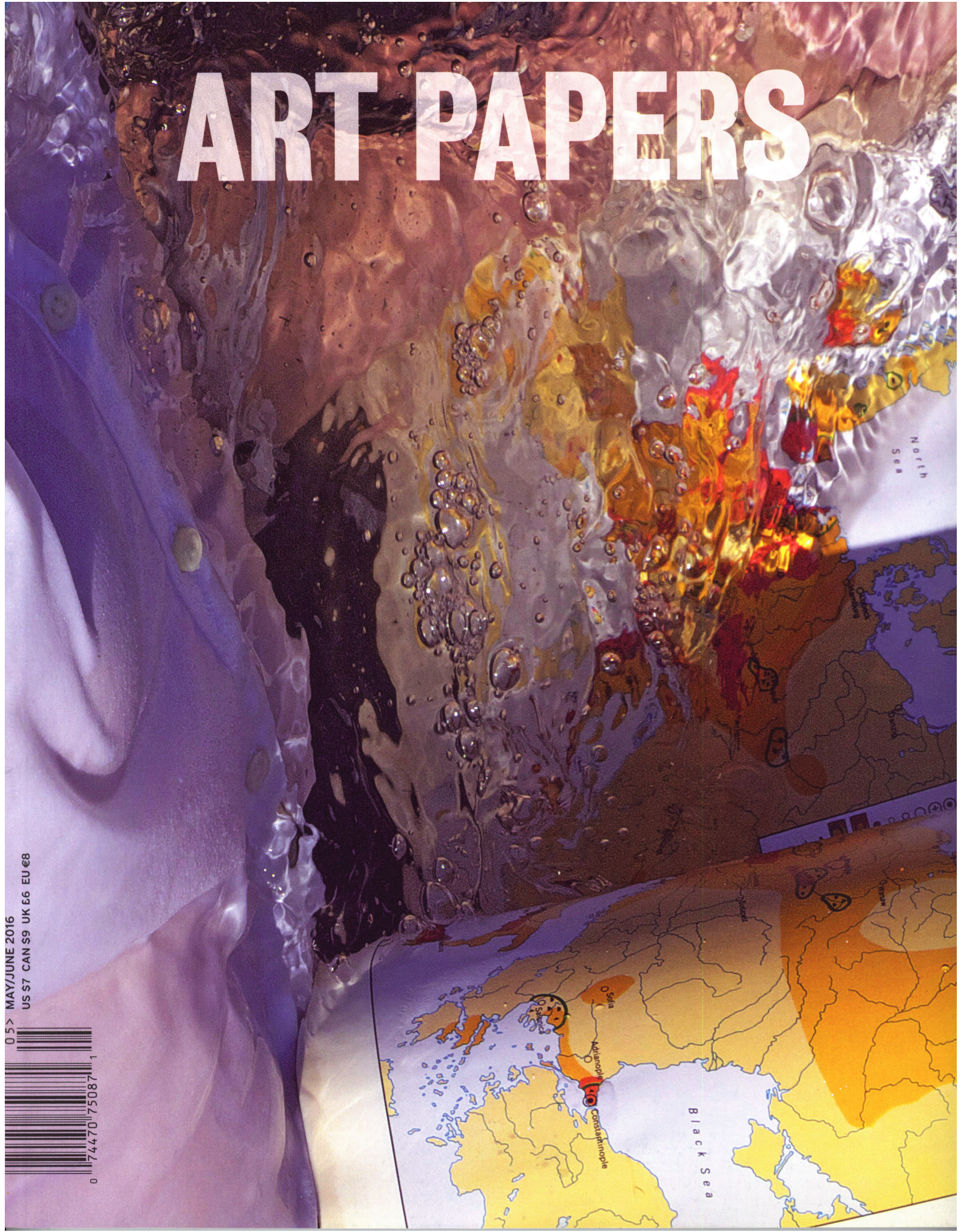


# ART PAPERS

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The dramatic environmental shifts that have taken place in the latest epoch of our planet call for a historical examination of human output throughout our existence. Dante's *Divine Comedy* condenses a lineage of early Western thought—Aristotle, Virgil, Aquinas, others—and its particular influence surfaces ubiquitously in subsequent epics, in literature, and in art.

