A VOCABULARY OF WATER

HOW WATER IN CONTEMPORARY ART MATERIALISES THE CONDITIONS OF CONTEMPORANEITY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis provides an in-depth analysis of how water in three contemporary artworks provides an affective vocabulary that gives material expression to the forces and dynamics that shape our current era.

It argues water is not simply a medium or metaphor; in the artworks, it articulates and is symptomatic of the conditions of contemporaneity. Focusing on the dynamics of time, placemaking and identity, it argues water in the artworks makes present our era’s fluid, multiple, precarious, contingent, complex, disorientating, immersive and overwhelming nature.

This dissertation uses Terry Smith’s theory of contemporaneity as a lens through which to identify the dynamics and forces of this era. By focusing on water in three artworks, it amplifies and extends his work to consider how the particular vocabulary of water materialises these forces.

This is demonstrated through three case studies of exemplary artworks in different mediums, made between 2000 and 2004, by Zhu Ming, Roni Horn and Bill Viola. Drawing on Mieke Bal’s approach of conceptual travelling, I do a close reading of each artwork, orchestrating a conversation between the work, the concept of water and the theory of contemporaneity. Focusing on the role of water in each work, I argue water provides a potent comment on the conditions of contemporaneity, offering a new ontology that is appropriate to, and symptomatic of, today’s complex conditions.

Each case study demonstrates several ways in which water captures something of the contemporary condition. Water in Zhu Ming’s Bubble Series (2000-04) materialises the ubiquitous and precarious conditions of contemporaneity. Roni Horn’s Another Water (The River Thames, for example) (2000) uses water to materialise a new kind of identity that is androgynous, in motion and contingent. Water in Bill Viola’s Five Angels for the Millennium (2001), materialises the sublimely immersive and disorientating experience of the contemporary condition.

As such, water acts as a vocabulary in contemporary art that exemplifies, articulates and is symptomatic of the dynamics of our current epoch. In its varied and nuanced manifestations, water unlocks the conditions of contemporaneity; it offers an ontology of the present.
DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

This thesis comprises only my original work towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy except where indicated in the Preface;

i. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used, and

ii. The thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.
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Introduction

Water is an intriguing material in contemporary art. Performance artist Zhu Ming floats in it.¹ Roni Horn documents and interrogates its surface.² Bill Viola slows and captures its movement.³ In these works, water variously bubbles, drifts, flows and circulates. It is ubiquitous, slippery, turbulent, immersive, boundless, fluid and precarious. It is a surface and a depth. It is a solvent, a void, a chameleon, a mime. It is navigated and harnessed, but it cannot be pinned down.

And yet, despite its multiplicity—and in part because of it—I propose that in contemporary art, water acts as an affective vocabulary that materialises the conditions of contemporaneity. This thesis provides an in-depth analysis of this claim. By closely analysing three artworks by Zhu Ming, Roni Horn and Bill Viola, I argue water is not merely a medium or metaphor. Instead, in these works, it is a material articulation and symptom of the dynamics of the present.

My approach to conceptualising the present conditions is built on Terry Smith’s writing about contemporary art and contemporaneity. In a line of inquiry since 2001, Smith has explored the question, ‘What makes contemporary art contemporary?’⁴ He argues that art today is an act of world picturing which is symptomatic and iterative of the conditions of our current era. He characterises these conditions as ‘contemporaneity’, which he sees as ‘the most evident

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¹ In The Bubble Series (2001-2006).
² In Another Water (the River Thames, for example) (2000).
³ In Five Angels for the Millennium (2001).
attribute of the current world picture.\textsuperscript{5} In Smith’s view, contemporaneity is defined by experiences such as complexity, multiplicity, friction, uncertainty and boundlessness, which he and others identify as conditions symptomatic of contemporary life. Throughout this thesis, I will demonstrate a number of ways in which contemporary art gives these experiences of contemporaneity a material expression through a vocabulary of water. In my analysis, I draw on Mieke Bal’s approach of ‘conceptual travelling’\textsuperscript{6} to orchestrate a conversation between each artwork and various concepts of water within Smith’s framework of contemporaneity.

By closely examining three exemplary artworks—\textit{Bubble Series} (2000–2004) by Zhu Ming, Roni Horn’s \textit{Another Water (The River Thames, for example)} (2000) and Bill Viola’s \textit{Five Angels for the Millennium} (2001)—I will tease out the ways in which the various qualities and states of water these works deploy act as a vocabulary that exemplifies, articulates and is symptomatic of the dynamics of our current epoch. I argue water in the \textit{Bubble Series} materialises the ubiquitous and precarious conditions of contemporaneity. Water in \textit{Another Water} materialises a kind of identity that is at times androgynous and at other times dissolving, while all the time in motion. In \textit{Five Angels for the Millennium}, water gives a material expression to the sublimely immersive and disorientating experiences of the contemporary condition. At the heart of each artwork, there is, I suggest, a diverse and complex vocabulary of water that materialises the conditions of contemporaneity, offering an ontology of the present and a vocabulary for the now.

\section*{Materialising the present}

Theorising the present is a challenge. In analysing this vocabulary of water, this dissertation draws on a wide body of literature that grapples with the question of how to define and understand the contemporary condition. Fredric Jameson, for example, asks in \textit{A Singular Modernity: An essay on the ontology of the present}, how can one judge the present? How can we create an ontology of the present without being trapped by narratives of continuity and rupture? Jameson argues we cannot theorise radical alternatives or systematic transformations within the conceptual field of ‘modernity.’\textsuperscript{7} Writing 20 years ago, Marc Augé describes

\textsuperscript{5} What Is Contemporary Art? p 5. 


contemporary ‘global society’, not through postmodernist principles such as the illusion of grand narratives or progress, but through the concept of ‘supermodernity’. Augé argues today’s ‘overabundance of events’, coupled with our ‘overabundant information and the growing tangle of interdependencies’ threaten to rob all meaning, making it difficult to characterize and define our current era. In his view, our current era is not defined by a postmodern collapse of meaning, but by an acceleration of meaning and an overabundance of events that are taking place right now but are simultaneously ephemeral. To Augé, the condition of supermodernity is a new global cultural construct that defines our era. He argues today, events and human life more broadly are fleeting and impermanent. There is an excess of people living on a stressed planet, excessive information, excessive things going on. Everything moves so fast and so fleetingly, it is difficult to find meaning, but despite this—and because of it—Augé argues we experience ‘an explicit and intense daily need’ to give meaning to the present:

never before have individual histories been so explicitly affected by collective history, but never before, either, have the reference points for collective identification been so unstable. The individual production of meaning is thus more necessary than ever.

Alongside and compounding this drive to create individual meaning in the face of instability is an excess of what Augé calls ‘non-places’: homogenous, unquantifiable, unidentifiable spaces that are without history or set relations. Airports, automatic cash machines and supermarkets are prime examples: they are globally profuse, uniform and transient locations where people converge anonymously and only for brief moments. These non-places lack the history, cultural content and identity of the places that characterized modernity. As individuals attempt to make meaning, they are faced with emptiness, anonymity and the perpetual presentness of non-places.

A perpetual presentness also evokes the central tenets of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s work *Liquid Modernity*, in which he argues we are now in a phase where everything is characterised by constant flux and change. In contrast to early modernity, which he describes as “heavy”, or better still, “hard” and

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10 ibid. p 37.

11 ibid. p 96.
“solid”…”constructed”, administered and managed, liquid modernity is ‘a diffuse, all-permeating, all-penetrating, all-saturating kind of modernity.’

In Bauman’s liquid modernity, Augé’s perpetual presentness becomes ‘a daily rehearsal of universal transience.’ There is no ‘condition’ any more; now, everything is ‘process’. We are in a time of flows, migration, globalisation and the Internet. Institutions are no longer stable. There is no ‘condition’ any more; now, everything is ‘process’. We no longer experience trust and confidence as we once did. Networks and patterns of connections like community, neighbourhood and family are now zombie-like, neither dead nor alive.

Bauman addresses Augé’s instability of collective identification when he describes the impact of individualizing forces. He writes, ‘the present-day uncertainty is a powerful individualizing force. It divides instead of uniting.’

Bauman argues ‘Nowadays, we are all on the move.’ Far from liberating, this constant motion creates new forms of stratification. The affluent majority, or ‘tourists’ as Bauman calls them, ‘travel because they want to’. The disadvantaged minority, or ‘vagabonds’, move ‘because they have no other bearable choice.’

As Bauman notes, ‘in a nutshell: rather than homogenizing the human condition, the technological annulment of temporal/spatial distance tends to polarize it.’ No longer secured by the stable anchors of early modernity, we experience dissolution without end, as social order and structures fall apart. We live in a state of relentless insecurity and existential anxiety.

Bauman sees identity as a battleground, a relentless struggle against dissolution and fragmentation, ‘an intention to devour and at the same time a stout refusal to be eaten …’ This uncertainty, a feature of liquid modernity, means the tourist always fears slipping into vagabondage. The fluidity is relentless:

> The search for identity is the ongoing struggle to arrest or slow down the flow, to solidify the fluid, to give form to the formless. We struggle to

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16 ibid. p 96.

17 ibid. p 18.

deny or at least to cover up the awesome fluidity just below the thin wrapping of the form; we try to avert our eyes from sights, which they cannot pierce or take in.\footnote{Liquid Modernity (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000). p 83.}

As soon as the individual has an inkling of something solid on which to hold, it dissolves, only for that process to be repeated iteratively. On the ‘royal road to the fulfilment of identity fantasies,’\footnote{ibid. p 83.} Bauman argues identity has become yet another point of consumption, as the individual is free ‘to “shop around”, to pick and shed one’s “true self”, to “be on the move”.’\footnote{ibid. p 87.}

Rosi Braidotti agrees we are grappling with a challenging yet exhilarating fast pace of change. In fact, ‘the only constant at the dawn of the third millennium is change’; ‘unless one likes complexity, one cannot feel at home in the twenty-first century.’\footnote{ibid. Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming (Oxford: Polity Press, 2002). p 1, 17.} With exhilaration or ambivalence, we face flows, transformations and mutations—indeed such processes of change begin to shape us.\footnote{ibid. p 1.} Yet we often lack the language to make sense of this complexity. Braidotti argues the norm in theoretical and cultural critique is still largely defined by hegemonic habits of linearity and objectivity. It is easier to think in terms of stasis, concept-bound reason and fixed problems, rather than flows and interconnections. She sees today’s challenge then, as the ‘task of representing these changes to ourselves and engaging productively with the contradictions, paradoxes and injustices they engender.’\footnote{ibid. p 1.} Yet rather than the dissolution of Bauman’s liquid modernity, Braidotti sees fluidity as holding potential, allowing space for transformations and metamorphosis, and for introducing movement into the fixity of constructionist perspectives.\footnote{Lisa Blackman et al., “Creating Subjectivities,” Subjectivity 22 (2008). p 20) See also Brian Massumi, Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).}

To Braidotti, identity in our current era is a process of becoming, shaped by constant shifts and complex negotiations. We are not ‘being’; we are
'becoming’—constantly changing, undoing closure and unity, and redefining our foundations. Braidotti often uses a vocabulary of water in her writing. She describes these processes as ‘flows’ and, following Luce Irigaray, she draws on the mechanics of fluids to challenge ‘the fixity and lethal inertia of conceptual thinking.’  

She also defines the dynamics of our era using terms such as nomadic subjects and figurations (or ‘materialistic mappings or situated, or embedded and embodied, positions'). 

**Vocabulary of water**

In grappling with the contemporary condition, metaphors of water recur throughout these works—none more so than in Bauman’s *Liquid Modernity*, in which he contrasts the stability of modernism with the fluidity of the present. He sees today’s world as characterised by flows such that we live in a state of ‘liquid fear’, dissolution and universal transience. Again, using water metaphors, Manuel Castells argues our network society is constructed around ‘a space of flows’—flows of capital, information, technology, organisational interaction, images, sounds and symbols. Arjun Appadurai, too, uses water to describe the chaotic and complex circulation of global cultural flows—as do many others, alongside metaphors such as flux, fluidity, liquidity and turbulence. In fact, scholars in and across fields as broad as cultural studies, sociology, feminist philosophy, geography, architecture, anthropology and

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27 ibid. p 2.


history use water in its various guises to describe and understand the ontological conditions of our era. John Tomlinson argues this trope of fluidity or liquidity is generally:

deployed to grasp the social ontology of recent modernity. This analysis is applied to comprehend, variously: the permeable, protean nature of social space; the intrinsic mobility both of agents and of social processes and relations (as in the flows around a network); and the phenomenology of modern social existence. The latter, not only in terms of the common experience of mobility and deterritorialization, but also in terms of the constant dissolution of fixity in value, of a different “texture” of life.

As Tomlinson observes, there is something in the nature of water that powerfully captures the dynamics and conditions of our current era. As a material, water is a transparent liquid so ubiquitous and fundamental that we often take it for granted. A simple compound of hydrogen and oxygen, it is the

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33 Tomlinson, The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy. p 75.
essence of our survival and required by all known life. Our bodies are made of 70 per cent water, as is our earth.

Yet water is elusive. You cannot step in the same stream twice or pin down water. It is by nature in constant flux and transition. It is always the same but always different; inherently in-between. Water circulates, continuously in motion, on, below and above the earth, filling the gaps between riverbanks and continents. It is at once the vastness of an oceanic panorama and the diminutive detail of a single drop.\(^{34}\) It can be a completely dependent form, its shape determined not by the water itself, but by its container (a fish bowl, a glass). At other times it determines the shapes of its surrounds, carves new routes across flood plains. As such, water is tolerant and accommodating; it is a solvent that dissolves and holds other forms (like salt, microorganisms and biological molecules) while still remaining water. Regardless of whether it falls as raindrops, turns to steam, condenses on glass, freezes or melts, it always returns to the same state and has the same fundamental properties.

As a subject matter, water also holds and is held within a wide range of references and associations, while still remaining water. As philosopher Ivan Illich observes, ‘Water has a nearly unlimited ability to carry metaphors.’\(^{35}\) Somewhat ironically, it becomes the container: it washes away sin, it is deep or clear or murky. It can be regenerative and purifying or violent and annihilating. It is calm or turbulent, hot or cold. It is a tomb and a womb, a respite and a threat. In water, we drown and surrender, we float away or we slip under, bobbing between this world and the abyss. Water is immersive or ingested and interiorised. It is a threshold; a liminal space that confronts us with ourselves, raising fundamental questions about who we are.

Water’s chameleon-like qualities and its ubiquitous vocabulary describe the conditions of our era with surprising resonance. This vocabulary of water infuses everything from quotidian turns of phrase to cultural analysis to contemporary art. In fact, Patricia Yaeger argues ‘the metaphors defining our contemporary world systems can be thrillingly fluid.’\(^{36}\) Water characterises, for example, the liquidity of markets, frozen assets and price freezes, profit streams, cash flows,


\(^{36}\) Patricia Yaeger, “Editor’s Column: Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons,” *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (2010).
companies going under, floating interest rates, a sinking dollar, dampening profits and the dark pools of hidden transactions in financial trade.\textsuperscript{37} It describes various states of uncertainty and threat, such as being all at sea and in deep water. It is a metaphor that describes the floodgate of emotions, such as drowning in tears and crying a river. We are anchored by faith and live in a sea of humanity; we go with the flow.

This vocabulary of water in everyday turns of phrase and theoretical writing is frequently deployed to express specific aspects of the contemporary condition. This vocabulary also resonates in contemporary art—unsurprisingly, as I will argue throughout this dissertation, given contemporary art’s important role in making sense of the dynamics and forces that define us.

**Contemporaneity and contemporary art**

The Australian and international art theorist, Terry Smith, stands out in his ambitious attempts to examine the intersection between contemporary art and the conditions of the present. Through the concept of ‘contemporaneity’, Smith seeks to capture the experiences of acceleration of time, dislocation in place and contingency of being and meaning that are so symptomatic of contemporary life. Across a wide range of books and articles, Smith has developed a framework that locates contemporary art within the conditions of contemporaneity.

By the 1980s, Smith argues there was an unmistakable shift from modern to contemporary art. This shift unfolded in different locations in distinctive ways, and resulted in worldly art—art from diverse centres, which is less concerned with style or period than was art in modernity.\textsuperscript{38} As this shift demonstrates,


‘contemporaneity’ came to be the ‘most evident attribute’ of our current era and the fundamental condition of our times. For Smith, the term contemporaneity encompasses ‘interactions between humans and the geosphere, through the multiplicity of cultures and the ideoscape of global politics to the interiority of individual being.’ More particularly, contemporaneity is capable of encapsulating ‘the multiplicity of incommensurable but bound together cultures, the untimeliness of multiple temporalities, the inequities accelerating everywhere, at every level’. Partly through Smith’s prolific body of work, contemporaneity has entered the discourse of contemporary art, describing work that is both appropriate to and symptomatic of the conditions of our current era.

Smith argues contemporaneity is at the heart of contemporary art. As the fundamental condition of our era, Smith sees contemporaneity as shaped by daunting complexity, accelerating multiplicity, uncertainty, immersion, boundlessness and friction to such an extent that these forces have become the most evident attributes of the current world picture. Furthermore, these forces are also in constant contestation. The world today is indelibly shaped by the considerable weakening of structural relationships such as religion, cultural universalism and political ideology, as well as growing environmental catastrophe. As the world shifts and the certainties of modernity have eroded, nation states are forced to grapple with what this means and how to move forward. Competing forces are volatile and in constant friction. Some states cling to the dying certainties of modernity; others aspire for a new place in the global world; others fear for the planet’s perilous state. Smith argues it is in fact friction and ‘multiplicative difference’ that shapes ‘all that is around us, and within us, everything near and far, every surface and depth.’ The world today is fractured by antinomies—contradictions such as growing inequality and polarising fundamentalisms. These antinomies are profound and we are all

41 ibid. p 255.
42 Smith argues ‘state after state sacrifices its citizens in the rush to plug itself in as a resource provider to the leading economies.’ Yet against this ‘toxic mix of resignation and aspiration’ comes the growing realisation that our planet is overstressed and life as we know it must—and will, inevitably—change dramatically. “The State of Art History: Contemporary Art.” p 379.
43 ibid. p 379.
deeply embedded in their processes. Their interaction—and the friction from other fissures great and small—dominates contemporary life, and significantly shapes what it means to live today.45 The contemporary world is a complex place, swirling with a multiplicity of jarring and often contradictory dynamics.

Yet, despite this friction and contestation—and perhaps because of it—Smith sees the condition of contemporaneity as the essential subject matter of many artists today. He argues central to much contemporary art (and perhaps all art) is the act of responding to the world, of representing it, imaging it, challenging it, adding and subtracting, looking at it in new ways.46 Smith calls this act ‘world picturing’. Of course, capturing the world in a picture is fundamentally impossible, yet as Smith argues, ‘the urge itself is not a matter of choice.’47 In fact, for Smith, this urge—to imagine and picture worlds within the world—is the core of contemporary art.48 Art today therefore tends tentatively to explore ‘temporality, place, affiliation and affect—and the ever-more uncertain conditions of living within contemporaneity on a fragile planet.’49

Of course, the world picturing of this tentative exploration cannot offer a singular, unified view. Shaped by such multiplicity and complexity, our era—and the art that pictures it—resists generalisations. To Smith, today’s world picture is ‘shaped by friction between antinomies so intense that it resists universal generalization, resists even generalization about that resistance.’50 However, contemporary art is not completely shapeless, far from it. For Smith, it is:

precisely in the acceleration, ubiquity and constancy of radical disjunctures of perception, of mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world, in the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities, in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social

45 ibid. p 11.
47 ibid. p 24.
multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them.\(^{51}\)

The world pictures of contemporary art, then, are characterised by this very fission and resistance. For Smith, art today is so diverse, contested and contingent it can no longer be placed within a linear all-encompassing narrative which traces the progression of art. Instead, despite all of this difference and complexity—in fact, because this difference and complexity became so evident and intense—art today can be described as contemporaneous.\(^{52}\)

Smith argues the role of art history is to ‘scrutinize current and recent art for what it shows of the ontology of the present.’\(^{53}\) It is my contention that the allusions to water that are replete in contemporary cultural theory and political discourse—and in contemporary art—exist because water provides us with a vocabulary for this ontology. A vocabulary of water is also a subtle feature of Smith’s writing. For example, he describes our current era in terms of circulation,\(^{54}\) immersion,\(^{55}\) drift,\(^{56}\) turbulence,\(^{57}\) flows,\(^{58}\) the ‘river of time’\(^{59}\) and ‘stream of times.’\(^{60}\) These references are occasional and not linked into any coherent argument. Nonetheless, I propose they are not merely coincidental,
but instead point to the resonance of water’s vocabulary with the conditions ascribed to the state of contemporaneity envisaged by Smith.

Just as metaphors of water appear in turns of phrase and in cultural theory, water in its varying forms appears in contemporary art. Hiroshi Sugimoto and Asako Narahashi both photograph the ocean’s horizon line. Olafur Eliasson uses water to create artificial waterfalls and rivers. Julius Popp irrigates droplets so they form words generated by internet news terms, and Song Dong dips his brush in to paint transparent and disappearing text. Finnbogi Pétursson creates patterns from water, light and sound and Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba films underwater scenes. Katie Peterson connected a phone line to an underwater microphone in Iceland, while Aleksei Steven recorded underwater sounds from a polluted New York waterway. Tatsumo Miyajima filled a fishing hut with a pool of water and flashing LED lights. Patricia Piccinini filled screens with undulating digital waves and David Haynes and Joyce Hinterding over-filled a digital house with gushing torrents. While not all of these works use water as a metaphor for the experiences of contemporary

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66 Katie Peterson, Vatnajökull (the sound of) (2007); Aleksei Steven, Standing Water: Sound Map of the Gowanus Canal (2010).

life, nonetheless the prevalence of water in works of contemporary art is, I argue, more than representational. It provides artists with a means of capturing the unique conditions of contemporaneity.

This is particularly so in the works I examine in this thesis. Zhu Ming climbs into a giant bubble and floats in water in his Bubble Series (Figure 1). In Another Water (The River Thames, for example) (Figure 2), Roni Horn photographs the surface of a river and documents its flows in footnotes that reflect on water’s properties and ask whether water in fact reflects us. In Five Angels for the Millennium (Figure 3), Bill Viola records and slows water so we can scrutinise its movement, as a body is ever so slowly immersed in water. In part, I selected these three works by Zhu Ming, Roni Horn and Bill Viola for their diversity. They emerge from different mediums, locations and circumstances: Zhu Ming, a performance artist from China, whose work is performed internationally; Roni Horn, a North American artist whose work spans photography, sculpture, text, drawing and site-specific installation, and whose book Another Water documents the River Thames in London; and Bill Viola, a leading North American video artist who pioneered art made using digital image technology, sound and installation. Each uses water in different ways: as a physical material in live performance; as a photographed surface, stripped of its materiality; as text reflecting on its characteristics; as a digitally enhanced recording, projected as light onto a wall; as a soundscape and as an immersive experience.

Water by no means follows a distinct theme, style or ideology in contemporary art as these three diverse artworks suggest. Nevertheless, this vocabulary of water is more than an illustration or handy metaphor. I argue its prevalence in art, language and theory is due to the unique ability of water’s essence (always the same but always different, always in-between) and characteristics (such as immersion, flow, circulation and dissolution) to express—and materialise—the conditions and experiences of our current era.

As such, my analysis of the three artworks not only demonstrates and exemplifies Smith’s theory, but more originally, it extends and develops his writing on contemporaneity to argue that characteristics of water materialise the forces and symptoms of contemporaneity. I do not claim this is the singular all-encompassing theory of the role of water in contemporary art. However, in closely reading three artworks, I demonstrate the ways in which these characteristics of water are present in contemporary art, and how they materialise the conditions of contemporaneity. My research therefore critically engages with Smith’s work on contemporaneity as a theoretical frame, while expanding his analysis to focus on the resonance of water in three contemporary art case studies.
The world picture of art is not a mirror of the world, but an iteration and symptom of the conditions in which we live: an ontology. I argue through its vocabulary of fluidity, complexity and multiplicity, water materialises the contemporary. As a symptom and iteration of contemporaneity, then, water in contemporary art offers an ontology of the present. As I will demonstrate in chapters two, three and four, water in contemporary art is a vocabulary of the now, its characteristics capable of materialising the conditions of contemporaneity.

Methodology: conceptual travel

In his book *Water and Art*, art historian David Clarke argues there is a danger in overemphasising the significance of a literal subject matter in a study such as this thesis—of focusing only on the meanings of water as a subject while ignoring the ways in which form, medium and content are inextricably linked. Clarke argues water has a distinct ‘dual presence’ in art—as a literal subject matter (where water is depicted) and as a material or medium, such as watercolour paint and water in sculpture or performance art. Focusing only on the symbolism and translation of wateriness for example, would overlook the important role of the medium of water-based paints in capturing what Clarke describes as the ‘feeling of “fluidity”’ in artworks such as painting by J M W Turner.

I take heed of Clarke’s warning, however, I add another dimension to the subject matter versus medium dichotomy. I also approach water in contemporary art as a material vocabulary that is symptomatic and iterative of the conditions of the present. As such, water is a subject, medium, and an ontological vocabulary.

To further overcome Clarke’s warning, I also draw on Mieke Bal’s practical guide to interdisciplinary cultural analysis; specifically—and in my case, importantly—for ‘an age characterised by the loss of boundaries.’ In *Travelling Concepts* and in a range of other works that further elaborate and demonstrate

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69 ibid. p 9.

this approach, Bal sets out her guide to the cultural analysis of artworks. Her approach involves closely reading an artwork, then orchestrating a conversation between the artwork and the concept, so the analysis is informed, but not overridden, by theory. Concepts are dynamic and, as part of this conversation, they travel. I will consider the key elements of close reading, conversation and conceptual travel in turn.

Close reading

By closely reading the three works by Zhu, Horn and Viola, I take form and medium into careful consideration, making sure I start with and return to the work I am analysing. For example, I examine the ways in which Viola’s installation depicts figures being immersed in water, while at the same time creating an immersive aesthetic and mode of engagement for the viewer; the viewer undergoes a parallel experience of immersion through the installation’s physical layout, its soundscape, lighting and so on. This concept of immersion also operates as an emblem of the contemporary condition; as such, my analysis considers form, medium and content as inextricably bound.

The starting point and continual focus of Bal’s practice of conceptual travelling is the object itself. As Bal argues, ‘No concept is meaningful for cultural analysis unless it helps us to understand the object better on its— the object’s— own

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I undertake what Bal describes as a conversation between the art object and the concepts. This conversation flows back and forth. It empowers the object, enabling it to 'speak back':

The text does not speak for itself, but it does speak back; the theory will not get away with overruling the object, nor with obscuring its own contributions, impositions and control.

For this reason, each case study begins with a detailed close reading of each work before I undertake any analysis or evaluation. Enabling an artwork to speak back is, of course, a transformative process, as an artwork cannot really speak for itself. Bal recognises, 'We surround it, or frame it, before we let it speak at all.'

The close reading of an artwork is not unproblematic, and in response to a range of factors, including the awareness that no text can yield meaning outside of the reader’s social and cultural world, the practice of close reading has fallen out of favour.

However, rejecting close analysis means a valuable opportunity is lost. Artworks are instances of cultural philosophy that are, as Bal argues, ‘always already engaged, as interlocutors, within the larger culture from which they have emerged.’ This echoes Smith’s argument that art is often an act of world picturing and, as such, is a rich, puzzling, revealing engagement with the dynamics of our current era. Interpreting an artwork is not impartial, distanced or objective, but embedded, engaged and situated. (This is particularly apt for contemporary art, which, as I will demonstrate in this dissertation, often emphasises immersion and close engagement instead of modernist distance.)

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77 ibid. pp 32-3.

Bal argues artworks are ‘theoretical objects that “theorize” cultural history.’ Closely reading an artwork recognises that art is not a silent witness but an active participant in making meaning. Therefore I read the work’s meaning in terms of its resonance with contemporary audiences. This is to ask not what art is, but what art does—to think through and about art and examine what kind of knowledge art produces. As such, Bal argues ‘art thinks.’

Conversation and travel

Bal’s approach is close reading with a difference, a practice informed by the object and its critique, rather than one or the other. Theory is not a toolkit for analysis, waiting to be “applied” to the artwork. Rather, Bal sees it as ‘a discourse that can be brought to bear on the object at the same time as the object can be brought to bear on it.’ Bal argues conceptual travel does not seek to apply static or rigid frameworks that supposedly enlighten the object of study, but rather subject and subjugate the object. In this approach, subject and object are not structured in a hierarchical opposition. As an inherently interdisciplinary endeavour, cultural analysis is likewise not defined or limited by the frame of traditional disciplines, such as the field, method and objects. Instead, conceptual travel initiates an interaction or conversation between concepts, theoretical approaches and the artwork. Importantly, however, concepts can only do the methodological work once undertaken by disciplinary traditions if they are ‘kept under scrutiny through a confrontation with, not application to, the cultural objects being examined.’ In this way the artwork has the last word. This approach resists reduction. It keeps the thrust of interpretation in check. It diverts and complicates, enriching the analysis and theory while avoiding what Bal describes as pacing the treadmill of entrenched ‘Theory 101’ slogans.

In this dissertation, I orchestrate a meeting between an object (in my case, three key artworks) and a research agenda (water as a material vocabulary that is symptomatic and iterative of the current era). I follow the map determined by

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79 Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History. p 5.
80 ibid. p 22.
81 Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide. 18. See also “Close-Ups and Mirrors: The Return of Close Reading, with a Difference.”
84 ibid. p xiv.
the close analysis of each artwork and the resulting conversation with conceptual approaches. At each stage of the analysis, this requires 'a negotiation, a transformation, a reassessment.' I travel centrifugally from the artworks, spinning off and developing strands and seeing which relevant critical perspectives this generates. In this way, the artwork itself becomes a thinking 'living creature, embedded in all the questions and considerations that the mud of your travel splattered onto it, and that surround it like a “field”.' Guided by the artwork, concepts are not fixed, simple or stable. Unlike whole (macro-) theories, Bal sees concepts as 'theories in miniature' and 'shorthand theories.' Concepts are smaller and more flexible. They are able to move to different environments and be integrated into new interdisciplinary contexts. Concepts are therefore dynamic: they travel across disciplines, places and times, and within their own conceptualisation. Such analysis is unstable and gains a momentum of its own; travelling might take the analyst to unexpected places. The concept’s meanings are renegotiated through travel into different disciplines, triggering conceptual and theoretical innovation and transformation.

As an example, Bal examines the concept ‘framing’—both a travelling (academic) concept and a (cultural) practice. Framing has come to replace the older concept of ‘context’, with some significant implications. Bal argues the idea of context implies a static ‘thing’ that suggests an artwork can be explained deterministically. This implication entangles the ‘unavowed motivation for the interpretation—indeed the analytical passion’ in a conflation of ‘origin, cause, and intention.’ Focusing on context therefore confuses metaphysics, logic and psychology, often resulting in masochistic ‘paraphrasis, projection and paradigmatic confinement.’ By contrast, the act of framing is a practice, ‘a simple request to do a practical job.’ This job is an event and a process,
performed by an agent who is responsible for his or her act, taking place at a particular time. The act of framing also implies an object that is not merely an abstract theoretical reflection, but that exists in time, space and aspect. Bal argues the concept of framing as a travelling practice ‘results in a repositioning of the object as alive, in ways that have to do with the “social life of things” rather than with a metaphysical hypostatizing of objects or a rhetorical strategy of personification.’ In other words, ‘framing adds performative baggage to the staged image’: it is an act that is performed, by a concept that travels back and forth between artistic practice and academic theory.

‘Collective memory’ provides another example of a travelling concept. Originally developed in philosophy and psychology, memory is a process that takes place in an individual’s mind. As a group we do not have a unified ability to think or remember—individuals do. Travelling the concept of memory to a shared space therefore requires a metaphorical leap. The conceptual journey is useful, however, as much of the way cultures collectively create a shared past involves similar processes to individual remembering, such as creating a ‘useable past’ through selectivity and perspectivity. As Neumann and Tygstrup observe, ‘both the features of individual remembering and the sphere of culture are projected into a blended space’, which brings salient features of the two knowledge domains together and selectively borrows from both, producing a new knowledge. Neumann and Tygstrup see concepts such as collective memory as operative metaphors which travel well, due to the richness of their interdiscursive connotations and their ability to cross boundaries by making specialised knowledge concrete. In doing so, they serve as ‘strong, well-delimiting searchlight[s]’, which draw attention to things that were previously not visible.

Nevertheless, the ‘rough’, non-prescriptive and open approach of Bal’s concept-as-methodology is both a blessing and a curse. Bal does not give a checklist for closely analysing artworks. She offers no clear recipe or set of instructions. However, this lack of a road map also ensures that Bal’s approach involves ‘hard

93 ibid. p 173.
94 ibid. p 173.
96 ibid. p 7.
work and entails a great vulnerability. Engaging objects necessarily involves
being selective, and in each instance, it asks the question whether the selected
ideas are relevant, adequate and effective in engaging with the object on its own
terms. Furthermore, in response to Joseph Früchtl’s criticism that such an
approach produces an ‘arbitrariness of practice’, Bal suggests that his frustration
at her travelling concepts methodology perhaps ‘stems from the sense of
unmooring, the loss of anchor’ from a situation where the possibilities are
unbounded and not limited to a canon.

This statement reinforces the extent to which Bal’s travelling concept
methodology fits my project. Central to my argument is rethinking hierarchies
and dualities, linearity and modernist categories. My dissertation focuses on
how water materialises contemporaneity: how it unlocks the contemporary
experience of multiplicity, dislocation and precarity (see chapter two),
uncertainty and dissolution (chapter three) and the sublime awe and terror of a
thirst for situatedness (chapter four). Like water, a travelling concept
methodology is characterised by fluidity, overflows and spills. It is not linear or
solid and is sometimes unpredictable. Nonetheless, I keep Terry Smith alongside
me as my travelling companion, to ensure I do not meander too far from the
central focus of my thesis on the conditions of contemporaneity and their
manifestation in contemporary art. The analysis and travel is kept in check by
the object under scrutiny.

As Bal argues, concepts are meaningful only when they are counterpointed by
the cultural text or artwork which is the object they are analysing. Without this
conversation, the concept exists in a vacuum. Concepts can therefore only do
the methodological work that disciplinary traditions once did if they are ‘kept

98 “‘You Do What You Have to Do’: A Response to Josef Früchtl,” Krisis: Journal for
contemporary philosophy 9, no. 1 (2008).

99 ibid. p 66.

100 ibid. p 63. Murat Aydemir argues the debate was vital but missed opportunity to
reengage cultural studies with the humanities. Both Früchtl and Bal spoke as
representatives of their respective fields without sharing common ground. Instead,
both viewed the relationship between cultural studies and the humanities in terms of
hierarchy. Aydemir argues while Bal dismissed philosophy as a ‘branch’ or ‘variant’ of
cultural analysis, Früchtl ‘made clear he views cultural analysis as bad philosophy at
best, a partial, derivative, ill-informed, or parasitic philosophy, whose only road to
redemption lies in either fully becoming philosophy or submitting to its authority;
becoming, in effect, applied philosophy.’ Murat Aydemir, “A Reaction to the
Früchtl/Bal Debate,” ibid.2. p 37.
under scrutiny through a confrontation with, not application to, the cultural objects being examined.” Without a close interaction with the object they analyse, concepts on their own are not particularly useful. They are abstractions and simplifications that at times have little bearing on the object they describe, or that obscure the interpretive choices that have been made.

As I have noted, Terry Smith proposes that the key attributes of both contemporaneity and contemporary art are multiplicity, complexity and friction. ‘Nowadays’, he writes, ‘the frictions of multiplicitous difference shape all that is around us, and within us, everything near and far, every surface and depth.’ As I will further elaborate, at the core of my thesis is the recognition by a number of cultural theorists of a shift from the solid concrete dualisms and certainties of the past to the fluid conditions of the present, and a natural desire to capture this change in the project of world picturing that Smith attributes to much contemporary art. A methodology that embraces multiplicity, flexibility and fluidity, then, is particularly appropriate for our current era.

With an uncertain destination, conversations between object and concept may fail or result in a collision. Travelling and orchestrating conversations is a risky enterprise, which entails both gain and loss. As Bal argues, both the concept and object may not come out unscathed. There is a risk that concepts can be limiting and vague, obscuring the phenomena to which they attempt to bring meaning. They can be misinterpreted and carry baggage. However, Bal argues this process is a generative and ‘productive collision.” When concepts are not ‘dogmatically protected’ but are free to travel, the tension and damage that may result also leaves survivors and insights: ‘When an analysis fails, new insight can still emerge; more new insight than when a protected concept is routinely


102 Bal argues concepts are mostly ‘considered abstract representations of an object. But like all representations, they are neither simple nor adequate in themselves. They distort, unfix, and inflect the object. To say something is an image, metaphor, story, or what have you—that is, to use concepts to label something—is not a very useful act. Nor can the language of equation—’is’—hide the interpretive choices being made. In fact, concepts are, or rather do, much more. If well thought through, they offer miniature theories, and in that guide helping the analysis of objects, situations, states and other theories.’ ibid. p 22.


applied.”  

Bal argues it is this changeability that makes conceptual travelling ‘useful for a new methodology that is neither stultifying and rigid nor arbitrary or “sloppy”.” Bal’s approach is associative and playful, and this flexibility is an asset, contributing to a richness and complexity of analysis. The disputes and shifts from travel fuel discussion and analysis, and it is the controversies themselves that can become stimulating. Engaging with the artwork, theories and ideas in this way creates a space for reciprocal encounters, which are generative and transformative. It leaps into new territory, with a spirit of adventure.

In my research, I have therefore closely read each artwork, allowing it to speak back to the inevitable frame through which one approaches an artwork: in my case that of the contemporary condition and water. I have then travelled with each artwork and the concept of water as the work illuminated aspects of water and its resistance to providing fixed meanings. Terry Smith’s writing on contemporaneity and world picturing meets water (the ‘theory in miniature’) and takes an interdisciplinary journey through science’s theories of turbulence and fluid dynamics; Bauman’s sociological Liquid Modernity; and art history’s theories of the sublime. This analysis brings different discourses and frames of reference into collision with cultural objects, and in so doing, offers a meaningful account of how water materialises the conditions of contemporaneity.

Structure of this thesis

In a literature review in Chapter 1: The vocabulary of water in art, I review writing about water in contemporary art from art historians such as David Clarke and Abigail Susik, as well as studies on water in art historically from

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105 Ibid. p 164.


107 Ibid. p 20.

108 Bauman, Liquid Modernity.


110 Clarke, Water and Art: A Cross-Cultural Study of Water as Subject and Medium in Modern and Contemporary Artistic Practice.
Reflecting the inherently interdisciplinary nature of contemporary art, and by extension, this dissertation, I also consider a range of interdisciplinary studies that analyse water’s significance and role in our current world—from Gaston Bachelard and James Hamilton-Paterson on water’s symbolism to Jamie Linton’s work on water as a modern abstraction.112 Next, I turn to theoretical approaches that use water’s vocabulary as a metaphor to describe the forces and conditions of society, with terms such as liquid modernity, flow, fluidity and turbulence. I then review several thematic art exhibitions that feature water in contemporary art. Finally, I turn to contemporary art itself to demonstrate that water in art today is complex and diverse. I also suggest that the three artworks I examine in the following chapters are in fact representative of a wider body of art that uses water to bring forth an awareness of the experiences of contemporaneity. As such, I briefly test my argument on artworks by Patricia Piccinini, Julius Popp, Song Dong and Asako Narahashi.113 This chapter situates my contribution within a wider literature and outlines how it differs from, and builds on, other scholarship.

In the second part of my thesis, I undertake three case studies to examine closely the ways in which water materialises a number of the experiences and conditions of contemporaneity. The first of these studies is Chapter 2—Bubble Series, performing the precarious present, in which I analyse Zhu Ming’s multi-location performance work, Bubble Series (2000-4). In the work, the artist strips naked and climbs headfirst into an inflatable bubble, where he floats in a body of water (usually the ocean) for up to an hour. He sits, lies or rolls around inside the bubble until either the bubble is damaged or he runs out of oxygen.


113 Patricia Piccinini, Swell (1999); Julius Popp, bit.full (2005); Song Dong, Writing Diary with Water (1995-ongoing) and Stamping the Water (1996); and Asako Narahashi, half awake and half asleep in the water (2001-2007).
and is rescued by boat. Zhu has performed in five different bodies of water around the world, and documentation of his performances has appeared in a number of galleries. I argue water in the Bubble Series materialises three key aspects of contemporaneity: its multiplicity of temporalities, its dislocation, and the resulting experience of precarity. Through the multiple times and worlds the bubble brings forth and its ever-present danger of leaking and of overflowing, the work offers a material expression of our era’s permanent transition, uncertain futures and relentless precariousness.

In Chapter 3—Another Water, the end of certainty, I argue water in Roni Horn’s work Another Water (the River Thames, for example) (2000) materialises the uncertainty of contemporaneity. Within the context of Horn’s wider project on the River Thames, I focus largely on Another Water, an artist’s book containing 47 full-bleed photographs of the surface of the River Thames, alongside seven obituaries and forensic reports detailing deaths and suicides involving the river. A band of footnotes runs below each photograph. The footnotes have no corresponding referent and variously describe the experience of water and list random facts, cultural and literary sources and scientific observations. I argue the work mimics an encyclopaedia, but actually subverts the possibility of certainty as the water and its reflections become increasingly strange. The work materialises contemporaneity’s collapse of binaries and confronts the viewer with the boundlessness of the resulting void.

