

INTERVENTION

Waters in Anthropocenes: Art, Hydrofeminism and the 59th Venice Biennale 2022

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This intervention provides a selective survey of some of this year's Venice Art Biennale works that deal with water in an analysis that brings together the plural aspect of water with that of the anthropocene. The article does that by working through theory, description of artworks and fiction writing.

Keywords: hydroart; water; fiction

In Plural

Water in the Anthropocene is never in the singular. To talk about *the* or even *a* water today amidst the plurality of anthropocenic claims and responsibilities is not only an odd essentialisation but almost an epistemological violence. Water is of course everywhere and all connected, coursing through the geological veins of anthropocenic imagination and dread. We are all paddling as best as we can in rising water, lack of water, polluted water, bottled water, borrowed water; but significantly, to paraphrase Kathryn Yusoff (2015), we are not all in the same water together. And certainly not in the same way. My water might come in discreet packages, controlled flows, scenic vistas. Her water might be coming in torrents of personal and material disaster, in rising oblivion and aquiferous eradication. And their water might be a constant humidity that reaches up to their knees, never to move up or down, never to become anything more than a gurgling receptacle of their molecules.

So allow me to pluralise, spread and overflow: water in the Anthropocene is always *waters*.

Is there a conflict, however, between the need for slow and meticulous pluralising when it comes to working with waters and the urgency to take action in the time of the Anthropocene? Astrida Neimanis (2016: 170) writes:

Rather than responding to the alarm clock ring of the Anthropocene with a quick insistence that we are all in this together, [bodies of water] seeks to acknowledge the unsettled terms in which we live as bodies of water, with other watery bodies that materialize in temporal and spatial tangles.

On the surface, the hydrofeminist approach developed by Neimanis and the geological and sociopolitical narrative of the Anthropocene appear incompatible. But I would argue

differently: the need for a measured response in view of unsettled boundaries amongst bodies of water is actually confluent with the justified urgency of environmental collapse augured by the Anthropocene. If anything, hydromultiplicity is similar to the anthropocene discourse on how human responsibility, but also involvement with the anthropocene and its consequences, differ across the globe. I see this as an opportunity to consider varying response speeds from different knowledge bodies. All practices, knowledges and disciplines working on these issues now have a responsibility to move in that direction: to plurify themselves by dissolving the boundaries that kept them dry and in complicit discretion.

The multiplicity of waters foamily pools in the middle of the multiplicity of anthropocene, and there we have a truly material, embodied and buoyant version of *anthropocenes*.

Hydroart

One of these practices is art. We have witnessed an extraordinary increase of ecoart and specifically hydroart in the past decade or so (Bailey-Charteris 2021), with such initiatives as Ocean Space in Venice or the Floating University in Berlin becoming beacons of such preoccupations. In this vein, here I am attempting an aquatic reading, in the broader context of anthropocenes, of three art installations presented in 2022 in Venice during the 59th Art Biennale. All are national participations (Serbia, Latvia, Denmark). The reasons for which I chose to focus on these works will become apparent below; however, on a basic level they all deal with water in varying degrees, whether explicitly, partially, representationally or conceptually. This becomes especially important in view of the fact that the lagunar city is constantly present, whatever one chooses to show here. Many participating artists across the decades of the Biennale have turned to water as the main element through which their projects operate. This is both a response to the location, and a contribution to what I have elsewhere (2019) called an elemental turn in art and thinking practices.

I must stress that these are by no means the only artists dealing with water in this Biennale. Malta's participation *Astute Diplomacy* by Arcangelo Sassolino, Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci and Brian Schembri drew a great deal of attention, also because of the way water was used as a bridge between canonical art references and technological colonisation; Italy's national participation mid-twentieth century industrial trajectory *History of Night and Destiny of Comets* by Gian Maria Tosatti culminated in a vast pitch-dark volume of water speckled by some faint lights in what could be interpreted as a gesture of hope as well as a signifier of increased alienation; David Cass's *Where Once the Waters* connected miniature seascapes on found tin boxes with letters written by people affected by sea-rising; and my exhibition *Our Distance Became Water* dealt with water in the form of material and representational connections of rising waters between Venice and various precarious Pacific islands.

