



Ellen Mara De Wachter

A Journey for Each of Us

Essay contribution for

Yva Jung

Journey with a Container

2022

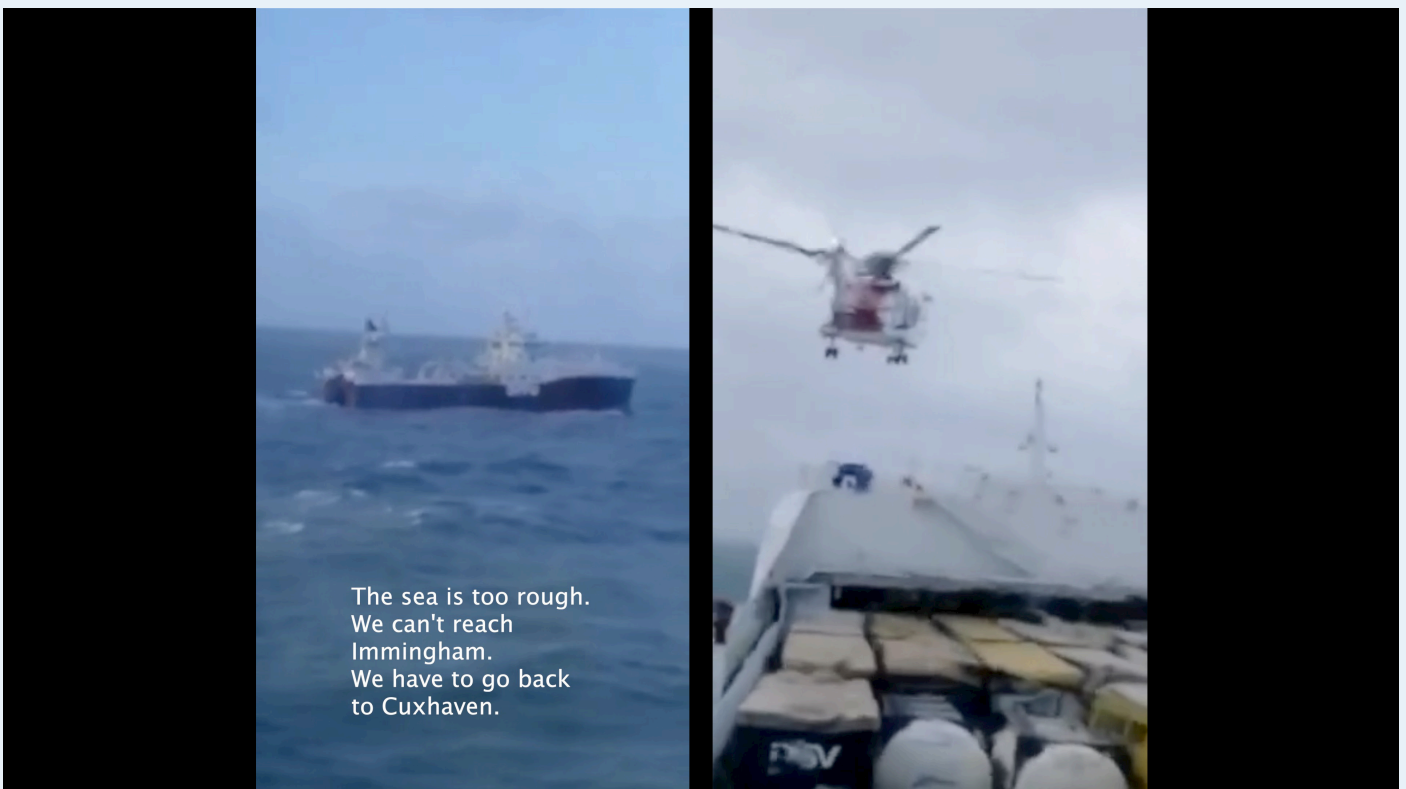
Commissioned by Pier Projects

All images are video stills
from Yva Jung's *Journey with
a Container* (2022).

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A Journey for Each of Us

How do we imagine a life in relation to the magnitude of our globe? Surrounded by friends and families, ensconced in our homes and communities, we may feel comfortable and proportionate. But set against the planet and its systems, oceans and atmosphere, or within the frameworks we work so hard to build and hone, our existence might seem as volatile as a house of cards on a windy beach.