It takes an epic poem, for instance, to confront the epic losses and challenges facing our relationship to water. How could we allow so many avoidable deaths in the wake of Hurricane Katrina? How could we allow the damage to human life that has occurred in Flint, Michigan? Regarding the impact of climate change and the rise of sea level upon our society, Dante's *Purgatorio* is a particularly rich resource for me: Purgatory is a tall mountain surrounded by water; the adaptation of historical poetry in service of my own work has been akin to climbing it.

Accompanying the following images, taken from my *Men and Women in Water Cities* series, is my take on the *Purgatorio's* Canto II. Dante's original work was in part about journeying toward and ultimately facing god; I have removed religious references to create a libretto that is about facing each other, looking directly into each other's eyes, and reflecting upon ourselves in society. Reflecting upon nature and our misguided treatment of it, the text replaces Dante's journey to heaven with a journey toward a world free of the privilege and power dictating the past, present, and future of the shared resource that is water.

The text reproduced here is designed to be performed.

## Men and Women in Water Cities

Text + Images: Kim Anno





*solo, new reader*  
*two readers*

The lot of them were a sweet sight, and then  
with one motion, leapt upon the strand;  
then, swiftly as he flew in, bird took his leave.

Those strangers left behind  
gazing around like those who test  
Some unknown thing they seek to understand.

The sun with sure arrows had made fly  
Capricorn from our mid-heaven, far and wide  
shooting shafts of day about the sky,

Those new folk caught sight of us, and cried,

*chorus*

“Tell us, if you know what path will lead us to  
us to the mountain-side.”

*solo, male reader*

Virgil replied: “You suppose perchance that we are  
Familiar with the place; but it is not this,  
we are strangers here as you

just arrived, a short while previous  
to you, but by so steep and rough a road  
this new climb will seem child’s play to us.”

Then, when they looked at me, whose breathing showed  
I was still alive, each spirit’s brow  
pale with wonder;

*chorus*

when a courier with an olive bough  
brings news, the townsfolk throng to hear,  
jostling each other unabashed

all those souls, so happy as they were,  
inquiring eyes upon my face.  
Well-nigh forgetting to go make them fair;

*two female voices, cantando*

We watch fairness live  
I advance in all eagerness  
clasp me in her arms, whose looks expressed  
love as moved me to a like embrace.

O shadows vain! I see I cannot touch!  
Three times I felt my hands behind it meet,  
3 times they came back empty to my breast.  
Amazement across my face  
changing colors, the shadow slipped  
smiling, and I plunged forward after it. Come here!

*chorus*

Gently it bade me cease; at once I knew  
what man it was, and begged him to wait,  
one moment with me, and a word or two.

“As in my mortal bonds I loved you, so  
I love you free; and therefore I will stay;  
But where will you go?”







## CANTO II

*The Ship of Souls arrives at the island mountain; steered by an angel, it brings the newly dead from the mouth of the Tiber to Ante-Purgatory. One of the souls aboard is Dante's friend Casella, a musician, who recognizes the poet. Casella delights him and other spirits by singing one of Dante's own songs. The party is broken up by Cato, guardian of the approach to the mountain, who chides the group for lingering and sends them on their way.*

*chorus, marcato*

The sun, by now o'er that horizon's rim,  
was sinking: a fluttering orange disc  
whose meridian circle stands  
with its mid-arch above Jerusalem.

*chorus, crescendo*

While night, who wheels opposed to him, from sands  
Ganges mounted with the Scales, whose weight  
Drops in her hour of victory from her hands;

Where we were soft Aurora, late  
flushing from parchment to rose-vermillion,  
Grew sallow with ripe age and matron state.

*solo*

And we stood beside the sea alone,  
travelers uncertain of their way,  
bodies linger while the heart Flies on,

*teneramente*

As near upon the hour of dawn,  
Mars in the West across the ocean floor  
Glow through thick vapor a dim, red ray,

*chorus, crescendo*

Mortals let us see this sight once more!  
I saw a light come speeding o'er the sea,  
swift, a flight knows no smile there.