Hydromethod/Wavewriting

I chose to focus on the specific artworks because I found them to be the most appropriate for yet another disciplinary bleeding I would like to perform here: my commentary on each artwork is paired with a hydrofiction extract from either *The Book of Water*, a collection of short stories I published in 2017¹; or my soon to be published novel *Our Distance Became Water*, which is also the conceptual fiction work behind some of my art practice.² This idea came to me when, upon seeing Vladimir Nikolic's (Serbian pavilion) work at the preopening of the Biennale, a short story I had written not long ago came rushing to my mind. I took the liberty of sharing it with him, thus laying the basis for further exchange of ideas. We realised that fiction (its textuality, its narrative, its extensions) can work well with the installation. The second reason I am keen on trying out the fiction route in relation to hydroart is because I want to follow the practice of the Danish artist Uffe Isolotto who, for the accompanying literature of the installation, wrote the short story *And Now We Are Water*. In the first instance, the story seems unrelated to the main pavilion. But the parallels between them run as powerfully as underground water.

This disciplinary bleeding between different practices and knowledges, such as art and literature, is in the core of the greater methodological challenge I have set myself, namely, to write water in the texts, not just metaphorically but as a method. I (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2022a) have called this *wavewriting*, the all-connected yet perpetually withdrawing turn of phrase that does not lead to clear conclusions, truths and certainties, but to an accumulation of wavings that approximate a direction without a thesis. An ondoyant writing methodology: 'the language of waveshape' (Ming-Yi 2014). It is the kind of wavewriting I am aiming at: small waves, not showy, coming from multiple directions. Confluence and conflict, a constantly postponed gratification, a deliberate postponement of the horizon. On the one hand, I want to encourage the disciplinary confluences implicitly, quietly; on the other, I want to allow the disciplinary conflicts to remain unresolved but not jarring. An open invitation of pluralising rather than a strategy. Take

your time. Speculate. Oscillate. Feel safe. Wavewriting to accommodate the three meanings of the word *Nalu* in the Hawai'ian Kanaka language: wave/to ponder and to speculate/amnion, amniotic fluid (Amimoto Ingersoll 2016).

Virginia Woolf (2000) manages it well: 'The waves broke and spread their waters swiftly over the shore. One after another they massed themselves and fell; the spray tossed itself back with the energy of their fall... The waves fell; withdrew and fell again.' Woolf wavewrote a narrative of whirls, reversals and non-endings, untruths and unquests.

More than mere discourse, wavewriting is an ocean methodology (Mawani 2018), a seascape epistemology (Amimoto Ingersoll 2016), a wet ontology (Steinberg & Peters 2015), an enquiry of submerged perspectives (Gómez-Barris 2017). It is persistent, fathoming, layering, uncovering. Like Michel Serres's (1995) analysis of *la belle noiseuse*, the repetitive ruckus of waves, the noise that reveals existence. It is also about a readiness to ride a certain wave. It is collective, and at ease with losing control and becoming one with the elemental.

And here is a bit of a political recommendation: we must mingle disciplinary practices and draw inspiration from it all. We need to move towards (but without claiming) this strategic horizon of planetary change while rinsing ourselves off the politicisation of fixed positions.

We Walked the Earth

Uffe Isolotto

In the two rooms of the Danish pavilion in the Giardino of the Biennale, two oversized and unnervingly life-like centaurs lie dying. A female centaur that has just given birth lies either dead or unconscious on the floor, the newborn baby still in its amniotic sac. In the room next to it, the male centaur is hanging from the ceiling, his powerful neck reduced to a bunch of unpulsing sinews, his six limbs hanging lifeless over the heads of the visitors. He could have been the father who killed himself, unable to bear the birth of the child in this world. The false freedom to decide one's end, when the total end has already been decided for you. We are invited to walk around the most intimate death spasm of the last human hybrids. They walked the earth but no longer. We are witnessing the end of a world in all its parallels with our current world.

And then, on our way out, we pick up the accompanying brochure, a short story written by Jacob Lillemose on a concept by him and the artist, that starts, 'There is water everywhere. Everywhere we have ever been and where we are now. Water is our life. We're made to live *in* water, and we're made *of* water.' So far, so bodies of water. But it soon becomes obvious that we are talking about something slightly different: 'Not the same water that surrounds our body, although it could easily be mistaken for it. The water that is our body is the new water. A water filled with miniscule units that allow us to transform our bodies into anything at all.' And so it starts, a journey of lapping Ovidian transformation of this unidentified 'we', the water-body, with 'no fixed form or dimensions.' We join this journey of continuous encounters with other bodies that emerge from the bottom of the sea. We never know what these bodies are. The description is always

volumetric, 'tall, rounded bodies', 'small, hard, angular bodies with six sides', 'an oval that is open on one side'. We go through something that might be a human body, in the cracks and the holes and out the other side, until we are pulled by 'a perfect little orb of soft material', a pulsing heart of a thing with its brief, rhythmic tugs. We are in the microverse of a body, surrounded by organs and bones, 'we feel the body's every detail. Fill it out entirely.'