In my third case study, Chapter 4—The disorientation and wonder of Five Angels, I analyse Bill Viola’s video installation, Five Angels for the Millennium (2001). In this work, five large screens are installed in a dark room, each displaying a lone figure moving through water in slow motion. The figures are

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114 Zhu Ming, 9 March 2003, 15 March 2003 and 16 March 2003 (2003) all took place in Sydney Harbor as part of the Liquid Sea exhibition, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. He also performed in Berlin: July 28 2000 (2000) for the Festival of Vision: Hong Kong – Berlin, Berlin; China: Zhu performed 5 November 2000 (2000) in the Huangpu River as part of Fuck Off, Eastlink Gallery, Shanghai, China; he also performed 26 July 2002 (2002) in Shanlao Mountain Cove (sometime written as Laoshan) in Qingdao in the Shandong Province (photos of this performance were shown at Sharjah Biennial 6, United Arab Emirates, April – May 2003). Hong Kong: Zhu did a secret performance on the occasion of an exhibition at Travel 2000 Art Fair, Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong, 2000. Miami: Zhu performed 5 December 2003 (2003) at a Miami beach with Ethan Cohen Fine Arts New York and The Museum of Contemporary Art Denver. Perhaps reflecting the ephemeral and sometimes clandestine nature of Zhu Ming’s work, it is difficult to ascertain exactly how many times he has performed the Bubble Series.
not synchronised and occasionally one crashes through the water’s surface, accompanied by a sonic crescendo. On closer inspection, the figures are actually defying gravity, some moving ever so slowly in reverse or gradually being sucked downwards through the water’s surface into the sky at the bottom of the frame. I argue the work uses an immersive vocabulary that materialises the impossibility of situatedness and the disorientation of being ‘all at sea’ in our era. In doing so, it confronts the viewer with the sublime power of the void left behind by the dissolution of certainty. Viola’s immersive world is stunning and terrifying, disorientating and revealing—paralleling the contemporary world with which we grapple.

Finally, I conclude that these three case studies together demonstrate the possibilities of the vocabulary of water in art, thereby extending Smith’s theory of contemporaneity. Water is a powerful concept in contemporary art—a vocabulary of the now—that is iterative and symptomatic of the dynamics and processes in which we live. In these works, it bubbles, overflows, shape-shifts and immerses us. As such, it offers an affective world picture—an ontology of the present.
CHAPTER 1
The vocabulary of water: a literature review

Water in contemporary art comes in many shapes and forms. It is a medium: it gives watercolour paint a luminous translucency, and analogue photographs are ‘born’ in a bath of water. Water is a material: from Olafur Eliasson’s enormous 2008 New York City Waterfalls to Ann Veronica Jannsens’ 2008 water and oil-layered aquarium Cocktail Sculpture. Water is also a subject: from Hiroshi Sugimoto’s Seascapes (1980–ongoing) to Tatsumo Miyajima’s water and light installation Sea of Time ‘98 (1998). And in other artworks, water is simultaneously a subject, material and medium, such as Brian Collier’s 2003 installation Some Properties of Water, which examines water’s social and symbolic meanings. Yet despite water’s diverse and eclectic nature in contemporary art, there is relatively little scholarship that specifically considers it. Studies look at particular aspects of water in art, but focus on historical examples like the late seascapes of JMW Turner or the role of the ocean in Romantic painting.¹ Other studies focus on water’s role and resonance outside of art history, such as cultural theory, geography and politics.² Water’s role in contemporary art—and more particularly,


the relationship between what it articulates and the conditions and dynamics of contemporaneity—tends to be overlooked.

This chapter situates my contribution within art history and the humanities more broadly. To reflect the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary art, and by extension, of this dissertation, I consider a wide range of literature from different disciplines. First, I consider texts about water and art. I review water as a theme or subject in art history in the writing of David Clarke, Howard Isham, Alain Corbin and Tricia Cusack. Second, I turn to writing about water (and writing that uses water’s language) outside of art history. Gaston Bachelard and James Hamilton-Paterson, for example, approach water as a symbol and subject, while theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman and Luce Irigaray use the characteristics of water to theorise the conditions of our contemporary era.

Alongside this writing about water from art history and beyond, a number of recent exhibitions have brought artworks together around the theme of water, such as the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art’s 2005 exhibition Water, water everywhere … and Brisbane Institute of Modern Art’s 2007 exhibition Grey Water. In the third part of this chapter, I consider how a number of these exhibitions approach water in art through themes such as fluidity, purity, pollution, scientific discovery and paradox.

My claim that water materialises contemporaneity is more apparent in individual works, a number of which I will examine in the final part of this chapter. Water in contemporary art is diverse and eclectic in its materialisation. Despite this

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5 Bauman, Liquid Modernity; Castells, The Rise of the Network Society; Irigaray, Elemental Passions.
diversity, however, a number of works that operationalise a vocabulary of water in fact gesture towards the conditions of contemporaneity—works such as Patricia Piccinini’s Swell (1999), Julius Popp’s bit.fall (2005) and Song Dong’s water performances. Although in this dissertation I only focus on three works, a number of others are worthy of analysis in their place. As such, through this brief review of water in contemporary art, I argue the detail of the three case studies I examine in chapters two, three and four can be seen as representative of a wider body of diverse art that operationalises this new vocabulary of water.

By critically analysing these key texts and exhibitions and assessing how they approach water in art, I carve out a space in which to locate my project. My approach to water as a subject, medium and vocabulary that materialises contemporaneity, as well as and my focus on its resonance in contemporary art, sets my research apart. I situate my argument within contemporary art and the theoretical frame of Terry Smith’s writing on contemporaneity. I view water not only as an abstract metaphor or symbol, but as a tangible vocabulary in contemporary art that materialises the conditions which Smith describes.

**Water in art history**

While scholarship within art history has focused on specific aspects of water in art before the present—such as water’s role in the work of specific artists or of a particular time or place—I have found little thematic analysis of water in art, and even less that focuses on water in contemporary art. Art historians David Clarke, Howard Isham, Alan Corbin, Tricia Cusack and Abigail Susik each write about the thematic of water in art, albeit from different perspectives to my approach.

In his book *Water and Art*, David Clarke analyses the significance of water in Western and European art, both as a signifier and signified, a subject and a medium. Focusing largely on painting, Clarke approaches water as having a ‘distinct dual presence’: it is a literal subject in art and a material or medium in art making, its form and medium inextricably linked. He traces connections and developments in water’s depiction in art historically, arguing water has become increasingly prevalent in modern art, both as a subject and as a material. He considers the development of the role of water in European art, tracing how

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8 Clarke, *Water and Art: A Cross-Cultural Study of Water as Subject and Medium in Modern and Contemporary Artistic Practice*. 

41 | The vocabulary of water
earlier attitudes to water as dangerous and deadly gave way to a more positive
reinterpretation in twentieth century art, such as the naturalistic images of Claude
Monet and the ‘near-abstract treatment’ of a metaphorical deluge in the works of
Wassily Kandinsky.\(^9\) Although Clarke briefly reviews the representation of water
in twentieth century art (in a ‘tip-of-the-iceberg-like’ fashion, as he
acknowledges\(^{10}\)), he does so with a view to trace the chronological development of
particular themes, such as underwater scenes, comparing, for example, Bruce
Nauman’s *One Hundred Fish Fountain* (2005) and Damien Hirst’s *Lost Love* (2000)
with Constantin Brancusi’s earlier work, *Fish* (1930).

As part of his analysis of underwater scenes and the motif of the swimmer, Clarke
briefly considers Bill Viola’s video art, which I too examine in chapter four of this
dissertation. Clarke argues Viola’s works ‘offer clear evidence of the extent to
which the metaphorical freight of water had shifted from the mid-twentieth
century to the late twentieth.’\(^{11}\) In making this claim, he analyses the motif of
water to trace how it has developed from a negative association to a more positive
one. Clarke argues the various figures floating or plunging into water in Viola’s
work are quite different from earlier representations of water as a symbol of death
and danger in art from the late-nineteenth century art. He argues the figures in
water in Viola’s work signify passages between worlds or states of consciousness,
purification and new beginnings. As such, Clarke sees water as ‘implicated in an
extended artistic questioning of long-established premises of Western thinking.’\(^{12}\)
This differs from my approach to Viola’s work in this dissertation; I am not
primarily concerned with historical shifts or the chronological development of
the motif of water, but with how water in Viola’s work materialises the conditions of
the present.

Nonetheless, my analysis largely confirms Clarke’s contention that water’s
qualities give rise to a number of resonances that have particular significance in
our current era. Clarke argues water, itself without a fixed form, is particularly

\(^9\) ibid. p 61.
\(^{10}\) ibid. p 74.
\(^{11}\) ibid. p 74.
\(^{12}\) ibid. p 113. He claims water’s representation has challenged artists and shaped their
approaches. For example, he notes water played a role in the path to abstraction for key
artists such as Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky: the depiction of water and its
double identity (as a subject and medium) enabled these artists to explore dissolution
and fluidity.
relevant ‘for our era of fluidity and dissolution.’ In tracing the shifts in representations of water in Western art in the early part of the nineteenth century, he demonstrates how water became a more overt and direct subject that expressed key cultural meanings of the time. In his view, this shift made water a more amenable and worthy area of study. Furthermore, he argues water’s changing role in art also reflects a wider development during the modern period, when:

artistic and cultural meanings in general have tended to become more evanescent, more mutable and difficult to pin down … characterized in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s *The Communist Manifesto* as an epoch in which “all that is solid melts into air”.

Clarke then turns to Chinese art and considers the use of water in Chinese landscape painting historically and in the work of twentieth-century painter Fu Baoshi (1904–1965). He analyses the role of water in contemporary Chinese art, tracing themes such as ink painting heritage with its watery traits and linking them to Chinese political discourse. He argues ‘what began as a small trickle with Fu Baoshi has become a strongly flowing current’ in contemporary art. From Fu’s painting, others have come to see water as able to carry and generate subversive messages. He argues, for example, ‘much water-themed contemporary art in China is best understood as a contestation of state rhetoric concerning the control of water’; as such, water’s crucial role in making and unmaking core cultural symbolism is unique to Chinese art. While he considers the work of a number of contemporary artists such as Song Dong, he does not write about the work of Chinese performance artist Zhu Ming—the subject of chapter three of this dissertation.

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13 ibid.

14 ibid. p 8. Clarke argues the lack of art historical attention to the thematic of water in art might be due to the prevalence of water in the artistic imagination across all cultures and ages, hampering attempts at cogent analysis of its representation in art broadly.


17 ibid. p 213.

18 ibid. p 228.

19 See eg ibid. pp 241-246.
Other scholars focus on water’s role in art historically. Howard Isham’s book, *Images of the Sea: Oceanic Consciousness in the Romantic Century*, explores the surge of ‘oceanic feeling’ in nineteenth-century art, music, literature and culture.\(^{20}\) His study is largely chronological and it analyses the background and causes of this ‘profusion of sea imagery and oceanic metaphor during these years,’\(^ {21}\) as well as their effect on aesthetic expression. Isham attributes the surge in oceanic consciousness to the displacement of the certainties of a sacral system and the rise of secular thought, critical reason and revolutionary ideas. Rather than representing the Biblical tradition, he argues images of the ocean came to represent new ideas and goals of eternity and spirituality—the ‘voyage of life.’\(^ {22}\)

Similarly, French cultural historian Alain Corbin traces a dramatic transformation in attitudes towards the sea which occurred in Europe around a similar time.\(^ {23}\) In *The Lure of the Sea: the discovery of the seaside in the Western world, 1750-1840*, Corbin studies the evolution of the sea over a set time frame. He examines how attitudes towards the sea shifted after the Enlightenment in England and France, and to a lesser extent, Germany. Before the eighteenth century, he argues the sea was seen as unfathomable and dangerous. From the Enlightenment onwards, however, the sea and shore became icons of beauty, recreation and rest. Corbin focuses on social practices and imagination (or meaning-making) around the sea, and draws on visual art, architecture, diaries, literature and medical literature.

Tricia Cusack’s edited collections *Framing the Ocean, 1700 to the Present: Envisaging the sea as a social space* and *Art and Identity at the Water’s Edge* take a wider view than Isham and Corbin, to trace how the ocean contributes to cultural and

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\(^{21}\) ibid.


\(^{23}\) Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World 1750-1840*. 
national identities. In *Framing the Ocean*, Cusack argues the ocean is not empty or uninhabited, but operates as a social space in visual representations—a space of mappings and crossings, microcosmic societies, imagination and narrative. In *Art and Identity at the Water’s Edge*, she focuses on how the marginal zone at the edge of oceans and rivers has been represented in art at various times, investing it with layers of meaning, which contribute to the formation of social identity. In another of her books, *Riverscapes and National Identities*, Cusack argues that paintings of rivers (such as Claude Monet’s paintings of the Seine, Thomas Cole’s of the Hudson and Isaak Levitan’s of the Volga) physically embody ideas of nationalism. She traces how modern riverscapes in art represented nationalist metaphors of life, time and culture, alongside the growth of nationalist ideas across Europe and the United States—much like the way ancient river mythologies expressed the dominant religious and political ideals of their time.

Other scholars consider water in contemporary art through the lens of environmental concerns, particularly climate change. In an article on contemporary photography and video art, art historian Abigail Susik traces what she describes as a recent resurgence in artistic representations of the ocean. She argues contemporary artworks depicting the ocean often have a documentary style and markedly depart from ‘the past legacy of painterly depictions of the oceanic sphere with all their symbolic baggage’. These photographs often contain provocative ecological messages, which depict the physical excesses of consumption and show the ocean as ‘the communal sewer for capitalistic excess’. Susik claims works in this vein often carry the message that even in the ocean, humanity cannot escape itself. The detritus of humanity that pollutes water is therefore a ‘grotesque experience of unavoidable self-reflection’—one of ‘suffocating claustrophobia and violent auto-critique’.

Susik argues that art which features water today has an undeniable human element of social commentary, reminiscent of maritime scenes from the

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24 Cusack, *Framing the Ocean, 1700 to the Present: Envisaging the Sea as Social Space. Art and Identity at the Water’s Edge*

25 *Riverscapes and National Identities*.


27 ibid. [unpaginated].

28 ibid.

29 ibid.
seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In both art then and today, the human ego has colonised a hostile environment.\(^{30}\) Susik gives examples of artists who picture pollution in water, such as Hans Haacke’s 1970 rubbish installation *Monument to Beach Pollution*, Pam Longobardi’s *Driftwebs* series (2006-ongoing) and Chris Jordan’s *Message from the Gyre* series (2009-ongoing).\(^{31}\) In each of these works, however, water plays a peripheral role, and the focus instead is on the rubbish the water regurgitates, thereby to confront viewers with the consequences of consumption and pollution. In her article, Susik concentrates on one aspect of contemporary art (documentary-style photography), whereas my project considers a broader range of contemporary art mediums, including performance art, an artist’s book and video art.

A number of other books and articles which consider water in contemporary art take a similar perspective. Jane Marshing and Andrea Polli, for example, examine how digital culture in contemporary art and media communicates climate change.\(^{32}\) In their edited collection, Marshing and Polli focus on the wave of artists travelling to the Arctic and Antarctic to make art about climate change. They argue such artworks, alongside other digital visualisations, create a complex and layered contemporary map of the Polar Regions that highlights the climate crisis. A chapter in their edited book by Lisa Bloom and Elena Glasberg, for example, explores the ‘affective possibility for data’ through Roni Horn’s art installation and community centre *Vatnasafn: Library of Water* (2007). Bloom and Glasberg argue Horn’s work visualises and archives scientific data on melting ice caps to pressure connection and invite viewers to, as Horn describes it, ‘recognise the water in us.’\(^{33}\)

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\(^{30}\) ibid.

\(^{31}\) Longobardi’s *Drifters Project* documents ocean debris and features photography, film, sculpture and painting. Jordan’s photo series *Message from the Gyre* (2009-current) depicts decaying sea albatrosses clogged with plastic fragments and large collages made from debris collected from the pacific gyre. See also Edward Burtynsky’s photographs *Oil Spill* (2010), which show swirling oil on the surface of the ocean taken during the environmental disaster in the Gulf of Mexico.


In this dissertation, I focus on a different extended project by Roni Horn on the River Thames, *Another Water (The River Thames, for example)* (2000). I, too, consider Horn’s notion of ‘the water in us’, albeit not through a lens of climate change or Iceland. Bloom and Glasberg argue artists such as Horn see water in the Polar Regions through a lens of climate catastrophe. They assert Horn creates ‘knowledge not picked up by official state or scientific discourse’ to construct narratives with a communicative pull. These narratives challenge assumptions about Icelandic worldviews, land and water and encourage participation in writing new stories where ‘water is us’. While climate change is a fundamental aspect of life today (and a key part of Terry Smith’s characterisation of contemporaneity34), it is beyond the scope of this dissertation. I therefore argue water in Horn’s work materialises several other key elements of the contemporary experience—it subverts certainties to offer a vision of contemporary identity that confronts the viewer with an experience of ambivalence and exhilaration from our current era’s dissolution of certainties and the collapse of binaries.

**Interdisciplinary water**

Water also features in writing from a range of disciplines outside of art history. A number of studies examine, for example, water’s significance, how it is perceived and its role in our current era. Noting water’s interdisciplinary prevalence, Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun observe, ‘the sea has begun to emerge as a truly interdisciplinary field of enquiry.’35 Historian John Gillis, too, argues that the emergence of the ‘blue humanities’ recognises the close relationship between western culture and the sea.36 As well as artists and writers, the fields of archaeology, anthropology, geography, history and the history of science increasingly focus on the sea and its significance, such that ‘history no longer stops at the sea’s edge.’37 Over the past decade, there has been significant growth in the number and variation of studies on water’s significance—both focusing on

34 See eg Smith’s chapter, ‘Contemporary Concerns | Climate Change: Art and Ecology’ in Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents*.


37 Gillis, “The Blue Humanities.”
the sea, and on water more broadly.38 These studies contextualise my research into the vocabulary of water which I examine in contemporary art.

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s work on archetypal images is a forerunner to the ‘blue humanities’ Gillis identifies, and is an important starting point to any study of water. Bachelard argues fundamental substances such as water, fire, earth and air create primary images which are free from social meanings and culture. These images enable us to rediscover a primitive ‘reverie’, a naïve and sincere form of daydreaming and abstracted musing, which learns from the material imagination.39 In Water and Dreams, Bachelard argues different kinds of water produce feelings and reverie: pure, fast running streams, for example, are joyous, while stagnant waters invoke despair and melancholy. Running rivers are sexual, while salt-water breeds corruption. While his observations are heavy with problematic assumptions, gendered hierarchies and puzzling judgements over purity, contamination and the primitive,40 his emphasis on imagination and close


40 Wendy O’Shea-Meddour notes water is always feminine in Bachelard’s writing with two exceptions: it is sexualised as ‘masculine’ when it is rare or valuable, thus becoming
reading of metaphors is an interesting starting point for thinking about water’s many layers of meaning.

Novelist and non-fiction writer James Hamilton-Paterson’s book *The Great Deep: The Sea and its thresholds* is a multidisciplinary and conceptual examination of the significance of water, which considers water through a more current lens.\(^{41}\) In his study, water functions as a central theme and springboard into themes such as ‘Islands and Boundaries’, ‘Reefs and Seeing’ and ‘Deeps and the Dark.’ Hamilton-Paterson’s approach is a literary and psychoanalytic meditation on the resonance of water, again with a focus on the sea. Both his conceptual approach to water and several of the themes he explores resonate with the artworks I examine, such as a fear of deep water in Roni Horn’s *Another Water*.

Jamie Linton’s recent book, *What is Water? The History of Modern Abstraction* is a contemporary contribution to ‘the idea of water in Western thought.’\(^{42}\) Linton traces how water is conceptualised in the modern world, arguing our perception of water—as a scientific abstraction, a resource and a commodity—has given rise to today’s global water crisis. He argues water is inextricably linked to society: society and water create each other. While this dissertation has a different focus from Linton’s (he does not consider art or water as a materialisation of the conditions of contemporaneity), I draw on his research to explore how the

virile, active and sexually potent, in contrast with ‘true’ (feminine) water which is ‘passive’, ‘receptive’ and ‘welcoming’. Secondly, water is masculine when it is excessively violent, breaking free from its normally passive state. O’Shea-Meddour laments that Bachelard follows a traditional binary definition of gender where ‘masculine is active, aggressive, strong and dominant, whilst the feminine is the passive, receptive, calm and weak.’ She argues his text ‘is evidently propelled by a militaristic desire to “make everything feminine which is enveloping and soft”. The “feminine”, in the forms of both water and paste, is there to be mastered. It must fulfill its “devoir” and help man conquer the world.’ O’Shea-Meddour argues Bachelard ‘is best left vegetating in his unrestricted “rêve de penetration”’. Wendy O’Shea-Meddour, “Gaston Bachelard’s *L’eau Et Les Rêves*: Conquering the Feminine Element,” *French Cultural Studies* 14 (2003). pp 90, 99.

\(^{41}\) Hamilton-Paterson, *The Great Deep: The Sea and Its Thresholds*. This book was also published under the name *Seven Tenths* by Hutchinson, 1992.

The modern idea of water is constructed both by its history and by the ways in which we conceptualise and reproduce it.\(^{43}\)

While these studies have provided a useful background for understanding the significance and construction of water in today’s world, they have focused largely on water as a symbol or subject without considering how it materialises the conditions of contemporaneity and, as such, offers an ontology of the present.

**Water as metaphor**

Other writing from the humanities and social sciences approaches the characteristics of water not as a material subject, but as a metaphor for the forces and dynamics of society. These studies do not write about water itself, but use its vocabulary, operationalising terms such as liquidity, flow, flux, turbulence and fluidity to analyse the constant shifts, uncertainty and mobility that characterise life today.\(^{44}\) As I outlined in the previous chapter, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, for example, uses water’s vocabulary to argue that the dissolution of institutions, structures and social order are such that nowadays, we live in an era of liquid modernity.

Another theoretical approach embraces the affirmative potential of fluid process and movement over stasis and linearity.\(^{45}\) Luce Irigaray, for example, sees fluidity and turbulent flow as offering a new imaginary that introduces movement into solid metanarratives. Irigaray argues western philosophy is built on a solid foundation of phallomorphism: an obsession with the shape and symbolism of the penis and its erection, unity, strength and visibility.\(^{46}\) Solids have been historically

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\(^{46}\) Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*.
privileged over fluid mechanics, and as a result, science and philosophy have a longstanding inability to deal with turbulent flow. Irigaray argues masculine theorists such as Nietzsche were actually afraid of water and could only accept a certain masculinist world view of ordered unit(y), solidity, bounded, hard entities and hierarchy. To Nietzsche, she writes:

   It is always hot, dry, and hard in your world. And to excel you always requires a bridge. Are you truly afraid of falling back into man? Or into the sea?

Irigaray argues the phallocentric order cannot tolerate the feminine or its multiplicity or fluidity. As a result, fluids were almost erased from the world picture, existing only as non-solids. Philosophy sought to control all fluids by categorising them and fitting them into a subject-object binary. By exposing the exclusions and repressed foundations of the symbolic order, Irigaray seeks to introduce fluidity. In her view, the notion of turbulent flow exposes the repressed foundations of the symbolic order and offers a female imaginary of multiplicity and depth. This imaginary—with fluidity at its heart—sees the possibilities of new beginnings, of coming together in difference. This phobia of water and the affirmative potential of water resonate with my analysis of Roni Horn’s work Another Water in chapter three.

Both Bauman and Irigaray’s approaches to the characteristics of water as concepts are valuable for how they enable us to identify and describe the forces and dynamics that surround and shape us. They describe the conditions of contemporaneity, which are intrinsically part of contemporary art. It is to these conditions that water in contemporary art, and, in turn, this dissertation, responds.

Nevertheless, these approaches overlook water’s materiality. Water is not simply a cognitive or linguistic category of the imagination. It has a complex, material reality; attending to this gives an enhanced understanding of water’s possibilities as an ontological vocabulary. Geographer Philip Steinberg argues the tendency to ignore water’s materiality is common in theoretical writing, at least in ocean-based studies. Drawing on a wide range of perspectives from geography, literary, historical and cultural studies, Steinberg argues the sea is generally seen as a space

49 Steinberg, “Of Other Seas: Metaphors and Materialities in Maritime Regions.”
facilitating movement, a mere surface or framework for historical investigation. Many studies overemphasise human agency, focusing only on how the ocean impacts humans. However this fails to account for what Steinberg describes as ‘the sea’s complex four-dimensional reality’, a reality that is continually reconfigured by human, non-human, biological, historic and contemporary elements. He sees the ocean as a ‘marine assemblage in which humans are just one component.’ It is a space of movement—not only facilitating movement by humans crossing its surface, but as ‘space that is constituted by and constitutive of movement.’ Steinberg thus calls for a perspective that emphasises the sea’s materiality, tactility and fluid mobility—a new ontology ‘that, through its essential dynamic mobility and continual reformation, gives us a new perspective from which to encounter a world increasingly characterised by connections and flows.’ In its focus on the materiality of water—its materiality in contemporary art, its material reality and how it materialises contemporaneity—my thesis shares this goal with Steinberg.

In my analysis of this literature I have revealed that, within art history, writers such as Clarke, Susik, Bloom and Glasberg approach water in contemporary art through a range of lenses—as a shifting motif and material that shows current concerns, as an icon of environmental degradation in documentary photography

50 ibid. p 164.
51 ibid. p 165.
52 ibid. p 156. A 2010 special issue of the Modern Language Association of America’s PMLA journal focused on the topic of ‘Oceanic Studies: Theories and methodologies.’ In the editorial, Patricia Yaeger argues we have ‘grown myopic’ about water’s role in creating history and culture. The ‘rush of aqueous metaphors’ which define contemporary world systems ‘lends materiality to a world that becomes more ethereal every day, to a discourse that has taken to the air, that treats iPhones like oxygen spas, as if our very lungs and sinews could be extruded into cyberspace.’ She writes about the techno-ocean ‘literary constellations of sea trash, vanished fish, and the techne of capitalist extraction’ as ‘ecocriticism’ and focuses on how literature highlights the financial fate of oceans: Yaeger, “Editor’s Column: Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons.” In another article in the special issue, Hester Blum argues ‘The sea is not a metaphor.’ Instead of figurative language, oceanic studies ‘could be more invested in the uses, and problems, of what is literal in the face of the sea’s abyss of representation.’ It should ‘recast theories of oceanic spaces and transnational crossings with the aid of speculative labour of figures whose lives were oceanic in practice. The bodies of labourers, in other words, exemplify and enact a body of work whose broader circulation in the literal and critical oceanic worlds still looms.’ (Hester Blum, “The Prospect of Oceanic Studies,” ibid. p 677-8).
and as data communicating climate change. Also within art history, writers such as Isham, Corbin and Cusack focus on water in art before the present, albeit by approaching water as a river or the ocean, and as a representation or metaphor of concerns of the time period in question.

Outside of art history, a range of interdisciplinary writers focus on water’s resonance and significance—writing, for example, about water as an archetypal image (Bachelard), as a literary and psychoanalytic meditation (Hamilton-Paterson) and as a modern abstraction or idea (Linton). Others do not write about water itself, but use its vocabulary to describe the conditions of our era—such as Bauman’s dissolution of liquid modernity and Irigaray’s analysis of the phallocentric order’s fear of fluids.

**Water in thematic exhibitions**

Despite the relative lack of art historical scholarship into the theme of water in contemporary art or into the role of water in the work of the three artists I will examine, a number of thematic exhibitions have explored different aspects of the relationship between water and art. These exhibitions are valuable forums for analysing contemporary art. Arguably, these exhibitions take the place of academic literature on contemporary art. In fact, Terry Smith observes these days, ‘curators stage the debate.’ In an article on the state of art history, Smith argues since the 1990s, wide ranging and substantial ideas and arguments about art history have circulated most effectively in debates by curators in ‘mega-exhibitions.’

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53 Terry Smith argues contemporary art is not always well understood by art history; it poses challenges and questions such as: ‘Can we do history of contemporary art? Should we do history that is like the art it studies? Are we really doing criticism, or perhaps theory (not to self: it may already be out of fashion)? Whatever happened to critical distance, scholarly objectivity, disinterested judgement? What counts as an archive?’: Smith, “The State of Art History: Contemporary Art.” p 366. See also What Is Contemporary Art? p 263 on the dangers of applying modernist methods to contemporary art.


A number of recent thematic exhibitions have raised interesting ideas and connections about art and water. These exhibitions often juxtapose a diverse range of artists and works, with a mixture of photographic, installation, performance and sculptural works about water, for example, or the works of artists from different locations around the world.

**Water, water everywhere …**

One thematic exhibition to explore the ‘meaning, metaphor and symbolism of water’ is *Water, water everywhere …*, held at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art in Arizona in 2005. The show featured video installations, sculpture, photography and painting by fifteen international contemporary artists. Curator Marilu Knode states the works featured in the show use water to

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58 The artists featured were: Lara Baladi (Egypt), Dorothy Cross (Ireland), Song Dong (China), Stan Douglas (Canada), Laura Horelli (Finland), Ange Leccia (Corsica), Sabrina Mezzaqui (Italy), Rivane Neuenschwander (Brazil), Jun Nguyen-Hatsushima (Vietnam), Janaina Tschäpe (Germany/Brazil) and Tony Feher, Robert Gober, Jacci Den Hartog, Roni Horn and Carrie Yamaoka (from the United States).
The vocabulary of water

suggest the complex web of relationships between ideas, or things, that are cohesive or stable and those that are fluid or mobile.\textsuperscript{59} The works use water symbolically to explore large cultural concepts, from the conflict between the desire for a stable ‘I’ and the instability of the ego, to social, political and cultural concerns such as environmentalism, consumerism and globalisation. As such, to Knode, water enables a broad range of projected meanings to ‘mediate the conflicting, chaotic ideas of contemporary life’.\textsuperscript{60} Knode argues water and art are both mirrors that reflect our world and our longings and record tensions such as flux and stability.\textsuperscript{61}

Importantly, the exhibition used the works to explore what Knode describes as the ‘symbolic possibilities for grasping modernity.’\textsuperscript{62} Knode argues the artists use ‘new artistic vocabularies to challenge the stability of artistic modernity, offering what might be called alternative modernities.’ In the 1960s, Knode claims the tenets of modernity were brittle and static, and artists came to reject and revitalise the narrow confines of ‘legitimate’ modernist art. They adapted and stretched modernity to include:

- indigenous traditions: Buddhism and other Eastern religions; Jungian psychology; mythological systems other than those of Greece and Rome;
- and independence analysis from former colonies of the effects of imperialism on local philosophical and political practices.\textsuperscript{63}

Through their art, the artists express what Knode describes as the ‘new face of modernity’ or ‘adaptive modernity’, capturing its tensions, countenance and unique conditions.\textsuperscript{64} Such art is variable, often reflecting a correspondence between medium and subject. Knode gives the example of video art, which, like water, is ‘characterized by mobility and permutation’. The show’s ice sculpture, apparently solid, is only temporarily so, and ‘is prone to alteration in response to the shifting conditions around it.’\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{59} Knode, “Adapting Modernity.” [unpaginated].
\textsuperscript{60} ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Water, Water Everywhere (Scottsdale, Arizona: Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005).
\textsuperscript{62} “Adapting Modernity.”
\textsuperscript{63} ibid.
\textsuperscript{64} ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} ibid.
Several of the works in the exhibition explore the fluidity of cultural exchange and difference. Lara Baladi’s work *Mother of the World #2 (Oum El Dounia)* (2005) was commissioned for the exhibition and features no water at all. The billboard was painted by the artist and Egyptian sign painters, who filled it with metaphoric borrowings from literature, history and the arts, from Alice in Wonderland’s caterpillar, to Tutankhamun and a mermaid from Greek mythology. In her enactment of the fluidity of cultural exchange and diaspora, Knode sees Baladi as turning to ‘the specifics of history to create a mellifluous blend of traditions’—the modern and traditional and the global and local.66

Song Dong’s *Floating: Scottsdale* (2005) is a two channel video projection that explores similar themes of cultural conversation and the fleeting nature of life. The video shows shimmering footage which Song made in Scottsdale while on holidays, layered with images of the artist tracing numbers into water. According to the exhibition’s catalogue, one can never know the multitude of any city, especially a foreign one, yet the shimmering water creates a connection and highlights the fleeting nature of life.67 This represents what Knode describes as ‘the most urgent question regarding the globalized art world’, namely, ‘how can works from such disparate places of origin be intelligible to a local audience?’68 Without a common or centralized codification of meaning, Knode argues ‘adaptive modernity demands a more rigorous interpretation of ideas on the part of its audience.’69 Water, here, stands for this local and global conversation.

Other artists in the exhibition use water to explore ‘adaptive modernity’ in different ways. Knode sees Roni Horn’s offset lithographs Still Water (*The River Thames, for example*) (1999) as exploring the ‘moving target of identity’, using a series of photographs and footnotes to evoke different aspects of the world. At the same time, however, Knode sees the work as questioning the ‘truthfulness’ of photography and highlighting the impossibility of capturing ‘life’. To Knode, Horn’s pictures of nature render ‘the rich life of the subject a nature morte—dead nature.’70 In chapter three of this dissertation, I examine Horn’s *Another Water (The River Thames, for example)*—a work from the same series and containing some of the same photographs and text as Still Water. Like Knode, I analyse the

66 ibid.

67 *Water, Water Everywhere*. [unpaginated].

68 “Adapting Modernity.”

69 ibid.

70 ibid.
ways in which water in the work materialises new modes of identity and highlights the impossibility of a stable, singular truth.

Water is everywhere in other works in the exhibition, too. Finnish artist Laura Horelli juxtaposes interviews with Finnish builders of luxury cruise liners against the ships’ poorly paid multinational crew, exploring the dynamics of the globalised world. In Love Lettering (2002), Rivane Neuenschwander creates nomadic, random poetry by attaching small strips of paper to the fins of goldfish, which swim around unpredictably to melodic soundscape. Knode argues Neuenschwander’s work suggests life’s melancholic arrivals and departures and its corresponding sense of loss ‘of family history, of loved ones, of place—within the shifting global sphere.’

The approach of Water, Water Everywhere … has some similarities to my study. Like Knode, I examine how artists use water as a vocabulary to express and respond to the condition of the present. Knode also describes these conditions using a vocabulary of water—such as its ‘variability’, ‘shifting conditions’, ‘mobility and permutation’. However, while I approach these conditions through the lens of Terry Smith’s writing about contemporaneity, Knode defines them as ‘adaptive modernity’, drawing on Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar’s writing on global modernities and sociologist Samir Khalaf’s writing on cultural resistance and global encounters in the Middle East. Perhaps reflecting this theoretical frame, the exhibition focuses largely on how water in art explores the forces of globalisation, diversity and cultural hybridity. In contrast, although parts of my dissertation consider these global concerns, I focus more broadly on the conditions of contemporaneity and how water in art materialises them: such as atemporality, dislocation, precarity, contingency and boundlessness.

Grey Water
Grey Water, an exhibition held at Brisbane’s Institute of Modern Art in 2007, focused on how we identify with the purity and pollution of water. Interested in

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71 Laura Horelli, Helsinki Shipyard/Port San Juan (2003).

72 Knode, “Adapting Modernity.”

73 ibid. [unpaginated].


75 Institute of Modern Art, Grey Water, 4 August–6 October 2007, Brisbane, Australia. Artists featured were: Bill Culbert (Britain), Marian Drew (Australia), Lawrence English
the intertwining themes of ‘concern for the purity of water and concern for the purity of our national essence’, curator Robert Leonard sought to create an exhibition showcasing the different cultural perspectives that grew from two themes. From a looming water shortage and drought to concerns about immigration, Leonard argues water ‘seems to tap into a whole bunch of anxieties simultaneously, if you’ll pardon the pun.’ The exhibition featured contemporary Australian and international works and also included Horn’s photographs of the River Thames, Still Water (The River Thames for example) (1997-99).

Several of the artworks connect water with death—a theme I examine in chapter three of this thesis. Alongside Horn’s scattered photographs, which include footnotes referencing deaths involving the River Thames, a short film by Peter Greenway, Death in the Seine (1988), depicts corpses being dragged from the River Seine, then being washed and labelled. In Teresa Margolles’ installation En el aire (‘In the Air’) (2003) bubble-blowing machines make bubbles using water that had previously been used to wash corpses in a Mexican morgue. Rosemary Laing’s colour photographs Remembering Babylon #7, a collaboration with Stephen Birch (2003) show bald disembodied ceramic heads lying in shallow water in a salt bore in central Australia.

Other artists use water as a means of contrasting ‘the haves and the have-nots.’ Two portraits from Roland Fischer’s Los Angeles portraits series (1993-ongoing) depict a woman wearing heavy makeup standing shoulder-deep in an aqua swimming pool, looking into the water as she poses for the camera. By contrast, Zhang Huan’s performance-for-video work, To Raise the Water Level of a Fishpond (1997), shows a number of disconnected poor migrant workers in China walk into a fish-breeding pond and stare into the camera. Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba’s Memorial Project Minamata: Neither Either nor Neither—A Love Story (2002-3), a

(Australia) and Toshiya Tsunoda (Japan), Roland Fischer (Germany), Peter Greenaway (Britain), Roni Horn (USA), Zhang Huan (China), Abie Jangala (Australia), Rosemary Laing (Australia) with Stephen Birch (Australia), Teresa Margolles (Mexico), Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba (Vietnam) and Lawrence Weiner (USA).

77 ibid.
78 Death in the Seine draws on Hippolyte Bayard’s self-portrait photograph in which he pretends to be a drowned man. The film also documents events in post-revolution France, based on written reports from mortuary archives between 1795 and 1801.
four-channel video, juxtaposes footage of a Japanese fishing village in which thousands of people were poisoned by industrial pollution, with footage of children playing and divers in a large plastic dome underwater.

Leonard sees the exhibition as ‘a chance for people to think about water as a material and as a metaphor.’ As the works are all interlinked, he argues they invite the viewer to ask ‘What is my relationship to water?’ The exhibition’s interest in water as a metaphor for themes of purity and pollution might appear to be a narrow frame, however the show’s premise is not so dissimilar to this dissertation. It draws on a range of diverse contemporary artworks, each using water as a material, to explore contemporary themes such as death, isolation and purity. Although my dissertation uses a different lens—the conditions of contemporaneity, rather than purity and pollution—it shares a method of featuring seemingly eclectic works with a core material of water to explore the characteristics of our world today.

**Liquid Sea**

Many contemporary thematic exhibitions about water focus on seawater. Liquid Sea, at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art in 2003, focused on constantly shifting ideas about the sea, as well as the ways in which the ocean has captured the literary and artistic imagination. According to curator Rachel Kent, the exhibition set out to:

> explore through art and film some of the principal themes and ideas that have inspired humankind in relation to the sea, from scientific and environmental perspectives to literary and artistic approaches associated with the Romantic imagination and notions of the sublime.

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80 Sea Change: The seascape in contemporary photography is another thematic exhibition held at Arizona’s Centre for Creative Photography in 1998; Aquatopia: The imaginary of the ocean deep (2013), Tate St Ives; Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, See into Liquid (2006) focused on contemporary artists’ responses to the ocean’s sublime polarities. See also Galleria Raffaella Cortese, ‘Ocean 1212-W’, Milan, Italy, 4 February to 30 April 2005; Arcadia: sound of the sea, National Portrait Gallery, Canberra (August-October 2014) featuring photographs by John Witzig, ink drawings by Nicholas Harding and film footage by Albert Falzon.

81 Kent, Liquid Sea. p 5.
These themes include water as a symbolic and elemental force, water as healing, nourishment, economic enterprise and a realm of discovery, as well as environmental perspectives such as scarcity and pollution. Kent states the exhibition broadly encouraged viewers to consider ‘the constantly shifting world of water, and in relation to the equally complex state that is humankind’, as well as ‘ideas about who or what we are, and where our place is within the world.’

The exhibition featured 17 contemporary and historic works, including photography, sculpture, performance art, video, film and sound art, but did not include painting or illustration.

The exhibition included the work of Zhu Ming, who staged three bubble performances in Sydney Harbour for the show’s opening week; still photographs and a video of his work were also displayed inside the gallery. Echoing some of the themes I examine in this dissertation, according to Kent, Zhu’s bubble performances highlight the gallery’s physical relationship with Sydney Harbour and ‘symbolise the amniotic, interior sea of the fecund female body,’ as well as the artist returning to nature or to a primordial state.

The exhibition also aimed to make the unseen visible and explore the hidden forces of the natural world—such as in the video work of David Haines and Joyce Hinterding in which a torrent of water gushes from the doors and windows of a gothic house. Other works exhibited in Liquid Sea were linked through the theme of water and the sublime—such as Hiroshi Sugimoto’s black and white Seascapes (1980-ongoing); Elisa Sighicelli’s illuminated photographs of Iceland’s stark coastal icebergs and beaches; Tacita Dean’s epic 16 millimetre films about man’s confrontation with the power of nature; and Mariele Neudecker’s liquid-

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82 ibid. p 13.

83 Artists exhibited in Liquid Sea were: Doug Aitken, Christine Borland, Joan Brassil, Dorothy Cross, Tacita Dean, David Haines & Joyce Hinterding, Zhu Ming, Mariele Neudecker, Ani O’Neill, Elisa Sighicelli and Hiroshi Sugimoto. Historical works were by Leopold & Rudolf Blaschka, Louis Boutan, Etienne-Jules Marey and Jean Panilevé.


86 Sighicelli’s works included Rock (2003), a partially backlit C-print.

87 Tacita Dean, Disappearance at Sea (1996); Teignmouth Electron (1997) and Bubble House (1999) (16mm films about round-the-world sailor Donald Crowhurst); The exhibition
filled glass dioramas exploring German Romanticism. Sugimoto’s and Sighicelli’s photographs are also both thematic explorations of the horizon line.

Liquid Sea also explored water through art and science—such as scientists who have made important artistic contributions, and artists who draw on scientific ideas and collaborate with scientists in their artistic practice. The exhibition featured twentieth century cinematographer Jean Painlevé’s documentary films about creatures of the deep, as well as Christine Borland’s contemporary work The Aether Sea (1999), the result of a collaboration between the artist and medical and scientific teams into bioluminescent jellyfish. These works (alongside glass marine specimens of Leopold and Rudolph Blaschka and Jules Etienne Marey’s ‘moving’ chronophotographic studies of sea creatures and waves) offered a ‘window onto life beneath the waves that resists simple classification’ of science, museum exhibit, art or design. They also played with temporality; with historical works (such as Painlevé’s) looking forward; and contemporary works looking back (such as Neudecker’s and Dean’s). According to Kent, the exhibition included both contemporary and historical works to contextualise the present through the past.

Finally, the exhibition explored the theme of water and transcendence through Doug Aitken’s 3D-projection work New Ocean (Cycle) (2001). The work is an also featured Dean’s film The Green Ray (2001-2002), a 3-minute loop of the sun setting on the ocean’s horizon.


Jean Painlevé, excerpts from The Love Life of the Octopus (1965), Liquid Crystals (1978), Shrimp Stories (1964) and The Seahorse (1934). Christine Borland, The Aether Sea (1999)—an installation under ultraviolet light of gel containing human and jellyfish DNA, alongside double projections of luminous jellyfish. Along similar lines, the exhibition also showed Dorothy Cross’s projections Come into the Garden Maude (2001) and Ghost Ship (1999), inspired by pioneering Irish naturalist Maude Delap; and Joan Brassil’s moving sculptural and sound installation Quay Vive (2003), poetically evoking cosmic scientific theories.

