A Place for Literary Pirates

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Artist Beatrice Glow has created a free library on a boat in the Hudson River

New York artist Beatrice Glow is building shelves and stacking books on a historic boat along the Hudson River for her latest art installation: a floating library.

While many of the 150 people that can fit on the boat may show up in order to page through old volumes or feel the breeze off the water, they may also be in for a surprise. Although Glow wants boaters and bibliophiles to come, her ultimate goal is more subversive: to create a community of intellectual pirates.

The problem for the millennial generation, she thinks, is that all her contemporaries have ever known is the constant drumbeat of wars and rising global temperatures. As a result they have become inured, hopeless and apathetic, to the point that they stare down at their screens and are quicker to answer a text than engage with someone in front of them, Glow said.

So instead of asking for money for passage onto her ship, “the fee that I’m charging to get on board is turn off your phones.”

“We had a joke that I should wear a sequin parrot on my shoulder,” said Glow, who will be counting and greeting people as they board. “It’s based on pirate utopias and mini-societies that have evaded living on the grid.”

The floating library is being staged on an 81-year-old boat called the Lilac that used to take supplies out to lighthouses. The Lilac is one of only three of its kind still around and it has seen many lives, including a retrofit for World War II, before finally being decommissioned and turned into a floating museum under refurbishment. Glow drew inspiration from the repurposed spaces of South American artists, where she spent several years after graduating from NYU.

“[The museum] is fixing the mechanical issue of an 81 year-old ship,” said Glow. “And the floating library is proposing to deal with a parallel of fixing socio-cultural issues.”
It’s an ephemeral project opening on Sept. 6, which after a month at Pier 25 just north of Stuyvesant High School, will be broken back down on Oct. 4 and the books donated. But Glow sees this as an advantage. Unlike the institutions on land that have to persist for long periods, the short life of the floating library will give people permission to engage in ways they wouldn’t otherwise.

So she has collaborated with a number of artists over months of coffee meetings to create workshops inside the boat’s cabins.

“We’re one of the performers of her performance piece,” said Alexander Campos, executive director of the Center for Book Arts who will lead workshops and forums on the boat. “We’re an item or component in her piece, a prop if you will.”

The main attraction is the silent library on the top deck, where readers will be asked to stay quiet as the open sky and the open book compete with the sounds of the Hudson for their attention. Passengers will then be able to indulge the spirit of DIY-“maker” culture through bookbinding and modular furniture workshops.

Indeed, most of the project will be constructed on the boat and then taught to participants in workshops: the furniture and shelves on the library deck will be made from just 30 donated wood pallets, each of which can be assembled and reassembled, shifting in form as needed. Glow grew up along California’s fault lines so she has a deep appreciation for structures built on a fluid foundation.

Participants can dangle their feet on a swing that was made from the pages of a chapter in Moby Dick by the artist Amanda Thackray. By literally turning the pages of Moby Dick into rope, people will be able to see that the physical parts of boats such as ropes have always been imbued with the magic of literature.

Then participants can immerse themselves in a cabin full of pulsing electronic music from six artists who created music inspired by works of literature.

Or they can attend the workshop of Glow’s mentor, the Bronx artist Nicolás Dumit Estévez, and apply dark eye shadow and make sandwiches from French cherry jelly, natural peanut butter and “dense, healthy” bread from Zabar’s.

“The full title is ‘Talking life and art while applying eye shadow and spreading PB+J on bread,’ so it’s a long title,” said Estévez, of his performance piece scheduled for Sept. 27. He wants to explore people’s associations with these objects, such as when of his aunt hit him for rummaging through her expensive vanity, and in part because he wants to try looking like a raccoon and give others permission to do the same.

Instead of a library full of academics with their heads down, Glow hopes to produce daydreamers whose eyes drift up. The floating library is what a library would look like if it was built by and for artists rather than by and for academics: under the open sky and over the undulating waves, books are not problems to be solved but inspirations to be dreamed up.

“This is an in-between space between art and life, water and land,” said Glow’s mentor Estévez. “You can sort of dream things, imagine things and also bring them to fruition.”
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