Constant movement and activity can help maintain the illusion of coherence. But when regular behaviours are interrupted, as happened so abruptly in the spring of 2020 with the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, the things that give meaning and structure to our daily lives are thrown into question. It is against this backdrop that Yva Jung began developing her video, 'Journey with a Container' (2022), which was commissioned by Pier Projects in Felixstowe and later exhibited at the nearby Landguard Fort. The enforced stillness brought about by lockdowns led Jung to investigate the ongoing activities of the Port of Felixstowe and from there, to research the lives of seafarers working on container ships. This group of more than 1.5 million people, who come predominantly from five countries — the Philippines, China, Indonesia, Russia, and Ukraine — enables the smooth operation of vessels responsible for transporting 90% of the goods traded worldwide, from raw materials used in construction, to food and all manner of manufactured goods. Seafarers facilitate an unimaginably vast and complex network of international trade, which we tend to take for granted day-to-day. Wherever you are right now, look around you: most of what you see was carried on such a ship; nearly everything you touch shared its journey with some of these seafarers. Yet their activities and experiences, their thoughts and feelings during their journeys of six months or more at sea, working more than 85 hours a week, are omitted from the story of our great global supply chain.

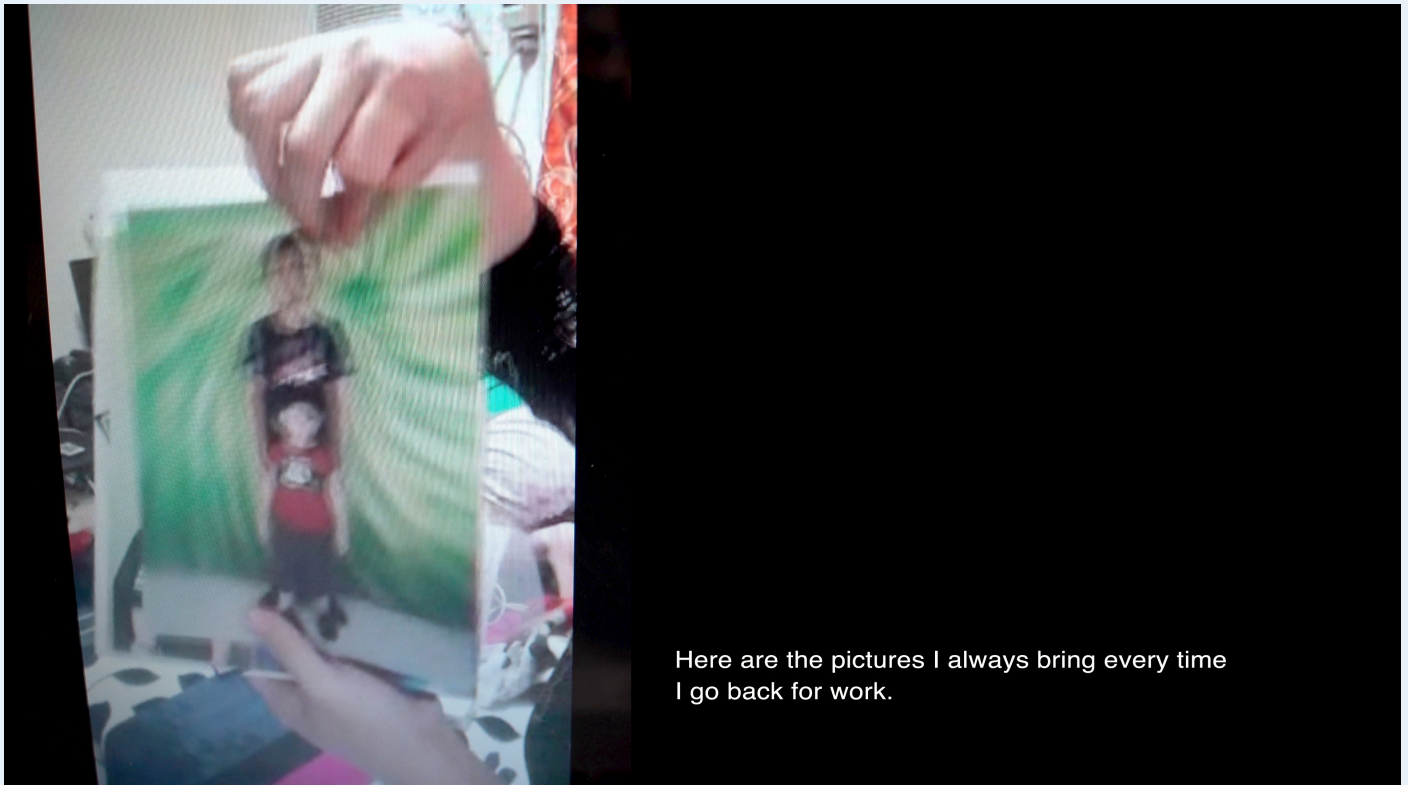


Jung's ambition for the work was to raise awareness of these people, who are central to a faceless and anonymous industry, and to introduce us to some of the specifics of their lives. At the Port of Felixstowe, where 48% of all goods enter the UK, Jung met Julian Wong, Regional Port Chaplain for East Anglia and Haven Ports, who works with Stella Maris, a network of seafarer centres whose chaplains visit ships. During the pandemic when seafarers were not allowed to come ashore, chaplains would meet them in open-air areas of the ships, for example at the top of the gantry. Wong introduced Jung to Ma Ru, a seafarer who, in order to do her job, must routinely leave her family behind in the Philippines, the country that supplies the world's largest number of seafarers. Ma Ru is also one of the women who make up just 2% of the profession.