Leopold and Rudolph Blaschka, 27 models of sea creatures (1860–c. 1890); Jules Etienne Marey works included Bay of Naples (1890).

Kent, Liquid Sea. p 7.
immersive 3D-video of a man swimming in water, projected on a circular screen that surrounds the viewer. According to Kent, it explores ‘transitional elemental states’ and the flux and transformation just before the moment of death or the loss of self.92 My study starts from a similar broad premise, and explores several of the same themes as Liquid Sea, including temporality, the sublime, scientific certainty, transformation, death and the loss of self.

Sea Change

Arizona’s Centre for Creative Photography’s Sea Change: The Seascape in contemporary photography (1998) is another thematic exhibition that focused on seawater in contemporary art. This exhibition featured nineteen artists using a range of techniques and scales to photograph the sea.93 The exhibition catalogue, curated and edited by Trudy Wilner Stack, features an article by James Hamilton-Paterson titled ‘The cultural impact of oceans’94 as well as Wilner Stack’s introduction. Outlining one of the exhibition’s main themes, Wilner Stack describes the ocean as a place of paradoxes. Yet, unlike landscapes, which have changed dramatically over past centuries, she argues the seascape is uniquely unchanged.95 Seascapes from the primordial to the 21st century ‘all present a remarkably uniform vision’, although Wilner Stack notes that artists today must grapple with the ocean’s vulnerability to pollution and climate change.96 The sea

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92 ibid. p 12.

93 Curated by Trudy Wilner Stack, the 19 artists exhibited in Sea Change were Robert Adams, Tom Baril, Thomas Joshua Cooper, Lynn Davis, Liz Deschenes, Robbert Flick, Roni Horn, Stuart Klipper, Fernando La Rosa, John McWilliams, Tom Millea, Michael O’Brien, Doug and Mike Starn, Iain Stewart, Hiroshi Sugimoto, James Welling, Randy West and Hiroshi Yamazaki.


95 This is in direct contrast to Abigail Susik’s claim that contemporary photography of the ocean tends to display the grotesque detritus of humanity: Susik, “Convergence Zone: The Aesthetics and Politics of the Ocean in Contemporary Art and Photography.”; ibid.

provides a unique place for artists to see the world anew in a ‘culture deluged by fabricated imagery.’

In contrast to the variety of *Liquid Sea*, the photographs in *Sea Change* are remarkably similar. Two artists, Hiroshi Yamazaki and Iain Stewart, are from Japan and the UK, however the seventeen other artists all live or were born in the United States (Hiroshi Sugimoto lives in New York). The photographs depict oceans from around the world; however, Wilner Stack notes the works selected all ‘advance the project’s aesthetic’. Despite subtle differences, the photographs in the exhibition are all visually aligned, depicting the ocean on the bottom of the frame, and the sky above. Wilner Stack claims works were excluded where they might ‘lead the viewer away from the pure seascape, or reveal a deeper insight into each artist’s individual processes and orientation.’ She continues, ‘These artists do not have complex, theoretical underpinnings to their sea imagery. Their explanations and discussions of content are straightforward and often remarkably reverential.’ The curator then lists general thematic comments by artists about their attraction to, and interest in the sea, such as: ‘Robert Adams speaks of its overwhelming beauty, unfailing mystery … Roni Horn sees the symbolic, psychological, imaginative power of the ocean … Stuart Kipper speaks of the nuances of change, of clarity, of immediacy.’ However, by focusing only on photographs of seascapes (and excluding all other features such as ships, seagulls, beaches or oil rigs), it is perhaps unsurprising that Wilner Stack sees the works as straightforward and not complex. This exhibition is consistent with much of the literature on water in art from art history, whereby writers such as Isham and Corbin have a similar representational engagement with water in the eighteenth century paintings they examine. *Sea Change*, also, approaches water as a representation, rather than as a symbol or metaphor (as other the exhibitions see it) or as material expression of the conditions of contemporaneity (as I argue in this dissertation).

All of these exhibitions are important avenues for exploring the nature of contemporary art today, as well as for examining what this art articulates about our current era. Interestingly, the thematic exhibitions I have reviewed engage with water in different ways. Several represent only water—Arizona CCP’s *Sea

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98 ibid. p 15.

99 ibid.

100 ibid.

The vocabulary of water

Change, for example, approaches water as pure, straightforward, reverential, and without complex theoretical underpinnings. Others explore cultural, political and scientific relationships with water, yet only a few gesture more towards the approach of this dissertation. Scottsdale’s *Water, water everywhere* . . . , for example, sees water in art as offering a vocabulary that expresses and responds to the conditions of the present, albeit through the postcolonial frame of ‘adaptive modernity.’ Grey Water, too, draws on a diverse range of contemporary art that features water as a material or subject, to explore the ideas of purity and pollution that characterise our world today.

It is inevitable that exhibitions that include a wide range of artworks will reduce the individual works to a common theme. By focusing on the representation of water in Roni Horn’s photos of Iceland within a narrow frame, Wilner Stack, for example, does not engage with the work individually; my reading of Horn’s work in chapter three sees it as distinctly complex and theoretical. By contrast, Scottsdale CCA’s *Water, water everywhere* . . . takes a more nuanced approach to Horn’s *Still Water*. It approaches the work in a similar manner to this dissertation: how water materialises the complexity and contingency of ‘adaptive modernity’, albeit through a theoretical frame that emphasises globalisation and hybridity. Grey Water’s approach to *Still Water* emphasises death, purity and pollution—although again, despite this different lens, this exhibition also approaches water as launch pad from which to explore the characteristics of the present.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given Zhu Ming’s low profile as an international performance artist, his *Bubble Series* featured in only one of these exhibitions—Sydney’s *Liquid Sea*. The work’s performative nature (even its documentation is not as a straightforward seascape) excludes it from *Sea Change*’s focus. However its iterative global nature—the work was performed in bodies of water around the world—fits within the framing of *Water, water everywhere* . . . Likewise, the curiosity and danger of a naked man floating in a plastic bubble also fits within Grey Water’s lens through which to view purity, pollution and death.

Notably, Viola’s *Five Angels for the Millennium* was absent from all of these thematic exhibitions. As I will further examine in chapter four, the work has been included in only three thematic exhibitions, perhaps due in part to its immersive nature and the space the installation requires. However, despite the challenges

102 Apart from solo shows, *Five Angels* was included in Grimaldi Forum, Monaco’s 2002 exhibition, *Extra-Large: Ouvres monumentales de la collection du Centre Pompidou a Monaco*; the Centre Pompidou’s *Big Bang, Destruction and Creation in the Art of the 20th Century* (2005-6) and the Hyogo Prefectural Museum’s 2002 exhibition, *Power of Art*, in Kobe, Japan.
of installing the work, Five Angels arguably fits with Grey Water’s focus on water and the anxiety of death and isolation, and Liquid Sea’s emphasis on making the unseen visible. It perhaps lacks the global focus of Water, water, everywhere… and the pure seascape aesthetic of Sea Change.

Despite these commonalities, my dissertation seeks to do the reverse of many of these thematic exhibitions. Instead of reducing the works to a common theme, I focus in-depth on individual works to make them more complex. I develop and extend some of the themes from these exhibitions about water’s resonance in contemporary art, taking the ideas further by bringing them into conversations with a range of concepts around contemporaneity. I find Terry Smith’s framework of contemporaneity and his method for thinking about contemporary art, alongside Mieke Bal’s approach of closely reading an artwork and then enabling concepts to travel in conversation with the work, offers a valuable framework that is appropriate to and symptomatic of contemporary art.

**Water in contemporary art**

I am interested in a common yet complex feature in contemporary art: how a diverse and eclectic vocabulary of water can be read as materialising different elements of the conditions of contemporaneity. Yet water’s potency is not limited to the three artworks I examine. Instead, these works are representative of a wider body of art that uses water to bring forth an awareness of the forces and dynamics at play. In fact, this argument can be tested on a number of other contemporary works.

Patricia Piccinini’s 3-channel video installation Swell (1999) (Figure 4) is one such example—a contemporary artwork that operationalizes a vocabulary of water that can be seen as materialising aspects of contemporaneity. In Piccinini’s work, three large screens on a gallery wall show heaving, undulating waves that eclipse the horizon. The waves are constantly moving, and the ‘camera’ moves with them so the viewer feels like they are being thrown up and down on a nauseating seesaw. The video occasionally plunges the viewer face-first towards the water’s surface (the waves take up the whole screen) before they are hurled backwards moments later, when the screen is filled with an overcast sky.

Although, at first, the waves seem realistic, small imperfections increasingly reveal them as artificial. The water is in fact computer generated, its surface strangely synthetic and uncanny. Although the viewer can hear a soundscape of water splashing and dripping, the water on the screen looks like a unified, lumpy moving surface. The seesawing movement is dizzying and overwhelming, yet the water’s undulating hills also move in slight slow motion, their graceful rise and fall at odds with the almost violent trajectory of the viewer’s point of view.
The vocabulary of water

Figure 5: Installation view from Julius Popp, *bit.fall* (2005–ongoing)
The water is restless, uncontrollable, turbulent and immersive—yet synthetic. It is simultaneously a space of nature and a media space, a simulation that is real and unreal. Water in the work can be read as materialising the ever-changing nature of space and time, as well as our new, endlessly shifting horizons. The world Swell presents is frontier-less and lacking orientation—themes that play out in different ways in the works I examine in later chapters.

Julius Popp’s installation bit.fall (2005) (Figure 5) is another example. In this work, pipes near the ceiling release droplets of water at specific intervals. The droplets are released in patterns so that, as they fall towards the floor, they momentarily align to form words. These words are visible for no more than a second, before they descend back into a curtain of chaos. The words—such as terror, girlfriend, Snowden, flu, and police—are visualisations of currents of information generated using a statistical algorithm from live filtering of Internet news terms. They are fleeting and temporary—the viewer can only briefly absorb the letters before they dissipate. The word-forming droplets of water offer glimpses into the present world’s non-linear threads of navigation, where everything is happening simultaneously. There is no longer a single strand—just presentness and instantaneity that comes from immersion in an infoscape. Although he does not specifically mention bit.fall, Terry Smith describes this infoscape as ‘a spectacle, an image economy or a regime of representation—capable of the instant and thoroughly mediated communication of all information and any image anywhere.’ Like the dynamics of contemporaneity, the droplets come together fleetingly before falling apart, materialising the multiplicity and jostling contingency that characterises contemporaneity.

A third example is the ongoing performance work of Chinese artist Song Dong. Unlike Piccinini, who creates a computer-generated undulating surface of water, and Julius Popp who uses water to realise computer-generated words, Song Dong uses water as a material to express traditional rituals to explore the conditions of the present. For over a decade, in Writing Diary with Water (1995-ongoing) Song Dong has intermittently written a daily diary on a stone block using a calligraphy brush dipped in water. As he writes, the water quickly evaporates, leaving no trace of his private thoughts. In another work that takes place in multiple locations, Writing Time with Water (2000-ongoing), the artist uses a large brush dipped in a bucket of water to write down the hour, minute and second on the ground. In his performance work Stamping the water (1996) (Figure 6), Song Dong stamped water in the Lhasa River in Tibet with an archaic wooden seal carved with the

103 See also Mariele Neudecker’s sculptural tank works Ship (1998) and The Sea of Ice (1996).

The vocabulary of water

Figure 6: documentation of Song Dong, *Stamping the water* (1996)
Chinese character for water. In each of the works, the water leaves no permanent trace—it is ephemeral, transient and illusory, existing only as a memory. Song Dong performs in different locations around the world, noting down his present thoughts and times while referring to his biographical history and to Chinese tradition and culture. Temporality becomes strange, a fleeting presence that cannot be captured. Again, water here can be seen as materialising the conditions of contemporaneity.

A final example is Japanese photographer Asako Narahashi’s series of photographs *Half awake and half asleep in the water* (2001-2007) (Figures 7-9) and *Coming Closer and Getting Further Away* (2009). To take the photographs, Narahashi floated chest-deep in oceans around the world and pointed her waterproof camera towards the shoreline and shot without the viewfinder. Water fills the bottom half of her pictures and the sky the top half—yet the horizon line is often shaky and lopsided. In *Jonanjima* (2002), an aeroplane appears to head straight into the pewter waves that dwarf it, while in others, off-kilter skyscrapers and bridges seem to rise askew from the water, absurdly sandwiched between sky and sea in an eerily dystopian world. In *Kawaguchiko* (2003) (Figure 7), light flecks the water like snow flakes while snow-capped Mount Fuji, the Japanese icon of eternal beauty, rises to the left. The water and sky are elemental, yet constantly in motion, materialising the relentless movement and disorientation that Smith argues characterises contemporaneity. Her photographs are calm yet alarming, moving yet still, like some half-forgotten dream. Water in the work also materialises the insecurity and anxiety of our current era, reflecting Smith’s contention that the fundamental, familiar constituents of being like time, place and mood are ‘becoming, each day, steadily more strange.’

Water features in these works in a variety of guises as a material, subject and object. In each of these works, water is prevalent, albeit diverse and eclectic. Despite their diversity, however, the vocabulary of water that runs through these works plays a powerful role. Water in its various guises—as computer generated surface, controlled droplets, invisible material for writing and stamping, and disorientating photographed ocean—offers a material expression for various aspects of contemporaneity. In Patricia Picinnini’s *Swell*, it stands for the new frontiers of media space that are simultaneously real and unreal, overwhelming yet an act of mastery. Water in Julius Popp’s *bit.fall* is a controlled droplet that almost immediately descends into chaos. Song Dong stamps and writes with water, conjuring contemporaneity’s multiplicity of places and times, while Narahashi uses water to articulate the insecurity and estrangement of our era.

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105 “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity.”
Figure 7: Asako Narahashi, Kawaguchiko (2003) from Half awake and half asleep in the water (2001-2007)

Figure 8: Asako Narahashi, Momochi (2003) from Half awake and half asleep in the water (2001-2007)

Figure 9: Asako Narahashi, Yunohama (2003) from Half awake and half asleep in the water (2001-2007)
As I will demonstrate in greater detail in the following chapters, this vocabulary of water in contemporary art is symptomatic and iterative of the conditions of our era. It gives a material expression to the forces and dynamics identified in a range of theories, such as writing by Bauman and Irigaray. However, while several of the art historical texts I have outlined in this chapter consider water’s role in contemporary art, my approach differs from this literature in several ways. I do not limit water to the ocean or river. My research focuses on contemporary art and is not concerned with chronological development or the linear progression of water in art over time. My dissertation also does not focus on how water is a metaphor or representation, but argues water acts as an affective material vocabulary that is symptomatic and iterative of the conditions of contemporaneity. Water in contemporary art is a diverse and eclectic vocabulary that materialises the Zeitgeist.

In the following three chapters, I will expand upon this argument by focusing on water in the works of Zhu Ming, Roni Horn and Bill Viola. While most of these works have featured in exhibitions about water, and occasionally in art historical scholarship, the following three chapters will approach them through a different lens, asking how, given water’s various manifestations, water in contemporary art provides an affective vocabulary that acts as an ontology of the present. Guided by Mieke Bal, my analysis of artworks is enriched and kept in check by allowing the objects to ‘speak back.’ As I explained in the previous chapter, I approach artworks as theoretical objects that ‘theorise’ culture. Closely reading them enables me to think with, about and through them and, in doing so, access deeper insights into the cultural conditions from which they have emerged.
CHAPTER 2

Bubble Series: Performing the precarious present

Chinese performance artist Zhu Ming strips naked and climbs headfirst into a large inflatable bubble. He seals off the entry, then rolls (or is pushed) into a body of water, where he floats for up to an hour. Sometimes he sits calmly or curls up in foetal position. At other times he jumps and tumbles, haphazardly propelling the bubble though the water. The performance ends when he runs out of oxygen or when the bubble is damaged; he is often towed back to shore by boat. Zhu performed iterations of this Bubble Series in different bodies of water between 2000 and 2003. Each performance is titled by the date in which it took place, such as 9 March 2003.1 As well as three Sydney performances in March 2003, he has also performed in lakes and oceans in Berlin, China, Hong Kong and Miami.2

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Water is a key element of the Bubble Series—both as a bubble and a body of water in which it floats. This chapter examines the ways in which water and the bubble operate as a vocabulary that materialise several conditions of contemporaneity; namely, atemporality, dislocation and precariousness.

First, I trace how the work materialises a multiplicity of ways of being in time. The bubble can be read as bringing forth a number of different temporalities, highlighting the disjuncture between being and time that Terry Smith argues characterises contemporaneity. The bubble stands for a return to the very beginning as a foetus in amniotic water or a water-borne primordial being. It manifests a cyclical journey of life, where the artist enters the bubble, floats, rests and plays inside, then exists—only for the cycle to repeat in other performances. I show how both the ephemeral nature of the bubble and Zhu’s limited air supply while inside materialise contemporaneity’s urgency that time is running out. Fourth, the bubble’s uncertain fate emphasises our current era’s contingency and relentless anticipation at what is yet to come. Finally, I demonstrate how the bubble’s iterative resurfacing in waters around the world, alongside its symbolic resonance with the Chinese concept of qi, materialise the ongoing presentness and immediacy of life today.

As well as typifying a multiplicity of ways of being in time, in the second section I argue the bubble materialises another characteristic Smith detects in our current era: dislocation. The bubble is everywhere and nowhere, ubiquitous, specific and dislocated. The bubble drifts in the water without an anchor, destination or system of navigation, yet it is very much located in the iconic waters of each performance. It is a travelling bubble of ‘Chineseness’ drifting in international waters, as well as a shield protecting the artist from the turbulence of Chinese politics. Yet the bubble resonates globally, circulating both in oceans around the world and on the global stage of contemporary art. The bubble therefore materialises the dialogue between local, regional, global narratives. Its circulation is complex, a dialogue between situatedness and dislocation.

In the third section, I argue the bubble gives material expression to the precariousness of the contemporary era. Extending Terry Smith’s theory of contemporaneity into work on precarity by Nicholas Bourriaud, Nancy Ettlinger and Judith Butler, I argue that by floating in a flimsy bubble that is prone to burst, ephemeral and sometimes clandestine nature of Zhu Ming’s work, it is difficult to be certain of exactly how many times he has performed the Bubble Series.

Smith, What Is Contemporary Art?
Zhu Ming performs the uncertainty, complexity, currency and contingency of the epoch. In doing so, the bubble materialises the conditions of contemporaneity, offering an ontology of the present. The world picture it offers is shaped by a multiplicity of ways of being in time, by circulating location and dislocation and by the ambient precariousness of the bubble vessel.

First, however, I will closely read the artwork itself to empower the object, as Mieke Bal pleads, enabling me to better ‘understand the object on its—the object’s—own terms.’

**Bubble Series: A close reading**

Washing his clothes in soapy water in the early 1990s, Zhu Ming first started ‘playing with the bubbles,’ beginning his long-term work with bubbles as a medium. His work gradually shifted from blowing bubbles to water-filled condoms, to large inflatable balloons inside which he could fit. He first performed inside such a bubble in open water in 1997. He has floated in oceans and rivers around the world since, particularly in the Bubble Series between 2000 and 2003.

Zhu enters the bubble on the shore (or occasionally on a jetty or boat) by squeezing his body through a narrow opening that he fastens shut once inside. In some performances the bubble has a thin breathing tube that connects the artist to the outside world. Usually, however, he breathes only the air trapped inside.

According to a media report, the bubble Zhu used in Sydney Harbour held 33 cubic metres of compressed air, which enabled the performance to last just under an hour. As the air thins, he becomes light headed. The article reports that the artist, ‘an excellent swimmer, carries a small blade to cut himself free in an emergency.’

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8 Ming, “Illusory Bubble: Dialogue between Zhu Ming and Li Xianting.”

9 Jinman, “Artist Does a Bubble and Streak.”
The bubbles were specially constructed by a Chinese balloon factory to be large and strong enough to transport Zhu’s body over water. Each bubble is around 4 metres in diameter and made from thin plastic fused together with a number of seams, like a beach ball. The bubbles are fragile: the artist brings spares in case they are damaged in the course of a performance. The vessels are transparent, though slightly cloudy. While viewers can see his body inside the bubble, from a distance the view is hazy, as if looking through the frosted glass of a shower screen. Although they are spherical in shape, the bubbles are often not fully inflated. This gives the vessel a slightly squat, organic shape: at times it looks more like a jellyfish membrane than a beach ball. The plastic looks fragile and flimsy, almost soft, as if it could easily burst or bruise. The seams are often puckered and creased and are quite visible, reminiscent of a hot air balloon or parachute.

In each performance, Zhu is naked. His head is shaved and his body is pale. He has a small frame and, against the voluptuous roundness of the bubble, he looks particularly scrawny and vulnerable. Photographs of the process of inflating the bubble and preparing for the performance show a hive of activity; Zhu’s pale nakedness also stands in stark contrast to the many assistants, photographers and onlookers who are all fully clothed.

All of the Bubble Series performances share the same overlying structure—the artist climbs naked into the bubble and floats in a body of water. He enters the water where he floats for a period of time—usually just under an hour, when the bubble starts to run low on oxygen—and then exits the bubble, and the performance concludes. However, each performance is unique and unrepeatable,

10 Zhu Ming and Zhang Zhaohui, “Interview: Zhu Ming” (Hong Kong: Asia Art Archive, 6 July 2005).

11 Zhu has used bubbles in other performance works such as the Luminescent Man Series (1999–ongoing), where he splashed fluorescent paint or black Chinese ink inside the bubble until it coated the sides and the bubble was momentarily opaque (the paint and ink did not adhere to the non-porous plastic, so quickly fell away). Forty minutes later, he pumped water into the bubble until no air remained. At other times, he lit a fire that consumed the oxygen and filled the bubble with poisonous smoke. In July 27, 2008, Liangshanzhou, Sichuan, he inflated bubbles in one of the camping grounds of Mao’s Long March in rural China. In one performance, 18 people sat in one enormous bubble in the campsite of Mao’s Long March. The bubbles he uses in these performances vary between two and ten meters in diameter.

12 In an early performance, 26 July 2002 in Qingdao, Shandong, Zhu launched 30 plastic bubbles into the sea and climbed inside one of them. The other Bubble Series performances have all featured only one bubble, which contains the artist.
shaped by external conditions and uncontrollable forces. Sometimes, Zhu rests inside the bubble curled up like a foetus. At other times, he kicks or jumps around. In 5 December 2003 in Miami, he managed to ‘walk the balloon’ out to sea, propelling the bubble somewhat by moving his body inside it:

I stepped the balloon while on shore, and crept while in the ocean. It was difficult at the beginning. Then I gradually adapted to the movement. When a wave came, I threw myself towards it, over one after another... Yet any semblance of control is fleeting. The first time Zhu performed inside a bubble in 1997, he describes how water began to enter the balloon, increasing the air pressure. Becoming dizzy and in pain from the pressure on his eardrums, he was ‘desperate to get out’:

I sealed the entrance so firm that I could barely break out. I tried several times but failed, then I just acted by instinct, I was losing consciousness.

In another early performance in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Art Centre refused permission for Zhu to perform in the water, considering it too dangerous. Undeterred, he secretly performed at 5am before the guards came on duty. During a trial run in Sydney Harbour for the Liquid Sea performances, the plastic bubble became damaged. As it filled with water, a water taxi pulled Zhu to safety. In another performance, he floated in an ornamental lake in Berlin that was only 50 centimetres deep. The bubble scraped the bottom of the lake, breaking his leg.

In the Fuck Off exhibition in Shanghai, Zhu was not able to perform in the bubble at the exhibition site, so rented a boat and sailed to Waitan on the Hunangpu River, near where the tributary of the Yangtze opens out into the East China Sea. His assistants tossed the bubble (with Zhu inside) into the water at his selected location. As usual, the bubble was not anchored or moored but floated freely in the deep water. In an interview, Zhu describes the danger of the performance:

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13 Ming, “Illusory Bubble: Dialogue between Zhu Ming and Li Xianting.”
14 ibid.
15 For the Travel 2000 Art Fair, Hong Kong, 2000.
16 Ming, “Illusory Bubble: Dialogue between Zhu Ming and Li Xianting.”
18 Fuck Off (also translated as We Will Not Co-operate or Uncooperative Attitude) was a protest anti-exhibition held in Shanghai’s Eastlink Gallery, in response to the Shanghai
Zhu: The wind was very strong then, pushing the balloon forward. I tried to move inside but [was] unable to control it at all.

Li: There were no ropes pulling?

Zhu: Nope, it was drifting freely in the water. It ended up arriving at a small brook.

Li: It would be so dangerous if drifted to the sea.

Zhu: The wind was blowing from the sea that day.¹⁹

The bubble also ended up floating near motorboats and ships and, in an interview, the artist describes how the uncontrollable water made rough by the boats was ‘more frightening than any natural force’ and shattered his illusory sense of safety inside the bubble.²⁰

In Qingdao, in China’s Shandong province, Zhu lost sight of the boat accompanying the bubble and was floating alone in open sea with strong currents. An onlooker of the performance, Li Xianting, who later interviewed Zhu, said of the performance:

Qingdao must be the most dangerous, and the most exiting waterborne performance of balloon series. The environment of the ocean made the balloon and performer seem to be as fragile, insignificant, rootless and perilous as the soap balloon in real world, truly impressive.²¹

As various performances, a number of viewers noted the haunting precariousness of Zhu in his bubble. Li Zhe saw the Sydney performance as ‘haunted by death. The uncertain pressure exerted by a closed environment makes the individual inside feel helpless and vulnerable.’²² Susan McCulloch was mesmerised ‘as the man-filled bubble was blown hither and yon over a choppy sea.’²³ And to Mark Lee:

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¹⁹ Ming, “Illusory Bubble: Dialogue between Zhu Ming and Li Xianting.”


²¹ Ming, “Illusory Bubble: Dialogue between Zhu Ming and Li Xianting.”


Figure 11: Documentation from Zhu Ming, 5 December 2003 — Bubble Series performance in Miami, USA.
Zhu Ming’s slight body stands in contrast to the enormity of the materials and the intensity of his performance. It is often unclear whether the bubbles shield him against external forces or whether their translucent skin emphasises the vulnerability of the naked figure within. This tension is apparent in the artist’s March 8, 2003 performance, executed in the waters of Sydney Harbour, Australia, which draws a fine line between the protection of the buoyed bubble and the threat of the shark infested water.24

Other commentators have noted the slowness and dream-like quality of the Bubble Series. While the performances are occasionally dangerous and exciting, each performance usually lasts an hour and, most of the time, the bubble drifts slowly and without incident. Thomas Berghuis sees the Bubble Series as ‘serene and composed’, while curator and critic Paul Klein emphasises the ‘balancing of the real and the dream, reality and imagination, fact and fiction.’25 Li Zhe describes the work as ‘a silent appeal for public attention’, and Susan McCulloch found 9 March 2003 ‘mesmerising’, offering ‘many opportunities to dream and reflect on the otherworldly realm of the aquatic.’26 For Kate Davidson, the performance encapsulated the capacity ‘to transport us to worlds that are completely removed from our own.’27 These observations suggest the bubble functions as a material frame that cushions the artist inside, provisionally excluding him from real life.

While the Bubble Series displays seriality by featuring the same core elements—the naked artist entering an inflatable bubble, floating in the ocean and then exiting the bubble—the location, context and unpredictable conditions make each performance unique, unscripted and unrepeatable. Whether the sea is calm or rough, if it rains, if it is windy or sunny—all have an impact on the work.

The location of each performance also shapes the ways in which is the work is experienced and consumed. The media release by Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art stated the three free performances would ‘take place at Farm Cove, between the Sydney Opera House and Mrs Macquarie’s Chair.’ It claims the ‘Botanical Gardens offer one of the best vantage points to view these

26 McCulloch, “M.C.A. Swims into Wider Waters.”
performances.\textsuperscript{28} The Botanical Gardens and Opera House are significant tourist attractions in Sydney, and are especially busy at 2.30pm on a weekend in late summer. Circular Quay is also the port of the busy ferry service, connecting ferries with other forms of public transport. The performance was advertised in Sydney’s press,\textsuperscript{29} and while some came specifically for the performance, I suspect many of the onlookers would have happened upon it accidentally. A Sydney Morning Herald article, for example, describes the ‘two elderly women who had come to see the Opera House’ temporarily forgot the Utzon masterpiece.\textsuperscript{30}

Other performances in China, however, such as 5 November 2000 in Huangpu, Shanghai and 26 July 2002 in Shaolan, took place in secret without the permission of authorities or collaboration of galleries. Aside from a handful of assistant and photographers, the works had no crowd of expectant onlookers. The performance in Shaolan occurred in open water beside a remote mountain cove, with few (if any) accidental bystanders. Photographers nevertheless accompanied Zhu in a boat and documented the performance; these images were first exhibited at the 6th Sharjah International Art Biennale in the United Arab Emirates in 2003.

Although he has performed the Bubble Series in only six different locations, documentation from the performances has been exhibited more frequently around the world.\textsuperscript{31} Photographic and, to a lesser extent, video documentation, are important elements of Zhu Ming’s works; however, as Berghuis notes, they are ‘often treated separately from the actual performance event.’\textsuperscript{32} Underlining the importance of the ‘specificity of time to the live performance event,’ Zhu uses the date of the performance as the title of artwork.\textsuperscript{33}

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\textsuperscript{29} ibid.; Jinman, “Artist Does a Bubble and Streak.”

\textsuperscript{30} “Artist Does a Bubble and Streak.”

\textsuperscript{31} As some of Zhu Ming’s performances have taken place in China without an audience and with little documentation, and as there is little written about the artist and his performances, it is difficult to determine whether additional bubble performances have taken place. Zhu Ming has performed other works, such as the Luminescent Man and Mountain Rock series, in cities around the world. For this chapter, I am focusing on the works in which he floats inside a bubble in a body of water (ie the Bubble Series).

\textsuperscript{32} Thomas J Berghuis, Performance Art in China (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2006). p 30.

\textsuperscript{33} ibid. p 30.
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Aside from the six performances I detailed above, documentation of the Bubble Series has been shown in several solo exhibitions. Documentation of his performances has also featured in a range of thematic group exhibitions on contemporary Chinese performance art. One such exhibition in New York in 2004, *Between Past and Future*, looked at photo and video art produced in China since the mid-1990s. Curated by Wu Hung and Christopher Phillips, the exhibition included work by 60 young Chinese artists and set out ‘to explore the surprising complexity of artistic reflection on the drastic metamorphosis underway in China.’ Zhu Ming’s work featured in the thematic section *Performing the self*, showcasing works that reflected ‘the emergence of hybrid new conceptions of selfhood and personal identity in contemporary China’, arising from the shift away from traditional conceptions of the collective subordinating the individual. More recently, documentation of several of Zhu’s performances and a sculpture of a man in bubble were included in the exhibition of Chinese performance art *I’m Not Involved In Aesthetic Progress: A Rethinking of Performance*

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at Beijing’s Star Gallery in 2013. This exhibition questioned the limitations of critical discourses around performance art by approaching ‘a dual notion of presence and absence of aesthetics within the excessive discourses revolving around performance art.’ Bubble Series has also been included in exhibitions about contemporary Chinese art more broadly. Made in China, an exhibition in Copenhagen’s Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in 2007, focused on the diversity of contemporary Chinese art and sought to show China’s rapid rise in the global art world.

As I noted in the previous chapter, the Bubble Series has also been shown in a large thematic exhibition about water I examined in chapter one. Liquid Sea, at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art in 2003 featured three bubble performances—9 March 2003, 16 March 2003 and 17 March 2003—during the exhibition’s opening week, as well as photographic and video documentation. The exhibition focused particularly on shifting ideas about the sea, as well as how the ocean has captured

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37 I’m Not Involved In Aesthetic Progress: A Rethinking of Performance, Star Gallery, Beijing, China, 14 April–16 May 2013, curated by Su Wei.

38 Star Gallery, I’m Not Involved In Aesthetic Progress: A Rethinking of Performance Press Release, Beijing, China, 14 April–16 May 2013. Among other Chinese performance artists, the exhibition included Zhu Ming’s sculpture of a bubble with the hazy outlines of a person sitting inside, referencing his performances, ‘as a one-to-one souvenir, so to speak’. Edward Sanderson, “I’m Not Involved in Aesthetic Progress: A Rethinking of Performance,” Art Agenda 2 May (2013).


40 Made in China included works by well-known artists such as Ai Weiwei, Chen Shaoxiong, Qiu Zhijie and Zhang Huan, as well as lesser-known artists like Zhu Ming. In a similarly comprehensive vein, China: the Contemporary Rebirth showcased the variety of contemporary Chinese art, with one thematic section dedicated to video works. Zhu Ming also featured in China Live, a touring exhibition and performance program in the United Kingdom in 2005. The exhibition sought to enable viewers to ‘experience some of the visceral and challenging performance work being created by the current generation of Chinese artists.’ Zhu performed in a bubble with toxic paint as part of his Luminescent Man series. See Chinese Arts Centre and Live Art UK, “China Live: Presentations of Contemporary Performances, Actions and Films,” ed. Chinese Arts Centre and Live Art UK (London 2005). See also the exhibition’s publication China Live: Reflections on Contemporary Performance Art. K. (Chinese Arts Centre, Grove UK and China). pp 84–87.
the literary and artistic imagination. For curator Rachel Kent, the bubble performances in Sydney harbour linked artistic practice to the museum’s location and history, and reflected Sydney’s important relationship with the ocean. To Kent, water in the Bubble Series ‘symbolises the amniotic, interior sea of the fecund female body’. The artist, in his bubble on the surface of the ocean, is ‘like a child in the womb, returning to nature, or a primordial state.’

Other exhibitions featuring Zhu Ming’s work have focused on the theme of isolation. Breaking the Isolation, a solo show at the Alice Chilton Gallery in February 2010, displayed Zhu’s performance photographs and videos, alongside a large projection of a video recording of his Sydney 9 March 2003 performance, on an external wall at night. The catalogue states ‘Zhu Ming finds peace and tranquillity in his bubbles … creating a zone of isolation.’ According to curator Wang Hua:

Zhu Ming’s personal and poignant ‘bubble art’ reminds us all that at times illusion and reality do co-exist. Isolation can indeed be found amid chaos, and that all of life is in a constant state of transition.

The body is another theme examined in exhibitions featuring Zhu Ming’s work. In Sydney’s Sherman Gallery in 2005, curator Danielle Johnson displayed photographs of the Bubble Series in Text Me: explorations of body language. The exhibition considered ‘the complex and challenging exchange of cultural experiences and information via the highly charged mediums of text and the artist’s body in the practice of contemporary Asian and Australian artists.’ Johnson states Zhu Ming, in his bubble performances, initiates self-transformation into an ‘alien’ self with an eerie result.

Stepping In: Nature at the Macau Museum of Art in 2011 featured photographs of Zhu’s performances in a group exhibition exploring the relationship between man and nature, and substance and the self. According to the director, Chan Hou Seng,  

41 Kent, Liquid Sea.  
42 Alice Chilton Gallery, Breaking the Isolation, 19 February–14 March 2010. Zhu Ming also performed in the 2012 festival of international performance art, Infr’action, in Paris (at the Swedish Institute and the Square du Temple), however this performance was not part of the Bubble Series.  
the exhibition used the ‘bodies of performers and other objects as the point of intrusion to step in and reflect upon the relationship between the body and religion, life and death, humans and the natural world, as well as humans and the universe.’

In his book on performance art in China, Thomas Berghuis argues Zhu Ming’s work has been unfairly excluded from significant Chinese and international exhibitions, especially where they were organised by government-controlled organisations. His work has also been missing from ‘many leading mainstream Chinese art magazines, in spite of favourable reviews in independent publications.’ Berghuis argues this is due to the official scrutiny, vilification and ‘growing stigma attached to the idea of performance art in China.’ Perhaps for this reason, there is also not a great deal of scholarly literature on Zhu Ming’s Bubble Series. Berghuis’ study of performance art in China offers the most in-depth reading, with around five pages dedicated to Zhu Ming’s work. An article by Carla Kirkwood in Theatre Forum also examines Zhu Ming’s work and includes in an interview with the artist, as well as fellow performance artist Li Wei. In 2007, Meiling Cheng interviewed Zhu Ming and included a three-page analysis of the Bubble Series, among other works, in her article on performative objects in Chinese art, focusing on the work’s time-based nature. Rachel Kent’s introduction to Zhu Ming’s work for the 2003 Liquid Sea exhibition catalogue is another useful source about the work, although again the catalogue dedicates only five pages to the artist.

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47 ibid. p 20.


Gallery press releases and articles about the Bubble Series often frame the work in similar terms, indicating the general lack of analysis and in depth engagement. They often refer to several key arguments about illusion and reality, the womb and the traditional Chinese concept of qi. In a short article on Zhu Ming in Sydney’s 2003 Liquid Sea exhibition catalogue, Thomas Berghuis describes the performance as ‘… the place where reality and illusion exist side by side and where life and death come together in an ultimate “bubble”.’50 The Beijing-based F2 Gallery also describes Zhu’s performances as ‘the place where reality and illusion truly exist side by side and where life and death come together in an ultimate “bubble”,’51 without referencing Berghuis. Karen Berguist too, in an article in Culture Base, describes how Zhu’s ‘bubbles hover at the boundary between reality and illusion’.52 In a similar vein, the China Live catalogue outlines how ‘Zhu Ming’s bubbles have the characteristics of both substance and emptiness and serve as a metaphor for the fragility of life and relationships.’53 Chinese Contemporary Zhu Ming Solo Show press release also describes how Zhu’s performances ‘hint at the fragility and ultimately singular experience of human existence’ and serve ‘as a symbol of the transience of the human life cycle.’54 This press release has appeared in several websites, such as Artintern.net.55 A number of press releases and media articles also frame the work as symbolising the womb, which I will discuss below.56


56 eg ‘like a child in the womb … the water here symbolises the amniotic, interior sea of the fecund female body’: Kent, Liquid Sea. Zhu lies in ‘foetal position as if returning to sleep in his mother’s womb’: Berghuis, “‘Bubble’: Birth, Death and Transference in the Work of Zhu Ming.” The bubble’s ‘soft, fragile skin’ and ‘umbilical cord’ pipe: Zhe, “Zhu Ming.” See also Gallery, “Artists: Zhu Ming”.

87 | Bubble Series: Performing the precarious present
The vocabulary of water in the *Bubble Series*

My analysis of the *Bubble Series* departs from these readings, focusing instead on how water in the work (in this case the bubble and ocean) materialises the conditions of contemporaneity. As I explained in the introduction to this dissertation, Terry Smith sees contemporary art as profoundly shaped by its situation within contemporaneity. Art is therefore symptomatic and iterative of the dynamics of our current condition and as such, it offers a valuable lens into what it means to be in our time. Central to contemporaneity is the impossibility of periodisation. Yet while it may resist generalisation, our current era is far from shapeless. In fact, Smith argues it is shaped by fission and resistance, by radical disjunction and confounding multiplicity. These characteristics of contemporaneity both shape the *Bubble Series* and are articulated in the work.

In this chapter I look at how three elements of contemporaneity play out in the work: a multiplicity of temporalities, dislocation and precarity. First, I will turn to multiplicity of ways of being in time.

**Multiplicity of temporalities**

In the *Bubble Series*, the ocean and bubble have a powerful resonance in the work. They operate as a vocabulary that materialises the conditions of time—being in time and the radical disjunction of temporality—that shape contemporaneity. The *Bubble Series* does not just take place in the present. It can be read as referring to five different temporalities that simultaneously jostle and overlap. The bubble floating in water stands for the very beginning; the continual cycle or journey of life; time as running out; the anticipation of what will happen next; and, finally, time as ongoing presentness and immediacy.

The first temporality I look to in the *Bubble Series* goes back to the very beginning. Photographs of Zhu entering and exiting the bubble show him naked, squeezing himself through a narrow opening, often headfirst. His legs look frog-like, or like the hind legs of an animal, maybe a rabbit. He is naked and pale; his head is shaved and his body appears hairless, newborn-like. Inside the bubble, when floating on water, he lies in foetal position or sits calmly. Sometimes he plays around, kicking and rolling inside the bubble, with periods of activity and rest, much like a foetus. There is ample space inside the bubble; its size dwarfs the artist, making him look small, frail and fragile. The bubble looks soft, resembling a


membrane. In some performances, Zhu breathes through a narrow tube, which connects him to the outside world, much like an umbilical cord. Amniotic fluid is a salty liquid that surrounds the foetus in the womb—salty like tears and sweat, and seawater. At the end of each performance, Zhu must squeeze himself out into the world or be cut out of the bubble. Several commentators read the work as symbolising a return to the womb or to a primordial unicellular state of being. For Rachel Kent, the work is ‘very symbolic’, reminding us of ‘our unicellular marine origins.’ She sees Zhu ‘like a child in the womb’ who ‘often places himself in a foetal position as if returning to the sleep in his mother’s womb’, while the water ‘symbolises the amniotic, interior sea of the fecund female body.’ Berghuis too argues Zhu ‘often places himself in foetal position as if returning to sleep in his mother’s womb.’

The *Bubble Series* can also be read as returning to a more distant ‘very beginning’. Theories of evolution suggest life started as ‘primordial soup’ in the ocean. The idea of our ancestral origins being in the ocean and involving primordial unicellular organisms is central to mainstream thought about the beginning of life. Kate Davidson argues ‘Like a single-celled marine organism, Zhu Ming returned to nature,’ transporting ‘us to worlds completely removed from our own.’ Zhu Ming, then, is like a single unit inside a bubble, the nucleus of life in a sea of possibility. He is returning to very beginning of life.

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60 Berghuis, “‘Bubble’: Birth, Death and Transference in the Work of Zhu Ming.” p 22. In a media report, Li Zhe argues ‘the soft and fragile skin of the bubble serves as a metaphor of a womb from which life is shaped, nurtured and exiled; while the pipe connecting Zhu Ming and the bubble symbolises the connection between umbilical cord and womb’: Zhe, “Zhu Ming.” Michael Desmond, too, sees Zhu Ming ‘bobbing like a foetus in its caul, adrift in the fetid amniotic fluid of Sydney Harbour.’ Michael Desmond, “Liquid Sea,” ibid. p 108.