We are given a small, tentative hope. Not a hope that humanity will continue the way it is. But a hope that we humans might be discovered by other bodies, the watery bouncy otherness of the shifting water molecules, explorative, playful, alien yet part of us. Might this be the anthropocene sequence? A diffused consciousness that shapeshifts and bounces in our bodily crevices and valleys from where our existence used to emerge?

Underbelly

So what? Does it really matter that there are no streets? We can swim after all. (...) We snub boats. We only use them to transfer large things. And even then, others come from out there with their boats and their language and their weird yells, and they transfer for us the things we need. It costs a lot, but it's worth every penny. I think we scorn boats because if we use them, then this thing might never happen. Not that it happens all the time. But when it does, especially when we swim at night and the light from the windows is reflected on the canals, that's when we are all glad not to be using boats. So, as we're doing our usual strokes and we're thinking whatever everyone thinks when they're coming home from work or going out in the evening, we sometimes decide to give in to this thing that pulls us into the deep ever since we were born and maybe even before: a collective rambling in our underbellies, like seaweed hands pulling us under, further below the gold green surface, deeper still than the dark green almost brown of the seabed. On that level something else begins, like a city, which we sometimes call the foundation and at other times we don't give it a name, and we talk about it through bubbles that come out of our mouths when we meet down there. And as we go deeper and deeper, our eyes pour out and become one with the steaming water at the centre of the earth, our hair tangles with other hair from other bodies and weaves a mythology of womb, and our feet float on air from other planets. We become one with everything down there, with friends who happen to be in the deep at the same time, with tourists who got lost and accidentally ended up there, with the dead and the ones that might never be born. But also with winged and glassy bodies, with trembling stamens and slumberous roots, with the whole city above and even higher, with a universe that ceaselessly swims in a borderless water bubble.

(extract from *The Book of Water*
Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2022)

Walking with Water

Vladimir Nikolić

Two giant projections, one horizontal, one vertical. Water everywhere. On the horizontal, the perfect horizon. A body of sea water of the most characteristic sea blue with not even a trace of foam. Light lapping wavelets that seem only to bounce, never to end up anywhere. Vast. Eighteen kilometres latitudinally of open sea. On the vertical projection, an Olympic swimming pool, lined up and empty except for the body of the artist-as-swimmer tracing the length of each lane, a perfect vertical horizon seen from above. The swimmer runs through the whole width of the pool, one lane at a time, in a loop

On the horizontal projection, all 18 metres of it, we are confronted with pure ontology. Nikolić 'took away the power inscribed by the laws of perspective and optics to fix the subject in a single point in space' (2022: 82). Here, there is no observer, no viewpoint, no angle. Here all is pure element. 'The space is seen directly from the water, at eye height, not from a distance' (Nikolić 2022: 104). This is the closest we get to 'an abstractedly, completely even state that does not create any expectation, that does not promise any change, in which both air and water are clean and evenly colored surfaces' (Nikolić 2022: 105). What, for Nikolić, is 'the reality of the image' for my purposes is the ontology of the element. While everything seems to be offered in full flat visibility, the element itself perpetually withdraws. This is the paradox of being constantly connected and yet withdrawn. What are the waters? Where is the boundary of the element? Where is our hook to its identity? We are given nothing. The waters are all there is, and in this absolute abstraction, the waters withdraw in their pure elementarity. They are simultaneously everything and nothing. They are rising from below, swallowing up all structures. The waters cover the globe, a flood of pure anthropocenic dimensions, replacing with their horizontality all human verticality.

On the vertical projection, the artist films himself swimming. A double: 'To think the abstract space and at the same time to be in it bodily' (Nikolić 2022: 107). Or as Dejan Sretenović (2022: 41) writes in his analysis of Nikolić's work, 'the homo duplex situation of a contemporary artist: when he speaks about institutions he speaks in his own voice and the voice of the institution, revealing himself as an institutionalized subject.' This is the image of the anthropocene: seeing our ghost on this planet after our demise, from a temporal and spatial distance, post-extinction and from a vantage point to appreciate our departing presence. The swimmer has already been replaced by his image; further, his image has been replaced by its repetition. The body of the artist becomes one with the rectangular pool, swimming on an endless straight line, absolutely institutionalised, interpellated by the rectilinearity of the repetition. These are the rules of the game: 'swimming is a total reduction and repetition, pure thought about movement in the perfect container for space and time' (Nikolić 2022: 91).

There is justice in this, a form of spatial justice, where bodies vie for the same space at the same time. There is mastery and yet resignation. Full-blown presence and withdrawal.

