Archive translates current knowledge about the Ocean into a shared language that enables us to make better decisions about urgently needed policies.

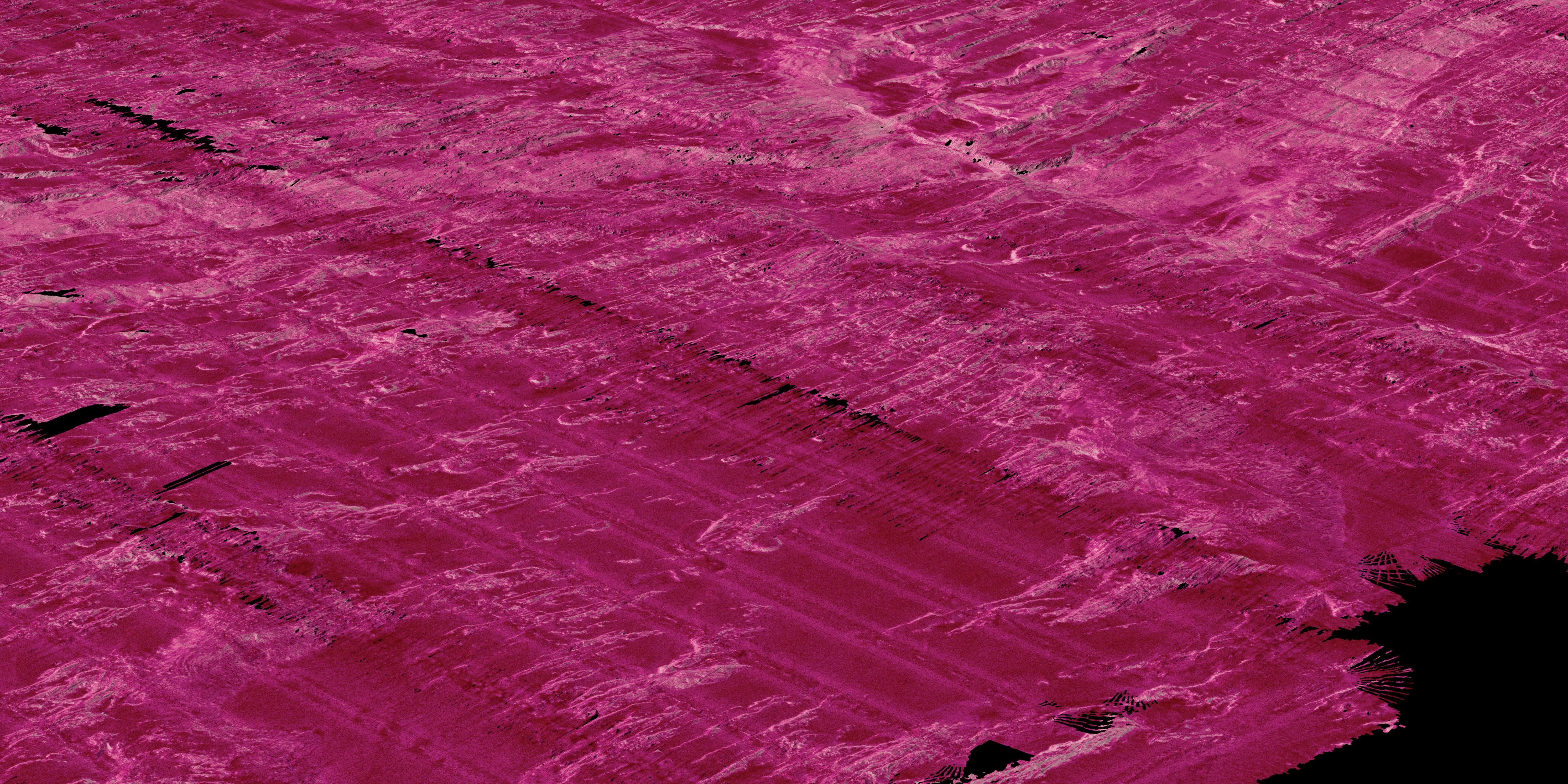
Ocean Archive is constantly developing and evolving as a site of transdisciplinary discussions with artists, scientists, policy makers, and many more, especially through ocean comm/uni/ty, an online forum for oceanic discussions on topics ranging from academic debate, petitions, and opportunities for action to sharing recommendations from oceanic culture. The starting point of all of our work is the transformative experience of spending time together on, in, and by the Ocean—time devoted to process and exchange, in local communities and with a global scope. From there, we instigate intersectional and collaborative research, artistic production, and new forms of knowledge that feed into exhibitions, public programs, mediation, and education. We are driven by questions: Can the Ocean be an art space? How can works of art create moments to rediscover connectivity, communality, reciprocity, and empathy? By proposing an exercise in awareness, we ask how art can produce new imaginations of possibilities.