63 Davidson, “Journeying to Other Worlds: Liquid Sea at the Museum of Contemporary Art.” p 32.
A second temporality that plays out in the work sees the bubble giving material expression to the continuous cycle or journey of life. In an interview with Zhu Ming, Chinese art critic and curator Li Xianting observes, what resonates in the Bubble Series is its ‘resemblance to people’s life, generation after generation, while perishing one after another, giving me the sense of nihility and destiny.’\textsuperscript{64} Likewise, Li Zhe, in a review of Zhu’s Liquid Sea performance, argues ‘An inevitable nature life cycle, from beginning to end, was in full evidence in this work.’\textsuperscript{65} In this way, Zhu’s performance in the bubble is a like the journey of life. He enters the bubble, he is tossed in the waves as he walks, rests, sits, plays, until finally he exits the bubble, his journey complete. This temporality is a fleeting one: the bubble, like time, is transient and continuously moving. Zhu’s performance is ongoing with multiple iterations; he repeats this process again and again at different times, in different bodies of water and in different bubbles, like different generations of a family. The bubble here stands in for a cyclical temporality where individual lives begin and end, to be replaced by new generations and their life cycles—or bubble journeys.

Yet while time might be cyclical, at the same time the work evokes an urgency, a sense that time is running out. Smith argues we grapple today with impatience and ‘a degree of urgency that, it seems, dare not pause to check whether it has its precedents.’ An element of the awareness of what it is to be with time is ‘a growing sense that many kinds of time are running out,’\textsuperscript{66} and this plays out in the Bubble Series. This temporal urgency is implicit in the very nature of the bubble. As soon as a bubble is created and starts drifting in the air, its walls become thinner and thinner until suddenly it bursts, disappearing forever. Its destruction is inevitable; the fleetingness of its existence is a certainty. In the Bubble Series, each performance lasts under an hour, as the bubble contains limited oxygen.\textsuperscript{67} As I mentioned earlier, the first time Zhu performed in an inflatable bubble, he started to run out of air and as water entered the bubble, the air pressure increased and Zhu became dizzy and started losing consciousness.\textsuperscript{68} The bubble’s fleeting existence and inevitable destruction is echoed by the nature of performance art. As soon as the hour is up and Zhu exits the bubble, the

\textsuperscript{64} Ming, “Illusory Bubble: Dialogue between Zhu Ming and Li Xianting.”

\textsuperscript{65} Zhe, “Zhu Ming.”


\textsuperscript{67} Jinman, “Artist Does a Bubble and Streak.”

\textsuperscript{68} Ming, “Illusory Bubble: Dialogue between Zhu Ming and Li Xianting.”
performance—like the bubble—disappears and shifts into the past. In these ways, the performances materialise the urgent contingency of times: for the bubble, and for Zhu, floating inside, time is running out.

A fourth temporality does not look backwards, at time as a cycle or time as running out. This temporality looks forward to what is yet to come, materialised by the bubble’s uncertain fate. Each bubble performance is unscripted and shaped by uncontrollable forces, such as ocean currents and the weather. The performances are sometimes dangerous, with an unknown outcome. Curator Mark Lee commented on the tension apparent in *March 8, 2003*, while Susan McCulloch was ‘mesmerised’ watching as the bubble was ‘blown hither and yon over a choppy sea.’ The performances are full of anticipation. What will happen next? Will the artist drown? Will he need to be rescued, or collide with a ship? Will he suffocate or run out of air mid-journey? This temporality is a future that is as yet unwritten; it is yet to come. The bubble’s uncertain future stands in for shared uncertainty that characterises contemporaneity.

The complexity of these various temporalities—in which the bubble materialises a return to the beginning, a cyclical journey through life, time as running out and what is yet to come—is symptomatic and an iteration of the conditions of contemporaneity. Yet despite this temporal push and pull back and forth, the bubble also stands for a fifth temporality: presentness and immediacy. Zhu Ming has often emphasised the traditional Chinese concept of qi in his work—a concept of constant renewal and ever-present energy. In an interview, Zhu states his fascination with bubbles ‘has something to do with the Chinese traditional

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69 Peggy Phelan, in her work on the politics of performance art, argues ‘Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.’ Phelan argues it ‘becomes itself through disappearance’: Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993). p 148. Performance, then, is in some respects an act of vanishment, the antithesis of ‘saving’: Rebecca Schneider, “Performance Remains,” *Performance Research* 6, no. 2 (2001). p 100. Yet while the performance itself may be lost in the past, Phelan argues this should not stop us from writing about or documenting performance art. Instead, the disappearance of the live event becomes a characteristic. Rather than the act of writing towards preservation, Phelan suggests we write towards disappearance, mindful ‘that the after-effect of disappearance is the experience of subjectivity itself’: Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. p 148.

70 Lee, “Zhu Ming Solo Show.”

71 McCulloch, “M.C.A. Swims into Wider Waters.”
Philosophical concept of qi (air, gas),’ as well as the transience of life. Qi is a fundamental concept that traditionally ‘penetrated every walk of Chinese life, from the philosopher to the artist’, as well as mathematics, astrology and literature. It is still central to Chinese medicine and martial arts. Ho Peng Yoke, in his book Li, Qi, and Shu: An Introduction to Science and Civilization in China, claims qi has such as subtle meaning it is impossible to translate, but resembles air, gas, vapour and matter-energy. It was sometimes connected to the idea of a psyche or spirit, or understood as the part-ethical substance from which all of the universe as well as its celestial beings were composed. Together with ‘li’, which has been translated as ‘form’, ‘law, ‘reason’, ‘principle’, and even ‘divine law’, qi is a fundamental cosmic entity: the ‘matter-energy’ to li’s cosmic organisation. Zhu Ming sees bubbles as ‘fascinating and meaningful’, especially as people tend to only ‘see the bubble, but not the ‘qi’ in it. In the Bubble Series, qi refers to the passage of time and constant renewal of energy that is always present. It is air, a life force, time and energy, ongoing and always present.

The ritualistic nature of Zhu Ming’s bubble performances further emphasises the temporality of the present. The location changes, yet in each of the performances he enters the bubble, lies in foetal position, or sits or moves, naked, cradled inside the bubble. Repetitively, he returns to the sea. He rolls (or is rolled) into open water, where he floats for the duration of the performance. He repeats this action in bodies of water around the world. This is not the same artwork staged for different exhibitions around the world, as the dated performance titles suggest. The performances in this respect are repetitive but sequential, like re-enactments. There are new bubbles all over the place. By resurfacing in different places and times, the work refuses to disappear or conclude. Although it captures a multiplicity of temporalities, it has an ongoing presentness.

This multiplicity of temporalities— I have traced five different ways of being in time that the Bubble Series brings forth—is an iteration and symptom of contemporaneity. In his analysis of what makes contemporary art contemporary, Smith’s defines ‘contemporary’ as referring to the ‘depths of meaning’ of the concept of con tempus. Smith argues, ‘con tempus came into use, and remains in

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72 Other commentators have noted this connection, such as Lee, “Zhu Ming Solo Show.”


74 Ibid, pp 3-5.

75 Zhu Ming, quoted in ‘Bubble Man’, City Weekend Magazine Beijing (Ringier/China Publishing Group, 5 April 2007)
use, because it points to a multiplicity of relationships between being and time.\textsuperscript{76} This sense of multiplicity signifies the many `ways of being with, in and out of time, separately and at once, with others and without them.'\textsuperscript{77} Writing about art, then, entails an awareness of both the present—and what it means to be in today’s era—while remaining conscious of the ‘presence’ of other temporalities and kinds of time.\textsuperscript{78} Time in contemporaneity is not linear or stable, nor does it follow the straightforward past-present-future triad that is central to the modern understanding of what time is and how it functions. Instead, time today is multiple. To Smith, this multiplicity of temporalities is at the heart of contemporaneity, and mixing, disrupting and displacing time is a core element of what makes contemporary art contemporary. As such, art today has many histories and disjunctions all working with and against each other.

As Smith notes, ‘contemporaneity itself has many histories and histories within the histories of art.’ It is shaped by an ‘awareness of what is it to be in the present whilst being alert to the “presence” of other kinds of time.’\textsuperscript{79} Contemporaneity, then, entails an awareness of how time is passing within the context of multiple coexisting worlds.\textsuperscript{80} This awareness is operationalized in much contemporary art, as artists grapple with the current conditions by trying to take steps within this ‘seemingly endless stream of times.’\textsuperscript{81} Contemporaneity is also defined by ‘its immediacy, its presentness, its instantaneousness, its prioritizing of the moment over the time, the instant over the epoch, of direct experience of multiplicitous complexity over the singular simplicity of distanced reflection.’\textsuperscript{82}

In the Bubble Series, the bubble and ocean in Zhu’s work give a material expression to this multiplicity of temporalities that Smith argues characterises contemporaneity. The bubble simultaneously materialises the most distant past with the origin of life and life in the womb; the ongoing journey of life; the

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{76} Smith, \textit{What Is Contemporary Art?} p 4. Italics in original.
\item\textsuperscript{77} “Questionnaire on “the Contemporary”: Terry Smith,” \textit{October} 130, no. Fall (2009). p 48
\item\textsuperscript{78} “Contemporaneity in the History of Art: A Clark Workshop 2009, Summaries of Papers and Notes on Discussions.” p 5.
\item\textsuperscript{79} ibid. p 5.
\item\textsuperscript{80} For a discussion on the historicity of contemporaneity in the writing of Smith and others, see Ross, \textit{The Past Is the Present; It’s the Future Too: The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art}.
\item\textsuperscript{81} Smith, \textit{What Is Contemporary Art?} p 198.
\item\textsuperscript{82} “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity.” p 703.
\end{itemize}
urgency that time is running out and cannot be retrieved; and anticipation for the future juxtaposed against the intensity and immediacy of the here and now.

Tracing these five temporalities at play in the work brings forth an awareness of the multiplicity of disjunctures between being and time. Smith argues this awareness can manifest surprising representations and historical trajectories, as well as contradictory temporalities. He sees the relationships between these clashing temporalities as contingent, perhaps accidental and perhaps without predetermination.83

These multiple temporalities of contemporaneity—and of the Bubble Series—are much like the ‘homologous structures’ described by Foucault in the Archaeology of Knowledge.84 The different ‘times’ in the work have no reason or coherence; they are not predetermined. They do not reflect a source of origin or manifest a hidden meaning. But they have a correspondence of structures—Foucauldian archaeologists can attempt to situate them within the larger discursive regime of contemporaneity. In the Bubble Series, the temporalities are multiple and contingent. They do not necessarily reflect some overarching historical meaning, but their existence, however contingent and random, iterates our current era. The bubble and ocean offer a vocabulary that expresses this multiplicity of temporalities.

Dislocation

The Bubble Series does not only bear a multiplicity of temporalities; it also materialises a multiplicity of ways of being located. The work can be read as referring to a number of ‘worlds’ that are at once situated and dislocated. Like the complexity and multiplicity of ways of being in time I examined above, situatedness in contemporaneity is infinitely complex, such that, as Smith argues, a single artwork can be read as referring to multiple worlds simultaneously. The Bubble Series exemplifies this tendency.


84 Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge (London: Routledge, 2006). Smith, too, argues contemporaneity’s deep differences are contingent; like Foucault’s ’structural homologies that occur without predetermination, quasi-accidentally, but occur they do, determine events they do, and those events stick: history in this contingent sense, happens, and through this affirmative heterogeneity, shapes our lives.’ Smith, “Contemporaneity in the History of Art: A Clark Workshop 2009, Summaries of Papers and Notes on Discussions.” p 7.
Drawing on Smith, I argue the experience of dislocation and the interplay between location and dislocation Zhu’s work brings forth is another iteration of a key condition of contemporaneity. The work grapples with different worlds, the dynamic of location and dislocation and the complexity of world picturing. The bubble and the body of water in which it floats reveal these dynamics and materialise several ways of being located, or dislocated, as the case may be. The bubble leaves dry land and floats without coordinates or destination; it is located in specific waters in the local world of each performance. The bubble can be seen as standing for the intimacy of Zhu’s interior world inside the bubble; and as an emblem of a journey into more distant worlds—unknown ones over the horizon, as well as a travelling bubble that refers to China. Finally, the bubble circulates in international waters and the global contemporary art scene. I argue the Bubble Series can be read as epitomising the conjunction of these worlds, materialising this dislocation and multiplicity of locations that characterises the contemporary experience.

The first ‘world’ or experience of location present in the Bubble Series plays out as Zhu enters the bubble, and leaves dry land and the locatedness it offers. Tossed in the waves, the bubble has no coordinates, destination or reliable system of navigation. The water’s currents largely determine its path. In some performances, Zhu attempted to steer the bubble by walking inside it, however he is never really in control. In his Qingdao performance, 26 July 2002, he lost the rescue boat accompanying him and was tossed around by strong currents in the open sea. In Shanghai in 5 November 2000, he was blown by strong winds into the path of motorboats and large ships.

This layer of locatedness points to distant unknown worlds. In the 5 December 2003 performance in Miami, the bubble floated off into the sunset towards the horizon. As I detailed earlier, in photographs documenting the performance the bubble appears to drift out to sea, towards an unbroken horizon line. Floating towards the outermost edge of the visible is reminiscent of the Aristotelian horror vacui. From early antiquity onwards, the boundless ocean was a particularly frightening forbidden frontier that could not be conquered or navigated. As

85 Ming, “Illusory Bubble: Dialogue between Zhu Ming and Li Xianting.”
86 ibid.
Hamilton-Paterson writes, ‘Every Greek sailor knew that once one had sailed beyond the last points of land the sea just went on and on.’

This inability to pin down a location is exemplified by the very nature of the bubble. Karin Berguist argues bubbles in Zhu’s work ‘hover at the boundary between reality and illusion, between the natural world and the inner world of the imagination.’ In their transience, bubbles are eternally in the process of disappearing; they are like an illusion that cannot be captured in time or space.

The Bubble Series performances, too, are ubiquitous. The bubble appears for less than an hour before disappearing, leaving behind only memories and photographs. Six of the performances have been well documented, but it is possible other iterations of the Bubble Series have occurred elsewhere without documentation. In an interview, Li comments,

Li: It would be so interesting if you had taken down the different results and experience of each performance.
Zhu: I did write something after each performance in the beginning, but didn’t carry on.

Zhu has performed the work in a several bodies of water yet without keeping many records, as if the location of the performance can be substituted with any body of water. Inside the bubble, the artist himself becomes a hazy figure who could be anyone, anywhere: naked, hairless and anonymous.

The second layer of complexity in this location/dislocation dynamic is the bubble’s location in the local world. While the performances may be ubiquitous, at the same time each one has a singularity and uniqueness that is very much shaped by its location. The ocean in which each iteration takes place becomes the canvas, with landmarks and icons shaping the work’s resonance. Zhu’s performance in Florida, 5 December 2003, for example, took place on the shore beside a wide beach. For viewers standing on the sand, looking out to the calm sea, the bubble was the only interruption on the unbroken horizon line. The sun was setting during the performance and the sky turned from blue to pink and mauve and then

89 Berguist, “Bubbling Performance”.
90 Ming, “Illusory Bubble: Dialogue between Zhu Ming and Li Xianting.”
Figure 12: Documentation from Zhu Ming, 23 July 2002—Bubble Series performance in Shanlao Mountain Cove, Laoshan, China.

Figure 13, Zhu Ming, 5 November 2000—Bubble Series performance in Shanghai, China.
indigo. One photograph shows the bubble floating in fading light under a big sky, punctured by the bright white spot of the moon (Figure 11). Other documentation shows a crowd of assistants, photographers and onlookers gathered on the beach, but this hustle bustle is juxtaposed against the almost empty sea. Apart from a tanker sailing past in the distance at one point in the performance, there are no visible boats, swimmers or surfers sharing the sea with the bubble. This performance looks calm and tranquil, the bubble like an oversized jellyfish drifting in an almost clichéd sunset seascape from tourist brochures and motel walls.

This is in stark contrast to the performance 9 March 2003 in which the bubble floated in the bustling waters of Circular Quay in Sydney, in the path of constant water traffic from speed boats, yachts and ferries. Unlike the expansive empty horizon on Miami, Sydney’s cityscape is the backdrop for this performance. One photograph shows Zhu floating past the Sydney Harbour Bridge and Opera House (see Figure 10). The sea is a glittering blue, closely matching the colour of the sky. The bubble looks perfectly round, its striped seams echoing the patterns and curves of the Opera House’s sails. In photographs documenting this performance, Zhu Ming is visible inside the bubble—he is sitting down and leaning back, appearing to gaze up at the Sydney icons. The bubble here looks like a curious trespasser on a classic Sydney postcard, its alien inhabitant dazzled by the view.

A performance in the Huangpu River in Shanghai titled 5 November 2000 has quite a different feel (Figure 13). The photographs show a grey-white sky and pewter sea; buildings and ships in the distance are hazy, showing the smog in the air. Unlike the Miami and Sydney performances, which show a crowd of people looking on, the Hunagpu photographs show only two or three assistants on a wooden boat, helping Zhu into the balloon and then photographing him as he floats. Several of the photographs are taken against the light, making the buildings on the shore of the river look dark and ominous. In one photograph, the sun has just broken through a crack in the overcast sky, leaving a glittery trail on the water on the left side of the image. The top of the bubble has a warm glow, but this is juxtaposed against the dark solid block of the buildings that take up almost half of the image, dividing the flat greyness of the sky and the flat greyness of the water on the right side of the image. The sparkle of the sun reflecting on the water seems like a slice of magic and light against a sombre backdrop. A brief New York Times review of the work suggested that by ‘drifting past a warship’, Zhu ‘created a juxtaposition of the peace of the womb with the violence that is modern life.’

92 This performance took place as part of Fuck Off, a satellite (or dissident) exhibition of the Shanghai Biennale, curated by Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi.

While this observation may resonate with this performance in Shanghai, it is quite different to the other performances I have described in Sydney and Florida. This is because in each performance, the iconic waters in which the bubble floats become part of the work. The weather and watery location do not simply frame the performance, but are active elements of its resonance – they shape it. In this way, the bubble can be read as referring to the local worlds of each performance.

The Bubble Series can also be read as materialising Zhu’s interior world—a third ‘world’ or sense of location. In his multidisciplinary study of the symbolism of water, James Hamilton-Paterson argues an island in an ocean is a territorial expression of the ego. The bubble here is perhaps a similar emblem: the threshold where Zhu’s internal world and the external world meet. Along these lines, Kirkwood argues the work explores ‘the world of the inner self’ and ‘the illusionary boundary that exists between the natural world and the world of human reality.’ By placing himself at the mercy of the ocean and exposing his frailty, she sees the work as acknowledging ‘the symbiotic relationship between his naked body inside the bubble and the busy, outside world that must provide the oxygen he needs to survive.’ In this reading, the bubble, then, stands for an internal world adrift in the unpredictable and dangerous waters of the external world.

A fourth world the bubble evokes is China. While the background and context of the artist is not necessarily relevant to how the work resonates with viewers, several commentators and curators have read the work in terms of its Chineseness—as if it were a floating bubble of Chinese culture drifting through international waters, or a protective film cushioning the naked artist against the turbulence of Chinese politics. Such readings, which I will detail shortly, frame the work’s relationship with China as integral to its meaning. In this respect, the

96 Bal argues contextualising an artwork in this way is problematic, as the act of contextualising means producing a new text that itself requires interpretation. However, in this case, I am staging a conversation between the work itself and its reception, as this is part of the multiplicity of locations it operationalises. See Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History,” The Art Bulletin 73, no. 2 (1991).
bubble can be read as located in China, highlighting the multiplicity and mismatch of location and dislocation that characterises our current era.

Exemplifying this approach, art historian Julie Segreves frames the Bubble Series as an icon of Chinese art, reading the work in terms of the artist’s Chinese background. To Segreves, ‘Although the settings for these large bubble performances vary, for Zhu Ming they all represent his sense of social and psychological isolation amid the upheaval of an ever-changing China.’ Segreves particularly focuses on the role of performance art in China and the difficulties of working as an artist in China. By 1997, she asserts ‘isolation—social, cultural and political—had become a primary theme in Zhu Ming’s work.’ In a similar vein, Berghuis discusses the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution in China and Zhu’s traumatic childhood, arguing:

Writing about the artist’s personal experiences in his life and the general social and political context of China coming out of the Cultural Revolution … [becomes] a useful approach for anyone who is somewhat open to the peace and tranquillity that lies behind many of the artists performances.

Kirkwood, too, couches her analysis of the performance work of Zhu Ming and fellow artist Li Wei in terms of the shifts in Chinese society that have ‘dramatically influenced’ contemporary Chinese culture, redrawing the boundaries of Chinese art. She argues that from the mid-1980s, Chinese artists began creating works that confronted ‘the antagonistic relationship between the individual and the state mandated “collective”.’ Performance art was a particularly controversial practice. The Chinese term for performance art is xingewei yishu, which can be loosely translated as ‘behaviour art’. According to Gao Minglu, the term ‘also encompasses the moral sense of the individual expressing one’s self in a community or within a social structure.’ In traditional Chinese Confucian thinking, all individual behaviour is social, reflecting social relationship, so much

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98 Segreves, “Found in Transition.”

99 ibid.


so that there is ‘no such thing as purely individual behaviour.’ To Kirkwood, this Chinese context is an integral part of Zhu Ming’s work.

As I outlined previously, the Bubble Series has also been included in range of thematic exhibitions about Chinese performance art as well as exhibitions about contemporary Chinese art more broadly. Such exhibitions, curated around the theme of art in China, emphasise Zhu Ming’s nationality and background. By viewing the work through a lens of Chineseness (by focusing on the artist’s country of origin and featuring his work in exhibitions themed around China), the Bubble Series is often seen as a bubble that represents China.

Yet his relationship with China is not straightforward; Zhu Ming has been described as an ‘outsider’ artist and, as Kirkwood explains, his artistic practice

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103 Zhu Ming was born in 1972 in a town in the Hunan Province that was also the birthplace of the Chinese Communist Party’s former Chairman, Mao Zedong. He moved to the countryside as a child, where he stayed until he was 15. Zhu says he was bored at school and was eventually kicked out. Despite trying to get in to an art college for a number of years, he never received a place. He moved to Beijing in 1991 and eventually joined the ‘East Village’, an artist community near Beijing.


106 From the outset, he has often been described as an ‘independent artist’ working outside the ‘official’ state sanctioned Chinese art establishment (Zhu Ming interview in Kirkwood, “Chinese Performance Artists: Redrawing the Map of Chinese Culture.” 20). This dichotomy—inside versus outside the Chinese establishment—shapes the way in which Zhu’s work is received, both within China and in the international art world. His work has been defined as ‘avant garde’, experimental, illegal and part of a radical subculture. Berghuis discusses this and the distinctions between inside and outside the system: pp 153-6. See also Thomas J Berghuis, “Considering Huanjing: Positioning Experimental Art in China,” positions 12, no. 3 (2004). on the complexities of unofficial art. Zhu’s work was omitted from the official Shanghai Biennale in 2000, and Berghuis argues he was ‘excluded from prominent local and international exhibitions organized by government-controlled institutions. His works have also been excluded from many
sits outside of the Chinese art establishment—both in terms of its legality and acceptance by the authorities and establishment and the fact that the very genre of performance art is not recognised (and in fact outlawed) in China. Zhu was arrested several times for his artistic practice and says he never feels safe performing his artwork in China. In this context, Mark Lee suggests it is not always clear whether the bubbles shield him against external forces or whether their translucent skin emphasizes the vulnerability of the naked figure within. As well as being a metaphor for a travelling bubble of Chinese culture, the bubble then also materialises the situation of outsider Chinese artists. Both of these readings locate the bubble in China, such that it offers, at least to these viewers, a material expression of a ‘national’ world circulating alongside and within other worlds—worlds distant and unknown; the local world of each performance; the bubble of Zhu Ming’s interior world within the exterior world of the ocean; and the ubiquitous world of global circulation, to which I will turn now.

The fifth world of locatedness that plays out in the Bubble Series plays out through the geographical ubiquity of water. Regardless of whether Zhu floats in a bubble in leading mainstream Chinese art magazines, in spite of favourable reviews in independent publications': Performance Art in China. p 20.

In 1994, alongside two other East Village artists, Zhu first attempted a performance work with bubbles. First, the other two artists, Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming, performed their works. Next, Zhu planned ‘to dive into this very dirty lake nude, and then force bubbles filled with the filthy substances contained in the water, up onto the surface of the lake’: Performance Art in China. p 20. A journalist from Hong Kong was to photograph the performance but before he could begin, plain-clothed police arrested the three artists. Zhang Huan managed to escape, while Ma Liuming served two months in jail. Zhu Ming was imprisoned for three months in a labour camp outside of Beijing, and claims he was punished for anarchy and prostitution under the guise of art: Kirkwood, “Chinese Performance Artists: Redrawing the Map of Chinese Culture.” p 21.

In 2004, Zhu Ming said in an interview ‘I don’t believe that the government clampdown in the early 1990s had any effect on my work, but I felt it always in my bones. I feel more liberated these days, but my mind has never been free, ever since I went to prison in 1994 for three months. From that moment, I have always been terrified, in my body, in my human core, and I have never done a performance in China without feeling scared that a policeman would come and arrest me’: Barbara Pollack, “Chinese Photography: Beyond Stereotypes,” http://www.artnews.com/2004/02/01/chinese-photography-beyond-stereotypes/.

Lee, “Zhu Ming Solo Show, Chinese Contemporary Gallery”.

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China, Florida or Sydney, his work resonates. The Bubble Series has been exhibited in biennales and exhibitions around the world. Like much contemporary art today, it circulates on a global stage. Its universal values of isolation, transience and so on are in dialogue with more local concerns, such as the political situation in China and Zhu’s cultural background. The very art form of performance art in China, too, is a dialogue between Chinese and Western artistic practices and traditions. What matters here is circulation: regardless of where Zhu’s performance takes place, it circulates in global waters and is part of a bigger world.

This accords with Smith’s contention that ‘art now comes from the whole world.’ Artistic practice and production is no longer driven by metropolitan centres. Instead, the global art world is interconnected. Contemporary art is not only made within cultures, it simultaneously enters into exchanges between cultures and across the globe.110 These different values—local, global, regional, and also independent values such as identity and diversity—are in constant dialogue, shaping the creation and reception of art. Smith argues an art history of the world’s art is not simply universal art with the quirk of a local instance; nor is it local arts read and organised by colonisation or globalisation. Instead, for Smith, world art is ‘generated by the world’s diversity.’111

To Smith, the conditions of contemporaneity make it essential to generate ‘narratives that work on global, regional and local levels.’112 These narratives highlight how art circulates between cultures and on the global stage. Smith writes:

A history of contemporary art worth its name … would treat art that originates from all over the world, in its local setting and in its

111 ibid. p 264
112 ibid. p 259. Although he does not specifically address Zhu Ming’s work, Smith’s views on Chinese artistic practice today give important insights into this sense of locatedness in Zhu’s work. Smith sees Chinese art as very much embedded in the political struggles of the 1960s and 70s, right up until today. Chinese artworks are often then ‘responses to living in times the parts of which seem out of sync yet remain vividly present to each other.’ China is modernising rapidly; across single generations, life is unimaginably different. Chinese artists also respond to the contemporary condition by searching ‘for a sense of locality within situations of constant disruption, dispersal and displacement, their resistant awareness of the pervasive power of mass and official media, their acute sensitivity as to how these pressures affect everyone’s sense of selfhood, and finally, their interest in acting in ways that will improve the situation.’ Contemporary Art: World Currents. p 11.
international circulation—acknowledging that it is, perhaps for the first time, the world’s art (not, that is, a universal art with local instances, nor local arts organised by colonisation or globalisation, but particular arts generated by the world’s diversity).

The five different worlds I traced in the bubble performances give a material expression to these dynamics, showing how local, national and internationalist locations of contemporary art are in constant dialogue. As Smith writes, ‘location is sought, and dislocation experienced, everywhere and always.’ The frictions from this multiplicity and difference—the experience of multiple ways of being in time and place, of simultaneous location and dislocation—‘shape all that is around us, and within us, everything near and far, every surface and depth.’ The bubble drifting in waters around the world exemplifies the frictions and dissonance of this contemporary experience.

The bubble is a material expression and physical conjunction of a number of worlds—unknown worlds without coordinates over the horizon and out to sea; the local worlds of Sydney Harbour, Miami Beach and the Huangpu River; the intimacy of Zhu inside his small, interior world inside the bubble; more distant worlds, like China; the global world of international art in which the bubble circulates; as well as worlds which Smith describes as ‘transitory, “no places” in between.’ Smith argues all of these layers or worlds are connected by relationships, such as diplomacy, politics, globalisation, ecology, art, language, cooperation. Adding further complexity, these connections are interwoven by the ‘substance of relationships’ or ‘connectivities’—things like imagination, searching, feeling, identification, communication, presuming, and so on. Smith says, ‘Imagine them as threads weaving through these layers and forms of connection, thus giving us a three-dimensional matrix … Let us call this overall activity, this weaving of connectivities, ‘world-making, or ‘worlding.’


Within our complex, multiple, uncertain and ever-changing world, Smith argues art today often grapples with ‘World picturing, placemaking and connectivities’,118 Inside his inflatable vessel, Zhu Ming traverses many worlds. He drifts and circulates through a network of flows. This is an art that grows from and articulates the conditions of contemporaneity: the complexities of situatedness and the multiplicity of location, dislocation and geographical ubiquity. Smith argues such art offers ‘an array of location, places to pause and pathways to follow through the minefields of our estrangement’.119 The bubble does seem estranged from its world; it offers a place to pause and follows various unpredictable pathways through an array of locations, some estranged. The bubble materialises both the dislocation and dizziness from contemporaneity’s complexity, and what Smith describes as the ‘embodied connectivity situated within worlds of difference’.120 Anchored but without coordinates, national and local yet global, the bubble both materialises and is symptomatic of the conditions of our era.

Precarity

While the Bubble Series makes present the multiplicity of ways of being in time and dislocation that characterise contemporaneity, the work also give a material expression of the corresponding experience of precarity.

Floating in open sea in deep water, Zhu Ming in his bubble looks decidedly precarious. The large bubble dwarfs his small naked frame, and the ocean dwarfs the bubble. Constructed from thin plastic fused into a sphere by a number of seams, the bubble looks fragile and thin, as if it will easily burst or bruise. As I outlined above, in the course of many of Zhu’s performances, the bubbles do just that: they have ripped and taken on water,121 been blown uncontrollably out to sea,122 floated in the path of motorboats and ships,123 scraped the floor of a lake (breaking Zhu’s leg),124 and trapped the artist inside, almost suffocating him.125


120 ibid. p 43.

121 During 9 March 2003 (2003), Sydney Harbour performance as part of the Liquid Sea exhibition. Also during the first time Zhu performed inside a bubble in 2007, before he made the Bubble Series: Ming, “Illusory Bubble: Dialogue between Zhu Ming and Li Xianting.”

As I outlined above, commentators and viewers from various performances have noted how precarious and vulnerable Zhu appears in the bubble and ocean. Art historian Li Zhe, for example, reported the Sydney performance she saw was ‘haunted by death. The uncertain pressure exerted by a closed environment makes the individual inside feel helpless and vulnerable.’\textsuperscript{126} Li Xianting, who watched Zhu’s performance 26 July 2002 in the Shanlao Mountain Cove in Qingdao, China, observed, ‘The environment of the ocean made the balloon and performer seem to be as fragile, insignificant, rootless and perilous as the soap balloon in real world.’\textsuperscript{127}

In this section, I explore the ways in which the Bubble Series materialises the precariousness of the contemporary condition. After briefly introducing several theories of precarity and precariousness, I will argue the bubble vessel and structure of the performance embody a confrontation with precarity – both a precarious regime of aesthetics, and a precarious dynamic of flowing and overflowing. Next I consider the ways in which the precariousness of our era plays out in the Bubble Series. I argue this precariousness is a broader ontological and existential vulnerability and argue the bubble materialises the confrontation with the Other’s precarious face.

Nicholas Bourriaud argues that central to ‘the political program of contemporary art is its recognition of the precarious condition of the world:’\textsuperscript{128}

> When we look at artistic production today, we see that in the heart of the global economic machine that favours unbridled consumerism and undermines everything that is durable, a culture is developing from the


\textsuperscript{124} 28 July 2000 (2000) for the Hong Kong-Berlin Art Festival, Berlin. Ibid. pp 22-3

\textsuperscript{125} During a 1997 performance that pre-dated the Bubble Series: Ming, “Illusory Bubble: Dialogue between Zhu Ming and Li Xianting.”

\textsuperscript{126} Zhe, “Zhu Ming.”

\textsuperscript{127} Ming, “Illusory Bubble: Dialogue between Zhu Ming and Li Xianting.”

bankruptcy of endurance that is based on that which threatens it most, namely precariousness.\textsuperscript{129}

In response to the transitory and fragile state of the world, he argues artists and developing and operating in a precarious regime of aesthetics that impregnates every aspect of artistic production. This is exemplified by the status of contemporary art itself—it sits between different disciplines, traditions, concepts and modes of use. Exhibitions, too, have a limited duration, reinforced by the speed and transience of technology. Bourriaud argues precariousness is the ‘dominant trait and the “reality”’ of the ethics of contemporary art—such that ‘the real of contemporary art is situated in precariousness.’\textsuperscript{130} Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity, whereby our society is driven by disposability and ‘the horror of expiry’,\textsuperscript{131} Bourriaud argues endurance is becoming increasingly rare. Instead, our era has developed a ‘precarious regime of aesthetics… based on speed, intermittence, blurring and fragility.’\textsuperscript{132} In this way, he argues art today is inherently transitory.

Bourriaud asserts to be precarious generally means to have ‘no definitive status and an uncertain future or final destiny’; to be ‘held in abeyance, waiting, surrounded by irresolution’ in a ‘transitory territory.’\textsuperscript{133} This does not necessarily mean the artwork itself has an ephemeral or immaterial character—although in the Bubble Series, this is also the case. To Bourriaud, the precarious stands for ‘a fundamental instability’ that ‘inscribes itself into the structure of the work itself and reflects a general state of aesthetics.’\textsuperscript{134} It is a philosophical notion, not merely a formal or demonstrative characteristic.

The Bubble Series can be read as a material expression of the precariousness Bourriaud argues defines contemporary art. Just as the bubble is inherently transient and disposable as a material, the performance, too, has a transient nature—once concluded, it is lost forever. The bubble performances manifest themselves—the bubble appears—before disappearing from sight, only to

\textsuperscript{129} ibid. p 23.
\textsuperscript{130} ibid. pp 22-3.
\textsuperscript{131} Bauman, Liquid Life. p 3.
\textsuperscript{132} Bourriaud, “Precarious Constructions: Answer to Jacques Rancière on Art and Politics.” p 23.
\textsuperscript{133} ibid. p 32.
\textsuperscript{134} ibid. p 32.
reappear intermittently in different bodies of water. Peggy Phelan, in her work on the politics of performance art, argues ‘Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.’ Phelan argues it ‘becomes itself through disappearance.’

The Bubble Series performances are inherently ephemeral. Furthermore, the status of the Bubble Series performances is also precarious: Zhu’s work has been deemed illegal in China. Performances have also been cancelled for safety reasons and, once permitted or performed in secret, whether or not they go ahead depends largely on the weather. There is nothing certain about the performances—their nature, subject matter, outcome and form, are inherently precarious.

The notion of precarity does not only apply to art practice; it is to be found in a broader interpretation describing a more generalised condition of life.

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136 See above; Berghuis, Performance Art in China. Pollack, “Chinese Photography: Beyond Stereotypes”.

137 Travel 2000 Art Fair, Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong, 2000. Zhu Ming held a secret bubble performance early in the morning before security guards came on duty, without the gallery’s permission.

138 The notion of precarity has circulated in increasingly wide fields, yet its meaning is somewhat unwieldy and indeterminate: A Mitropoulos, ‘Precari-Us?’ (2005) 29 Mute ‘The Precarious Issue’. In her ‘ontological map’ of the term, Louise Waite traces its usage from French sociology, feminist philosophy, anthropology and human geography, detailing its use as a condition (often linked to experiences of the labour market) and as a mobilising term in political activism. She suggests the word ‘conjures life worlds that are inflected with uncertainty and instability’: Louise Waite, “A Place and Space for a Critical Geography of Precarity?,” Geography Compass 3, no. 1 (2009). pp 415-16. Precarity first emerged in European sociology and the term précarité has such mainstream currency in France, it is now inscribed in law, protecting for example ‘precarious employees’ such as temporary agency workers in France’s labour law statute, the Code du travail. Outside of France, too, it is used to describe the ambient insecurity of
theorist Jean-Claude Barbier argues precarity has a wider meaning, as ‘human life is quintessentially transitory … Uncertainty and contingency are at the heart of the human condition.’\(^{139}\) Likewise, Nancy Ettlinger has an expansive view of precarity, asserting it is an ‘enduring feature of the human condition’ that is situated in the ‘microspaces of everyday life’, resonating over time and across space.\(^{140}\) It is a vulnerability that grows from contingency and an inability to predict, based on the very human urge to construct illusions of certainty from precarity. For Ettlinger, attempting to bound precarity ‘spatially and temporally is an implicitly essentialist enterprise.’\(^{141}\)

Other theorists, however, link precarity to temporality and see the condition as in some way specific and unique to the contemporary era.\(^{142}\) Waite argues the term has ‘come to prominence at a specific historical juncture in many post-industrialist societies’ and is ‘associated with changing economic landscapes, intensifying trajectories of neoliberalism and globalisation and increased mobility.’\(^{143}\) Judith Butler argues precarious life is a post-9/11 condition of existential fear, powerlessness and vulnerability linked to everyday


141 ibid. p 320.

142 Waite, “A Place and Space for a Critical Geography of Precarity?.”

143 ibid. p 416.
governmentality. Likewise, precarity is a feature of the post-Fordist economy, according to writers who see precarity in terms of labour conditions.\textsuperscript{144}

The causes of precarity are beyond the scope of this dissertation’s focus; what is important here is that precarity is ubiquitous today: it has become the new norm. The *Bubble Series* materialises this ubiquitous precariousness of our era, making present the ontological and existential experience of the frailty and vulnerability of the human condition that is exacerbated by the contemporary conditions of disjuncture, multiplicity and contingency.

Read in conjunction with the theories discussed in this section, Zhu’s work challenges Ettlinger’s contention that precarity is a timeless and placeless condition; however, I find her description of how precarity works useful in explaining one aspect of how the *Bubble Series* materialises the conditions of contemporaneity.\textsuperscript{145} Ettlinger argues we face relentless existential stress from the uncertainty and vulnerability that characterises precarious life. To cope, we attempt to distance ourselves through an essentialist urge to construct illusions of certainty. To Ettlinger, ‘People grope for the surety to navigate social, political, economic and cultural life’, developing ‘strategies that permit feelings of certainty amid uncertainty.’\textsuperscript{146} To do so, we use strategies of reflexive denial—attempting to disengage our discomfort and achieve certainty. Central to these strategies of reflexive denial is boundary construction through classification, homogenisation and legitimisation. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US, for example, Ettlinger notes there was a widespread reflex across the country of hanging American flags outside of homes. She argues we seek to ‘carve the world into

\textsuperscript{144} Neilson, B., and Rossiter, N. (2005). ‘From precarity to precariousness and back again: labour, life and unstable networks.’ *Fibreculture* Vol 5. As well as Bourriaud’s approach to art’s response to the precarious condition of the world, precarity has also been used in art history to describe the labour conditions of artists as well as the structures of artistic production. Bain and McLean trace the precarity and poverty of artists, who face higher than average employment uncertainty and structural contradictions of making art in advanced capitalist economies: Alison Bain and Heather McLean, “The Artistic Precariat,” *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 6 (2013). pp 93–111. Undertaking a close reading the performing body in contemporary art, Nicholas Ridout and Rebecca Schneider argue ‘Precarity is a life lived in relation to a future than cannot be propped securely upon the past. Precarity undoes a linear streamline of temporal progression and challenges “progress” and “development” narratives on all levels’: Ridout and Schneider, “Precarity and Performance.”

\textsuperscript{145} Ettlinger, “Precarity Unbound.” p 320.

\textsuperscript{146} ibid. p 325.
discrete, (overly) homogenous, predictable units, and erect boundaries around which people navigate their social lives and position their selves.\footnote{ibid. pp 326-7.}

Ettlinger draws on Michel Callon’s concepts of ‘overflowing’ and ‘framing’ to describe how this reflexive denial works. Framing is an exercise in classification whereby we enclose (or bracket) relations, constructing boundaries to clearly demarcate and contain internal differentiation. This is difficult to achieve, particularly due to overflows—the leaks and blurring of boundaries. Ettlinger argues by attempting to create certainty through reflexive denials, ‘actors frame and thus contain power and block overflows’, despite the inherent porousness of boundaries.\footnote{ibid. p 327. Michel Callon, “An Essay on Framing and Overflowing: Economic Externalities Revisited by Sociology,” in The Laws of the Markets, ed. Michael Callon (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1998).} Therefore, through the vulnerable and precarious bubbles, Zhu suggests that life today is characterised by complexity, isolation, fragility and disjointed experiences. To counter this, we paradoxically contain and cushion ourselves—in a bubble, for example.

By climbing into a bubble and floating in the ocean, Zhu Ming is performing this dynamic of framing and overflowing. The bubble appears sound: a transparent yet water-tight barrier between man and water. The artist is protected from the outside world, cushioned in his bubble, safe and dry from the insecurity and uncertainty embodied by the sea.

The bubble is a framing device, which cushions Zhu against reality. As I noted above, the performance has a dream-like quality. Critic Kate Davidson argues it has the capacity to ‘transport us to worlds that are completely removed from our own.’\footnote{Davidson, “Journeying to Other Worlds: Liquid Sea at the Museum of Contemporary Art.” p 32.} In most of the performances—only occasionally have they encountered problems—the artist looks serene and peaceful, lying in foetal position apparently oblivious to the dramas and dangers of the outside world. In an interview, when asked if he feels fear during the performances, Zhu replied, ‘Usually it is very relaxing. Sometimes I’ll play in the bubble and sometimes I will adopt the foetal position.’\footnote{Jinman, “Artist Does a Bubble and Streak.”}
Yet, the bubble is also at risk of overflow. As a vessel and a boundary, it is flimsy and provisional, prone to leak and overflow. In interview on his Qingdao performance 26 July 2002, in which he was swept out to sea and lost the boat accompanying him Zhu Ming said he was frightened to have lost the boat and alarmed by the dangerous undercurrents; ‘All I can do was grasping the mouth of the balloon (sic).’\textsuperscript{151} The leap of faith Zhu takes in entering the bubble exposes the illusory nature of any sense of certainty in the otherwise precarious performance.