There is still the grand delusion of the human ('In water I can almost touch space and time. I can brush up against them' [Nikolić 2022: 77]), so vainglorious, so understandable, so seductive. But there is an attempt at erasing oneself, or at least of becoming aware of one's permeability, one's irreducible connectivity and ontological withdrawal. Or how, even when fully vertical, the human becomes submerged in the absolute horizontality of the waters.

Perhaps this is why, as opposed to the centaurs, the swimmer still walks. *Walking with* (in this case, with *water*), quoting Juanita Sundberg (2014: 45) means 'respect for the multiplicity of life worlds...learning to learn about multiplicity.' The swimmer is already the vanishing line, the evanescent contour of a body of water.

Geometry

His swimming style had always been gauche, evidently self-taught and serving a purpose rather than made to look good. Nothing compared to the beautiful mechanics of other swimmers, sliding over the waves as if truly belonging. His was all noisy and fractured, making it up as he went along. Perhaps because he never learned how to breathe when swimming and was gulping water instead. His inbreath was filled with waves, his outbreath mixed with overworked drool. But there was one thing he always did almost methodically: he only sucked in the water when his head was turned left, always on the side of the heart. And he exhaled the water a couple of arm-lengths later, but always to his right, head still dipped in the water, web-like saliva flow entering the body of the sea. Despite his shortcomings, he was fast and could carry on for long distances. He had once seen himself swimming from above (a documentary on winter swimmers or something). Months later, they sent him the video. He did not manage to watch the whole thing – he got bored and, anyway, it was not so much about winter swimmers after all. It was about people swimming in polluted waters, desperate people risking lives in various places around the world. He knew the sea was polluted of course. He saw something when he watched himself from above that he could not have known otherwise: his body was moving along a line so straight and precise, cutting the waters so perfectly, that at first he really doubted it was him swimming. It was as if the line were there before him and he was simply tracing it with his body, allowing it to emerge from underneath the water surface. But no, he was the one making it. He could see that clearly. It was a windless day when they filmed him, the sea calm, looking even calmer from high up. Yet the sea was split into two. The water on the left of his body was soft and smooth, lulling wavelets licking the air, a lake-like constancy unperturbed by his awkward flaying. And to his other side, the water was rippling with a strobe striation, filled with flashes of incandescent reflection like a pool busy with kids at lunchtime. From high up, the whole sea surface was split into two, smooth

and striated linked up by that perfectly straight line he was tracing on the water. And right in the thick of this line, at its very birth point, his own inconsistent arm movements and his head splashing in the waters, mouth open swishing and spitting, mixing waters while keeping them separate.

(extract from *The Book of Water*
Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2022b)

Selling Water by the River

Skuja Braden

The Latvian pavilion is found almost at the end of the Venice Arsenal. Arriving, one feels as if stepping into a river delta, borne there by the art trajectory coursing through the long Arsenal building, and gently deposited into a world made out of clay, water, wild imaginings, irony, eroticism, queerness, fierce critique, frumpy comfort. It can feel bewildering, and this is perhaps why, upon entry, the visitor is furnished with a folded map of the space, a diagram of domestic perambulations ('bedroom, washroom, dining table, studio/kitchen, vanity, altar'), or as the curators write, 'the map of the mental, physical, and spiritual areas of Skuja Braden's Home at the Latvian pavilion' (Silapetere & Krese 2022a).

These physical and conceptual zones are traversed by a river, a flow that

dissolves the boundaries between not only private and public but also nature and home. Water flows through and past any difference, and in so doing offers us one of the richest images of what it could mean to be together. The water enveloping the house here...signals the idea of a radical collectivism (Silapetere & Krese, 2022a).

Water here is used in its most explicit and faithful hydrofeminist version, where bodies of water 'recognize the need to understand waters as emplaced, specific, and contingent on relations' (Neimanis 2016: 170). The sense of scale in *Selling Water by the River* is local and at the same time open to the global, including it both as an opportunity of collective co-emergence and a space of responsibility.

Ingūna Skuja and Melissa D. Braden are the artist duo Skuja Braden behind *Selling Water by the River*. Theirs is 'a love story' (Silapetere & Krese 2022b: 23) that unfolds both between each other, and between them and the material. The attention to detail is stupefying, and the invitation to their fluid domesticity is intimate and unnerving at the same time. But the most captivating space of the installation is the bedroom: a vertical seabed of intense flowing intimacy between the two artists embracing each other and a cornucopia of animate and inanimate bodies that float around them. The bed is made out of porcelain, the water in it thrown into relief through the image of a gently foaming sea, all of which is mounted on the wall, a bed that also becomes an upright monument to aquatic intimacy.