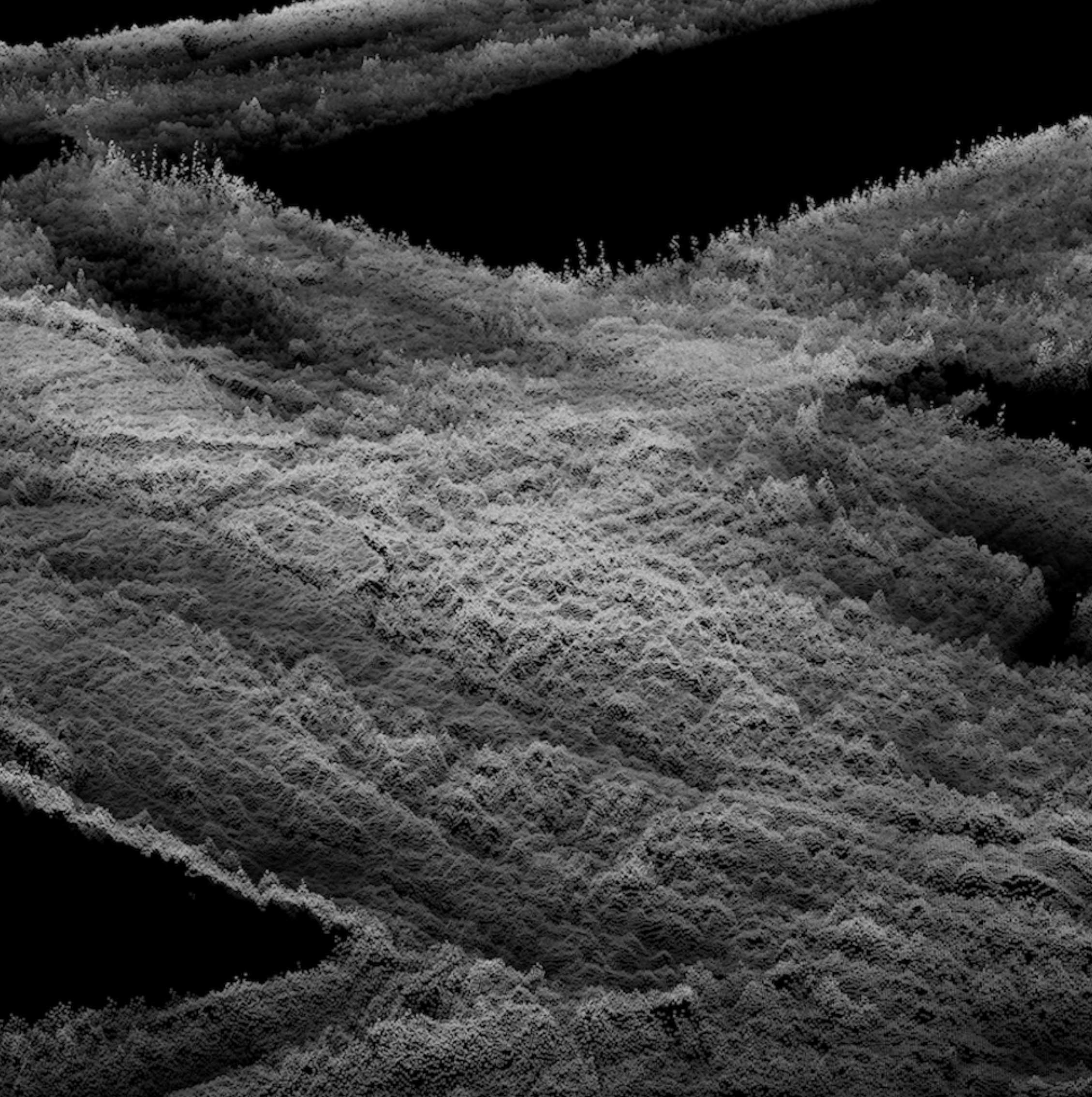
To have a home for these possibilities in Ocean Space in Venice, in the Church of San Lorenzo, made a lot of sense. Through its unique location in the lagoon and facing a number of compounded crises—rising sea levels, over-tourism, and cruise ships being just a few of them—Venice and its neighboring islands are like the canary in the coal mine. Historically, Venice has been a place for exchange and Ocean Space proposes a daring, radically imaginative program that becomes a laboratory for possible ways forward, interweaving many disciplines bound together by culture. Addressing urgent questions and offering a rich set of exhibitions, public programs, lectures, workshops, screenings, and performances, Ocean Space creates opportunities for convivial encounters with new topics and ideas, as well as a network of diverse practitioners and disciplines.