Zhu may often look relaxed inside the bubble, like a foetus cushioned against the outside world. However, this bubble of certainty is prone to burst at any moment, quite literally. The protective layer is frail and flimsy at best. The \textit{Bubble Series} offers more than just the suggestion of danger; nothing is certain or stable. In subject matter and form, the work materialises contemporaneity’s fundamental lack of stability and the leaky and precarious illusion of certainty.

\textbf{The confronting precariousness of the Other’s face}

While floating in a flimsy bubble in open water may be a precarious act, it is the physical presence of the artist’s body that makes this message particularly powerful. The \textit{Bubble Series} does not simply depict a figure in danger in a painting; it contains real live flesh and blood. Just as the artist is physically present, the audience, too, becomes implicated in the performance.\textsuperscript{152} In this section, I argue the ethical implications of our response to Zhu’s vulnerable body extends the concept of precarity into Judith Butler’s concept of ‘precariousness’.\textsuperscript{153} As such, the \textit{Bubble Series} exposes viewers to their own precarity through a confrontation with the body of the Other.

While the bubble performances in Shanghai and Hong Kong took place in secret without an audience, the audience had a central role in the performances in Miami and Sydney. As I noted above, the latter performances were organised by galleries and advertised to the public. The Sydney works \textit{9 March 2003, 15 March 2003 and 16 March 2003} all took place on weekends in late summer in a bustling part of Sydney Harbour. As such, while some viewers may have come specifically for the performance, many others would have stumbled upon it accidentally. A viewer who knows that Zhu is an artist performing in a bubble approaches it within a particular frame: organised by the Museum of Contemporary Art, presumably he is not really in danger; there must be insurance and rescue plans;

\textsuperscript{151} Ming, “Illusory Bubble: Dialogue between Zhu Ming and Li Xianting.”

\textsuperscript{152} Berghuis, \textit{Performance Art in China}.

\textsuperscript{153} Butler, \textit{Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence}.
no need to call the coast guard. However, the vision of a naked man bobbing along in a giant flimsy bubble in the harbour must have been puzzling for those unaware of its nature as contemporary art. An accidental viewer might wonder, is he allowed to do that? Is he in danger? Might he need rescuing? This accidental viewing experience raises ethical questions about the artist’s precariousness—and it is this relationship between accidental viewer and precarious performance that I will now examine.

For Butler, precariousness is an ontological concept of shared vulnerability. This vulnerability is not just a bodily threat or danger, but something more: an existential precariousness. According to Butler, we are social beings, our lives dependent on and enabled by forces outside ourselves, such as other people, institutions, and so on. Yet these very conditions—our dependence and reliance on others—make life precarious.

This brings a relationship between us (the Self) and the Other. In this relationship, Butler argues we come to consider humanisation and dehumanisation, how some are represented and humanised and others not regarded at all. This relationship calls forth ethical responsibilities and according to Butler, raises ‘an insurrection at the level of ontology, a critical opening up of the questions, What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade?’ Zhu in a bubble becomes the Other, whose body might convey ‘the meaning of this precariousness.’

Butler’s argument about precariousness is helpful in thinking about the impact of engaging with the hazy outline of a naked man being tossed in the waves in a flimsy inflatable bubble. Transformative responses and political ethics aside, what is important here is the impact of the physical presence of Zhu’s body inside the bubble. By exposing his naked body to the dangers of the bubble and ocean, Zhu

154 ibid.

155 Butler draws on the work of Emmanuel Levinas to argue for an ethics of non-violence, particularly in the context of the Palestinian Israeli conflict. According to Butler, the face of Levinas’ Other makes an ethical demand, reminding us of our own vulnerability while simultaneously triggering an anxiety—a temptation even—that it’s a dog eat dog world and we might need to kill the Other for our own survival. She sees the Other’s ‘face’ as a mode of address, a representation of something unrepresentable, carrying the meaning of precariousness. Ibid. pp 33 & 135.

156 ibid.

157 ibid. p 135.
confronts viewers with something unrepresentable: the illusory nature of security and safety in precarious life.

The presence of the artist’s body inside the bubble demands a particularly affective response. Rebecca Schneider argues performance artworks linger—even after the performance has finished—through the body’s affective response. For Schneider, affect is ‘situated, like atmosphere, between bodies.’ It is as if affect ‘jumps’: it ‘crosses borders of bodies, getting into and out of bodies, as if there were no material border of consequence even “if only for a minute”.’

The affect can almost jump from Zhu’s body, through the bubble’s transparent walls and into the bodies of those watching on the shore.

The Bubble Series has a physicality: human flesh and blood in the cold depths of the ocean. Butler argues the body—or the face, as she frames it—‘speaks in something other than language to know the precariousness of life that is at stake.’ Zhu’s presence in the water is perplexing and ominous. In Butler’s words, this is ‘the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense.’ Confronting the vision of the Other means we ‘would have to interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense.’

Naked and anonymous, Zhu inside the bubble stands in for everyman. What is particularly confronting about the work is not so much a fear that we might need to get in to the water to rescue him; it is a broader fear of precariousness. As Butler suggests, ‘To respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life, or, rather, the precariousness of life itself.’ The work confronts us with a fear that, despite our illusions of certainty and security, we too are actually as precarious as the bubble man; our lives are as vulnerable, complex, disjointed, fragile and isolated. The performance leaves an affective ‘residue’.

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160 ibid. p 151.

161 ibid. p 134.
In the Bubble Series, the bubble confronts the viewer with a realisation that our contemporary era means living in a condition of permanent uncertainty. Analysing the performing body in contemporary art, Ridout and Schneider describe precarity as ‘a life lived in relation to a future that cannot be propped securely upon the past.’ In their view, precarity ‘undoes a linear streamline of temporal progression and challenges “progress” and “development” narratives on all levels.’ However, it is not an experience of precarity itself that undoes linear temporality or narratives of progress, although they go hand in hand.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the ways in which the Bubble Series’ performances of a bubble floating in water materialises three conditions of contemporaneity: a multiplicity of temporalities, dislocation and precariousness. The ongoing performances are characterised by a multiplicity of ways of being in time. The bubble materialises a return back to the very beginning and it stretches time out across the continuous cycle of life. The bubble’s ephemeral nature shows time running out and inevitably disappearing, yet its uncertain path points to a time in the future and an anticipation of what will happen next. Jostling between these temporal disjunctures is an ongoing temporal presentness and immediacy.

Alongside this asynchronic co-temporality, the bubble also is a material expression of contemporaneity’s placemaking against a jumble of location, dislocation and ubiquity. The bubble is everywhere and nowhere, anchored to the location of each performance, connected to China and yet circulating globally. Its journey grows from and shows a world that is mismatched and disjointed. This is a world picture characterised by seeking location and experiencing dislocation, everywhere, always.

Finally, drifting without coordinates and in deep, potentially perilous waters, the bubble materialises the precarious uncertainty of our current condition. Faced with vulnerability from all of this rupture, complexity and multiplicity, the bubble confronts us with our own precarity. It simultaneously acts out and exposes an attempt to construct an illusion of certainty, the bubble cushioning the artist from the insecurity of the outside world, yet threatening to burst at any moment. The presence of the artist’s naked flesh and blood demands an affective response from viewers, a realisation that a bubble cannot really protect a man—or the viewer—from the precariousness and accelerating complexity of the current era.

163 Ridout and Schneider, “Precarity and Performance.” p 5.
Water in this work acts as a vocabulary that gives a material expression to contemporaneity’s multiplicity of ways of being in time and place, and the uncertainty from its relentless precariousness. Smith argues we have ‘come to realize that we are all living in a condition of permanent transition, and moving toward uncertain, unpredictable futures.’ The bubble’s journey—and its provisionality, ubiquity, transience and precariousness—materialise three aspects of this new condition.

In the following chapter on Another Water, we will see again this location/dislocation dynamic. However, of all of the three case studies, the Bubble Series is the only global, multi-location performance work. The artist’s body is not present in the next two case studies: Roni Horn’s Another Water depicts only water, but this water is heavy with the imagined presence of bodies referred to in footnotes and obituaries. In his video work Five Angels, Bill Viola originally filmed bodies, but decontextualises them by attempting to harness their pace and trajectory. Despite their diversity in materiality and form, however, the confronting precariousness of contemporaneity’s uncertainty and fluidity is echoed by the vocabulary of water in the following two chapters.

CHAPTER 3

Another Water: The end of certainty

In 1998, Roni Horn spent several weeks on a tugboat on the River Thames, photographing the river’s surface. The photographs have grown into what Horn describes as a ‘multipartite epic project [that] cycles back on itself.’ 1 The River Thames project is an investigation into the multiple meanings and possibilities of water and resulted in a number of closely connected works in different mediums. This chapter will focus on one of the project’s iterations—her artist’s book Another Water (The River Thames for Example) (2000)—although it will do so within the context of Horn’s extended body of work on the Thames (and her related works on water more generally).

Horn’s explicit focus on water began with the River Thames project. 2 Originally commissioned by the Public Art Development Trust in London, she started

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2 Horn also has large body of work on Iceland that features a great deal of water—such as VATNASAFN/Library of Water (2007); and the nine volumes of her encyclopaedic books on Iceland, To Place (1990-ongoing), some of which have become larger-scale installations, such as Pi (1998) and Doubt by Water (2003-4).
researching the river in 1998. She commissioned a photographer, Nic Tenwiggenhorn, and the pair rented a tugboat, spending several weeks in two different seasons chugging along the Thames. Horn had scaffolding built into the boat to suspend the camera over the water, mimicking the vantage point of a person gazing into the water from a riverbank. Horn has since used these photographs in a range of works relating to the River Thames.

In 1999, a year before Another Water was published, Horn first exhibited 15 of her Thames photographs as a series of offset lithographs titled Still Water (The River Thames, for Example) (1999). The prints are 76.2 by 104.1 centimetres, and depict only water on the river’s surface, apart from a light peppering of tiny white numbers, which at first glance could be bubbles, froth or litter. At the foot of each photograph in Still Water, there is a white band of footnotes, which correspond to the numbers superimposed over the water. These numbers are scattered across each image, so this linking of number with footnote makes a linear, chronological reading difficult.

Saying Water (1999) is a sound piece Horn performed at the opening of the exhibition, Still Water. Like much of her work, Still Water has taken many forms, at times accompanied by a slide show, and its duration varies. Horn has described it as a monologue which drops the visual entirely, although another version has been

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3 Roni Horn, Roni Horn Aka Roni Horn: Catalogue, vol. 1 (New York and Göttingen: Whitney Museum of American Art and Steidl Verlag, 2009). p 125. The commission was part of a larger public arts project involving artists from both London and New York, commissioned by the Public Arts Development Trust and Minetta Brook, to make works about the Thames and Hudson rivers.

4 “The Master Chameleon,” Tate Etc Visiting and Revisiting Art, etcetera, no. 10 – Summer (2007); ibid.

5 Rather than reading the footnotes one after another, I find myself jumping between footnote and image. Mark Godfrey argues the experience of looking at these still images is fluid as the eye is drawn across the various swirling and calm surfaces of the water: These photographs produce stillness and movement, a dynamic that intensifies when we begin to pick out “a sprinkle of little numbers” across the surfaces, corresponding to the footnotes running like a stream of language below.’ Mark Godfrey in Roni Horn Aka Roni Horn: Subject Index, 2. p 134.

6 In Saying Water (1999), Horn linked chains of quotations by Emily Dickinson, Hank Williams and Martin Heidegger, for example. See Judith Russi Kirshner, “Roni Horn: Art Institute of Chicago,” ArtForum 43, no. 1 (2004).
incorporated into a video recording. In 2009, a sound recording of this work accompanied an exhibition at the Tate, and in October 2012, Horn performed a version of Saying Water during her residency of ‘A Room for London’, a one-bedroom installation and ‘riverboat’ perched on the roof of the Queen Elizabeth Hall on the banks of the River Thames.

Some Thames (2000) is an installation from 2003, which again takes the River Thames as its subject. Featuring 80 large-scale photographs, the installation captures different views of the water, this time without any text. Another element of Horn’s extended project includes the publication Dictionary of Water (2001). This book features 96 digitally manipulated colour photographs of the river’s surface—Horn describes it as the ‘book version’ of Some Thames. The book was promoted as the completion of Horn’s study of the river, ‘a perfect final statement of the work.’ It offers ‘ninety-five answers, ninety-five directions, ninety-five possibilities … Here in a dictionary because water is the ultimate lexicon, because Horn’s work is always about completeness.’

These works are iterations of a wider meditation on water in the River Thames. They frequently reference each other—Another Water and Still Water and Some Thames feature many of the same photographs and footnotes. The books Another Water and Dictionary of Water display image after image of water alone, framed in much the same way. Exhibitions of Still Water and Some Thames feature photographs hung the same way, in the same frames, with consistent spacing: they are a series of images which, apart from slight variations in colour and texture, are (almost, but not quite) the same.

With so many iterations of the wider Thames project, Horn’s works related to Another Water have been exhibited extensively around the world. Still Water was first exhibited at CAPC Musée d’Art Contemporain, Bordeaux, France in late 1999, and was exhibited in 2000 at Castello di Rivoli in Turin, Italy; Timothy Taylor Gallery in London; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. A catalogue Still Water: Photographs by Roni Horn and John Waters, John Waters Interviews Artist Roni Horn at the Boston I.C.A.


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7 Roni Horn and John Waters, John Waters Interviews Artist Roni Horn at the Boston I.C.A. (Boston Institute of Contemporary Art, 2010).


9 Some Thames, Inkjet print on lacquered paper.

10 Horn and Waters, John Waters Interviews Artist Roni Horn at the Boston I.C.A.

Roni Horn was published in 2000, on the occasion of the exhibition of Still Water at the Lannan Foundation and SITE Santa Fe.\textsuperscript{12}

Some Thames was first exhibited in Museo Serralves, Porto, Portugal, in 2001, before it was permanently installed at the University of Akureyri in Iceland in 2003. Horn designed the exhibition to inhabit an entire building, with the photographs running through the exhibition space, offices and bathrooms. In an interview, Horn said she hopes the students, teachers and cleaners who use the building stumble upon different parts of the artwork each day and as time goes by and they move through different parts of the building, they discover more of the work. Horn sees the work as a ‘flow through’ and a ‘monumental work of unknown size’, as the viewer only experiences it in a piecemeal way.\textsuperscript{13} Another iteration of Some Thames was exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2004.

Horn’s work has also been shown in her major solo exhibition, Roni Horn aka Roni Horn, from 2009 to 2010. Jointly organised by the Tate Modern in London and New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art, the exhibition also toured to Boston’s ICA and Collection Lambert in Avignon, France. Horn’s River Thames works have also featured in group exhibitions around the theme of water.\textsuperscript{14}

Another Water, the specific work which is the focus of this chapter, is slightly larger than an A4 artist’s book, featuring 52 photographs of the river’s changing surface across 112 pages.\textsuperscript{15} Like the other iterations of the broader project, the

\textsuperscript{12} Roni Horn, Still Water: Photographs by Roni Horn, Santa Fe, New Mexico: SITE Santa Fe, in collaboration with Lannan Foundation, 2000. The book contains 15 four-colour plates of the 15 photographs from the exhibition, measuring 15 x 21 inches.

\textsuperscript{13} The work is a wild thing running through the building like the Thames runs through the urban area. Horn, Roni Horn Aka Roni Horn: Subject Index, 2. pp 124-6. See also Horn and Waters, John Waters Interviews Artist Roni Horn at the Boston I.C.A.

\textsuperscript{14} Water Work at Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA (2010); Water in Photography at Huis Marseille stichting voor fotografie, Amsterdam (2008); Grey Water at IMA Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, QLD (2007); Water at The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, Saint Louis, MO (2007); Im Flus at Weserburg Museum für moderne Kunst, Bremen, Germany (2007); Water, Water Everywhere … at Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Scottsdale, Arizona (2005); H2O (x) + 6 at Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, CA (2004); Sea Change—The Seascape in Contemporary Photography at International Center of Photography, New York City, NY (1999).

\textsuperscript{15} The book measures approximately 19.75 x 30cm and is 1cm thick. Scalo first published Another Water in 2000, while Steidl published a revised edition in 2011, on which I have
photographs depict only water, apart from a white strip of numbered paragraphs in the style of footnotes at the bottom of the page—although unlike in Still Water, these notes have no corresponding referent on the photograph. Every six or seven pages, a blank page punctures the sequences of photographs, followed by a full page of text, taken from forensic reports and obituaries, that details suicides and deaths involving the Thames.

In this chapter, I will examine how water in Another Water gives a material expression to the uncertainty that characterises our current condition, and in particular calls into question notions of identity. To explore this, I focus on how water is deployed in Horn’s work as a means of subverting certainty and providing the viewer an experience of a vision of contemporary identity.

Another Water appears to mimic a scientific study or encyclopaedia of water, but, as I argue in this chapter, the way in which water is presented, cited and analysed disrupts scientific categories and subverts the possibility of certainty. The reader cannot be sure they are actually seeing water—it is increasingly made strange. Through the use of iteration, water is presented as a chameleon, leaving the viewer with the realisation that water is multiple and complex, a relationship between different states and ideas. What at first appears to be the most simplest of compounds is made strange, as Horn unravels any sense that one might have of knowing the River Thames, water and indeed knowing oneself.

This identity-as-water confronts the viewer with the experience of ambivalence and exhilaration from contemporaneity’s collapse of binaries and its dissolution of certainties, such that you are water and water is you. By introducing doubt and multiplicity, the work also suggests other ways of seeing water and, by analogy, identity: as androgyny, and ultimately a solvent.

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Based my analysis. The first edition was available in gallery bookshops and the new edition can still be purchased from the publisher’s website and online bookstores. According to the Hauser & Wirth website, the revised edition features ‘a new edit of the photographic aspect of the work. Over 50% of the photographs are new to the work.’ Hauser & Wirth, “Publications: Roni Horn, Another Water,” Hauser & Wirth. This edition has a different photograph on the cover—it is darker, one third black with two thirds mottled by light bluish reflection. The original issue featured a lighter sepia-coloured photograph with light brown reflections that almost look like dark icebergs moving across darker brown water. The layout of some footnote text on the front and back covers is different; otherwise the text is largely the same.
For Horn, androgyny is not just an adjective; nor is it only about gender. Androgyny in Horn’s work is used, I suggest, to denote multiple identities, an existence of multiplicity and difference without any contradiction—to be this and that. I argue that the work uses this concept of androgyny to materialise the collapse of certainties and binaries that shape the contemporary condition, and thereby offers a new figuration for identity.

The final part of this chapter considers the dark undercurrent of dissolution in Another Water, and proposes a third way in which the work materialises the conditions of contemporaneity: by confronting the viewer with the boundlessness of the void. Another Water stands for the ambivalent challenge of undoing fixed certainties and embracing a watery identity. It is a material expression of the thrill and fear of the ‘rush into the synthesizable’ that Smith argues characterises our era. Another Water grapples with what Smith describes as ‘the minefields of our estrangement’ and ‘the gathering darkness of these shape-shattering antinomies.’

However, before turning to the ways in which a vocabulary of water in the work expresses the dynamics of our era, I will begin with a close reading of the work, based on my own engagement with Another Water and reflecting on that of others, along with Horn’s own cryptic commentary, which can only really be understood as a further iteration of the works themselves.

Close reading
At first glance, the book Another Water seems repetitive: it is mostly page after page of water. The 52 photos are each full bleed, the water spilling to the edges of each double spread. The photographs have a shallow depth of field, with an equal focus across the surface of the image. Iwona Blazwick, director of Whitechapel Gallery, UK, argues Horn’s images have an ‘antipictorial emphasis on the materiality of the water’, as if they are almost accidental photographs, backgrounds without subjects or foregrounds. They seem like abstract studies of texture and colour.


18 Blazwick in Horn, Roni Horn Aka Roni Horn: Subject Index, 2. p 12.
Figure 16: internal pages from Roni Horn, *Another Water* (The River Thames, for example) (2000).
Yet despite their serial, indexical nature and their focus on water alone, the photos are a hyperactivity of detail. The moving water is captured with such precision and clarity that it has a three-dimensional sculptural quality. The variations in the water’s surfaces are remarkable: sometimes it is a smooth polished stone or a viscous black liquid, or aspic. Then it is the wrinkled skin of an old hand or an elephant, or rough wood, or snowy mountain ranges viewed from the sky, or crinkled plastic.

The photographs are murky, the colours so subtle they could almost be in black and white with a greenish wash, or a grisaille. Yet on closer inspection, and encouraged by Horn’s provocations, presented as if footnotes to nowhere in particular, I notice the wide range of colours from lavender, amber and teal, slate grey, silver, swampy greens and blues. It almost becomes a game, with Horn quizzing in a footnote about some particularly yellow-ish water, ‘Is this khaki or beige … beige or ochre … ochre or yellow … yellow or tan … brown or black?’ (note 28-37). The colours seem evasive and muddled, half from the sky and half khaki, which Horn defines as having ‘all the colours in it, though none are visible, and the whole of it is nondescript’ (note 555).

These notes—832 in total—sit at the bottom of each photograph on a white background. They run from the front cover, across each page, to the back cover, where they end mid-sentence. They describe the experience of water; refer to reflections and random facts, to various cultural and literary sources such as songs and poems; to wetness, photography, sounds. They also mention suicides on the River Thames. They cite forensic, meteorological, geological and chemical reports. Other notes are more poetic, analytical and associative, listing insights, fears and fantasies, and quoting newspaper articles and obituaries.

Seven times in the book, a double spread interrupts the water, containing a blank page on the left, and a white page with text on the right (Figure 17). In each instance, the text is a coronial report or obituary examining a suicide in the River Thames: a stark naked jeweller’s apprentice with chronic acne found tangled in a ladder near a wharf; a middle-aged man fished from the river with a large dictionary in his pocket and ‘various bits of hardware—nuts, washers, and screws, and £168.52 in coins—weighing thirty-two pounds’ buckled to his waist (note 180).

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19 It is actually possible to see occasional reflections, bubbles and debris in the water on a couple of the photographs, such as on the pages beginning with footnotes 546, 148 and 223. However these details are rare, difficult to find and not readily noticed. See John Muse, *The Rhetorical Afterlife of Photographic Evidence: Roland Barthes, Avital Ronell, Roni Horn* (Berkley: University of California, 2006). p 115.
Another Water: The end of certainty

Figure 17:内部页面来自Roni Horn，Another Water (例如泰晤士河)（2000）。

126 | Another Water: The end of certainty
The sudden whiteness of the paper provides a stark contrast to the photographs, and breaks up the repetition of the murky tones of water. Lulled by seven barely distinguishable images of water, the viewer is suddenly confronted by a blank sheet, and then details of a dead body found in the water.

The text on these pages is written in an authoritative, objective style. Each report follows a formal structure, first identifying the deceased through factual observations, then a list of what the deceased was wearing; a description of the crime scene; a chronological narrative of events including how the body was found; witness statements and other evidence; and finally the context surrounding the death, sometimes with suggestions about why it occurred: ‘Mr Mutton had left the keys to his home in the front door. The house had been thoroughly cleaned and tidied. The refrigerator was empty, unplugged, with the door left ajar.’ (D.B. 9.93). The reports are written in concise shorthand in a neutral tone with an emphasis on fact. They contain logical deductions based on evidence and detailed observations. The victims are described and identified through observation, such as ‘D.B. 2.96 (Jeanne Falcon)’:


The victims are also often referred to as ‘bodies’ and body parts:

Body was found floating face-down in the vicinity of H.M.S. Belfast.
Shoulder strap of handbag was wrapped tightly around neck. The bag itself was lodged snugly under the chin. (D.B. 2.96)

The text is voiceless in both the notes at the foot of each photograph and the full-page reports, which highlights the impact of the entire work as a forensic documentation of the river and related events. However, as I will examine below, the relentless repetition of image and fact begins to question the very possibility of knowing the River Thames.

There are common threads throughout this body of work, and themes which ripple out across Horn’s other works, such as the photo series This is Me, This is You and glass blocks Asphere, Untitled (Yes)–1 and Untitled (Yes)–2 (2001). Horn’s works are often interlinked, and it is not easy to keep track of the various editions, supplements and codas. Another Water has a large number of photographs and the most extensive body of footnotes, as well as additional forensic material such as suicide reports. Its repetitive nature provides a micro-experience of Horn’s work as a whole and works well as an overview of Horn’s approach to water. However,

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20 Such as ‘Mr Mutton had left the keys to his home in the front door. The house had been thoroughly cleaned and tidied. The refrigerator was empty, unplugged, with the door left ajar.’ (D.B. 9.93)
the works are so interlinked it is limiting to view them completely separately. Although this chapter will largely focus on Another Water, it will do so within the context of Horn’s related works. Lynne Cooke argues ‘such additions or extensions of a corpus become a constant in [Horn’s] work, a way of expanding on the “event of relation.” Future indefinite.’ 21 To Cooke, viewing Horn’s works in isolation:

will have a circumscribed experience; for the whole is relational, critically engaging the viewer as an essential agent who interacts with each of the parts. That interaction is crucial; for it is only in memory—only over time—that these dual experiences come together to disclose the bifurcated unity. 22

For this reason, Another Water can be best understood when viewed alongside her other work.

In comparison with Zhu Ming, a great deal has been written about Horn’s work. Art historian Briony Fer has written extensively on Horn in articles and catalogues, and co-curated the 2009-10 retrospective exhibition Roni Horn aka Roni Horn. She also contributed to its catalogue Subject Index. 23 The curators, critics and art historians Mark Godfrey and Lynne Cooke have similarly written articles and catalogues and curated exhibitions. 24

Other important critical contributions to Horn’s work include Jeanette Winterson, Julie Belcove, Robert Enright, Martin Herbert and Elisabeth

21 Horn, Roni Horn Aka Roni Horn: Subject Index, 2. p 151.


In an article in *New Art Look*, Winterson observes, ‘Horn’s work is obsessed with water.’ Focusing on a wide range of Horn’s works in the context of her retrospective *Roni Horn aka Roni Horn*, Winterson sees the passage that Horn’s work has taken as often river-like in itself: ‘its doublings, its caracoles, its mirror images, its watery surfaces, its strange depths, its capacity to carry the frightening mutability of matter …’ To Winterson, Horn’s ‘surfaces are never simply surfaces’. Through the relationship between the visible and invisible, Horn is able to reveal the ‘actual’.

In a 2007 article in *ArtReview*, Martin Herbert analyses several of Horn’s works about water, including *Another Water*, and explicitly invokes water’s qualities to argue that together Horn’s works ‘create the conditions for experiencing the fluid motion of identity.’ Likewise, Markovitz Goldstein, when experiencing Horn’s works, observes:

**References**


Academic and artist John Muse completed his PhD partly on *Another Water* in 2007, however he has not otherwise published writing on Horn. Muse’s dissertation, *The Rhetorical Afterlife of Photographic Evidence: Roland Barthes, Avital Ronell, Roni Horn*, examines the rhetoric of photography and the connection between photographs and the contexts of their reception in Roland Barthes’ writing: Muse, *The Rhetorical Afterlife of Photographic Evidence: Roland Barthes, Avital Ronell, Roni Horn*.


27 ibid.

28 ibid.

the viewer becomes one with the artwork, just as the model becomes part
of the watery, dreamy landscape around her. The interpolative pronoun
“you” (a common thread in Horn’s titles) invites viewers into an intimate
relationship with the images.30

Horn, too, has written and spoken extensively about her own work and water’s
significance in it.31 Alongside Another Water, Still Water and Dictionary of Water
she has authored 22 books on topics including the weather, identity and Iceland.
She has also given numerous interviews and written about the meaning of her
own work.32 For her 2009 retrospective, Horn created a book, Roni Horn AKA Roni
Horn: Subject Index as a companion to the exhibition catalogue. The book is a thick
glossary defining terms related to Horn’s work. Much of the writing comes from
Horn’s published books, interviews, letters and unpublished notes, as well as
excerpts by curators and Horn’s friends and fellow writers and artists. The book
lists ‘keys and cues’ to Horn’s work in alphabetical order, with entries such as
‘Abba’, ‘androgyne’, ‘anhydrony’ and ‘Another Water’. In a twist on authorial
autonomy, Horn makes her own artistic practice the subject of an encyclopaedic
work. The book functions as a work of art in itself, as well as an extension to past
works. Occasionally, Horn’s voice is interspersed with readings by others. In the
introduction, the exhibition directors, Donna De Salvo, Carter Foster and Mark
Godfrey, note that Subject Index undermines the authority of a single-volume
catalogue, and works as a meta version of the actual works—a parallel or parallax

30 Markovitz Goldstein, “Roni Horn AKA Roni Horn.”

31 Such as Roni Horn, “Cultural Cartography: Roni Horn,” in Frieze Foundation: Frieze
Talks (2007); “Interview with James Lingwood: Some Thames: Háskólinn Á Akureyri”
(Göttingen, Germany, 2003). “Roni Horn in Conversation,” in Tate Channel (London:
Service (PBS), 2009); “Roni Horn in Conversation.” See also Horn’s writing: Roni Horn
Aka Roni Horn: Subject Index, 2; Horn and Spinelli, “Roni Horn: Interview with Claudia
Spinelli.”; Horn, Interview: Roni Horn | Water; “Cultural Cartography: Roni Horn.”

32 Horn’s To Place series has 11 books so far, each examining a specific aspect of Iceland.
See eg Horn, Roni. Folds. (To Place, book II.) New York: Mary Boone Gallery, 1991;
Horn, Roni. Arctic circles. (To Place, book VII.) Denver, CO: Ginny Williams, 1998; and
Roni. Doubt box. (To Place, book IX.) Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2006. Horn’s other
books about water and the weather include Horn, Roni. You are the weather. Zurich and
New York: Scalo in collaboration with Fotomuseum Winterthur, 1997; Horn, Roni,
Louise Bourgeois, Anne Carson, Hélène Cixous, and John Waters. Wonderwater (Alice
London: Artangel/Steidl, 2007. See also Roni Horn Aka Roni Horn: Subject Index, 2.
which expands on and displaces the original. Like water itself, Horn’s work on water is hard to pin down. Horn herself notes, ‘The problem with the project is that there are a dozen projects, and I get them all confused.’

Writing about Roni Horn aka Roni Horn, New York Times art critic Roberta Smith argues, ‘Horn’s writing voice rises above the others. It is one of the most memorable aspects of the show.’ She sees much of Horn’s work as ‘engagingly autobiographical’:

In a way her most complex creation is her own persona, as suggested by a recent work titled “a k a”… As you watch her grow up, and her sense of identity and sexuality mutate, the work becomes a poignant reminder of how much change a lifetime can bring…

In a 2009 interview Horn stated, ‘there was some criticism about “You shouldn’t do that, Roni. People will think the book’s all about you.” Yeah? Well, the book is about me.’ Horn is explicit about the degree to which her work examines the concept of identity, but asserts that any self-exploration that is undertaken is just as much that of the viewer’s or anyone else’s. ‘I don’t necessarily think of myself as a visual artist primarily,’ she states. ‘A lot of my work is really very conceptual, and it has very little visual aspect to it, the sculpture especially. That work is more powerfully about experience and presence than it is about a powerful visual experience.’ Her work is not about her own experiences but about the nature of experiences more generally.

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33 ibid. p 12.

34 Horn’s work has been shown around the world in group and solo exhibitions, and a number of scholars have studied her work. Curator Briony Fer has written articles and catalogues about Horn, as well as curating exhibitions such as Roni Horn aka Roni Horn in 2009; Fer, “Open Books: Briony Fer on Roni Horn’s Vatnasafn/Library of Water.” Mark Godfrey and Lynne Cooke have made similar contributions, curating exhibitions and writing catalogue essays: Godfrey, “Roni Horn’s Icelandic Encyclopaedia.” Cooke, “Introduction.” and “Introduction.”; Horn, Roni Horn Aka Roni Horn: Catalogue, 1.

35 Interview: Roni Horn | Water.

36 Smith, “Gaining a Voice and an Identity in Minimalism.”

37 ibid.


39 ibid.
While Horn and others have written a great deal about the River Thames project, I take a different approach in this dissertation. Throughout the following three sections, I consider the ways in which Another Water acts as a vocabulary to articulate several aspects of the contemporary condition which relate to ways of knowing—most significantly what we can know about ourselves and others.

The vocabulary of water in Another Water

Uncertainty

Water is a powerful matter in Another Water. To examine more precisely the way in which water functions as a vocabulary in the work and what is at stake, I first focus on the theme of uncertainty. In this section, I examine ways in which Horn’s work materialises and is symptomatic of the collapse of epistemological certainties which characterise contemporaneity. Later in this chapter, I return to this theme in the context of the inevitability of relentless change and movement, and the resulting confrontation with the boundlessness of the void.

Another Water materialises the uncertain, contingent and shape shifting nature of our current era, first through miming a scientific study of states of water. But, right from the beginning, this study is complicated by the fact that the viewer cannot be sure whether they are really seeing water at all. As the apparent study continues, the viewer is led to wonder: if something as fundamental as water might not actually be water, can any certainty be trusted?

Another Water has a scientific dimension, including such activities as footnoting and mapping. It becomes a kind of logbook that archives, catalogues and classifies a journey on the river. The photographs are scientific studies of turbulence. They index the colour and texture of the water. The footnotes, too, systematically note logical oppositions of colour, darkness and light, transparency and opacity. They seek to classify and catalogue the water. For instance, note 317, lists:


Other notes use scientific language to make statements and observations, such as note 167:

167 Water is transparence derived from the presence of everything. That is water sifted down, filtered through the planet Earth, earth—aquifer that clarifies and realizes purity. This filter of everything modulates to exquisite
balance: a substance is obtained that bears no likeness. All things converge into a single identity: water.’

*Another Water* continues to reference this modern scientific worldview. Through its scientific attention to categorising the river’s various states and indexing its victims, *Another Water* becomes a kind of encyclopaedia. The River Thames is itself mapped, photographed, documented and archived. The work contains numerous references to the river, differentiating the Thames from other famous rivers and defining its singular identity through notable facts and figures. It indexes the river through references to songs, poetry, art, film and urban myths. It refers to the river’s specific meteorology, geology, chemistry and forensic science.

The obituaries and coronial reports also reference this empirical discourse. As well as the authoritative, official language I described above, the authors of each police report are not identified, and are thereby rendered invisible and insignificant. The reports imply that the identity of the victim and the circumstances of death can be ascertained through evidence and rigor; the where, when, why and how of each death is thus outlined with logical accuracy. This kind of scientific certainty rests on a particular view of knowledge and truth, which underpins legal science and formalism. Modernist values of knowledge and truth were centred on a scientific paradigm, once viewed as the archetype of knowledge. This knowledge was based on proven and undeniable hard facts.

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40 Such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s 1969 film, *Why Does Herr R Run Amok?* (note 76); Claude Monet (n 98); Neil Young (n 172); Joseph Conrad’s book *Heart of Darkness* (n 208); Wallace Stevens 1923 poem “Domination of Black” from *Harmonium* (n 229).

41 Such as geology (note 156); the physics of opacity (n 159-60), transparency (n 167) and light (n 178); and chemistry (n 437). Other notes compare the Thames to the Hudson (n 175); ask ‘Are you wondering if I’m talking about the Ganges? Or the Yangtze? Or even the Congo?’ (n 260); wonder where rivers end, and whether the Thames really ends in the North Sea (n 460-1); and ask ‘Which river did Bruce Springsteen get his baby pregnant down by?’ (n 496) ‘See the song “The River”. He doesn’t name the river in that song.’ (n 497).

42 In the acknowledgements for *Another Water*, Horn writes ‘Suicide accounts were gathered from policemen. Incidental information from boatmen, taxi drivers and individuals working on the River’. The book’s promotional text states the ‘so-called “Dead Body Reports”’ were ‘collected from the logs of Scotland Yard.’ It is nevertheless unclear whether Horn wrote the coronial reports herself.
The photographs of the river, too, initially appear to follow this scientific paradigm of objectivity and accuracy. They have a quality of seriality, almost mechanically cataloguing the various states of the water’s surface. The photography is meticulously executed; the water is carefully framed not to show the reflection of the boat, its wake, or the photographer. The reader can see the water, but does not see from what point they are seeing, or whether the water has a particular depth. Of the book, John Muse observes, ‘I am not to see that I am seeing it. I am held aloft, the ground no ground at all, the photographs providing both the lift and the security of a pose.’ Alongside scientific conventions of footnoting, classification and authoritative and objective language, the deliberate absence of subjectivity in the photographs can be seen creating an air of scientific certainty.

This echoes historical conceptualisations and representations of water. To provide spatial stability and somewhat appease the terror of the void, early cartographers sought to categorise and frame the ocean in maps, sometimes using mythical sea creatures or invented continents to fill the gaps.44 Centuries later, empirical thinkers continued to conquer the dangerous and unknowable void of the ocean. In the late eighteenth century, water was named as a chemical compound, significantly shaping how water was (and is) understood. This modern scientific worldview, whereby water became an object of chemical discourse for classification and exploitation, gradually replaced the mythical and religious filters of the past.45

Our modern understanding of the encyclopaedia’s role as a printed, general-knowledge, widely distributed map of knowledge has roots in the 18th century


work of Diderot and D’Alembert. Their *Encyclopédie* was first published between 1751 and 1772 and contained 33 volumes of text and plates compiled by 140 scholars.\(^{46}\) It sought to be a compendium of all knowledge—to understand and map the ‘system of human knowledge’ or the ‘tree of knowledge’.\(^{47}\) Today’s encyclopaedias have retained these characteristics, with information categorised alphabetically or hierarchically, offering systematic, accurate and totalising knowledge. Just like an encyclopaedia, in *Another Water*, the river, its water and its victims appear knowable and objectively catalogued.\(^{48}\)

However, while ‘scientific’ investigation is at the heart of the work, this encyclopaedia of identity has more in common with Borges’ fictional Chinese encyclopaedia than with the encyclopaedists’ volumes.\(^{49}\) In the preface to *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault writes that his laughter at Borges’ encyclopaedia shattered:

> all the familiar landmarks of my thought … breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and

\(^{46}\) Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond D’Alembert (Eds) *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Spring 2011 Edition).

\(^{47}\) The work was a compendium of all human knowledge, but also a new manifesto for seeing the world. It was controversial, as it promoted Enlightenment values and scientific empiricism and criticised religious dogma and the injustice of the monarchical system.

\(^{48}\) Likewise, Iceland is a central feature in much of Horn’s art, again anchoring her to a specific place. Horn started visiting the island in 1975, and much of her work ‘could be a long series of travel notes, charting not only a journey in real time and space to a particular place but also inside her head.’ (Fer in Horn, *Roni Horn Aka Roni Horn: Catalogue*, 1. p 24). She calls Iceland her ‘open-air studio of unlimited scale and newness,’ and says she uses the country ‘the way another artist might choose marble as the substance of one’s work’ *Roni Horn Aka Roni Horn: Subject Index*, 2. p 75.

*VATNASAFN/LIBRARY OF WATER* and her *To Place* series of publications are all intimately connected to Horn’s experiences in Iceland, and also document the country and its inhabitants. Her book, *Subject Index*, features eight entries under Iceland, covering subjects as wide as Iceland as a labyrinth, its entry in the encyclopaedia (between ice hockey and ice skating), its role in Horn’s life and work, as well as sign posts ‘Iceland see centre of the earth’; ‘Iceland see Emily Dickinson’ and ‘Iceland see erotic adventure’ ibid. p 78.

\(^{49}\) The ‘Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge’
threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other.\(^5\)

In Borges’ encyclopaedia, ‘animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens … (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush’ and so on.\(^5\) The categories seem wildly ridiculous. Yet that such a strange alternate system exists, with ‘precise meaning and a demonstrable content’, highlights the existence of alternative realities. Borges’ exotic categories show that the fundamental ‘Order of Things’ governing how we see and classify the world (and ourselves) is not universal, natural or stable. It is contingent.

This contingency is central to how Another Water presents the uncertainty of our current era. This encyclopaedia of water only pretends to be scientific. Its indexes and archives are always incomplete. Just as Borges’ encyclopaedia highlights the disorder of systems of classification, Another Water’s mimicry of scientific methods works to demonstrate that water’s identity cannot be fixed, objectively known or reliably classified.

By miming an encyclopaedia and then subverting expectations, Another Water highlights and is symptomatic of this multiplicitous difference—it makes things strange. These gestures of doubling, mimicry and subtle questioning subvert expectations, as the familiar suddenly becomes confounding and joltingly unfamiliar. This unravels any sense of knowing the River Thames and, in its place, leaves estrangement. Highlighting the confounding effect of the mime, footnote 28 comments (this is repeated at note 164):

\(^{28}\) Confused? Lost? Large expanses of water are like deserts; no landmarks, no differences to distinguish here from there. (If you don’t know where you are, can you know who you are?) Just tumult everywhere, endlessly. Tumult modulating into another tumult all over and without end. The change is so constant, so pervasive, so relentless that identity, place, scale—all measures lessen, weaken—eventually disappear. The more time you spend around this water—the more faint your memories of measure become.

The footnotes, too, are frequently repetitive, looping and doubling back on themselves, which further heightens this experience of confusion at the subtle multiplicity of things. Footnotes 1 to 285 are repeated not quite verbatim but very


\(^{51}\) ibid. p xv.
closely in footnotes 545-832. Other footnotes are repeated pages later, and the same phrases bubble up again and again (such as ‘black water’ and ‘another water’ and ‘is water sexy?’), as do fantasies of drowning and disappearance. This again heightens the experience of uncertainty, as the reader is left to wonder whether they have already read this text. The result is one of uncanniness—the phrases disappear only to bubble up again, at uncertain intervals.

Other footnotes almost repeat the directly preceding note, with subtle differences that alter the meaning. Such footnotes hammer the viewer with apparently repetitive questions, such as the series beginning with ‘What do you know about water?’

55 What do you know about water? When you talk about water, what is it you’re really talking about?
56 What do you know about water? When you talk about water aren’t you really talking about yourself?
57 What do you know about water? Isn’t that part of what water is, that you never really know what it is?
58 What do you know about water? That it’s everywhere and so familiar-seeming and yet so elusive (a kind of everything without definition), never quite graspable, even as an ice cube?
59 What do you know about water? Only that it’s everywhere differently?