This is a new vertical, a grand hope for the future, where the classic anthropocentric verticality that elevated us from the ground, whether corporeally or technologically, can be thought of differently, and not only as the thing that brings

about our current planetary melt-down. Skuja Braden shows us this different way of thinking of the vertical, where the local intimate and the global collective merge, embodying queer ecology's adage that 'asks us to respond to wounds of other bodily waters in which we are implicated, even at a distance' (Neimanis 2016: 170). The Latvian pavilion is a space of healing, where waters are invited in to mix and proliferate, and where the fear towards the outside is transformed into a softness that is all-enveloping. This is what the title means: this knowledge is already here, next to us, within access. There is no need to make a fuss about it. We just need to lean over the river and drink.

We bickered about many things, but one thing got to me more frequently: you never locked the door during the night. I could never tell whether you forgot, as you said, or you were simply trying to prove a point about safety or openness or something. I always had to make sure that I locked before going to bed, even if you were the last one to come back to the flat.

My reasons were quite specific: not so much to keep the world out but to keep our water in, to stop it from running out and mixing with the water outside. Oh yes, water had already established itself in our life and by now had become an integral part of our domesticity, a little playful pet that followed us in every room. In fact, we had become rather possessive of our water – our very own water. We still entertained the idea, however tenuous, that our water was special, more limpid, a brighter emerald than any other water.

Yet, some evenings, when we were indulging the mindless pleasures readily available during those dry times, such as watching some silly reality show on TV, I'm sure that we were both sharing the same lurking doubt that perhaps our water wasn't that special after all. We never talked about this. In fact, I cannot know that it is not just me, but I really could swear that, at those moments, when our feet were idly plodding on the surface, toes flirting with each other's or with the legs of the sofa and the moss-like carpet saturated by our familiar, domesticated water, your eyes would open up to a different world, a world outside where saints and demons might have mixed differently and your presence would have been like a red round hot collateral ready to shriek away in pleasure.

But I never asked you and now it's too late.

What would the point be anyway? I often imagined, no I actually knew, not that I'd seen it but it was as good as that, I certainly heard it happening, anyway it haunted my dreams sometimes, when stress from work and the constant screaming of life became unbearable and my skin crawled away from all other skins, human and planetary: those nights I heard, in my dreams but with this piercingly real sound, as if the alarm clock got morphed into the crackling sound of my dream at the time, I heard the slurp-

ing sound of emptying water, waves rushing out from underneath our door, locked or unlocked it didn't matter after all, a domestic kenosis, a horizontal waterfall moving from within our flat and out towards the world, ships draining their water-load, useless as it is and imported from other seas, now ready to be filled with noxious oil, slow and heavy as my dreams, mixing with other waters from other cities; and then, large swathes of water, ours or others' or no-one's, waves sliding on top of other waves but in the opposite direction, this time entering our home and slowly filling what the previous water had left behind, the muddy floors and the wet newspapers we left floating on the floor the previous night, even the bottom shelves of the bookcases with their books bloated and sticky. But the sound would only be woven in my dream, and when we would wake up and look unthinkingly around on our way to the toilet, everything looked the way we had left it the night before, gently filled with our water, as inviting as arms open to the morning.

(extract from *Our Distance Became Water*
Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2023)

Art that deals with water is not necessarily hydroart in the sense discussed above. But it is rare to employ water in an artistic expression and not be affected by whatever continuum it augurs, whatever ruptures we impose on it, whatever distance there is between human and aquatic, whatever dreams of confluence. In a sense, the aquatic avenue is an obvious candidate for both conceptualisation and acting upon anthropocenic issues, because of the need for plurality, an understanding of perhaps the necessity of boundaries and yet the inevitability of unstoppable crossings, and the absolute dissolution of human exceptionalism when it comes to the hydrocontinuum amongst bodies of water. There is something ironic about witnessing these works in Venice, the city of water that is built on perpetual defiance of the nonhuman (the elemental, the planetary, the aquatic) yet cannot help but precipitously succumb to the consequences of anthropogenic climate change. Especially this year, a visit to Venice feels like a sinking symbol of the Anthropocenes.

Notes

¹ First published in Greek and subsequently translated in various other languages, with the English version by Sakis Kyratzis to be published by Eris Press this year.

² See <http://www.daniellearnaud.com/exhibitions/exhibition-tracing-submergence.html>.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, A. (2022). Waters in Anthropocenes: Art, Hydrofeminism and the 59th Venice Biennale 2022. *Anthropocenes – Human, Inhuman, Posthuman*, 3(1): 10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/ahip.1378>

Submitted: 27 September 2022

Accepted: 10 November 2022

Published: 21 December 2022

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