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TRACKS: More Than a Pretty View

by James Trimarco

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Two wooden boats sit on warehouse-style pallets in the courtyard of the Neuberger Museum in Purchase, New York. One is stained a sandy red, the other a washed-out seafoam green. With their handsomely curved 14-foot hulls, sturdy construction, and tightly fitted joints, the boats seem rustic yet seaworthy.



Two Liberum Dories and four sheets of repurposed and stenciled plywood on display in the courtyard of the Neuberger Museum in Purchase, New York. Photo by James Trimarco.

Visitors may be surprised to learn that such attractive vessels, on display as part of the Neuberger's *Off the Grid* exhibit, were built in a single day by novices using cheap repurposed materials. Four sheets of ratty plywood propped against a nearby fence suggest how this was done. A matrix of bright yellow curves, lines, and letters has been stenciled over the plywood's original patina of graffiti and water damage. Like a dressmaker's pattern, the curves outline the boat's component parts, while the lettering identifies each one with a maritime term such as "starboard gunwale" or "stern knee." Just cut along the dotted lines with a jigsaw, and you're a few screws and a bucket of sealing compound away from a day on the water.

These boats and stencils are the creations of Mare Liberum, a "freeform publishing, boatbuilding and waterfront art collective based in the Gowanus, Brooklyn," according to the group's web site. The collective includes curator and sailor Dylan Gauthier, industrial designer Stephan von Muehlen, and Benjamin Cohen, another designer who is also a director at the Gowanus Studio Space, a nonprofit workshop for artists, designers, and entrepreneurs. While sealing up a boat on a warm day in May, the three of them told me they founded the project to help make it easier for New Yorkers to access the water that surrounds the city.

"There's an idea that the sea is supposed to be open," Gauthier says. "To an extent you obviously have restrictions when you're within a certain distance from a functioning state. But outside that distance, you know, the captain of the ship is everything at once: the judge and the president of a small island."

That kind of radical maritime freedom isn't something New Yorkers get to experience very often. Heavy industry has made most of the waterfront inaccessible for over a century, and while the city is taking down some of its rusty old docks and warehouses today, that won't necessarily transform the waterfront into a creative public space. Much of it will likely be privatized and become inaccessible again. Other areas will be made into the sort of pleasant but tightly policed parks favored by the Bloomberg Administration. If the new East River State Park at North Eighth Street in Williamsburg is any indication, the new open space along the waterfront

will come with guards, gates, and limited hours, which hardly encourage the sort of active maritime experimentation that interests the Mare Liberum collective.

Other obstacles to the waterfront include the huge expense of buying and storing a boat, the misperception that New York City water might be fatal to the touch, and the various overlapping bureaucracies that oversee the shores. Gauthier and von Muehlen became familiar with these issues while working on the Empty Vessel Project, a 63-foot former Navy rescue boat they helped to convert into a floating nonprofit arts space. Beginning in June 2005, the boat was docked at various parking lots, mixed-use spaces, and squats along the Gowanus Canal and provided a space for many free activities including Russian language classes, performances of sea shanties, parties, and dinners.

“We were able to exist for a while with not a lot of people paying attention to us,” von Muehlen says of the Empty Vessel. “But in the end it wasn’t sustainable, because it was this behemoth of a boat that couldn’t go anywhere under its own power and required collaboration from the official powers that be right there in the backside of Brooklyn.” Those powers eventually made the project impossible to maintain and in the winter of 2006 the team sold the boat to some friends for a dollar.

The new project takes the same essential drive to get New Yorkers onto the waterfront—with or without official approval—and channels it into smaller, less centralized boats that can be more easily maneuvered and stored. Gauthier and von Muehlen had already been dreaming of such a project when Tianna Kennedy, a curator and former collaborator on the Empty Vessel Project, sent them a request for proposals. She was helping to curate the Neuberger’s *Off the Grid* show, and was seeking art that challenged “conventional or commercial infrastructures.”