Questions repeat and morph with dizzying circularity, moving from ‘What do you know about water?’ (55-59) to ‘You hold onto the idea of water, which is the water you grew up with: clear and sexual’ (60). The next seven footnotes continue with the proposition ‘Is water sexy?’ and ‘Water is sexy’; followed by six more notes beginning with the sentence ‘Black water isn’t sexy’ (68-73). By placing these similar but slightly modified propositions side-by-side, Horn subtly modifies their meaning, until the mutability becomes confounding.

While the photographs of water may initially appear to have a fixed subject—water in an inner-city section of the River Thames (a stable, definable location that can be pinpointed on a map with some accuracy)—the work simultaneously unravels the certainty of this site. It replaces it with estrangement, such that the river becomes increasingly unfamiliar and disorientating until it is not at all what it first seemed.
Figure 18: internal pages from Roni Horn, *Another Water* (The River Thames, for example) (2000)
The estrangement is such that eventually the viewer cannot be sure whether what they are seeing is water at all. Despite the work’s mock-scientific taxonomy, viewers never see the river in its entirety but only glimpses, frozen snippets and cropped moments. They only see sections of the water and never its banks. They see the surface, but are left to wonder about its depths. They read about deaths in the Thames, but never see the bodies.

Concentrating on its immense range of variations, the simple subject of water becomes unrecognisable. The work highlights water’s mutability and multiplicity in notes such as those at 103 and 104:

103 Have you noticed how water rarely looks like water?
105 For instance: “wet” always seemed to be one of the more appropriate words to apply to water. But the more I look at water “wet” is rarely the adjective that comes to mind.

Footnote 105 then asks ‘What is this?’ and responds (footnotes 106-7) ‘Moonlight or mercury?’ ‘Moonlight or mystery?’

Flicking through the pages of Another Water, the viewer sees page after page of surfaces. On the page, the water is dry, fixed, sculptural and two-dimensional: it is anything but water. The book features only water, but this water is ungraspable and not water at all. The photographs in Another Water strip the water of its materiality, its wetness and sound, its depth. And yet, ironically, in drawing attention to water’s chameleon like qualities, Horn creates a vocabulary that is capable of giving a material expression to the uncertainty and estrangement that pervades the contemporary. Terry Smith argues ‘the frictions of multiplicitous difference shape all that is around us, and within us, everything near and far, every surface and depth.’ To Smith, contemporary art often displays a ‘sense that these fundamental, familiar constituents of being are becoming, each day, steadily more strange, unfamiliar and not shared at all.’ This sense of

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52 In Subject Index, the artist’s book that accompanied Horn’s retrospective exhibition, serving as an encyclopaedia to the ‘keys and cues’ of her work, there are five separate entries on doubt. These include ‘doubt see dust’; ‘doubt see infinity’; and ‘doubt see me.’ The first entry on doubt reads: ‘Questions gather around moments of doubt—that’s how you enter the work. Often nuances and subtle differences that verge on the imperceptible are enough to cast you in doubt, to catch you in a moment of hesitation; this infinitesimal pause is the place where engagement occurs’: Horn, Roni Horn Aka Roni Horn: Subject Index, 2. p 44.


54 “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity.” p 703.
estrangement is a response to the complexity, multiplicity and shape-shifting antinomies that characterise our current era. By subverting expectations and highlighting the impossibility of really knowing or classifying water, Another Water acts out this dynamic of estrangement. Water is a fundamental, ubiquitous element that becomes steadily stranger in the work. It is a chameleon that never offers a straightforward reflection or perfect facsimile. The work demonstrates that singularity is a thing of the past: water, materialising both identity today and the conditions of contemporaneity, is contingent and multiple. It cannot be pinned down.

As I have argued in this section, in Another Water, Horn invites us to conclude that water might not really be water at all, and scientific vision might not enable us to accurately see. Certainties give way to doubt. Rather than offering closure and answers, empirical studies and objective facts about identity and water, Another Water continuously problematises these ways of knowing, offering confounding puzzles and subverting the possibility of certainty. This vocabulary of uncertainty, contingency and multiplicity offers a vision of contemporary life which Smith argues is symptomatic and iterative of the conditions that characterise contemporaneity.

Identity
If water is not water then what is it? Another Water—and its references to water as an/other—gestures to an inquiry into the nature of identity, one that Horn makes explicit when she describes the entrance to all of her work as ‘the idea of an encyclopaedia of identity.’ In this respect, the work (at least at first glance) is an encyclopaedia of water as well as an encyclopaedia of identity. An encyclopaedia of water and identity suggests a biological notion of taxonomy, that a person or organism can be systematically identified, named and classified according to categories such as appearance, gender, and other characteristics.

By photographing water—the same substance on the same river from the same perspective, but at different times—Another Water highlights water’s multiplicity.

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55 Horn describes the entrance to all of her work as ‘the idea of an encyclopaedia of identity’: Horn and Spinelli, “Roni Horn: Interview with Claudia Spinelli.” In other works, Horn collects a range of identities including her own (in Subject Index), Hélène Cixous (Index Cixous (2005)); actress Isabelle Huppert (Untitled (Isabelle Huppert) (2005) and Portrait of an Image (2005)), her niece Georgia Loytaken (This is Me, This is You (1999-2000)); and Icelandic woman Margrét Haraldsdóttir Blöndal (You are the Weather (1994-1995)). To Place (1990-) is an ongoing series of publications Horn describes as an ‘Icelandic encyclopaedia’.
It demonstrates that water lacks a singular identity. The River Thames of the title is only ‘for example’: its universality undoes its site-specific identity. The photos could in fact be close ups of any body of water. By appearing to categorise and classify the water, the photos breed moments of hesitation and unknowing, revealing the inherent paradox of such a task. The water is always water, but its inherent difference and changeability demonstrate that the moment captured is arbitrary; a page or two later the differences unravel any sense of knowing or being able to classify the river.

Acts of (almost) repetition continue throughout the work like an endless hall of mirrors. Fittingly, references to mirrors and reflections are scattered through Another Water and as soon as Horn invokes water as a mirror, she moves on to deny the equivalence

638 I won’t talk about how water is a mirror.
639 I won’t talk about how water is a mirror, but it’s hard to talk about water without talking about oneself.

The dark river mirrors London’s cloudy skies; its darkness also reflects the ‘darkness’ of the suicides, crime and deaths by misadventures in its water. It provides an image library seemingly capable of being a mirror, a subject and an identity. Footnotes 661 and 662 wonder if water is a ‘mock or mirror’, a ‘mirror or me?’ The water photographed almost mirrors the actual water of the river.56 Horn suggests the nature of Another Water as a book itself ‘can become a kind of mirror’ with an inside and an outside.57 Footnote 26 asks, ‘When you see your reflection in water, do you recognise the water in you?’ In a subtle but important difference, a later note observes ‘When you see water, you see your reflection in it. (Water is a reflection of you).’58

Confronted with such images and statements, the viewer is invited to look twice at things that on first glance appear to be the same. On closer inspection, the viewer realises they are subtly but importantly not the same. Water here is not just H2O—it is contingent and multiple, a confounding hall of mirrors with no referent. Any sense of encyclopaedic order is simply a mime; the warped doubling

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56 While a lake can be mirror, Horn doubts whether things really double in rivers. Roni Horn, Another Water (the River Thames, for Example), 2000. Scalo. Note 404.

57 She continues, ‘A lot of things don’t have that. They only have outsides; images for example.’ Horn and Spinelli, “Roni Horn: Interview with Claudia Spinelli.”

58 Note 484. Note 369 reads ‘When you look at water, you see what you think is a reflection. But it’s not yours. (You are a reflection of water.)’
and subtly disjointed repetition in Another Water’s photographs and footnotes and across Horn’s other works highlights that knowledge and certainty is a shifting mirror, as is identity and in this section I consider the ways in which water in Another Water materialises an alternative vision of identity. This vision embraces contradiction, contingency and multiplicity though a concept of androgyny and ultimately dissolution.

**Androgyny**

Water as it appears in Another Water does not denote an indexical reference but its characteristics reinforce the multiplicities of identities that exist alongside each other in the contemporary condition: a form of androgyny that is being this and that, without contradiction. The not-paradox of black water illustrates this concept. Footnotes in Another Water return again and again to references of ‘black water,’ an unnamed and unnameable liquid that has lost its transparency and is frightening and violent. It becomes a void:

91 … It is no longer water. It is an unnamed liquid, another water—one as yet without identity that shares only its appearance and only part of that with water. This surprises because where you expect to see water, for example, in a river, you see instead some coloured fluid mimicking water; it is a surrogate water, a petrified water. You are fooled. It is a wilful and necessary foolishness. It is water-by-faith only. You hold onto the idea of water even though you must forsake all that water is. You hold onto water; it is a raft at sea. Your foolishness is an expression of your hope. Soon water will only be an image.

The phrase ‘Black water is black milk’ (note 595) recurs at several points throughout the work. This is a puzzling contradiction: water is transparent H2O

and milk is a creamy white; neither are black. Footnotes 593 to 622, for example, read:

593 Black and water are twin elements. It’s a mistake to believe black is merely an adjective.
594 Black water is the opposite of water. Black water is uncoupled water.
595 Black water is black milk.
596 The Thames is black water.
621 Black water is only the idea of water.
622 Black water is black milk.
623 Is milk milk when it’s black?
622 Isn’t transparency to water as whiteness is to milk?

By placing opposite or contradictory images and propositions side-by-side, the work invites the viewer to look twice.

More importantly, it also offers a vision of identity for contemporaneity. While doubt and confusion are central experiences of Another Water, as I have argued, occasionally the contradictions converge, offering some kind of fluid and provisional suggestion—I don’t want to say answer, as that implies singularity and closure—to this identity puzzle. In Another Water, that suggestion is the way in which water materialises androgyny.

Another Water offers an androgynous approach to identity: embracing multiplicity and contradiction, being both this and that. Theorist Luce Irigaray also grapples with the question: how can one be complex within oneself? By reading her approach alongside Horn’s, I seek to throw light on how Another Water uses the ungraspable characteristics of water to explore the conditions of androgyny. Irigaray examines difference through a feminist lens and argues ‘female’ has never been theorised on its own terms.60 Western philosophy is built on a solid foundation of phallocentrism: an obsession with the shape and symbolism of being erect, strong, and visible, of masculinist ideals and a singular, rational, ordered unit(y). The masculinist ideal is limited to things that are defined, homogenous, knowable, named and fixed. The fluid, and the feminine, can only exist as negations, as lacking and imperfect mirror images. Things that are contradictory, dynamically changing, multiple and inconsistent are an anathema—they are frightening and monstrous to the masculinist order. Irigaray argues the feminine, along with fluidity, have been minimized and envisaged ‘only in light of an ideal status, so as to keep it/them from jamming the works of the

theoretical machine. As an example, she gives the phallocentric order’s inability to deal with turbulent flow. Understanding turbulence requires non-linear mathematical equations, which are a challenge to physics and its preference for linearity and solid forms. Irigaray argues, however, the challenge is not the difficult equations per se, but the privileging of masculine unity over feminine complexity, which is reinscribed in mathematics. She writes, the ’historical lag in elaborating a “theory” of fluids,’ created an ‘ensuing aporia even in mathematical formulation.’

By highlighting these absences, Irigaray seeks to expose this phallocentrism and fear of fluids, and reveal the repressed Other (the feminine within). She argues it is possible to intervene and find symbolic expression within language, so the Other can become a speaking subject. Crucial to Irigaray’s project is rethinking difference and otherness. She demands we free ourselves from the rigidity of the Same to embrace multiplicity and fluid turbulence. She writes,

We need to listen (psycho)analytically to its procedures of repression, to the structuration of language that shores up its representations, separating the true from the false, the meaningful from the meaningless and so forth … What is called for instead is an examination of the operation of the ‘grammar’ of each figure of discourse, its syntactic laws or requirements, its imaginary configurations, its metaphoric networks, and also, of course, what it does not articulate at the level of utterances: its silences.

Water in Another Water makes material a kind of fluid identity that is similar to Irigaray’s analysis, albeit much broader. Horn’s work does not simply present an alternate feminine language. Identity in her work doggedly rejects gender binaries—in fact, it is not about gender at all. Nevertheless, in 2002, as part of New York’s Dia Art Foundation lecture series, subsequently published as an edited volume, Jan Avgikos read Horn’s work as a personal feminist search or ‘vision

61 ibid. p 107.
62 ibid. p 106.
63 ibid.
64 The notion of fluidity and flow as offering creative potential is a thread taken by a series of (often feminist) theorists such as Braidotti, Hanneke Canters and Grace Jantzen, often building on the ideas of Deleuze and others like Haraway and Irigaray: Canters and Jantzen, Forever Fluid: A Reading of Luce Irigaray’s Elemental Passions. Irigaray, Elemental Passions. This argument resonates with Rosi Braidotti’s argument that identity is not fixed; it is in motion: Braidotti, Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming.
65 Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One. p 75.
quest’ for a sense of self. Inscribed in Horn’s work, Avgikos saw a ‘personal iconography … In a manner of speaking, her experiences are written all over the work—her inquiry, her rapture, her doubt, her yearning.’ She sees Horn’s two-volume book *Pooling Waters* (1994) as ‘[t]antamount to journal entries’ reading ‘as both travelogue and epic inner journey.’ Avgikos notes that ‘Horn’s narrator is always female’ and compares Horn’s work to that of other female artists who link their identity and sexuality to nature and the human body, such as Barbara Kruger.

Horn strongly contested Avgikos’ reading of her work, eventually refusing the publication of any images of her work alongside Avgikos’ text in the edited volume, as noted in Lynne Cooke’s introduction. Cooke refers to Horn’s statement that Avgikos’ reading is a fundamental misinterpretation of her intentions in her work, and sits much too narrowly within a gendered paradigm. In the introduction to the lecture series, editor Lynne Cooke suggests Horn saw Avgikos’ approach as ‘constraining and reductive’. Introducing Avgikos’ text, Cooke writes:

[Horn’s] request that no illustrations of her work be included in this volume amounts as much to a critique of what she deems Dia’s refusal to support the artist’s position as to a reflection of her antipathy toward a reading that discounts her steadfast attempt to reframe gender issues in what are for her less programmatic and deterministic.

While I am not so much concerned with loyally supporting the artist’s position or complying with her reading of her practice, I agree with the limitations of Avgikos’ reading for Horn’s work as a feminist identity quest. I do not see Horn’s artistic practice embracing a position as a ‘woman’, or being limited by gender binaries.

Instead, concepts of water, androgyny, fluidity and flow are much wider concepts that apply to more than just sexual difference and feminism. Androgyny in Horn’s work is a more radical framework that goes beyond the binary categories of male and female and, more broadly, beyond gender altogether. It extends to multiple

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66 Avgikos, “Events and Relations, and Then Some: Roni Horn.”
67 ibid. p 110.
68 See editor’s note, ibid. p 113. See also Lynne Cooke, “Introduction,” ibid. pp 11-12.
sites of difference and offers a broad critique of the modernist subject and traditional Western philosophy. Such fluid thinking seeks to introduce movement into solid metanarratives, hierarchical thinking and rigid logic. Notions such as ‘non-unitary’, split, in-process, knotted, rhizomatic, transitional, nomadic subject, issues of fragmentation, complexity and multiplicity all point in this direction.\footnote{Braidotti, \textit{Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming}. p 5.} In \textit{Another Water} androgyne is solid and liquid at the same time, male and female, multiple, complex, this \textit{and} that.

The work explores androgyne through water’s multiple possible states, as part of a bigger project of re-imagining identity. In an interview with Claudia Spinelli, Horn spoke about ‘growing up androgynous’:

\begin{quote}
It started with my name, which is not male or female. It seems to me, retrospectively, that my entire identity formed around this, around not being this or that: a man or a woman. I don’t fit in with these kinds of singular identities. Perhaps that’s a basis for having the option to work with so many different idioms. The work has a way of developing in a manner that never allows the viewer to become too familiar with it or to make assumptions about it.\footnote{Horn and Spinelli, “Roni Horn: Interview with Claudia Spinelli.”}
\end{quote}

On the first page of her \textit{Subject Index}, under ‘androgyne’, Horn writes ‘Androgyne not paradox.’ In the next entry, also under ‘androgyne’, she writes:

\begin{quote}
… Androgyne is the possibility of a thing containing multiple identities… integrating difference is the basis of identity, not the exclusion of it. You are this \textit{and} you are that.\footnote{Horn, \textit{Roni Horn Aka Roni Horn: Subject Index}, 2.}
\end{quote}

Finally, she writes: ‘androgyne see water.’

Black water is not a paradox. Nor is ‘anhydrony’, which Horn defines as ‘dry water.’\footnote{ibid. p 15.} Water is elusive in its shifting mutability. While its appearance is constant—a glass of water looks the same around the world—water is wildly changeable. It shifts from a liquid, to a solid, to a gas. Water in a waterfall, a river, the ocean, a puddle, a raindrop or from a tap is all just water, despite its different appearances. As Horn notes, you never look at water alone, it’s always in a liaison with its neighbours or container—water is in a glass, or surrounded by muddy riverbanks. Water is a highly dependent form: it reflects its surroundings and the
sky. Water is also familiar and intimate, yet unfamiliar. It is elusive, ‘more a state of perpetual relation, it offers a complexity that defines identity as a much more open-ended thing.’

Water in Another Water undermines the certainty of boundaries: if water can be simultaneously milky and black, or solid and liquid, what else is certain? That the water in the River Thames is in fact another kind of mysterious water—or perhaps not water at all—subverts Horn’s references to chemistry, biology and physics. It refutes the scientific aura of the works and disrupts the symbolic order and certainties of the past. Water’s unknowable and unfixable qualities as presented in Another Water gesture towards the wider inability to ‘know’ in the way the encyclopaedic projects attempted to capture knowledge.

In Another Water notions of identity, water and androgyny are intertwined. The work uses water to materialise androgyny, offering the possibility of contingent, indeterminate identities continuously reforming. There is no fixed, singular identity, nor a way to systematically know who we are. Instead, identity is fluid, multiple and mutable. Androgyny here is not just an adjective. Instead, water is inherently androgynous: it contains multiple identities, it can exist as multiplicity and difference without any contradiction or, as Horn notes, with ‘a lot of paradox but without any contradiction.’

In the work, water is not merely water: it materialises ‘you.’ It opens up ontologies of self that are frequently explored through allusions to the mirror stage of development—a time when identity first becomes a phenomenon to a child: how do I know this is me? Notes throughout the work play with androgynous identities, teasing and testing with questions that ask: Is this water? Is this ‘another water’? Is this ‘you’? Do you reflect the water, or does water reflect me?

22 You say it’s a river. I can believe that. But when you say it’s water, I get suspicious.
23 Is the Thames a case of mistaken identity?
24 When you say water, what do you mean?
25 When you say water, are you talking about the weather or yourself?

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75 ibid. p 165.
76 “The Master Chameleon.”
77 Footnotes throughout Another Water use the second person pronoun ‘you’.
(When you see your reflection in water, do you recognise the water in you?)

In the most prominent position inside the cover of Another Water (where one would normally start reading a conventional book), footnote 10 hints: 79

(But water is you.)

This is again reinforced by notes 183-192, which play with variations of:

184 “I am the Thames! I am the Thames!”
185 “You are the Thames! You are the Thames!”
186 “We are the Thames!”
184 “The Thames is us!”

In Another Water, you are the water and the water is you. Building on the mimicry of encyclopaedic knowledge, the work suggests things that appear fixed and knowable—such as the River Thames—are actually shape shifters. The notion of androgyny enables ‘you’ to contain multiple identities, to integrate difference without exclusion, to be this and that, water and something else. 80 If water is you, then, like water, your identity is a mime that appears to be knowable and classifiable but is in fact confounding, multiple and contingent. Water can look like two completely different things, but still be water—and so can you. Like you, water can be simultaneously black and milky—not a paradox, but androgyny. In the work, androgyny is an open-ended element, a sometimes-uneasy reconciliation between two answers and elements within the same conceptual frame. 81 Androgyny is the integration of difference as a source of identity: When you combine the one with the other you come towards a synthetic identity, one that is not so nameable. You know, not that kind of mutually

79 The location of this series of footnotes at the beginning of the book and just before the title, suggests that it is important text: it is the end of the preface or introduction. Other footnotes repeat these questions, such as note 56: ‘What do you know about water? When you talk about water aren’t you really talking about yourself? Isn’t water like the weather that way?’ Another strand throughout the footnotes is the notion of water as a mirror: ‘I won’t talk about how water is a mirror, but it’s hard to talk about water without talking about oneself’ (note 93). ‘What is water?’ ‘Mock of mirror?’ ‘Mirror or me?’ (notes 114-116). Other notes ask about the darkness in you, such as footnote 154: ‘What is the darkness in the Thames?—Is it you?’ As I quoted above, Horn also repeatedly plays with the words ‘You are the Thames’, ‘We are the Thames’ and ‘The Thames is us’ (notes 184-191).


exclusive form of identity like gender … Somebody said it is something that at first seems familiar and as you spend more time with it [it] becomes less and less familiar.\textsuperscript{82}

This is a crucial part of how \textit{Another Water} uses water to radically reimagine contemporary identity. In an interview about the project, Horn says she sees the water in the Thames as:

a master chameleon. Or the ultimate mime. The ultimate mime is the thing that keeps its distinction from everything else. When you think about that fact—of imitating or reflection and the possibility of losing your identity in that connection—how water never loses its identity, it is always discretely itself. And I am deeply drawn to the possibility of existing in two spaces at the same time, without any contradiction, a lot of paradox but without any contradiction, a lot of things being the opposite of what they are but something they can carry on with being both sides of the story.\textsuperscript{83}

Horn’s concept of identity as both one and another, finds resonance in the work of cultural theorist, feminist philosopher, Rosi Braidotti, for whom identity is not fixed; it is in motion, much like in \textit{Another Water}. But Braidotti opens up another dimension to an exploration of identity. In her view, any sense of unity is ‘the fictional choreography of many levels into one socially operational self.’\textsuperscript{84} Subjectivity is not about what already ‘is’—it is not about Being, solid and static, or about a quest to capture the essence of a transcend identity. Braidotti discards the habits of linearity and objectivity and resists the fixity of classical conceptions of Being and subjectivity. Her quest—and, I argue, this is echoed in \textit{Another Water}—is to make a ‘conceptual leap across inertia, nostalgia, aporia and other forms of critical stasis,’\textsuperscript{85} to rethink the subject through a figurative language of flows, processes and interconnections. Subjectivity ‘is a process, made of constant shifts and negotiations between different levels of power and desire … wilful choice and unconscious desire.’\textsuperscript{86} Her starting point is ‘not to know who we are,

\begin{itemize}
\item Horn and Spinelli, “Roni Horn: Interview with Claudia Spinelli.”
\item Horn, “The Master Chameleon.”
\item Braidotti, \textit{Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming}. p 22.
\item \textit{Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming}. p 22.
\end{itemize}
but rather what, at last, we want to become.’\textsuperscript{87} This is a question of ‘becoming’: of transformation and metamorphosis.

The notion of fluidity and flow offering creative potential is a thread taken by a series of (often feminist) theorists.\textsuperscript{88} In Another Water, however, ideas of water, androgyny, fluidity and flow are much wider concepts that apply to more than just sexual difference and feminism. They extend to multiple sites of difference and offer a broad critique of the subject and traditional Western philosophy. Such fluid thinking seeks to introduce movement into solid metanarratives, hierarchical thinking and rigid logic. Notions such as ‘non-unitary’, split, in-process, knotted, rhizomatic, transitional, nomadic subject, issues of fragmentation, complexity and multiplicity all point in this direction.\textsuperscript{89}

In this vein, Braidotti argues we are grappling with a challenging yet exhilarating fast pace of change in contemporary society. A feature of the current historical context ‘is the shifting grounds on which periphery and centre confront each other, with a new level of complexity which defies dualistic or oppositional thinking.’\textsuperscript{90} Difference has long been colonized by hierarchical and exclusionary thought, and is therefore deeply embedded in broad movements from the Enlightenment to fascism and colonialism.\textsuperscript{91} This confrontation then is on-going; Braidotti warns that while the centre (the Same, the Majority, the phallocentric mastercode) may be more fragmented, it retains its dominating and central force. The challenge today lies in the ‘task of representing these changes to ourselves and engaging productively with the contradictions, paradoxes and injustices they engender.’\textsuperscript{92} To do this, we must grapple with how to re-think difference away from the pejorative in which it has long been steeped. Alternative subjectivities are increasingly emerging, which are hybrid, multi-layered and in-between.

\textsuperscript{87} ibid. p 2.

\textsuperscript{88} For example, Hannecke Canters and Grace Jantzen build on the ideas of Deleuze and others like Haraway and Irigaray, arguing for a transformative notion of the identity as fluid and flowing: Canters and Jantzen, Forever Fluid: A Reading of Luce Irigaray’s Elemental Passions. Irigaray, Elemental Passions.

\textsuperscript{89} Braidotti, Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming. p 5.

\textsuperscript{90} ibid. p 14.

\textsuperscript{91} ibid. p 12.

\textsuperscript{92} Blackman et al., “Creating Subjectivities.” p 20).
Androgyny in *Another Water* is one such alternative. Roni Horn’s work fits within this fluid trajectory. It acts as a living map or figuration, a transformative exploration through embodied subjectivity as fluid, in-process and non-unitary. It operationalises a powerful and affirmative new way of conceptualising the self as water. A powerful and affirmative reconceptualisation of subjectivity plays out in *Another Water*. And as Braidotti notes, the transformative potential of rethinking identity as becoming (or shape shifting) and androgyny can be exhilarating. However, I want to suggest that Horn’s exploration of identity throws into question the very notion of identity itself as it not only shifts identity but implies that water as a solvent can produce the dissolution of identity all together.

**Dissolution**

The transformative potential of reconceptualising identity can be exhilarating, however in *Another Water*, exhilaration is tempered by continual references to darkness, danger and death. The obituary reports detail deaths involving the river and footnotes describe the river’s dangerous allure. In this section, I examine how this undercurrent of darkness plays out in *Another Water*. I argue it is not however a return to the death drive, negativity and lack of psychoanalytic theory. Just as water is not simply water, I argue black water (and its toxic and fatal associations) is not what is seems. Black water is both the darkness in you and a solvent for identity, a contradiction that is exhilaratingly—and challengingly—hypnotic in its allure to sweep away all ‘memories of measure.’ While the androgynous identity operationalised in *Another Water* is exhilarating, such transformation and contingency is nevertheless accompanied by ambivalence and an awareness of the significance of dissolving and becoming estranged from solidity. Through its shifting identity and undercurrent of dissolution, water in the work also materialises these conditions of ambivalence and fear from the collapse of binaries and void of uncertainty that defines contemporaneity.

First, the undercurrent of death and danger in *Another Water* is pervasive. The first two footnotes on the front cover of the work recount two dark anecdotes:

1. In the waiting room of a doctor’s office some years ago I overheard a mother talking about how her kids were afraid of it. If they couldn’t see into it, they wouldn’t go into it. It’s like being dismembered. When you wade into this dark fluid, a kind of milk without nurture, you disappear.

2. Disappearance: that’s why suicides are attracted to it. It’s also why children fear it (see preceding note). It’s a soft entrance to simply not being here. When I imagine a river, it’s something I can enter, something that will surround me, take me away from here. But then the pain of it is less imaginable too. Less than violence or chemistry.
Both by the physical placement on the book’s cover and by the repetition of the idea of disappearance later in the work, these footnotes highlight central concerns of the work: disappearance, danger and black water.

The darkness in the Thames is not just colour, shadow or depth; it is a more sinister darkness. Note 49 reads, ‘Black and water are twin elements. It’s a mistake to believe black is merely an adjective.’ Numerous other footnotes refer to black water, such as:

44 Black water is opaque water, toxic or not. Black water is always violent. Even when slow moving. Black water dominates, bewitches, subdues. Black water is violent because it is disturbing and irreconcilable. Black water is violent because it is alluring and because it is water.

90 Opaque water, no matter the colour, is black. Black is a double opacity: without light, without transparence. Loss of transparence is loss of identity. What is it now? Is it another water—uncoupled water?

91 Black water agitates and unsettles. The lack of transparence is frightening, even violent. It is no longer water. It is an unnamed liquid, another water—one as yet without identity that shares only its appearance and only part of that with water …

111 Black water is both an oxymoron and redundant. This is a paradox that excludes everything. Black water is not water. Black water is the opposite of water. It is mostly agreeable with expectations, but in our insistence, in our holding on, it compromises us. Little by little we lessen, we dilute ourselves—we tolerate, we accept water that is no longer water, we allow this unnamed substance as water …

151 Black water isn’t sexy. (But isn’t it common to find dark things sexy?) …

From the footnotes, it becomes clear that ‘The Thames is black water’ (footnote 53) and that this black water is dangerous and mythical, a receptacle for bodies with a magnetic pull. It is not merely coloured black, it is something quite ‘other’. It is a receptacle for people ending their lives; it holds secrets and tragedies and spits out decaying bodies. Footnotes allude to missing limbs, drowning babies, drifting bodies, unidentified corpses, Dead Man’s Stairs, prostitutes and ‘all those eensie-weensie, itty-bitty boys and girls, mostly of old … If you took the currents away you would probably see the soup of it today’ (notes 440-1). Elsewhere, the footnotes list some of the contents of that soup: ‘Body parts (victims of murder), corpses (suicides—mostly jumpers), sewage (human waste), heavy metals (lead, mercury, cadmium, for example). Herons and cormorants lighten up the look, but not much—and only briefly’ (note 214). The next footnote, at 215, reminds the viewer ‘(The Thames is us.)’ Repeated throughout the book is a perhaps rhetorical question ‘Where is the torso?’ and ‘(Did you find the torso yet?)’ (at notes 213, 238, 347, 398 etc).
These anecdotes are interspersed with reflections on how it would feel to enter the water, how quickly it would surround you, how inevitably and quickly you would die and what would happen to your body. Footnotes describe bodies destroyed by the force of currents and tides, by the temperature of the water, its toxicity and depth. The ‘soft entrance’ sometimes seems gentle: ‘it’s something I can enter, something that will surround me, take me away from here’ (note 2). Footnotes ask how the streetlights might look from under the water and whether they would be a secret other constellation (from streetlights and buildings) blinking overhead. They invite the reader to imagine the relief from ‘the unending demands of simple sight’ (note 6), from no longer being visible and not seeing anymore. These anecdotes are written either in the first person from the narrator’s perspective, or directly address the viewer in the second person.

As I described above, the obituary reports are brief and list-like, recording observations in concise shorthand. They use formal, impersonal language and a passive voice. The dead are often described as ‘the body’ or ‘Deceased’, or by their title and surname, such ‘Mr Taylor’s body’ or ‘Mr Bick.’ Body parts are also depersonalised, referred to as ‘the neck’, ‘the fingers’ and ‘own teeth.’

Yet despite the detail of these anecdotes and suicide reports and the relentless reminders of what the river contains, the photographs show none of it. They show only water, only a surface, the dark underworld completely invisible. Hidden, perhaps; however Enright, in an interview with Horn, suggests Another Water looks like it is made out of lead: ‘It takes on a weight incommensurate with what it actually is as a subject and a substance.’ It is this partly invisible but nonetheless powerful narrative of death and dissolution that I will now untangle.

These constant references to death and danger can be read as a psychoanalytic state of lack or a death drive. In trying to explain the human psyche and its drives and principles, Freud observed a fundamental excess of negativity and destructiveness, which he formulated as a ‘death drive’ (or death instinct or Todestrieb). He saw this as a compulsive repetitive drive towards the end, which acts as the driving force of life. Lacanian thinking, too, centres on a negative lack: the self is constituted through a process of identity conflict and boundary formation, which necessitates experiences of separation and loss. After an infant misrecognises his fragmented self in an ideal image, he experiences a lifelong desire to regain the jubilation of a united and whole self and an enduring

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narcissistic fantasy. Central to this conception of the self is negativity—an ontological deficit or lack—which stems from the impossibility of ever attaining this internalised ideal image. This is a paranoid self who is armoured and antagonistic, in constant contradiction and crisis.

However, I argue Another Water materialises a different kind of death. According to Grace Jantzen, death has been central characteristic of Western thinking from Homer and Plato and still persists. It underpins the obsession with destruction and violence, with a fear and hatred of bodiliness, sensory experience and sensuality. Jantzen argues ‘a gendered necrophilia, calls upon the “Name of the Father” (whether in theological or psychoanalytic terms) to assert its dominance.’ This obsession with mortality, rigidity and stasis is sedimented, layer upon layer, so we now live in a ‘material and discursive situation in which our habitus is deadly.’ The fact we all die becomes central to our self-understanding. But Janzen argues we forget we are all born. Natality, to be natal, ‘entails embodiment. To be born is to be embodied, enfleshed.’ Approaching Another Water through a psychoanalytic lens of lack or death drive is to be bound by the relentless obsession in western metaphysics and psychoanalysis with death and rigidity that Jantzen describes.

Another element of the firmly entrenched dialectical and psychoanalytic illusion of solidity is what Irigaray describes as a fear of fluids, turbulence and chaos, which I outlined above. Another Water echoes theorists like Janzen and Irigaray in offering a new, fluid conceptualisation of identity, while resisting a phallocentric obsession with solidity and death. This does not mean replacing the masculine solidity with a feminine fluidity; it is broader and more androgynous than gender categories. Instead of fixating on death or on a psychoanalytic death drive or ontological lack, Another Water offers death in another sense: this death materialises the undoing of the traditionally solid moorings of identity.

This is not a physical death; in the work, death is not real death just as water is not real water. As I have outlined in this chapter, Another Water offers water of a


96 ibid. vii-viii.

97 ibid., vii-viii.
different sort: it is contemporary and distinctly ‘another’; a chameleon, a mime, a dry, flat photograph—water, but not real water. This water is also black, bewitching, dominating, sexy, misleading, doubtful, androgynous, paradoxical, dangerous, magnetic, and most of all, ‘you’.

Viewers do not see real water on the page, but a photograph and a mime. More literally, viewers also do not see any bodies in the work. They can read about numerous deaths, as well as various facts about death involving water, such as how a body can drift for miles and might never resurface. The work invites viewers to imagine the unspeakable, unpronounceable, horrifying things the water might be contain: however it is only ever imagined. Although the narrator in the footnotes might contemplate jumping in and invite the reader to follow, other notes are quick to remind us that the photograph is just a printed surface on a page. While the work refers to death, it is an abstract, theoretical death.

While the Thames in Another Water might dissolve bodies, more importantly, the water’s darkness threatens to unhinge and disembowel any united or solid sense of self. This is death by photograph and death by idea. In his study of Horn’s photography, John Muse argues Horn ‘conducts a veritable symphony of contexts, but her music treats the Thames as a corrosive text, as an absolute limit.’ The Thames in Another Water is dark and dangerous; it swallows bodies and even the city itself:

When I look at a map of London it’s hard to imagine a Thames that isn’t black. I mean the city is so enormous, so thick and chaotic and deep. London seeps into the river.

Footnote 371 comments, ‘Every year they find a body or two in the river that remain unidentified.’ Note 372 continues ‘Isn’t that what you’d expect? Isn’t that what you’d be after—to lose your identity? (The Thames looks like a solvent for...

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98 See eg notes 33, 34, 35, 44, 90, 91, 588, 590-596, 621-23, 636, 637, 669 (black); notes 44, 588 (bewitching and dominating); notes 61-73, 137-151, (sexy); notes 23, 83, 91, 28, 103 (misleading and doubtful), paradoxical, dangerous, (magnetic); notes 10, 23-5, 637, 184-187 (‘you’). On androgyny, see Horn, Roni Horn Aka Roni Horn: Subject Index, 2.

99 See eg note 444: ‘A body can drift for miles. But it’s possible you’ll go in and you won’t come back up. You’ll get caught between the tides and the currents and turn endlessly under water—only re-emerging days or weeks later—possibly in the same place.’ See also eg note 542: ‘When your body goes limp, the currents will let you go. The currents will give you back …’; Note 702: ‘Maybe you can say it’s the foulness that attracts body parts and various other items an individual might want to hide, including oneself.’

100 Muse, The Rhetorical Afterlife of Photographic Evidence: Roland Barthes, Avital Ronell, Roni Horn. p 112.
identity, doesn’t it?)’ The water here is not just a threat or danger; it is what you are really after: the temptation of dissolution. This kind of death is tempting and productive, the kind in which we decompose and recompose with every encounter.

Horn says she created the Another Water series after the end of a long love relationship in a ‘kind of vicarious suicide’.¹⁰¹ This raises a connected strand that ripples through the work: that of desire. Footnotes often refer to the difference between ‘sexy’ and ‘not sexy’; footnote 63 remarks, ‘Water is sexy. It’s the purity of it, the transparency, the passivity, the aggression of it.’ After listing other ways in which water is sexy (such as ‘I want to hold it … to go into it, to be surrounded by it’ and ‘I want it in me’ (notes 65-6), the text examines black water, which ‘isn’t sexy’ (See footnotes 134-151 for a continuation of this narrative strand).

Water in the Thames is simultaneously repulsive and seductive (it’s this and that), perhaps physically dangerous but also because it threatens to flood into and undo the viewer. Its allure becomes a kind of morbid curiosity, with potentially serious consequences:

449 The river is lulling and comforting and constant. The colour is curious. And it will be cover. You need cover (The river is an entrance.)
450 The river is lulling and comforting and constant. The colour is curious. And it will be cover. You need cover (The river is a tunnel.)

Elsewhere, the first person voice in the footnotes—this may or may not be Horn’s; I have termed this voice ‘the narrator’—is caught up in spots where the currents turn the water in tightening circles:

70 … (I can’t turn away from these tightening, turning circles.) I want to feel myself twisted around. And I want to watch, I want to feel time twist as I watch these spirals forming. I want to feel time twist and myself turning as I watch them disappear. I want to twist with the turning water. I want to watch these spirals turn themselves invisible. You want to watch them

¹⁰¹ Horn, “The Master Chameleon.”
turning from the surface, turning down into the depths, where I cannot see them. I want to turn invisible with them. I want to turn with them: invisible—and keep turning.

Through this wordplay and repetition, it is as if the narrator has been hypnotised by the water, twirling from watching the water, feeling increasingly transfixed by it and then wanting to be it and be in it. Horn’s photographs confront the viewer not only with a fear of slipping in and drowning, but also a temptation to do so.

In the process of being hypnotised by the water—and by becoming water—the viewer’s reflection and the way in which water reflects also becomes uncoupled, like a visual echo or an unhinged dyad:

239 Your reflection uncouples in this water. It drifts away from you. As you stand there on the bank or bridge, helpless, watching your reflection float downstream and disappear, you may wonder what forces black water gathers. But instinctively you already know they must be closer to witchcraft than geometry.

No longer anchored by fixed categories of solid foundations of the self, the dark water acts as a solvent for identity. This is deeply desirable, yet confusing; the exhilaration is accompanied by ambivalence. Several footnotes in Another Water refer to nostalgia for the old metaphors for water: the sublime, romanticism, uninhabited and faraway places. Footnote 391 reads:

391 We are stricken with nostalgia (you might even call it romance) for waters of the past—or even with waters of today that still exist in far off, relatively uninhabited places, waters which retain more than a semblance of themselves. Anyway, this nostalgia sublimes contemporary water, as if the two waters are the same.

These yearnings are for a time before the confusion of grappling with the contingency and fluidity of contemporaneity. In contrast, the water of Another Water is inherently confusing, disorientating and relentless. As footnote 28 asks:

28 Confused? Lost? Large expanses of water are like deserts; no landmarks, no differences to distinguish here from there. (If you don’t know where you are, can you know who you are?) Just tumult everywhere, endlessly. Tumult modulating into another tumult all over and without end. The change is so constant, so pervasive, so relentless that identity, place, scale—all measures lessen, weaken—eventually disappear. The more time you spend around this water—the more faint your memories of measure become.’

This footnote captures the ambivalence of the contingent identity in Another Water. The constant state of becoming rather than being someone or somewhere
fixed and solid gives rise to relentless dislocation and disorientation. ‘The change is so constant, so pervasive, so relentless that identity, place, scale—all measures lessen, weaken—eventually disappear.’ This is the danger that circulates in Another Water. ‘The more time you spend around this water—the more faint your memories of measure become.’ This is simultaneously a danger and a tempting magnetic pull to embrace fluidity and discard memories of measure. Water here materialises the death of solidity and the rebirth of a new kind of fluid, androgynous identity that is integral to the contingency and multiplicity of our contemporary era.

### Conclusion

These notions again resonate with Terry Smith’s writing on contemporaneity. As I mentioned above, Smith argues familiar, fundamental constituents are becoming steadily stranger and less familiar. In response, contemporary art works with, but also against, the general conditions of contemporaneity, within the frictions of its antinomies. It works against them, within its multiplicity and complexity, while at the same time trying to take steps to make place. That is to say, Smith describes works that ‘provide pauses in the overall rush into the unsynthesizable, showing its flows as if in section, or as glimpses frozen into objects intended for passers in between.’ Another Water displays these tendencies with almost surprising accuracy. Against the increasingly fast pace and complexity of contemporaneity’s changes, the work offers a pause in the ‘rush into the unsynthesizable.’ It literally freezes the turbulent surface of water, ‘showing its flows as if in section.’ It offers ‘glimpses frozen into objects’, enabling viewers to reflect on the dynamics and conditions at play.

Smith argues contemporary art also offers ‘an array of location, places to pause and pathways to follow through the minefields of our estrangement.’ In this chapter, I have argued water materialises all of these tendencies. Water in the work is located but dislocated, familiar but estranged. Another Water becomes a place in which to pause and contemplate the complex conditions we face. Smith continues, in ‘describing the gathering darkness of these shape-shattering antinomies,’ contemporary art and its analysts seek to ‘discern the outlines of contemporaneity’s labyrinth and to identify art’s shining within it.’

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103 ibid.

104 “World Picturing in Contemporary Art: The Iconogeographic Turn.” p 42.

105 ibid. p 43.
Another Water helps discern the outlines of this labyrinth by materialising a new identity for our era, one that is in motion, androgynous and continuously dissolving.