In a carpeted room, we watch Jung fill a wooden box, a scale model of the standard international shipping container. Into the box go bedding, towels, clothing, and personal items such as sanitary pads, soap, shampoo and hair dye. These are the items on Ma Ru's packing list, and most of them will have come through Felixstowe before ending up in the shops serving Jung's neighbourhood in Hertfordshire. Later, Jung joins Ma Ru on a video call. They don't talk about the hardship at sea — the loneliness, isolation and challenges of being part of the tiny minority of women. Instead, Ma Ru proudly talks about her life: meaning her children. She shows Jung

the family photos she takes along whenever she goes to work on a ship. As viewers, we are made witness to the unfamiliar world of shipping from a range of vantage points: from inside the ship, from the coast, in seasick and homesick footage filmed via smartphone video link, shot through tears of rain streaming down the window. And from the loving heart of a seafarer, mother.



Some things seem unimaginable. Until you begin to imagine them, and later, perhaps, to gain a sense of their physical reality. It is one thing to learn facts and figure abstracted from lived experience. It is another thing altogether to develop an affective sense of someone else's embodied experience, to cultivate empathy by seeking to humbly approximate aspects of their lives. From her perspective on land, Jung wanted to understand how it would feel to be 'in Ma Ru's shoes', to perform the labour of carrying all that personal cargo and the emotional burden it represents. In a performance that began in her home in St Albans, Jung rolled, pulled and dragged her laden wooden box to the Port of Felixstowe, bearing its weight across suburban streets, through the infrastructure of the port and along the pebble beach.



On Felixstowe Beach, Jung is silhouetted against the horizon, straining and leaning forward as she pulls her container. Looming in the distance, the ships make everything look improbably small. Everything, that is, apart from the sea and the sky, which cannot be dwarfed by anything made by humans. Nevertheless, as they rise from the water's surface, the container ships express a sort of industrial sublime. They exude a manufactured magnitude — 'magnitude', a term we also use to measure the scale of earthquakes. Does that mean the container ship can be thought of as a force of nature? As the planet increasingly presents the symptoms of long-term human intervention and abuse, the dividing line between so-called 'nature' and culture seems increasingly tenuous. The spread of the coronavirus was exacerbated by international air travel. In addition to causing human disease and death, it went on to disrupt supply chains, whose delicate equilibrium is a result of the extreme concentration of activity in hubs like Felixstowe. When one port suffers an operational difficulty, the repercussions are magnified across the planet, just as they are when our delicately balanced ecosystems are impaired.

Container ships are a part of our reality, a tangible expression of the anthropocene in which international trade is a dominant force shaping lives. Yet these vessels and the activities taking place on board remain concealed from our understanding of the way our existence is furnished

with its material reality. Getting better acquainted with the complex system of seafarers and ships that criss-cross our oceans is an essential part of equipping ourselves to navigate the uncharted waters of the future. By inviting us to imagine the intimate details of Ma Ru's life, Yva Jung helps us appreciate the unimaginably vast network of seafarers who make our lives run smoothly.

Ellen Mara De Wachter

[Ellen Mara De Wachter](#) is a writer based in London. Her work has featured in a range of publications, including Frieze, Art Quarterly, Art Monthly, The World of Interiors and The White Review. Her book 'Co-Art: Artists on Creative Collaboration' (Phaidon) explores the phenomenon of collaboration in the visual arts and its potential in society at large. She is a co-author of 'Great Women Artists' (2019) and has contributed to several medium-specific anthologies published by Phaidon. De Wachter has taught widely, including at Central Saint Martins, Royal College of Art, London College of Communication, Royal Academy Schools and Goldsmiths College. She mentors artists and writers through various publicly funded creative development schemes.

[Yva Jung](#) is a visual artist currently based in Hertfordshire. Jung's work begins with a particular way of observing the external world. She works mainly with installation, moving image, drawing, and improvised encounters, and her practice is an ongoing, reflective dialogue with daily experiences and everyday objects that she subverts to add stories to. Yva studied Fine Art in Seoul and New York before receiving her practice-led PhD from Slade School of Fine Art. Jung has been awarded many grants including from Arts Council England and the Arts Council Korea, and her work has been exhibited in contemporary art institutions globally including CAFAM Biennale, König London and St Albans Museum.

[Pier Projects](#) is a visual art agency inspired by and working within the coastal town of Felixstowe, UK. It was founded in 2017 and is led by curator Natalie Pace and arts educator Louise Stratford. The agency was formed to commission artists beyond the gallery and was prompted by shared passions for the coast, concerns around climate change and desire to support the creative development of young people. Interests in endurance swimming and running shape a unique and proudly non-dualistic approach to art and health.