*solo cantando, penseroso*

For a brief space I turned inquiringly  
to my guide; then looked again, and  
and brighter far it seemed to me.

Then, from each side there seemed to grow  
a white I-knew-not-what; whiteness  
bit by bit, below appeared.

*two readers, cantando*

Now all this time the captain spoke no word,  
we saw, those first two were wings;  
and we knew then what helmsman steered.

*chorus, forte*

"Stand Up!" he cried. "Hold hands and face each other;  
Behold the light of the Sun  
you will see each as great emissaries.

*fortissimo*

See how we scorned instruments of earth,  
Many need oars, and wings as well,  
to travel the vast ocean shores

*diminuendo*

Each soaring pinion heavenward springs,  
beating the air with quills imperishable  
that won't be mewed like mortal coverings."

*solo, semplice*

As nearer and nearer he came, full sail  
bird of the future shone more bright  
that eyes endured fell.

And hard on he steered his flight,

*solo, semplice*

Freehold of bliss apparent in his face,  
future bird landed on the bow, tip-toed,  
with him a hundred souls faced





*teneramente, piano*

“O my Casella, in the hope some day  
to come back here, I travel far now,” I cried;  
“But what about you? Why so much time lost?”

*solo male voice (voice of Virgil)*

“I am not wronged if,  
by he who may decide to journey and with what vessel,  
I have often been refused passage,” he replies

“Fate shapes me, it matters how I react;  
three months have been offered to all those  
who wish to board the ship  
and come

*Virgil joined by solo female voice*

So, when I sought that shore where first the stir  
graciously took me as his passenger.

I wander by the shore of the Tiber,  
waves grow salt and we are admitted  
the mouth of the river;  
is where all souls come presently,  
they sink not down to Acheron.”

*chorus, gustoso*

I say: “if no new law prohibits us  
with skill and remembrance, we sing songs of love  
once could charm all fevers out of us,

Is there little to console my spirit,  
in this dull body toils and faints  
the long road here,”

*solo female voice*

“Love’s discourse in my mind races,  
the sweetness thrills me.  
Within me still the song echoes.

My gentle guide and all that spirit-kind  
that came to us hung on those notes  
we are entranced, as bearing nothing else in mind.”

*chorus, drammatico*

Stock-still we stood, intent no word to miss,  
When lo! That favored elder, all at once  
Crying: “How now, you laggard souls! What’s this?”

*staccato*

Why all this dawdling? Why this negligence?  
Run to the mountains, slough away the filth  
will not let you see all that is good countenance.”

Like us, as a wild flock of pigeons gather  
make a goodly feast of wheat or tares,  
have no pride put by a commonwealth

*two voices*

peaceful industry, if you appear  
scare them, off they go and quiet their feeding,  
by pressure of more urgent cares;

so, breaking from the song, I saw them heading  
toward the slope, that newfound company,  
like men who speed, nor know to what they’re speeding;

*chorus, grave*

We went too, and no less hastily.

Kim Anno is a painter, photographer, and film and video artist born and based in Los Angeles. She has been exhibited and screened internationally at such venues as the New Media Festival (Seoul, Korea); the Goethe Institute (Johannesburg); Flux Projects (Atlanta); the Asian Art Museum (San Francisco); Site Santa Fe (Santa Fe, NM); and the Berkeley Art Museum (Berkeley, CA). Anno is a recipient of the Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation Purchase Award and the Eureka Foundation’s Fleishhaker Fellowship, as well as grants and fellowships from the Zellerbach Foundation, the Open Circle Foundation, and the Berkeley Film Foundation. Anno has been a professor at the California College of the Arts since 1996.

Anno’s recent work has explored the intersection of art and science, particularly in relation to aesthetic issues surrounding climate change, water, and adaptation. Her *Men and Women in Water Cities* is an ongoing, multichapter, interdisciplinary and film/video work in which people are recorded in predicaments underwater. The text above is part of a work in progress that will include an actual musical score, adapted by Kristina Dutton; slowly, it will grow into an experimental opera.

ALL IMAGES: Kim Anno, *Men and Women in Water Cities*, 2010–ongoing [courtesy of the artist]