Since opening in 2019, Ocean Space has hosted major exhibitions that resulted from long-term commissions by the Academy, such as Joan Jonas's mesmerizing tribute to the oceans *Moving Off the Land II* and Territorial Agency's complex research exhibition *Oceans in Transformation*. 2021 saw the beginning of the cycle *The Soul Expanding Ocean* curated

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Words by Markus Reymann
Artworks by Territorial Agency





by Chus Martínez, with an exhibition by the artist Taloi Havini from the Autonomous Region of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea. The program continued with the waves and vibrations of the exhibition-performance O.C.E.A.N.I.C.A. by Isabel Lewis, still reverberating and leaving its traces in Ocean Space; it was a magical experience to see the work evolving over weeks, to sense a kind of intuition on the move, to dance the Ocean.

But I would like to rewind, to the very beginnings, when TBA21–Academy started its itinerant motion, dedicated to moments in space and time, not yet at home in Venice, operating anywhere. It all began with sound, or, better said, with listening. Our first fellow was the sound artist Jana Winderen. For Silencing of the Reefs, she listened to the lively, diverse, and dynamic threatened acoustic environments of coral reefs and their neighboring ecosystems. This project was based on sounds from the inhabitants of the oceans in general and from coral reefs in particular and the communication of these sounds. Winderen “fished” the sounds and presented them to an audience to broaden and awaken curiosity about, concern for, and understanding of the ecosystems and habitats that cover 70 percent of our planet by using one more sense, listening with care: “The best way to know the ocean,” Winderen said, “is to be close, to be in the water, to learn by experience. The most essential thing is to stay curious and open, and tread carefully, or swim with care.”