In her extended work on the River Thames, Horn uses a vocabulary of water to materialise the uncertainty, multiplicity and contingency that characterises contemporaneity. She does so by offering a subversive encyclopaedia of water and identity: a mime that disrupts scientific categories and undermines the possibilities of certainty. At first glance, the work appears to be an encyclopaedia of water, cataloguing and categorising the river (and its related deaths) with scientific certainty. However, through mimicry and doubling, Horn invites the viewer to look twice and notice subtle but jolting differences. This subverts expectations and introduces doubt; the viewer realises what they are seeing is not what they expected. This creeping doubt undermines and ultimately erodes any fixed certainties. Water in the book might sometimes appear to be a sandy desert, crinkled cling wrap or aspic, but it is always just that, water: it ‘never loses its identity, it is always discretely itself.” Yet this water is not simply water, it is ‘another water’—invisible, black milk, shape shifting water-by faith. The very premise of a fixed and knowable identity is scrambled and unrecognisable, highlighting the contingent and multiple nature of identity in contemporaneity.

While Horn photographed water, the project does not in fact show water—it shows, in the words of Horn, ‘Another Water’, water that is made strange and unknowable, that is depicted in a way that throws into doubt the certainties of the encyclopaedia. It is a different substance with a different set of relationships and meanings: it is this and that, androgynous, and a mirror for how we think about identity in our current era. As such, the photographs depict not real water but only pages of printed surfaces. The scrambled referent is disorientating; once photographed and documented with puzzling footnotes, the water loses its materiality and becomes something else: something restless, shape shifting and constantly changing.

In this act of subversion, the work orchestrates a different kind of identity, whereby the water is you. In Another Water, water is androgynous, invisible, black and milky; water but not water, this and that. Most importantly, water is you, and you are water. Androgynous, then, is the possibility of a new kind of contingent, fluid identity that has no fixed certainties. It is multiple and mutable, a master chameleon, one that integrates difference without exclusion. These conditions and forces are at the heart of contemporaneity; water in Another Water gives them a material expression.

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106 Horn, “The Master Chameleon.”
However, a narrative of water’s darkness and danger tempers the exhilaration of androgyny and motion. Just as water is not really water in the work, but a chameleon, death is also not what it seems. The work shows no bodies; death is merely the idea of succumbing to the water’s power. Black water is the challenging ambivalence of embracing a watery identity. It is the simultaneous desire and fear of undoing certainties and the solidity of the self, while losing all memory of units of measure. By unsettling identity and dissolving the self, water materialises these contemporary conditions—it stands for the thrill and fear of the ‘rush into the unsynthesizable’, which characterises our era.

In doing so, water in Another Water materialises another aspect of contemporaneity: it is a new formation, one which reframes the antinomies that dominate our world today. As I outlined in the introduction, Terry Smith argues the processes and frictions of profound antinomies are deeply embedded in the conditions of contemporaneity. Although Smith acknowledges his analysis is open to question, he argues three key antinomies dominate contemporary life. First, globalisation thirsts for hegemonic control but is hampered by increasing cultural differentiation, asynchronous temporalities and the exploitation of resources. Second, dreams of liberation and equality are jarring alongside accelerating inequality. And third, today’s infoscape pits the instant free flow of information against control and mediation of that information. These are not the only antinomies. Smith argues ‘condensed instances of each of these developments are not only instantly seen all around the world, and seen for what they are, but in one form or another they are felt to matter everywhere.’

These intense opposing universalisms are in constant contestation. Master narratives are becoming increasingly simplified, as the world becomes increasingly complex. In the face of all this contestation and dangerous friction, Smith argues ‘New forms of translation need to be found for channelling the world’s friction.’

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107 In response to the question ‘In the aftermath of modernity, and in the passing of the postmodern, how are we to know and show what it is to live in the conditions of contemporaneity?’ a number of scholars, including Smith, attempt to frame the contemporary and antinomies that shape the present: Smith, “Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question.” 1. This book grew from a Symposium at the University of Pittsburgh in November 2004, convened by Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee, who also edited the book. It accompanied the exhibition, Fifty-fourth Carnegie International Exhibition at the Carnegie Museum of Art.


109 Smith gives the example of narratives of ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’ against ‘jihad’—see ibid. p 10.

110 ibid. p 11.
He hopes that ‘a configuration open to the antinomies of the present will emerge, one that tends towards hope, equity and freedom.’\textsuperscript{111}

According to Smith, contemporary art is driven by world picturing and world making, and as such, is shaped by these forces. For Smith, these antinomies contribute to four major preoccupations within contemporary art practice and discourse: provisionalisation, institutionalisation, diversification and ‘a widespread inclination towards an art of small gestured, slight interventions, imagined transformations.’\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Another Water} is an example of an imagined transformation and a new configuration that channels contemporaneity’s antinomies.

Horn’s work is an exemplary project of world making. By using water to materialise a new formation of androgyny, the work grapples with the frictions of contemporaneity and seeks a new framework to situate their contestation. Rather than diametrically opposed contestation aiming for domination and erasure, Horn’s formation of androgyny allows opposites to coexist peacefully. Water in \textit{Another Water} therefore materialises a radical new way of seeing the self: as fluid, androgynous, multiple and contingent. As I described above, its multiplicity and resulting estrangement resonates with Smith’s characterisation of our current era. In addition, water in \textit{Another Water} stands in for what Smith describes as the need for ‘profound realignments between the great formations of modernity, and the emergence of what may be new formations.’\textsuperscript{113} Water is one such formation, a radical conceptualisation that materialises a new way of grasping complexity within the antinomies of contemporaneity.

\textsuperscript{111} ibid. p 6.

\textsuperscript{112} ibid. p 16.

\textsuperscript{113} ibid. p 2.
CHAPTER 4
The disorientation and wonder of *Five Angels*

In London’s Tate Gallery, visitors enter an enormous pitch-black room. Five huge videos are projected on the walls, each showing a lone figure moving in extremely slow motion through a body of water. The figures are not synchronised; each follows its own path, slowly rising or sinking through the water or hovering in the air above it.

The room is filled with a quiet soundscape of water dripping, crickets chirping, waves breaking, a low hum. One of the figures moves at a snail’s pace towards the surface of the water. As he gets closer, the soundscape starts to intensify, increasing in volume until it becomes a deafening roar as he ever so slowly—but suddenly—shoots through the water’s surface with a sonic crescendo and a flash of light. Legs first, he seems to defy gravity as if he is gradually jumping backwards out of this world. He hovers above the water line, drifting extremely slowly up and out of the frame. The soundscape returns to its quiet nocturnal water world, until a figure on another screen crosses the water’s threshold.

Like the two previous case studies, water plays a key role in Bill Viola’s video installation, *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001) (‘Five Angels’), the focus for this chapter. The work features large moving images of water, as well as a watery soundscape. In fact, like Roni Horn, water is a central recurring theme in Viola’s work.\(^1\) Always ‘drawn to water’,\(^2\) the artist sees it as ‘connected to us in deep

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\(^1\) The motif of a figure in water recurs across a wide range of Viola’s works. Bodies plunge into water in some of Viola’s earliest works—such as *The Reflecting Pool* (1977–9) and *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986). In *The Passing* (1991), Viola himself appears as a man sinking into a body of water, juxtaposed against footage of himself as restless sleeper.
ways.’³ For Viola, water’s significance draws from its role as the first mirror for humanity’s self-knowledge. Our bodies are 70 per cent water, and water mediates the body’s core functions of mind and heart. He argues water flows like electricity, with a current, interconnecting the movement of humanity and sharing information.⁴

Although a number of Viola’s works could be surveyed in examining how water materialises contemporaneity, in this chapter I focus on Five Angels, both because of its enormous public popularity and the central role of water in the work. I will argue Viola has developed an immersive vocabulary—using water, slowness, space, sound, texture, colour and technology—which is both symptomatic and iterative of the dynamics of our current condition.

In making this argument, I will focus on three key ways in which the conditions of contemporaneity play out: the work materialises the impossibility of situatedness; the disorientation of being ‘all at sea’; and a confrontation with the sublime power of the void left behind by the dissolution of certainties.

In the first section, I will demonstrate how water in Five Angels materialises what Terry Smith describes as a ‘thirst for situatedness’, an experience he argues is a common response to the complexity and accelerating multiplicity of

and desert landscapes. In Nantes Triptych (1992), the three-channel installation shows a man diving into water and floating, alongside images of the birth of Viola’s first son and the dying moments of Viola’s mother’s life. In Stations (1994), five figures float upside down in water, and these images are projected onto hanging cloth screens and mirrored on the floor onto polished black granite slabs. One of his most recent works, The Dreamers (2013), continues this motif, showing ‘underwater portraits’ of seven people who appear to be sleeping or drowning as they lie still in shallow water.

A significant number of Viola’s works also depict water as a threshold: see Ocean Without a Shore (2007); Acceptance (2008); Helena (2008); Ablutions (2005); The Lovers (2005); Tempest (Study for the Raft) (2005); The Crossing (1996); Tristan’s Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall) (2005).


³ Joyce Morgan, “Tears of a Modern Mystic,” The Age 2005.

contemporaneity. It does this by offering viewers an immersive experience and aesthetic, inviting them to an underwater world where everything is slower and the water’s movement can be harnessed and scrutinised. At the same time as materialising a relief from contemporaneity, however, the work also stands for the very conditions of contemporaneity that overwhelm: the experience of being ‘all at sea’, disorientated by the failure of all systems of navigation and units of measure. Therefore, as a condition of entry to the immersive world of Five Angels, the viewer must relinquish visual control and mastery and ‘go with the flow’ of contemporaneity. While the viewer can experience relief and pause, this is only temporary and partial: it does not take long to realise that the viewer is underwater, gravity is turned on its head, temporal expectations are thwarted, and time, sound and narrative are scrambled and boundless. The thirst for situatedness is therefore never quite quenched.

In the final section, I suggest Five Angels’ strange underwater world confronts the viewer with the awe and terror of the void left behind by the dissolution of modernity’s certainties. The viewer is left with no system of navigation or anchor. Drawing on the work of Jean-Francoise Lyotard, I argue Five Angels materialises the contemporary sublime, an experience located in contemporaneity’s baffling complexity and fluidity. The sublime as it plays out in Five Angels is a confrontation with these realities, which are too complex to fully process or represent. Water, then, provides the affective vocabulary that materialises the thrilling rupture of our turbulent times. Viola’s immersive world is stunning and terrifying, disorientating and revealing—paralleling the contemporary conditions with which we must grapple.

As with the previous two case studies, I will begin by closely reading the work. I will then orchestrate a conversation or collision between it and several key concepts, namely immersion, situatedness, harnessing water and the contemporary sublime.

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The disorientation and wonder of *Five Angels*

Figure 19: Installation view from Bill Viola, *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001).

Figure 20: Departing Angel from Bill Viola, *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001).
Five Angels for the Millennium: A close reading

*Five Angels for the Millennium* is a 13-minute enclosed five-channel colour video installation, in which five large images are simultaneously projected onto black walls in an enormous and very dark room (Figure 19). In each projection, a larger-than-life sized figure moves in extremely slow motion, accompanied by a stereo soundscape of water noises and other ambient sounds. The figures float through the water or hover just above it, with occasional sudden climaxes as each crashes through the water’s surface. The panels are labelled *Departing Angel, Birth Angel, Fire Angel, Ascending Angel* and *Creation Angel*. The figures are all shot underwater, except *Creation Angel*, who is filmed from above.

The projected images actually show footage of two men diving separately into a pool. In real time, footage of each dive only runs for 35 to 40 seconds. To create *Five Angels*, Viola slowed the footage to run between 15 and 30 minutes. The footage also runs forwards, backwards and upside down; it is viewed from different perspectives and with different colour schemes for each angel. The video sequences are looped, but are spaced with intervals such that they do not follow a predictable pattern.

In *Departing Angel* (Figure 20), a figure slowly floats from the bottom of the screen towards the surface of the water above him. Small, light blue bubbles of air rise through the water around his body. Surrounded by a tunnel of bright light, the figure’s body slowly turns so his legs point upwards. He keeps ascending, legs first, as the soundscape intensifies. Clothed in white, his body looks rigid and muscular. Once he turns, his trajectory becomes uncanny; he isn’t floating so much as defying gravity as he almost seems to gradually jump, legs first and ever so slowly, up and out of this world. He finally shoots through the surface of the water with a sonic crescendo. The soundscape then returns to its quieter nocturnal ambience.

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6 In the Tate Modern exhibition of *Five Angels*, the projections were each 216.0 x 306.3 centimetres. In the Ruhrtriennale exhibition at the Gasometer Oberhausen in Germany, the projections were each 15 x 18 metres, projected onto walls that were 117 metres high.

7 Four of the sequences are performed by the same actor, Josh Coxx. *Creation Angel*, the only figure filmed from above, is performed by Andrew Tritz. Paid performers feature in the majority of Viola’s works. Occasionally, Viola appears himself, as do friends and members of his family. Nicholas Wroe, “Bill Viola: ‘People Thought I Was an Idiot and That Video Would Never Last.” The Guardian, 24 May 2014.
The disorientation and wonder of *Five Angels*

**Figure 21:** Birth Angel from Bill Viola, *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001).

**Figure 22:** Fire Angel from Bill Viola, *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001).
Birth Angel (Figure 21) appears on the screen very suddenly, shooting head first from a pool of bubbles at the bottom of the frame, propelled upwards. The figure is surrounded by a column of greenish-blue bubbles, beyond which is dark blueish-black water. A giant growing ripple expands across the bottom of the frame, where the figure breaks the water to shoot upwards. On closer inspection, the sequence is turned upside down: this figure is also defying gravity by diving up into the water; rather than shooting up into the air, he enters the water via the splash at the bottom of the screen. This figure’s body is similarly rigid and muscular, through the colour scheme is more greenish.

The Fire Angel (Figure 22) sequence has a dramatically different colour scheme: blood red water in contrast to the cool blues, greys and dark indigos of the other panels. In this projection, a figure surrounded by a red-golden glow rises up ever so slowly from the bottom of the screen, in a billowing column of bubbles and light against the dark water. This figure’s body is also rigid and strong, his arms are outstretched like Christ on the cross. As he rises, the surface of the water directly above him is illuminated a vibrant, almost iridescent, blue, like a halo of light. As he approaches, the water’s surface bubbles and boils with increasing intensity. He finally crashes through it, then rises off the screen. The boiling bubbles slow and droplets of water rain down and splash on the waterline until it calms to a reddish glow.

Ascending Angel (Figure 23) begins with still water. A neat horizon line bisects the sky and water in the lower part of the image: at first, this screen seems mostly to be made of sky. Bubbles start to appear, and continue to amass into a writing bubbling blue-purple that becomes brighter and lighter and more saturated in colour until suddenly, finally, the bubbles erupt to the deafening sound of crashing waves. As this occurs, a figure appears, floating upwards very slowly. This figure is facedown; his arms outstretched limply, a dark shadowy presence with vibrant white clothing reflecting the blue light. Droplets of water rise from the sea like mist and twinkle like stars in a dark sky. On closer inspection, this sequence is also turned upside down. The figure is actually falling into the water, upside down. He lands on his back (at the bottom of the screen) and sinks horizontally (up) into the water, the bubbles floating (down) to the water’s surface (below).

Creation Angel (Figure 24) is the only figure filmed from above, the camera looking down at the water’s surface and the top of the figure’s head as he rises towards the camera. This sequence begins with a mass of illuminated white-cyan coloured bubbles, which look like a slow motion exploding ball of light. At times it is a hazy milky way moving and morphing; at other times it is milk splashing onto a dark surface. The writhing ball of light starts to fold into itself, shrinking, as if sucking the viewer into a dark vortex. Suddenly the almost-disappeared ball of light morphs into the top of a head, which erupts out of the water, followed by a bird’s
The disorientation and wonder of *Five Angels*
The disorientation and wonder of *Five Angels*
eye view of bronze shoulders and outstretched arms. The figure is a warm, golden surprise that momentarily replaces the slow cold white-blue light. The ball of light quickly becomes a shrinking circle of foam, as the body exits the water and is propelled headfirst towards the viewer. After only three or four seconds, the figure has faded to a black shadow and then he completely disappears. The image calms to a dark blue-black, until the ball of light returns and the loop begins again.

The soundscape throughout the gallery is largely water noises—waves crashing, bubbling and dripping—as well as other ambient sounds such as crickets chirping and a low sonar-like sound. Each panel has an individual stereo soundtrack; however, the individual soundscapes are frequently drowned out by roaring noise from corresponding sequences as each figure crashes through the water’s surface. The sounds viewers hear do not always correspond to the image they are watching; there are interruptions from surrounding sequences. The soundscape periodically increases to a deafening rumble; however, this sonic climax does not always exactly match the figure’s action—even where it corresponds to the figure’s actions. The sound of waves crashing, for example, is not always perfectly in sync with the figure hitting the water; occasionally it occurs moments before or after the impact occurs.

Five Angels was first exhibited at Anthony d’Offay Gallery in 2001. It was purchased jointly by the Tate, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Centre Pompidou in 2003, and exhibited at the Tate Modern from April 2003 to March 2004.\footnote{It was also exhibited at The Power of Art exhibition, Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, Kobe, Japan in 2002; the Ruhrtriennale, Gasometer Oberhausen, Germany in 2003; Whitney in 2004-5; Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain in 2005; Centre Pompidou in 2005-6; Aros Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Denmark in 2005; Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan in 2006-7; Kukje Gallery, Seoul, South Korea in 2008; Grimaldi Forum, Monaco in 2012. ‘Departing Angel’ (one of the five panels from Five Angels) was installed at Pause at Duomo Cathedral, Milan, Italy, in 2004.}

It was also exhibited in 2003 at the Ruhrtriennale in the Gasometer, a former industrial space that was built to hold gas in Oberhausen, Germany. The building looks like a giant chimney, a cylinder 117 metres tall with steel walls and no windows. Viola claims he was drawn to the space for its cathedral feel; its acoustics are even better than most cathedrals, most of which have a 6 second decay (the length of time an echo bounces around before disappearing). The Gasometer has a 10 second decay time, creating haunting acoustics in which
sound seems to bounce infinitely. Viola was taken by the inherent tension in the space: the sacred, spiritual awe of an industrial cathedral once filled with toxic chemicals; juxtaposing dream images with this space of hardware. For the exhibition, huge screens were hung between 12 and 64 metres above the ground, creating quite a different viewing experience from the Tate’s comparatively low-ceilinged dark room.

Aside from these solo exhibitions, *Five Angels* has only appeared in three thematic exhibitions, in Monaco, Paris and Japan. In Monaco, Grimaldi Forum’s 2002 exhibition, *Extra-Large: Oeuvres monumentales de la collection du Centre Pompidou a Monaco*, explored the concept of ‘monumentality’ though 50 of the Centre Pompidou’s monumental contemporary works, many of which are too large for display in European galleries. The Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Modern Art’s 2002 exhibition, *Power of Art*, in Kobe, Japan, also included Five Angels, this time alongside the installation works of seven pioneering artists. Viola was the only artist to feature water in his work.

In Paris, the Centre Pompidou included *Five Angels* in their 2005-6 thematic exhibition, *Big Bang, Destruction and Creation in the Art of the 20th Century*. According to curator Catherine Grenier, the show was:

> based on a theme which is critical to understanding art since the beginning of the 20th century: the modern Big Bang. By demanding radical liberation and shattering established values, modern art produced a kind of creative destructiveness ... Released from the weighty burden of History and the constraints of the academic approach to art, the artists of the 20th century introduced a rich and entirely new way of perceiving the world around them which has had a profound and irreversible influence on our contemporary consciousness. This new approach to structuring the

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10 ibid.


collection has been based on the idea of continuous expansion of forms and creative forces emanating from the destruction of the original centre.\textsuperscript{13}

The exhibition’s interest in exploring how contemporary’s perception of the world shapes our contemporary consciousness resonates with the concerns of this chapter, albeit using a vocabulary of ‘big bang’ destruction rather than water.

Viola developed *Five Angels* from footage he had shot in Long Beach in California of a man diving into water and sinking until he had disappeared from the frame, in a reference to drowning and suicide.\textsuperscript{14} He worked on the footage ‘in a period of intense grief’ following the death of his father.\textsuperscript{15} When he returned to the film, he discovered he had inadvertently run four of the five films backwards, so apart from one figure who sinks, the angels all ‘rush upwards and out of the water … images of ascension, from death to birth.’\textsuperscript{16}

Viola frequently draws attention to a near-drowning experience he had as a boy. In numerous interviews, he explains how as a six year old he slipped through the middle of an inflated rubber tyre and sank into deep water.\textsuperscript{17} He recalls the beautiful and serene experience of being under the water, gazing at slow moving fish and reeds without fear, until suddenly a large hand yanked him out and away from the peaceful water world. The artist argues this experience had a profound impact on his life and work.\textsuperscript{18}

When *Five Angels* was first shown publicly at the Anthony d’Offay Gallery in 2001, employees estimate some 40,000 visitors saw the exhibition within a few months. This number of visitors is ‘quite ridiculous’ for a commercial exhibition in a small


\textsuperscript{16} Viola, “Five Angels.”

\textsuperscript{17} eg Paco Barragan, “Interview with Viola,” *Art Pulse*2011; ibid.; BBC and England, “The Dreamers: Bill Viola (Interview with Bill Viola).” This is also reported in numerous articles about the work eg Tina Rigby Hanssen, “The Omnipresent Soundscape of Drones: Reflections on Bill Viola’s Sound Design in *Five Angels for the Millennium,*” *The Soundtrack* 2, no. 2 (2009). p 128.

\textsuperscript{18} Bill Viola quoted in Barragan, “Interview with Viola.”
gallery, which usually sees far fewer.\textsuperscript{19} According to staff, visitors would sit for hours in front of the screens, three and four deep; some brought coffee and sandwiches.\textsuperscript{20}

The huge public appetite for Viola’s work—despite some quite negative responses from critics—suggests it resonated strongly with public audiences. In an introduction to his edited collection on Viola’s art, art historian Chris Townsend argues:

Viola’s is an art for “everyman”, rather than for cognoscenti; an art of affect rather than distanced appraisal, but not an art of pathos; an art of duration and absorption rather than of immediate satisfactions and revelations;… an art that addresses “big issues”—that life, death, “why are we here?” stuff.\textsuperscript{21}

Yet despite its public popularity, a number of critics have responded sharply to Viola’s work, describing Five Angels as a ‘crowd-pleasing but overblown video installation’\textsuperscript{22} that is pompous,\textsuperscript{23} sheer spectacle,\textsuperscript{24} more showbiz blockbuster than art,\textsuperscript{25} \textit{New York Times} critic Roberta Smith, for example, laments the work’s obviousness, arguing its ‘humanistic pretensions and Hollywood Sturm und Drang’ place it at ‘the midpoint between Old Faithful and a wall-size aquarium at Sea World.’\textsuperscript{26} In an edited book about Viola’s work, art historian Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield argues Viola’s work is a challenge to analyse without being overcome by ‘its mysticism, its overt symbolism, its attempt at transcendentalism, its ready


\textsuperscript{20} ibid. pp 7, 12.

\textsuperscript{21} ibid. p 10.


\textsuperscript{23} ibid.


\textsuperscript{26} Smith, “The Whitney Still Sings, Even Beside the Modern’s Grand New Opera.”
access to original states and its moral certainty.’

Though he sees moments when Viola’s works overcome these ‘baleful restraints’, he argues overall they offer ‘asserted, literal, illustrative, dogmatic answers to which the spectator can merely assent.’

In a more recent book, Ronald Bernier examines the theological sublime and aesthetic of revelation in Viola’s work. He reads Viola’s work from a theological perspective, and sees it as ‘a theological enterprise, located in a tradition that runs from the medieval and Early Christian apophatics to postmodern deconstruction.’ He challenges the secularism of art history and argues Violas suggests a re-emergence of a spiritual and theological dimension to contemporary art. He argues Viola has been ‘long attracted to the reflective, transformative and symbolic properties of water’ and how it ‘sustains, cleanses, blesses, a takes life away.’

He sees Five Angels as provoking theological reflection and ‘thoroughly infused with Christian symbol’, thus creating an ‘emotional experience like that of a church.’

Terry Smith, too, briefly addresses Viola’s work in *What is Contemporary Art?* Focusing on the role of spirituality and temporality as eternity, he argues Viola’s later work, including *Five Angels*, is ‘alive to many different kinds of time taken by a world that is, or can be, enchanted—that is, inhabited by gods.’ Viola’s video installations ‘render vivid the promise offered by what he (and too many others) calls “spirituality”: that these two levels of temporality—the eternal and the human—can be integrated.’ My analysis of *Five Angels* in this chapter expands Smith’s short analysis of the work by teasing out how it materialises the conditions

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28 ibid. pp 75-6.


30 ibid.

31 ibid. p 67.

32 ibid. p 69.


34 ibid. pp 202-3. Nevertheless, Smith finds Viola’s work does not reach the ‘emotional depth and the artistic subtlety or the dramatic clarity of, say, Caravaggio’s *The Taking of Christ*’ against which ‘Viola’s efforts at telling anachronism seem awkwardly contrived’: ibid. p 202.
of contemporaneity focusing particularly on how water provides an affective vocabulary for this materialisation.

I argue the role of water in the work is not one of symbolism, but of providing an experience of water. While Viola’s work may not always transcend the clichéd, *Five Angels* was a significant blockbuster, and I see its huge public popularity as evidence that the work expresses something about the Zeitgeist that captures the imagination. Across many of his works, and in *Five Angels* in particular, I argue Viola has developed a particular vocabulary using water, slow motion, movement, colour, sound, actors, technology and texture. He uses this vocabulary to create an immersive aesthetic and mode of engagement, which I will examine next.

Having closely read *Five Angels*, I will now turn to a discussion on how water in the work materialises the conditions of contemporaneity. As I outlined above, I will discuss three main points: first, how water in the work materialises an escape from the conditions of contemporaneity, thus resisting its forces. Second, I will examine how water materialises contemporaneity’s conditions of being ‘all at sea’, whereby previous regimes of knowledge and units of measure are turned on their heads. Either we can resist these forces, through escape, or accept them—ultimately, however, any escape is partial and provisional and in fact requires viewers to relinquish control and ‘go with the flow’ anyway. Finally, I will turn to a discussion of how water in the work materialises the contemporary sublime: an experience of awe and terror stemming from the leap of going with the flow.

**The vocabulary of water in *Five Angels***

**Thirst for situatedness**

In this section, I consider the ways in which *Five Angels* materialises contemporaneity’s thirst for situatedness—a yearning for respite from the complexity and acceleration of our current era. In response to this thirst, the work offers an escape through immersion into an underwater world, a shared space of slowness.

First, what is this ‘thirst for situatedness’? According to Terry Smith, a key characteristic of our current situation is daunting and accelerating complexity. Smith describes this using terms such as multeity, incommensurability and contingency. In other words, contemporaneity is characterised by multiplicity, yet there is no common standard of measurement. The future is increasingly unimaginable and cannot be predicted with any certainty. Inequalities are
accelerating everywhere.\textsuperscript{35} Globalisation and leaps in technology have come with an ‘enormous cost to social cohesion, peaceful cohabitation, and natural resources.’\textsuperscript{36} Our planet is overstressed.\textsuperscript{37} Fundamentalisms are on the rise.\textsuperscript{38} In every respect, our foundations are increasingly fluid and precarious.

In response to all of this overwhelming complexity, Smith detects a trajectory in contemporary art of responding ‘in some way to this circumstancing, to the thirst for situatedness that it calls forth.’\textsuperscript{39} The ‘thirst for situatedness’ Smith detects in contemporary art is itself another example of the vocabulary of water that infuses his writing on contemporaneity. Ironically, despite there being water everywhere, which I argue is a central aspect of contemporaneity, a thirst nevertheless remains.\textsuperscript{40} For example, Smith argues artists often mark out shared spaces that are exempt from the forces of contemporaneity, or ‘find themselves exploring ways of taking small, but hopefully significant, steps within this seemingly endless stream of times.’\textsuperscript{41}

Smith gives the example of Tatsumo Miyajima. In his water and light installation, \textit{Sea of Time} ’98, the artist created a black-bottomed pool inside an abandoned farmhouse in a Japanese fishing village. 125 yellow and green LED digital counters flash at different speeds in the pool. To Smith, the work is a quiet voice within the multiplicity of times which ‘establishes an uncanny connection to the duration of their lives, making the work a silent companion, a mute witness, and, in some cases, a memorial.’\textsuperscript{42} He also gives the example of Hiroshi Sugimoto’s series of photographs of ocean horizon lines, \textit{Time Exposed}, arguing it is another work to ‘try to fix a mode of seeing duration itself.’\textsuperscript{43}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} ibid. p 109.
\item \textsuperscript{36} \textit{Contemporary Art: World Currents}. p 13.
\item \textsuperscript{37} \textit{What Is Contemporary Art}? p 255.
\item \textsuperscript{38} ibid. p 255.
\item \textsuperscript{39} ibid. p 198.
\item \textsuperscript{40} ‘Water, water every where; nor any drop to drink’: see Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ in \textit{Lyrical Ballads}, 1798 (originally \textit{Ryme of the Ancyent Marinere}).
\item \textsuperscript{41} Smith, \textit{What Is Contemporary Art}? p 198.
\item \textsuperscript{42} ibid. p 200.
\item \textsuperscript{43} ibid. p 200.
\end{itemize}
I argue this thirst for situatedness is also evident in *Five Angels*. In this section, I examine the ways in which the work offers an escape from the complexities of contemporaneity through an experience of immersion. It does this by creating an immersive aesthetic and mode of engagement to transport the viewer to an underwater world, where figures move with mesmerising grace and the complexities and acceleration of contemporaneity are slowed and abstracted. Ultimately, however, by deferring the forces of contemporaneity, the work highlights them and holds them up for contemplation.

In *Five Angels*, immersion in water materialises an escape from the complexities and acceleration of our current era. Both the figures on each screen and the viewer rise and fall in water in several ways. First, this immersion plays out quite literally. There is a sonic eruption and flash of light as a body crashes through the water’s surface, crossing a threshold into a different world. The explosion settles and the body drifts ever so slowly, surrounded by darkness, glittering bubbles and shafts of light. In the darkness somewhere behind the viewer there is another sonic climax as a body crosses the threshold and is immersed in this slow, tranquil nocturnal world. All five figures in each panel repeat this action of immersion, variously jumping through the water’s surface, or diving in headfirst; one crosses horizontally, landing on his back. Some figures defy gravity, the sequence running upside down, so the ‘Angel’ appears to plunge from water down into a body of air. Other sequences run backwards, so the figure is sucked upwards and out of the water, feet first. In each sequence, once immersed in water, the figures become graceful and mesmerising. There is no trace of struggle or anguish; except when they cross the threshold, each figure is at peace.

While experiencing the work, the viewer undergoes an experience of immersion that parallels that of the plunging figures. A digitally mediated environment surrounds the viewer by 360 degrees, so they are enveloped by water. Like the plunging figures, the viewer is ‘under water’ for the duration of the installation. Each screen towers over the viewer’s head and the water level is generally above eye level. When four of the figures crash through the water’s surface, they leave the viewer underwater. Only in *Creation Angel* is the figure filmed from above so the viewer’s perspective looks down onto the surface of the water. However this perspective is ambiguous: apart from around ten seconds when the figure’s head appears and is propelled towards the viewer, the image shows an abstract mass of water, bubbles and light. It therefore appears that the viewer is again looking at another underwater scene. That the figure is filmed from above and crashes upwards into the air is not immediately apparent. The overall affect of the images and spatial layout is to locate the viewer underwater.

The experience of immersive escape is further heightened by *Five Angels’* enveloping soundscape. In her study of Viola’s sound design, Tina Rigby Hanssen
argues sound in the work seems to ‘propagate in all directions—it envelops you during your whole visit’.

Often it is absorptive and contemplative, especially at ‘in-between’ times, when none of the figures are crashing through the water’s surface. Here the water sounds—bubbling and dripping—are calm and peaceful. There are other ambient sounds, too, such as crickets chirping and a drone-like ‘undersound’ which Viola describes as ‘a deep rumble, the sound of wind, of heavy machinery, a continual sound that I think of as being in the basement of our lives.’ The sounds have been ‘pitched down to match the slow motion images’, which Rigby Hanssen argues creates ‘a profound low-frequency reverberation that lingers throughout the exhibition space.’ This slow moving underwater environment seems ‘omniphonic’, resonating all around the viewer and coming from all directions at once. At times of climax, when one of the five figures crash through the water’s surface, the sonic intensity erupts into a deafening roar, drowning out other sounds and giving the audience a sensational jolt. As the figure slowly drifts away, the rumbling calms until it fades back to the undersound of water dripping, crickets and low-frequency drones. Four of the five sequences have underwater soundscapes, further emphasising that the viewer is sharing the same immersive environment as the submerged figures.

The timing of the piece also contributes to its immersive, otherworldly nature. Each sequence is so significantly slowed down that for large stretches of time—in fact, for the bulk of the sequence—viewers float around in a very slow moving world surrounded by a quiet atmospheric water soundscape. When the climaxes I described above occur, they are deafening and overwhelming—however, they only occur occasionally.

In her study of immersion in virtual reality and screen-based installation art, Edwina Bartelm argues immersive art transports the viewer ‘to another realm or
state of sensory perception." The immersive environment offered by such artworks affect the viewer’s senses ‘on perceptual, sensory, psychological and emotional levels,’ so the viewer is transported to another world. By entering the immersive world of virtuality and deep engagement, the viewer temporarily leaves the real world. Erkki Huhtamo describes the shift from real to remote worlds as ‘a transition, a “passage” from one realm to another, from the immediate physical reality of tangible objects and direct sensory data to somewhere else.’ For Huhtamo, the environment edits out the real world so the viewer is free of the ‘disturbing realities’ of the real world.

This immersive ‘edit’ and transportation to a different realm also plays out in Five Angels. Viewers do not simply watch the video art; they are immersed in it, transported to another world. At the Tate installation of Five Angels in 2003-4, the gallery space was pitch black, so viewers were not able to see their own bodies or those of people around them. Alison Young, describing her visit of the exhibition, found her gaze ‘compelled by the screens, and the surrounding darkness meant that I often did not see other spectators on the periphery of my visual field, so that I would bump into people while moving around to view the screens.’ That Young became so significantly disconnected from the real world around her demonstrates how powerfully the work’s immersive aesthetic and mode of engagement edited out reality, transporting her to a different world.

Overall, the environment is mediated in such a way that the boundary and distance between the viewer and artwork seem to collapse: both the subjects on screen and the viewers are immersed in an underwater world. In Five Angels, the gallery space is fused with the work such that the immersive experience of the viewer parallels the immersion of the figures on the screens. Valentina Valentini argues, the gallery space in which the images are projected and sound diffused ‘becomes one with the work of art.’ The diving figure’s body then acts as ‘a

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49 ibid. [unpaginated].


51 ibid. p 161.

52 Alison Young, “Bill Viola: ‘Ocean without a Shore’,” *Images to Live By: A space in which to think about the images that shape our everyday life* (2009).
threshold and a dividing line … traced by the explosion of sound, which allows each spectator to fill the invisible space with their own imagination. In the installation’s all-encompassing, dark and immersive space, the viewer has an absorbing, dynamic connection with the diving figures. The relationship, too, is immersive: the figure and viewer are both plunged into a liquid; they are absorbed. The viewer is invited to become deeply engaged and surrender to the immersion.

This shared space of engagement between the viewer and work is in itself a response to the conditions of contemporaneity. Terry Smith argues installation art frequently engages with a paradox that:

as the world diversifies and complicates itself beyond all singularizing encompassment, artwork and viewer exist in that shared space and time, both doing the same kind of work (or, at least, similar, necessarily conjoint kinds of work) of bringing meaning into existence—together, at once, contemporaneously.

Creating a space of immersive engagement and connection is a common response to the complexity and acceleration of contemporaneity. By temporarily deferring the forces of our era, artworks such as Five Angels in fact reflect and draw attention to those forces—a point I will further develop below. Water here is an immersive underwater world, materialising a passage away from the relentless and accelerating complexities of contemporaneity, into a deeper realm, a shared space where everything moves much slower. It is a response to the thirst for situatedness and an attempt at finding relief from the complexities of our time by escaping into an underwater world.

Quenching the thirst by harnessing water

In this section, I argue the work responds to the complexity and acceleration of our current era by slowing water so the viewer can scrutinise its movement. Faced with such relentless contingency, incommensurable temporalities and ever-accelerating complexity, Five Angels dramatically slows the pace. Its movement may be turbulent with explosive splashes, but slowed down so significantly, the water’s power changes. Bubbles drift ever so slowly to the surface, enabling the viewer to track their trajectory in minute detail. Water is also manipulated and controlled. It is made to flow forwards or backwards, the right or wrong way up.


Water is powerful, but has been stilled, recorded and altered so the viewer can really ‘see’ it.

Capturing water’s movement so it can be scrutinised is reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci’s studies of turbulence. In *Studies of Hydrodynamic Turbulence*, Leonardo captures the movement and dynamic forces of water in meticulous detail, based on close observation. Water pours from a sluice into a pool, and Leonardo’s illustration is multi-layered and complex, featuring tiny bubbles, lines of movement, eddies and swirls. Leonardo’s drawings can be seen as approaching art as a kind of scientific knowledge. His treatment of water echoes the Renaissance developments in conceptualising the world through a scientific lens, where matter can be closely observed, investigated and understood. Of course, Bill Viola’s installation is quite different to Leonardo’s enlightenment drawings. I raise the comparison, however, to highlight how both works slow and harness the water’s movement so it can be studied and grasped. This gesture of harnessing water in *Five Angels* harks back to a time before contemporaneity’s complexity and acceleration.

Viola’s act of harnessing and capturing water in *Five Angels* also shares some similarities with *Another Water*. Both Viola and Roni Horn capture, record and alter water’s state so it can be scrutinised. However, Horn’s encyclopaedia of water is a mime that in fact highlights the impossibility of capturing a singular identity. Her photographs mock certainties by demonstrating things are not always as they seem. By harnessing water, *Another Water* suggests it cannot really be harnessed: it is shifting, elusive and distinctly other.

However, Viola’s gesture of slowing water in *Five Angels* plays a different role. Rather than highlighting the impossibility of a singular identity, in *Five Angels* it materialises the multiplicity of temporalities that Smith argues characterises contemporaneity. By showing multiple screens at the same time, each with water dramatically slowed and redirected, Viola is visualising and attempting to control the velocity and acceleration of time.

By slowing water, he also gives the viewer the temporary ability to undercut the relentless complexity and acceleration of time. Contemporary viewers are well accustomed to high speed editing and the compression of time to juxtapose action and significant moments. Slow motion is often used to draw attention to moments of fast physical movement or spectacular effects; in sporting events where cameras replay footage for emphasis or adjudication; so the viewer can dwell on a character’s emotional response or cannot miss a pertinent moment; in music
videos for its ‘compelling power to examine movement.’ Slow motion in these circumstances offers a particular kind of viewing: one in which we peer in, concentrate, look carefully at what we otherwise would not be able to see; at that which normally defies our vision. Yet Five Angels is significantly different from the relentless acceleration of media culture to which we are accustomed. Its water moves slowly, very slowly, undercutting the velocity of technology, and thus the speed and multiplicity of our times.

Walter Benjamin, in his work on art in the age of mechanical production, argues devices such as slow motion enable the viewer to deeply scrutinise the quotidian, revealing hidden details as ‘movement is extended.’ For Benjamin, ‘slow motion not only presents familiar qualities of movement but reveals in them entirely unknown ones “which far from looking like retarded rapid movements give the effect of singularly gliding, floating, supernatural motions”’. Benjamin’s observations describe well the role of slow motion in Five Angels. The figures float and glide, defying gravity and hovering over water. Their actions look, of course, spatially and temporally impossible.

Yet by stretching time out and slowing a 35 second dive to 15 to 30 minutes, Five Angels presents time as an avenue for deeper experience and enhanced awareness. He does this to expand the ‘now’, and in doing so, demands we wait. The viewer must patiently wait for an image to form, for a figure to appear, for that figure to move extremely slowly across the screen, and finally ascend or descend.

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In this meditative space of focused study, the viewer can temporarily enter a new realm, where time is harnessed and duration controlled. This new realm offers respite and relief from the complexities and acceleration of contemporaneity. Immersed in a slow underwater world, the viewer is invited to go with the flow. In harnessing water and controlling time, and in temporarily deferring the complexity and acceleration of contemporaneity, *Five Angels* acknowledges the power of these forces through their deferral. Immersion, a thirst for situatedness and harnessing water’s movement materialise a response to the conditions of contemporaneity.

By offering this immersive escape from the pressures of contemporaneity, *Five Angels* asks the viewer to relinquish visual mastery and control. As I have argued above, the viewer is immersed in an underwater world, where they can see figures moving through water that has been harnessed and slowed. However, this demands a cognitive leap, as regimes of knowledge and units of measurement are turned on their heads. The work is disorientating: like contemporaneity, gravity, speed, time and boundaries are porous and unpredictable. However, I argue the overall effect of *Five Angels* is one of relief rather than resistance. The work offers a temporary escape from the pressures and acceleration of contemporaneity. This is not complete escape: the complexities and multiplicities of our current era remain. Nevertheless, in visually relinquishing mastery, coherence and control, the viewer can ‘go with the flow’ and quench a thirst—if not by achieving situatedness, then at least with temporarily relief. Before I turn to how the work asks the viewer to relinquish visual mastery and control, I will first demonstrate the ways in which *Five Angels* is disorientating.

Although Viola dramatically slows time and movement so viewers can study the water, a number of viewers describe their experience of *Five Angels* as one of sensory overload. Young describes her experience of the work as ‘utterly disorientating’, leaving her ‘all at sea.’

> “I experienced a temporary blindness… stripped of sight, aware of individuals around me, but unable to fix exact their locations. I felt vulnerable, left exposed to the ambient sound manifested as a low background roar containing no specific sounds yet evoking the sense of vast space… I felt insignificant and before my eyes adjusted to the low light leaking from the projections, before I regained my sense of self, I had been transported to a place where I was dwarfed by space and time.”

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61 Young, "Bill Viola: 'Ocean without a Shore'."