Quickly, the basic concept for a boat design so simple that almost anyone could build it began to take form. Gauthier and von Muehlen contacted Cohen, who had already built an elaborate 14-foot Adirondack Guideboat in his parents’ backyard, and asked if he wanted to join the project. He said yes, offered the use of the Gowanus Studio Space, and suggested they start with master boat builder John Gardner’s design for a Banks Dory, a simple, traditional boat used in Newfoundland cod fishing since the sixteenth century.

Gardner, a founding figure among wooden-boat-building hobbyists, was a labor organizer from rural Maine who graduated from Teacher’s College at Columbia University in 1932. When his background as an agitator for the International Workers of the World excluded him from teaching, Gardner returned to the shipyards where he’d worked with his father as a boy and enjoyed a long career building boats. But he also continued to express his populist leanings through a series of books that made traditional methods of boat building accessible by simplifying the designs.

Although relatively easy to use, Gardner’s plans were still too complex for the purposes of the Mare Liberum collective. His Banks Dory design featured a system of interlocking slabs painstakingly fitted together to swell and seal in the water, for instance, and its geometry was complex. On top of that, a dory made to his specifications would be too large to fit through the entrance to the studio.

So von Muehlen and Cohen loaded Gardner’s plans into a software

platform called SolidWorks and made a series of modifications. “We shrank it a little bit and worked out a scheme where you could fill up the connections after the fact and use available materials rather than planking it up,” von Muehlen says.

The plans they developed resulted in the *Liberum Dory*, a streamlined design that a small team of amateurs can bring to Gowanus-ready completion in just three days: one to cut out the frame and screw it together, another to seal the joints and build up the floor, and a third for painting, testing in shallow water, and other finishing work.

While Gardner’s designs and philosophy provided the most direct inspiration for the project, its creators also see it as part of larger trends in the art world and beyond. One of these is the use of repurposed materials, a practice at least as old as collage but which seems to be finding new energy in the context of today’s ecological movements. Gauthier points to the *Waste Not, Want Not* show currently installed at Astoria’s Socrates Sculpture Park, which features works like Letha Wilson’s *Gallery Garden (Jasper Johns)*, in which native trees and grasses sprout in planters built from repurposed art gallery drywall, and Randy Ray’s *Port*, an assortment of abstract forms sculpted from shredded junk mail. Like the Haitian improvised boats that the *Mare Liberum* team also admires, these projects find a use for materials that are everywhere and are usually going to waste.

The *Mare Liberum* team initially wanted to take this principle one step further by stenciling the pattern for their boat onto the plywood barriers that developers erect around construction sites, thereby encouraging people to make boats out of them.

“To me, using those materials is a counterpoint to the fact that there’s this marketing of the waterfront now as desirable property,” Gauthier says, “but all they really want out of it is views.”

In response, the stenciling project would take the very wooden barriers that help to commodify the waterfront and convert them into potential boats people could use to obtain full access to it. If the symbolism was flawless, however, the wood itself was not. The barriers proved too dilapidated and rotten for nautical use—although that didn’t stop the collective from nabbing a couple sheets for display at the Neuberger.

While *Mare Liberum* no longer contains a direct street art component, Cohen still sees a conceptual similarity there.

“It’s about claiming some little pieces of the city and getting through barriers, the way that graffiti art does,” he says.

It will be exciting to see how what adventures and events emerge from that process this summer. At the time of this writing, Cohen, Gauthier, and von Muehlen are planning to bring a few of their dories to the Mermaid Parade and to take them on the water for the first time that evening. They also hope to join with the Miss Rockaway Armada, a fleet of seven handmade rafts designed by the street artist Swoon and others, which will be traveling down the Hudson from Albany to Brooklyn. Other possibilities include races, exploratory missions, and nights of drifting in the East River while the reflection of the moon mingles with the city lights in the quietly lapping waves.

Asked about his highest hopes for *Mare Liberum*, von Muehlen answers

without hesitation.

“Somebody else gets the stencils and makes one without having anything to do with us,” he tells me, “and it floats.”

Interested parties can obtain the complete stencils at the group’s web site, www.thefreeseas.org, where they are available in a variety of formats.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Trimarco's writing has appeared in *Vanity Fair*, *Yes!* magazine, and *Critique of Anthropology*.

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