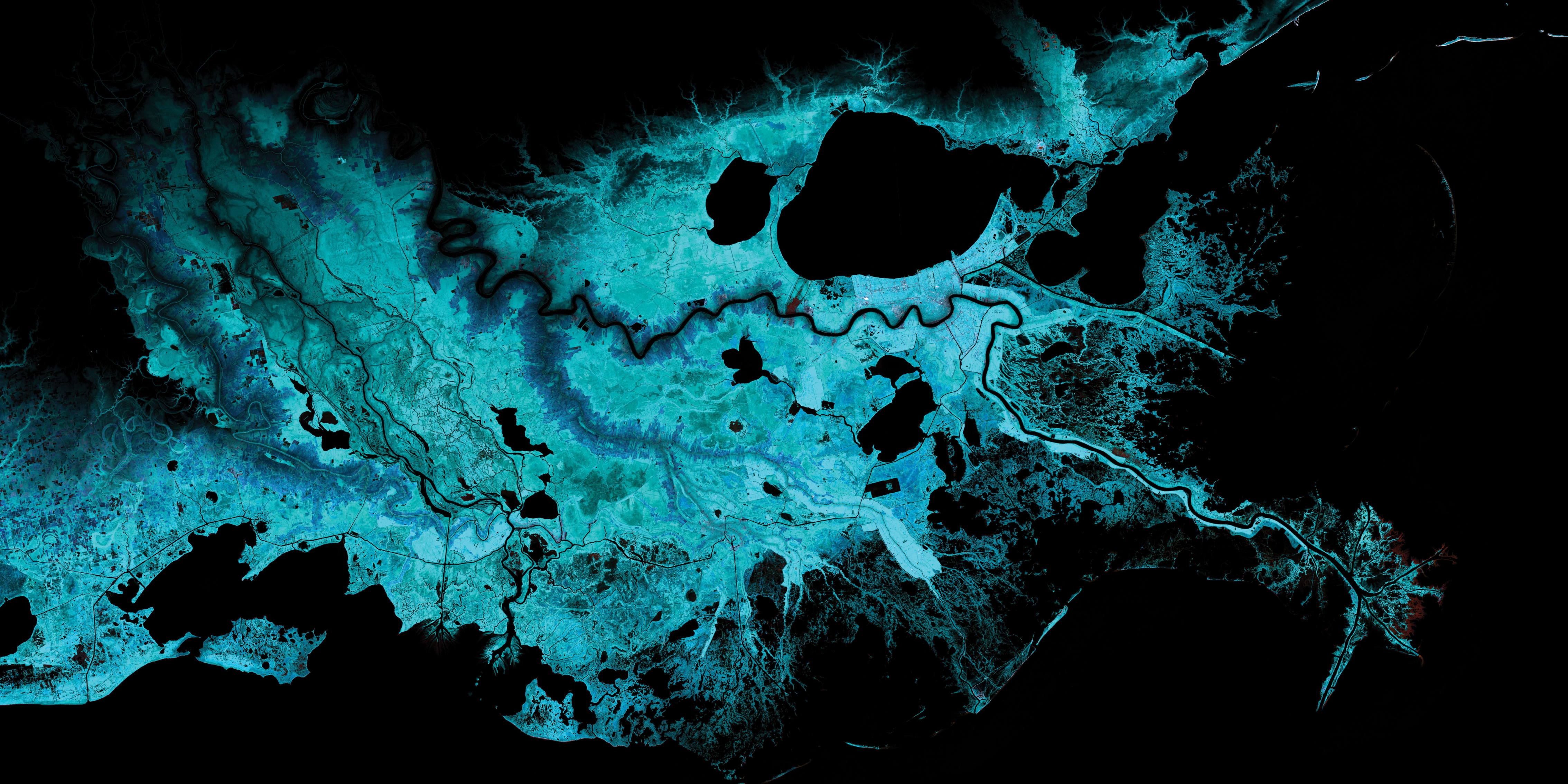
When in 2018 we took Carl Michael von Hausswolff on a trip on the Dardanella, the research vessel that was home for the first adventures of TBA21–Academy, he shared his excitement: “It was just this kind of creative environment that one wishes that everyone in the world would have the opportunity to experience, because that’s actually the way that you feel that you want to exist.” The Dardanella journey was where Von Hausswolff met another aural explorer: Jónsi Birgisson of Sigur Rós. Together they created what would become the sonic duo Dark Morph: “We just promote collaboration, in this case with the ocean, with other life forms. It’s about the ability not to exploit the ocean, but to collaborate, to be the kind of being that can collaborate with other beings. In our case, because we are musicians and composers, we collaborate with the sounds of the environment.”

In 2021, for one of the exhibitions celebrating our 10th anniversary, we were still probing the potentials and surprises of collaboration and sound. As Taloi Havini put it, when observing the mapping of the Great Barrier Reef with state-of-the-art technology on a research trip on the Schmidt Ocean Institute’s R/V Falkor, she said: “This ship is taking me to places I never thought of. It’s fascinating that so many people from different disciplines can come together. I think research is collaborative, it’s all these intersecting ideas of what research is. How science and art come together. It’s like this whole community of experiences that will feed in I think to my work.” For her exhibition at Ocean Space and the 22-channel sound installation Answer to the Call, Havini inquired how sound and other senses can be activated beyond their use in Western science as tools for measuring space and to reveal diverse narratives, asking audiences to attune the senses and reconsider current knowledge of the oceans. Using an ancient compositional technique that produces a dialogue between different ways of knowing through a method of call and response, Havini included Hakö language and instruments that conjure her navigational ancestors, moving beyond a sonic measuring of space and distance, asserting the presence of a much deeper, cyclical understanding of the ocean, space, and time. “We know the land by markers and boundaries and we use sound as well in our mapping, oral senses, and the other sensory elements of understanding and knowing a place.”

Our latest sound journey was with Patti Smith for the opening ceremony of COP26 in Glasgow, where Smith, Jesse Paris Smith, and Soundwalk Collective performed CRISIS OF THE LOST, a sound piece inspired by Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza’s lecture performance Sounds Too Many addressing the destructive impact of human-made acoustic pollution: “Water is a super conductor of sound, which explains why all species that inhabit the oceans are particularly sensitive to it. Its density carries sound not only faster, but much further than air. [...] Becoming aware of the physics of water, as well as coming to terms with the unimaginable sound pollution that we subject all maritime species to, has moved me to join forces with all those who before me have tirelessly campaigned for quieter oceans.” Closing the circle with the very beginnings of TBA21–Academy, the Glasgow performance was instrumented by Soundwalk Collective and featured amongst others recordings by Jana Winderen from her voyages with TBA21–Academy in Belize, Panama, Dominican Republic, and Iceland.

All these endeavors continue to be focused on a single, yet complex mission: to see a world where everyone cares for the Ocean, as the Ocean is our greatest ally in fighting the climate crisis. We do this by creating experiences based on proximity, collaboration, long-term engagement, and most importantly, care.

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TBA21–Academy strives to be an agent of change, working with an international network of institutions. We are, for example, the only cultural institution to hold Observer status at the International Seabed Authority. We have been invited to join the Advisory Council of the European Union’s Mission Board for Healthy Oceans, and we are actively engaged in collaborations with UNESCO and the European Commission. These collaborations are an important part of our practice. We believe by bringing together art, science, and advocacy the power of art can have a tangible, positive impact on both individual behavior and international policies. The journey is to be continued. Tune in and join us.

PS: You can listen to some of the experts whose work we keep returning to in Ocean Wants, a new series of ten podcasts commissioned by TBA21–Academy that playfully explores how multi-species communities and diverse life forms could like our planet to be. In each episode, writer Ingo Niermann meets with an expert from a different field to ask: What would a given species come up with if it could be as dominant as humans have been? What if fish, whales, octopuses, jellyfish, corals, algae, or extremophiles claimed to rule the world? What is their ideal environment and which role could human myths, habits, and technologies play in satisfying their needs? 🎧

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Ocean Space is a planetary center for exhibitions, research and public programs catalyzing ocean literacy and advocacy through the arts. Established and led by TBA21–Academy and building on its expansive work over the past ten years, this embassy for the oceans fosters wonder, engagement, and collective action.