Cynthia Freeland writes how at the Getty installation of *Five Angels* in Los Angeles, she was:

overwhelmed by sensory experience in the darkened room. Each of the gigantic panels dwarfs us, but they are also dispersed, so that one cannot view them together. We cannot take in what we are seeing or hearing. We cannot make sense of what is showing on any one screen, nor understand how the five are related. The low roars and bubbling sounds seem to speak an alien tongue, something like the language of whales.\(^{63}\)

The work’s immersive mode of engagement engulfs the viewer, leaving no room for critical distance. This is heightened by the physical layout of the exhibition space. Although the physical variations of each space mean each installation of the work has a different configuration, Viola carefully specifies how the exhibitions should be set up, how visitors enter the space, the scale of the images and so on.\(^{64}\) Each installation is housed in a dark room, filled with ambient sound and extremely slow moving illuminated images. These images envelop and surround the viewer in an enclosed space,\(^{65}\) offering an engulfing experience in a way that painting and photography do not. The viewer also does not sit passively on a seat in a dimly lit theatre with one screen flickering straight ahead. Instead, the multi-screen installation surrounds the viewer with action, as screens compete for attention on all sides. As sonic and visual climaxes occur in in one sequence, they drown out the sound and action in other sequences. When the viewer focuses on one panel, there are constant interruptions from the unpredictable climaxes happening on other panels in the viewer’s peripheral vision. This means there is no optimal place to view the installation—from every vantage point, other moving images are out of view and threaten to interrupt. It is only possible to take in small parts of the installation at once, as there is too much going on at the same time to take it all in.


\(^{64}\) ‘Bill Viola has specified every detail of his work *Five Angels for the Millennium* 2001, from how visitors should enter the display space to the scale of the images, the overall dimensions and the audio levels. Despite this, the work will necessarily be different every time it is installed, due to the architectural constraints of the overall space in which it is shown’: TATE, ‘Conservation—Time-based media’ Tate, London, at http://www.tate.org.uk/about/our-work/conservation/time-based-media.

The work also subverts existing systems of navigation, as units of measure—
gravity, linearity, temporality—fail. The sound and images are often out of sync.
As the viewer watches a figure slowly floating on one panel, the soundscape
suddenly climaxes to a deafening roar as a figure in an adjacent panel hits the
water. In this way, it is difficult for the viewer to fall into the rhythm of the work
and anticipate what will happen next. Valentini argues Viola uses a particular kind
of narrative strategy: ‘something does happen, even if the time that it takes for
something to happen is extremely extended, and the rhythm of the story is
emphasized by sound, colour and light.’ However this narrative is so slow and
decontextualized, it is difficult to latch onto, which denies a sense of coherence or
understanding. Elizabeth Ten Grotenhuis describes how she saw ‘arresting
 correspondences’ between two of the screens, Birth Angel and Departing Angel,
when she saw first saw Five Angels. Just as the Departing Angel rose to the water’s
surface on one screen, ‘the same figure seemed to shoot through the surface of the
glistening water in the adjoining Birth Angel version.’ Yet the second time the
images appeared, the Birth Angel rose before the figure of the Departing Angel ‘and
the two angels seemed unrelated.’ Ten Grotenhuis puts her initial sense of
connection down to ‘random interactions’ between the two screens. She latched
onto a narrative—and attempted to make meaning—only to have it thwarted
minutes later.

Viola’s installation does not offer a clear narrative structure and the projections
are not synchronised. Viewers are jolted out of periods of meditative observation
through the deafening sound of what Young describes as ‘the extraordinary
pleasure’ of the figure plunging into or being expelled from the water. The rush
of this climax of action is visually and sonically overwhelming, especially in
comparison to the slowness and quietness of what comes before and after.
Ascending figures hover unexpectedly above the water in a curious baptism in
reverse. Movement, trajectory and direction are all confused and disjointed.
Angels appear to be ascending, but on studying the sequence, they are actually
upside down, entering the water from below and defying gravity to dive upwards.
Or they are shown in reverse, splashes forming and bubbles rising before the figure
hits the water. When the figure finally crashes through the surface, the rippled
scar in the water disappears, the point of entry miraculously healed. And

67 Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, “Something Rich and Strange: Bill Viola’s Uses of Asian
Spirituality,” in The Art of Bill Viola, ed. Chris Townsend (New York: Thames & Hudson,
68 Young, “Bill Viola: ‘Ocean without a Shore’.”
heightening this sense of immersion and confusion, the sounds do not necessarily match the action. This lack of synchronicity is confusing.

The angels themselves are also disconcerting. Larger than life, they are undergoing what Jaye Young describes as a ‘violent, cathartic or mortal event’, yet this event is slowed down completely.69 The figures are human, yet they are abstracted: their faces are rarely shown, and the dark and shadow makes them look more sculpture than flesh and blood. Yet they are human figures, although it is unclear whether they are swimming or drowning. Colour changes in the water also heighten their otherworldliness. As Rinya Arya observes, colour changes and other annihilations of the straightforward simplicity of patterns and expectations work to ‘disturb our interpretive framework’.70

Time, too, becomes fluid and boundless. Townsend argues like much experimental video work from the mid-1960s onwards,71 Viola’s work is an anathema to modernity’s assumption of time as linear and uniform.72 Time in Five Angels is not evenly spaced and flowing in one direction. Viola takes time, speeds it up, slows it down, almost freezes it, turns it backwards, plays different sections from the same time simultaneously, then loops it. This goes against the grain of the atomist theory from which film emerges, that sees time as made up of infinitely small, uniform and consistent units. This scientific understanding sees time as objectively measurable, abstract and following a linear sequence: minute after minute, hour after hour. Film is made up of 16 to 24 frames per second, with time divided into representational space, seemingly reflecting this modernist conception.73

In contrast, Five Angels shows different sequences at the same time—five different panels simultaneously vying for attention. It also plays the same sequence at different times—a figure diving into water, played forwards and backwards, the

71 A range of video artists have played with time, such as Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham and Nam June Paik. See Barbara London, “Time as Medium: Five Artists’ Video Installations,” Leonardo 28, no. 5 (1995).
72 Townsend, “Call Me Old-Fashioned, but….” p 16.
73 ibid. p 16.

188 | The disorientation and wonder of Five Angels
right way up and upside down, so the viewer experiences a sense of déjà vu. Viola also inverts time, showing sequences run backwards. He uses sudden switches and shifts in speed. A figure drifting ever so slowly to the water’s surface suddenly seems to speed up and crash violently through the surface at the final moment. Time in *Five Angels* is not linear or straight, but a bundle of concentric circles or splashes of water. Each sequence is seamlessly looped, so the figures descend and ascend continuously and without pause. They are always on the move and time seems to progress, very slowly.

*Five Angels* materialises this experience of time as multiple—an experience Smith argues is a key characteristic of contemporaneity. The affective vocabulary of water here echoes its role in Zhu Ming’s *Bubble Series*, in which I traced how the bubble floating in the various bodies of water materialised five different temporalities simultaneously: it stands for the very beginning of life and the continuous cycle of life. The bubble’s ephemeral nature shows time running out and inevitably disappearing, yet its uncertain path points to a time in the future and an anticipation of what is yet to come. At the same time, however, the bubble also stands for ongoing presentness and immediacy.

In *Five Angels*, water acts as a similar affective vocabulary that gives a material expression to the disorientation of time in contemporaneity. There is too much going on to take it all in at once—time is multiple, disjointed and overwhelming. It cannot be measured or predicted; it confounds expectations. Just as in the *Bubble Series*, water in *Five Angels* provides a vocabulary that materialises what Smith describes as the ‘seemingly limitless stream of times.’ Smith argues contemporaneity is characterised by the confluence of multiple temporalities, which are contingent, mismatching and asynchronous. As he notes, ‘one hundred years after Einstein’s breakthrough understanding that the world’s time is, at its extremities, multiple, relative and fungible, contemporary artists are showing that these strange aberrations now characterise what has become the

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75 Neumaier argues this highlights and parallels ‘the temporal dimensions of the *conditioi humana*—the cyclical nature of life and its ups and downs. The Angels are born, they go up and down, creating or descending, simultaneously and over and over. In the cycles, the figures are part of the totality of life, at different stages but always on the move. In this respect, *Five Angels* shows no death as finality— there is no final end point, as the figures constantly return and repeat the cycles. Ibid. p 64.


77 “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity.” p 703.
contemporary world’s “normal” experience of time.” The name for this immersion in a plethora of temporalities, of living with time in the most emphatic and extenuated sense, has already been proposed: contemporaneity. The ‘stream of times’ in Five Angels is limitless: the multiple screens run on constant loops that are not predictable or synchronised but contingent and mismatching. Time in Viola’s work is a distinctly strange aberration, running backwards, forwards, upside down and extremely slowly. The work appears to offer relief from the strangeness of time today, but in fact works to highlight that it is inescapable. In all of these ways, water in the work provides an affective vocabulary that materialises this strange new time.

In his work on visual art in an ‘era of designer capitalism,’ visual culture theorist Jan Jagodzinski argues, ‘[w]e are living through the early stages of a shift from the alphabetization of the mind to its modification by digitalized screen images within a synoptic assemblage.’ Drawing on Bauman’s ‘liquid oeuvre’ of liquid love, life and modernity, he sees our era as characterised by a constant becoming of things. He sees this as an ‘ontological shift from depth to surface’: space has been supplanted by time, which is liquid; speed matters over duration; the world is now one of images, flattened into a new cartography manifested by the ‘libidinal flows of matter.’

Jagodzinski argues Viola slows down and magnifies the action in his works to such an extent that ‘the brain-eye circuit is overloaded by too much and not enough information.’ The images move so slowly that the viewer sees them differently. Quite simple images—figures diving into water—become abstracted and uncanny. Images therefore become strange and movements seem incremental and hypnotically slow. The viewer is able to see what they normally cannot. Jagodzinski calls this ‘extravisibility’. Seeing is further interrupted and manipulated by the experiences of immersion and sensory overload I described above. By receiving too much, yet enough, information, the viewer’s perception becomes stuttered. To Jagodzinski, Viola’s technique of slowing and magnifying is ‘exemplary of the technicity of vision turned against itself, attaining the criterion

79 ibid. p 198.
81 ibid. p 4.
82 ibid. p 190.
of undoing its own articulations." By slowing and inverting time so dramatically, then, *Five Angels* materialises and visualises the intangible.

In other words, by visualising the intangible, all units of measure disintegrate. Jagodzinski argues the viewer is placed ‘in an economy that seems absolutely contrary to calculation and measurement, expanding the present—making it a fractal “thing-like” space.’ *Five Angels* defies rationality. Vision is turned against itself, gravity is turned on its head, and the work’s multiple temporalities are anathematic to modernity’s linear, uniform time. Viola presents the viewer with what is actually invisible. The work attempts to harness water, to control its flow, trajectory and speed, however this attempt is ultimately turned against itself, as water, exemplifying and materialising the forces of contemporaneity—particularly its experience of time—cannot be controlled.

Despite offering the opportunity to study the movement of a figure in water in extremely slow motion, *Five Angels* actually asks the viewer to relinquish visual mastery and control, to override cerebral responses to the work and instead be ‘in’ the work, not separate to it—to ‘give in’. The work invites an immersive relationship of connection, an intimate, sensory, affective experience. This relationship is again symptomatic of the forces of contemporaneity. In *What is Contemporary Art?* Smith argues contemporaneity is characterised by closeness rather than modernist distance, with an emphasis on immediacy, contingency and encounters. *Five Angels* grants no distance for critical analysis; the viewer is immersed and engulfed, surrounded by water.

*Five Angels* therefore both reflects and resists the conditions of contemporaneity. The work responds to the thirst for situatedness produced by our era by offering the viewer a space of shared meditative slowness, an immersive world where water is harnessed and the viewer is free from the complexity and acceleration of real life. Water materialises this thirst, as well as the promise of escape. However, the work can only offer a provisional, temporary and partial escape. This respite entails relinquishing expectations and prior knowledge of modernist categories and expectations. The conditions of entering the immersive world demand that existing systems of navigation and units of measure disintegrate. Gravity is turned on its head. The viewer’s interpretive framework is shaken by out of sync sound, narrative, image and shifts in colour. Time is multiple and shifting. Space is boundless. Immersed in the work, the viewer can no longer be clear which way is up. Water again materialises these conditions: it is disorientating and

83 ibid. p 190.
84 ibid. p 190.
confounding. While attempting to reflect—and even resist—the forces of contemporaneity, Five Angels displays their symptoms of multiplicity, uncertainty and complexity. As such, the viewer is never quite situated, and instead must relinquish visual mastery: they must go with the flow.

**Contemporary sublime**

Through the interplay of harnessing water and then being overwhelmed by its failure to follow interpretive categories, in this next section I argue Five Angels materialises the contemporary sublime. The sublime experience is invoked not simply by the water’s elemental power. Instead, drawing on Jean-Francois Lyotard’s theorisation of the sublime, I argue water gives a material expression to the awe and terror of the boundless, disorientating and incommensurable conditions of contemporaneity. This new reality is too complex and confronting to digest; in Five Angels, this sublime experience is materialised by water.

The sublime has a long and rich history. From the distinct roots and slants of historical versions and national sublimes (German, French, English, even Dutch85) to the post-modern, technological, everyday and figurative sublimes, the term comes with quite some baggage.86 Yet it is a puzzle to define, coming as it does with a great deal of historical baggage, and wide and not always consistent application. In *The Sublime Now*, Griselda Pollock observes the sublime ‘keeps cropping up a lot’ these days but she admits she does not fully understand what the concept of the sublime means in art,87 which is apt, considering that the sublime ultimately seeks to describe an experience that exceeds understanding, that ‘lies beyond, or before, language’, where words fail us.88 For Pollock, the

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sublime was an experience that shocked her: ‘Standing before a painting—a real one; it was by Vermeer—I spontaneously said to myself: this is sublime.”

Water—and nature more broadly—is a central motif of the sublime. One of the key expressions of the sublime traditionally was in seascape and landscape painting by Romantic artists, who sought to capture the extremities of nature, often featuring the elemental power of water. Historically, the sublime was a ‘flexible semantic container’ for what Robert Rosenblum describes as the ‘murky new Romantic experiences of awe, terror, boundlessness and divinity that began to rupture the decorous confines of earlier aesthetic systems.’ Water often invoked the sublime to express what Edmund Burke saw as the ‘delightful terror’ and ‘sort of swelling, and triumph’ of dangerous things safely channelled.

Paintings of crashing waves, for example, would awe the viewer with the water’s power and destructive potential while posing no real threat to their physical safety. Emmanuel Kant saw the sublime as a more subjective experience, where the experience of the senses overcomes the power of reason. He argued the sublime is not innate in nature itself, but comes from our own minds and experiences. For Kant, the sublime is a problem of and for representation and comprehension. Faced with the formless and boundless magnitude of natural events, the imagination lacks the determinative concepts to make sense of the experience, and thus feels delight. As such, the sublime transcends every sense, and makes everything else seem small.

*Five Angels* can be seen as conforming to this traditional understanding of the sublime. Water in the work is elemental and awesome. Its power is emphasised through the deafening sound of waves crashing and the immense scale of the images in which the water almost fills up several of the three metre tall screens. The work places the viewer on the threshold of a deep watery void. Like the monk

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89 Pollock, “Vermeer’s Sublimity.” p 220. In her analysis of the painting, she concludes the experience stemmed from ‘the beyond of a not-yet area of analysis’: the problem of gender difference in which the maternal relation is a lost and impossible object of desire that Vermeer sublimates in his compelling and sublimely beautiful images.


standing and contemplating the threshold between ocean and sky in Caspar David Friedrich’s Romantic painting *Monk by the Sea* (1809), the viewer in *Five Angels*, too, is dwarfed by a screen bifurcated by a horizon line.

At each time of climax, when one of the figures crashes through the water’s surface accompanied by a roaring sonic crescendo, the previously calm void in *Five Angels* is filled with teeming unleashed power. This also can be read as echoing Joseph Mallord William Turner’s paintings, such as *Snow Storm: Steam Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth making signals in shallow water, and going by the lead. The author was in this storm on the night the Ariel left Harwich* (1842). The painting depicts a steamship in the vortex of a swirling storm, helpless against the elemental fury of wind and water. Light, sky and sea merge together in a dynamic and vaporeous swirling haze, juxtaposing the ocean’s destructive, untamed and awe-inspiring force against the ship’s smallness and inferiority. Like Turner’s *Snow Storm*, the water in *Five Angels* is abstracted such that light and water become indistinguishable; like Turner’s vortex, up and down, backwards and forwards are confused. The elemental fury of a figure crossing the threshold is such that the viewer’s mind can find no system of navigation. The sheer power of the water and light, as well as the work’s dramatic soundscape and immersive mode of engagement, can be seen as offering an experience of both Burke’s ‘delightful terror’ and Kant’s failure of comprehension at a boundless and formless experience.

However, while Viola’s use of water may refer back to historical conceptualisations of the sublime—conveying the ‘ferocity of elemental fears’ alongside nature’s awe and power—in *Five Angels*, the sublime invokes a different set of conditions. In *Five Angels*, the sublime does not just stem from the immense power of nature or god, dwarfing we mere mortals like the view of an immense waterfall or storm. Instead, the water does unworldly, unwater-like things. Air bubbles and the figures plunging through it defy gravity. They move ever so slowly and are larger than life. The figures are uncanny, human but abstracted. The colour scheme of each sequence lends an otherworldly glow. The power of water here is not simply awe at nature. In fact, for the contemporary sublime, it is not necessary that water is a natural element at all.

*Five Angels* offers a sublime experience driven by the work’s watery aesthetic and mode of engagement. Water in the work materialises the awe and terror at the overwhelming immersion that characterises contemporaneity. In our current

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93 Arya, “Bill Viola and the Sublime.”

94 Others have discussed the sublime in Viola’s work in terms of his work’s spiritual dimensions. Rinya Arya, for example, argues the sublime operates in Viola’s work.
era, we are faced with seemingly limitless streams of time, with accelerating complexity and uncertainty. Submerged in this new world, old systems of navigation fail. Like the figures in Viola’s installation, we are anchorless and boundless, always on the move but without units of measure. This confrontation with the immersive void of water—which materialises the conditions of contemporaneity—evokes the sublime.

*Five Angels* offers a particularly contemporary evocation of the sublime. There are a number of approaches to the contemporary sublime, such as those by Jameson, Zizek and Derrida, each focusing on different aspects of the sublime. For Jameson, while nature was the most powerful and unpresentable force for earlier thinkers, that force today is society itself, the ‘whole new decentred global network of the third stage of capital itself.’ Late capitalism is so decentred, fragmented, superficial and ‘depthless’, that the subject cannot come to terms with it. He argues the sublime, then, springs from the ‘phenomenological experience of the postmodern world.’ While this approach is in some ways relevant to Viola’s work—especially regarding superficiality and depthlessness—its emphasis on global capitalism as a source of the sublime lends itself to a sociological or even Marxist approach, which differs from my project. Zizek approaches the sublime through Lacanian psychoanalysis, alongside Hegel and Kant, arguing political ideologies refer to and revolve around a sublime experience that is beyond perception and intelligibility.

In examining five different approaches to the contemporary sublime (‘the unrepresentable in art and the experiences of transcendence, terror, the uncanny and altered states of consciousness’), Simon Morley argues what links these different perspectives is

> a desire to define a moment when social and psychological codes and structures no longer bind us, where we reach a sort of borderline at which through religious references deflected onto the everyday for a secular audience, affirming ‘the fact of our immanence, which is an immanence of the body.’ ibid. p 6.

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97 ibid. p 2.
rational thought comes to an end and we suddenly encounter something wholly and perturbingly other.  

This borderline was also central to Kant’s eighteenth-century understanding of the sublime sees it as a subjective experience, where the power of reason is overcome by the experience of the senses. A key architect of Enlightenment thinking, Kant saw the sublime as triggered by the shock of an experience that is the antithesis to reason, order, logic, and man’s mastery of nature. It was a confrontation with the excessive, the boundless and irrational, experiences which the imagination lacks the ability to make sense of. However, for Kant, human reason and rationality were ultimately able to reassert themselves when faced with the sublime, by reincorporating the unpresentable and reconciling the impossibility of the sublime back into reason.

Jean-Francois Lyotard draws on Kant in his formulation of the contemporary sublime, but within an overall critique of the Enlightenment and modernity. Lyotard argues we have become cynical of modernity’s claims. World wars, famine, disease and so on have challenged our mastery over nature. No longer are we satisfied with grand metadiscourse; instead, meaning and values are ephemeral, relative, interchangeable and conditional. This creates quite a void: what fills the gap where reason, certainty and rationality no longer reside? For Lyotard, this is the ‘postmodern condition’—and it is this very void that gives rise to the contemporary sublime. He argues the sublime is an allusion to something that cannot be presented, and experience of the impossibility of assimilating an object within our powers of reason—it ‘short-circuits thinking with itself’. It is triggered by an experience of irresolvable conflict—it is

98 Morley, “Staring into the Contemporary Abyss: The Contemporary Sublime.”


100 ibid. p 260. Lyotard grounds the contemporary sublime in what he terms the ‘postmodern condition’, which is a different formulation to Smith’s argument about contemporaneity. In fact, Smith argues our current world picture can no longer be characterised by terms such as ‘modernity’ or ‘postmodernity.’ Smith, What Is Contemporary Art? p 5. Smith argues such terms, however conditionally used, will miss the main points of our conflicted circumstances—they cannot be stretched and patched to carry this degree of spinout’ from the profound realignment of modernity’s categories and formulations. Smith sees ‘postmodernity’ as isolated to the West, never belonging to the world; a ‘one generation wonder,’ postmodernity has ‘evaporated.’ “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity.” p 707 and 706 and What Is Contemporary Art? p 255.

The disorientation and wonder of *Five Angels* destabilising, terrifying, unsettling and haunting. Simultaneously, however, it is subversive, an act of radical rupturing. By rejecting the totalities and metanarratives of modernity, the sublime becomes political. As Lyotard states, ‘Let us wage war on totality; let us be witness to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences in order to save the honour of the name.’

Today, the sublime’s confrontation with experiences that threaten to derail the comfort of the House of Reason is just as significant, albeit with a differently framed void. Where there was once solidity, singularity and certainty, in our contemporary era there is a void of ambiguity, incommensurability, contingency and ubiquity. *Five Angels* materialises this confrontation with the void of contemporaneity, triggering an experience that is overwhelming and defies logic. The work challenges the viewer by presenting what is beyond representation and articulating what Lyotard describes as ‘the incommensurability of reality to concept.’ While the sublime was once embodied by the immense power and awe of nature against man’s vulnerability, in *Five Angels*, the sublime stems from water’s power as a vocabulary that exemplifies the forces of our era. These forces—contemporaneity’s immersive complexity, multiplicity and acceleration—cannot be assimilated into categories or systems of logic; they have shock value.

In *Five Angels*, the images are slowed down so much, both visually and sonically, that we gain access to visions we would not normally see. The movement of the

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105 Another of Viola’s works, *The Quintet of the Astonished 2000*, part of Viola’s *The Passions* installation, is a large rear-projected digital image shown in even slower motion than *Five Angels*. In the work, five actors change facial expressions so slowly it is as if the moving image is a painting or still photograph.
figures and the water is so slow we can take everything in and watch every precise movement. Jaye Young describes this as Viola visualising the intangible. In his work, the artist seeks ‘to imagine (image-in) a state of mind, a suspended state of awareness.’ He ‘envisions the interface of the bodily and spiritual sublime, presenting us with the body as receptor, preceptor, and material vessel of the spirit.’  

The way Viola overturns concrete and solid cognitive categories is simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying, which is a central element of the sublime. Lyotard argues the sublime is a radical rupture; it destabilises, unsettles and terrifies. Morley also observes that in the sublime, ‘Awe and wonder can quickly blur into terror, giving rise to a darker aspect of the sublime experience, when the exhilarating feeling of delight metamorphoses into a flirtation with dissolution.’ The sublime, then, is ‘what takes hold of us when reason falters and certainties begin to crumble.’ It is:

About being taken to the limits. The sublime experience is fundamentally transformative, about the relationship between disorder and order, and the disruption of the stable coordinates of time and space. Something rushes in and we are profoundly altered.

The sublime power of Five Angels derives from the extent to which this shocks and cannot be assimilated. Life today is shaped by complexity, fluidity and contingency. Reason and certainty no longer anchor us like they used to; today we grapple with relentless shifts in identity and ways of seeing. As well as facing the complexity of these constantly shifting new realities, we face the impossibility of ever being able to fully digest them—we cannot necessarily explain, understand or represent the forces that shape us; our minds lack a system of navigation.

Terry Smith argues this experience is a defining feature of contemporary art:

A viewer passes through the initial shock to recognise that he or she is being asked by this work of art to throw out the framework for responding to works of art that had served hitherto, and to accept—without fully

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108 ibid. p 12.
knowing why—the new world of seeing that this work requires for an adequate response to it.\textsuperscript{109}

*Five Angels* exemplifies this invitation to throw out existing frameworks and instead—without being able to comprehend why—enter a new world of seeing. Smith continues,

The contemporary, then, is first of all a matter of direct experience, and then it is one that claims further significance because it may be epochal. It combines instanteity—total immersion in the present—with a demand that the unknowable future may be instantly accepted.\textsuperscript{110}

Viola’s installation also displays these tendencies. It is a work of direct experience, where the viewer is immersed in an alternative environment, a dark, boundless 360-degree world. This world is a sublime experience, one that characterises and forms the epoch; it is instant, yet the viewer cannot anticipate what might happen next.

It is water in the work that provides an affective vocabulary that materialises this immersive new world. As such, water provides the vocabulary for the contemporary sublime. This is not always the case; the contemporary sublime as I described it may play out in other artworks without any trace of water. However, in *Five Angels*, water gives this sublime a particular material expression, one that is symptomatic and iterative of the conditions of our current era. Water has a potent ability to capture the dynamics and conditions of the contemporary sublime—and contemporaneity. It is a powerful element that is vital to our survival. It is a respite and a threat—vital to our existence and yet we have limited power over it. Its essence is to be always the same but always different and always in-between. It characteristics, such as immersion, flow, circulation, dissolution and turbulence, describe the conditions of our era.

**Conclusion**

In one respect, Viola’s *Five Angels for the Millennium* is so simple. A lone figure dives into water in less than 30 seconds of footage. However the immersive environment, sensory excess, disorientation and shifts of fluid temporality capture something of the complex and fluid experience of life today. Perhaps this explains the work’s enormous popularity. Although derided by some critics, it captured the imagination of large audiences.

\begin{itemize}
  \item[110] ibid. p 373.
\end{itemize}
In this chapter, I have argued *Five Angels* materialises the conditions of contemporaneity in two ways. First, it materialises the thirst for situatedness that is often a response to the complexity and acceleration of our times. Immersion into the work offers escape—an entry to a slower underwater world. In this world, water’s movement is harnessed and slowed, so it can be scrutinised and grasped, in contrast to the increasingly confounding and complex real world. At the same time, it materialises another condition of contemporaneity: the experience of being ‘all at sea’. Succumbing to this is a condition of entry to the underwater world. It entails relinquishing visual mastery and control, ‘going with the flow’ in a slow new world where units of measure and systems of knowledge are turned on their heads.

Water provides an affective vocabulary in *Five Angels* that materialises these experiences. By offering a conditional escape from the complexity of contemporaneity, the work confronts the viewer with the awe and terror of the void. Relinquishing modernity’s certainties and solidities means the viewer catches a glimpse at ‘a gap through which the terrifying and stunning—but also the unpredictable and revealing—may enter.’ The water in *Five Angels*—and contemporary life—is too complex to fully comprehend. Bill Viola’s installation propels us towards the threshold and an experience of the contemporary sublime. Water is its material expression.

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CONCLUSION

Water: A vocabulary of the now

Whether it is a single drop, a tub of bathwater or a roaring ocean, water has the same fundamental properties: it is two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen. Yet water is also always in transition, shifting from solid to liquid to gas and back again. It is ubiquitous and essential, always the same yet always different. In these pages, it has appeared as a giant bubble, tossed in the salty waves of a body of water. It is a surface in a book, captured and recorded, stripped of its materiality and reproduced as blobs of ink on a page, alongside notes that explore it as a substance, an idea and a possibility. Water is a projection of light on a wall, showing a simple dive into the deep that has been digitally enhanced, dramatically slowed, and played upside down and in reverse. It is a soundscape of dripping, splashing and crashing waves and an experience of immersion. I have shown water to be calm and turbulent, a respite and a threat, an undulating surface and a three dimensional void.

All these examples of water in contemporary art have been my point of departure in this dissertation. I have asked the question: what does water in contemporary art do? This led me to investigate ways in which water might materialise the contemporary condition. In undertaking this inquiry I have closely examined three artworks, orchestrating a conversation between them in a manner envisaged by Mieke Bal, to explore the vocabulary of water they deploy alongside Terry Smith’s framework of contemporaneity. In doing so, I have drawn on a wider literature such as Judith Butler’s work on precarity, Luce Irigaray’s writing on fear of fluids and François Lyotard’s contemplations on the contemporary sublime. I have considered this literature through an expanding vocabulary of water, including the bubble, circulation, immersion and dissolution. I have used these concepts in conversation with the artworks to test my claim about water’s role in art today.
These conversations have demonstrated the ways in which water gives voice to the forces and dynamics that shape us in the present moment. In fact, I argue that through its diversity and multiplicity, its material qualities and characteristics, water acts as a potent vocabulary in contemporary art, one which materialises the conditions of contemporaneity. Zhu Ming’s bubble in the *Bubble Series* materialises contemporaneity’s multiplicity of temporalities and ‘worlds’ and the resulting experience of dislocation. The bubble also materialises our current era’s precariousness, confronting the viewer with their vulnerability. Water in Roni Horn’s *Another Water* materialises a new kind of identity for the millennium that is fluid, strange and androgynous, reflecting the contingency and shape-shifting movement that characterises contemporaneity. Water in the work is also a material expression of our era’s dark undercurrent of anxiety that surfaces as certainties dissolve. In Bill Viola’s *Five Angels*, water materialises a thirst for situatedness and partial immersive escape from contemporaneity’s complexity and acceleration. At the same time, it gives body to the inescapable experience of being ‘all at sea’. Entry to the underwater world therefore demands the viewer relinquish visual mastery and control and ‘go with the flow.’ *Five Angels* therefore confronts the viewer with the contemporary sublime—a sense of awe and terror at the void of contemporaneity’s complexity, multiplicity and lack of solidity. It is water, I have argued, that materialises this void.

Key to this dissertation has been the work of grappling with the conditions and experiences of the present. Terry Smith calls this work, as it is undertaken in contemporary art, ‘world picturing’—responding to the world, representing it, imaging it, challenging it, adding and subtracting, looking at the world in new ways. Each of the artworks I have examined has undertaken this work on a micro level, grappling with aspects of what it means to live in our era. World picturing needs a language—a vocabulary that resonates with the conditions and dynamics it seeks to represent. I have argued that one such vocabulary emerging from the works examined draws on the characteristics of water.

Throughout this dissertation, I have developed an argument around world picturing and argued that a new language has emerged that is symptomatic and iterative of our current era. In this way, I have undertaken what Smith argues is the role of art history: to ‘scrutinise current and recent art for what it shows of the ontology of the present.’ In doing so, I have uncovered a range of ways in which water materialises the conditions of our era.

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In his writing on contemporaneity, Smith argues a key condition of the current era is its multiplicity. ‘Nowadays,’ he writes, ‘the frictions of multiplicitous difference shape all that is around us, and within us, everything near and far, every surface and depth.’ In various ways, water in the three works I have examined materialises this multiplicitous difference. In the Bubble Series, I have revealed how the bubble materialises a sometimes-contradictory multiplicity of worlds and temporalities, such as the distant past (where the bubble stands for the origin of life and a return to the womb), an anticipation of the future and the intensity and immediacy of the live performance in the now. In Another Water, gestures of doubling and repetition materialise this multiplicity. Watery surface follows watery surface, sometimes resembling aspic or elephant skin or a mountain range, while footnotes double and morph with dizzying frequency. In Five Angels, this multiplicity plays out by juxtaposing five different screens showing figures that are always on the move. The work’s looped sequences and warped speed further reinforce this experience of multiplicity. The slow moving water, mismatching and asynchronous, gives contemporaneity’s multiplicity a material expression.

As I have investigated, another key aspect of Smith’s definition of contemporaneity involves the disorientating and dislocating experience that results from all of this multiplicity. In the Bubble Series, the bubble is everywhere and nowhere. It drifts without an anchor, destination or system of navigation. In Another Water, the footnotes, too, drift without a referent. The work is located in the River Thames, but the photos could be of a watery surface anywhere—they reveal no identifying features or landmarks. In fact, the viewer cannot be sure whether what they are seeing is in fact water at all—it is ‘another water’, increasingly estranged. In Five Angels, the experience of disorientation and dislocation plays out through the water’s immersive boundlessness and strangeness. The figures and water defy gravity and move in ways that makes no sense. There is too much going on to take it all in at once. The viewer cannot be sure which way is up—they are ‘all at sea’.

Smith argues contemporaneity is also characterised by a realisation ‘that we are all living in a condition of permanent transition, moving toward uncertain, unpredictable futures.’ Faced with confounding complexity and contingency, with relentless disorientation and contrariness, we are confronted by unpredictability. Again, the vocabulary of water in the three works materialises this experience of uncertainty from constant transition. Zhu Ming in his Bubble

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3 ibid. p 255.

4 Contemporary Art: World Currents. p 12.
Series faces a profoundly uncertain future: in each performance, there is a real possibility the bubble might burst, sink or disappear, and the artist might drown or suffocate. In Another Water, the river has an unpredictable magnetic pull. We are frequently reminded it is fatally dangerous and full of bodies, yet it is strangely hypnotic and bewitching, as if it might tempt us to jump in and lose our identities. In Five Angels, the figures, too, are in states of permanent transition and their futures are similarly uncertain. Colour changes, sound and temporal shifts disturb our interpretive frameworks and thwart expectations, as the figures crash through the water’s surface without rhyme or reason.

In each case study, I have argued the world picture brought forward by each work confronts us with a void, an overwhelming sense that the categories and structures which once anchored and defined us have dissolved. As Smith notes, the encompassing power of structures ‘of religious belief, cultural universalism, systems of thought and political ideologies’ have ‘weakened considerably.’ He continues:

> With the passing of modernity, the evaporation of the postmodern and the rise of fundamentalisms, with the eruptions of an overstressed planet and the diminution of imaginable futures, contemporaneity seems to be all that we have.5

The bubble in Zhu Ming’s performances is overwhelmingly precarious. I have argued that its propensity to leak or overflow is a materialisation of the inherent porousness of boundaries. Nothing is certain or stable; in subject matter and form, the work materialises contemporaneity’s fundamental lack of stability and exposes the leaky and precarious illusion of certainty. Likewise, Another Water articulates a yearning for a time before the confusion of grappling with the contingency and fluidity of identity. The water’s changing state confronts the viewer with contemporaneity’s relentless change and movement. It articulates our constant state of becoming as one which has replaced the stasis of being fixed and solid. Water in the work has an irresistible pull, inviting us to embrace fluidity and discard memories of measure. Yet the death of solidity is frightening, despite the possibility of a rebirth of a different kind of identity. As I have argued, Five Angels confronts the viewer with the awe and terror of a strange underwater world, in which modernity’s certainties—linearity, gravity, temporality—fail. The vocabulary of water here gives a material expression to the contemporary sublime, a reality that is too complex, disorienting and incommensurable to digest.

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At times, my findings on the vocabulary of water in these works make explicit what is implicit in Smith’s writing: for example, Smith writes, in response to the estrangement and fast pace of change, contemporary artists everywhere:

supply particular kinds of provisional syntheses, or provide pauses in the overall rush into the unsynthesizable, showing its flows as if in section, or as glimpses frozen into objects intended for passers in between; artists model the minutiae of the world’s processes as supplements that mark out possible pathways before us …

These tendencies are strongly evident in the three artworks I have examined. Both *Another Water* and *Five Angels* provide ‘pauses in the overall rush into the unsynthesizable’. In *Another Water*, Horn freezes the river’s turbulent surface in photographs, quite literally ‘showing its flows as if in section.’ As I have argued, it is as if she is creating an encyclopaedia of water that offers ‘glimpses frozen into objects’, enabling viewers to pause and reflect on the conditions that define our era. Likewise, in *Five Angels*, Viola dramatically slows time and movement, harnessing water and expanding the moment so that it can be scrutinised; in other words, ‘providing pauses in the overall rush’ of life today. His projections, too, offer ‘glimpses frozen into objects intended for passers in between’, making visible the normally invisible forces that shape our lives.

In a similar way, the *Bubble Series* ‘models the minutiae of the world before us.’ As I have argued, by entering his bubble and performing the conditions of contemporaneity—the multiplicity of temporalities and worlds and the fundamental precariousness of our position—Zhu models them and gives them a material expression. For example, he performs the dynamic of framing and overflowing: protecting and cushioning himself against the harsh realities of both the ocean and the contemporary condition (framing), only to be thwarted by a flimsy and provisional vessel that is prone to leak and overflow.

In these ways, my research has applied, supported and extended Smith’s writing on contemporaneity. In the three case studies, I have tested his theories against contemporary artworks, to analyse whether contemporary art does in fact offer a world picture that iterates and is symptomatic of the conditions of contemporaneity.

However, I have asked further questions of Smith’s framework. This is not to say Smith’s approach is lacking; rather, I have found an area in his writing that can be further developed in a different direction. I have applied Smith’s theoretical framework, then stepped away from his work to examine the ways in which water

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materialises the conditions of contemporaneity. In each case study, I have tested this claim, to discover that water is a powerful vocabulary in art and theory today, one that reflects and materialises Smith’s framework. Through these case studies, I have also shown that the vocabulary of water, which subtly infuses Smith’s work, is no coincidence. His prolific writing on contemporaneity is rich with references to water—the ‘drift towards incommensurability,’7 the ‘turbulence of temporalities, locations, mediations and identities’8, the ‘the flows of contemporaneity,’9 the ‘river of time,’10 the ‘seemingly endless stream of times.’11 However his writings are largely silent as to water’s ability to materialise the conditions of our era, appearing to overlook the significance of water in his conceptualisation. This vocabulary of water in fact reflects a general cultural turn towards water. My research, then, has extended Smith’s writing on contemporaneity, to attend to his silence about the parallel visual vocabulary of water in contemporary art which sits alongside the vocabulary of water which infuses his work.

My study has also utilised Smith’s claim that contemporary art is an ontology of the present, again extending his work to examine the specific ways in which water in contemporary art materialises this ontology of today. At stake in this claim is the question of whether it is possible to select a number of characteristics to define the essence of our era and its art. It can be argued that the very act of categorisation goes against the grain of contemporaneity. However, I see Smith’s framework as open to complexity and multiplicity without resorting to generalisations; it is thus amenable to the conditions of contemporaneity and contemporary art. Smith’s approach is one of zooming in and out—analysing a number of individual artworks and exhibitions, then moving back to make broader evaluations and analysis, and to locate these observations within art history and criticism. I think the merit of this approach is to let the art speak back—to ground interpretation and analysis in the cultural objects themselves. This implicitly draws on Bal’s methodology of staging conversations between the artworks and broader concepts. I have taken this a step further with the close readings that I have adopted in each of the case study artworks, introducing the concept of water as an additional interrogator. The danger here is in over claiming and making

10 Thinking Contemporary Curating.
generalisations about three specific examples. This, of course, is a problem that besets all cultural analysis.

However, I am not suggesting that contemporary art as a whole presents a singular or consistent message; nor that contemporary art presents a unified grand narrative of what it means to live today. I do not claim to be able to prove objectively or empirically that water is an ontology of the present. My study is one that results not in concrete answers or closure but in opening up a space in which to grapple with the forces and processes that create us. As I have shown, an important feature of the definition of contemporaneity is that it embraces multiplicity, friction and the ‘irreconcilable and indissociable’ coexistence of antagonisms and tensions that are manifest in our current conditions.  

Water, too, reflects these conditions; in its very nature, it resists closure, stasis and linearity. The ontology presented by water in contemporary art, then, is not neat or certain. This dissertation demonstrates that the term ontology is an exemplary travelling concept: my use of the term goes against the grain of its history, in that it rejects the possibility of a singular, universal absolute ground for being. Today’s ontology is shaped by and symptomatic of contemporaneity. It is, like water itself, fluid, shifting, immersive and turbulent.

In making these claims, my research has shown that Mieke Bal’s approach of close reading and conceptual travel is a valuable methodology for analysing cultural objects and their relationship to the conditions of contemporaneity. Throughout this dissertation, I have emulated Bal’s approach of closely reading an artwork, then orchestrating a collision between it and the research agenda in generative and meaningful ways. This does not mean ‘anything goes’—as my analysis and travel are kept in check by the object in question. To anchor my analysis, I have continually returned to these cultural objects to keep my interpretation in check. Following Bal, I have approached the artworks as living, thinking theoretical objects, ‘instances of cultural philosophy’ in and of themselves. 

By constantly returning to the artwork, and staging collisions with different concepts and frameworks, Bal’s methodology has enabled me to test the potential of water as an illuminating concept. Travelling Concepts involves flexibility and movement across environments, disciplines and times. As I have shown, Bal’s approach is particularly fitting for an age where modernity’s anchors and canons have become slippery. Like the conditions of our era (as Smith describes them), this is an approach that embraces complexity, multiplicity, contingency and fluidity.

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12 ibid. p 269.

13 Bal, Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History. p 5.
As well as applying and extending Smith’s work on contemporaneity and Bal’s travelling concepts, this dissertation has also made a contribution to several other bodies of literature. As I revealed in chapter one, the literature from art history largely overlooks the thematic of water in contemporary art. While studies focus on specific aspects of water in art, from historical examples such as water in eighteenth century European painting, to more contemporary studies of documentary photography of the seaside, I have revealed that an analysis of the role of water in contemporary art more broadly is a blind spot. My research also adds to a number of approaches in art history that consider water’s role in art.

I have also made an original contribution to scholarship in relation to the three artists themselves. There is little written about Zhu Ming and very few studies critically analyse his work. While there is more analysis of both Roni Horn and Bill Viola’s work, no scholars have taken my approach of analysing the role of water in their work in terms of cultural theories of contemporaneity.

Furthermore, while a number of interdisciplinary studies have used various metaphors of water, there has not been a synthesised approach to the question of how water in art materialises the dynamics of our current era. My research therefore adds to this wide body of theory using water-led language to explain the forces and processes that define our current era—such as Zygmunt Bauman’s Liquid Modernity, Luce Irigaray’s work on fluidity and a fear of flows and Manuel Castells’ writing on network flows. My study also supports the emerging literature from ‘oceanic studies’ and the ‘blue humanities,’ which seek to reframe how we conceptualise water’s role. However, more than this, my thesis has taken a different approach. I have not only considered the characteristics of water as metaphors for our era, as do Bauman and Irigaray. These theorists tend to overlook water’s materiality, instead using it as an abstraction to describe processes that involve movement and change. Nor have I studied water’s chronological development in Western and Chinese art broadly or focused on how it has influenced artistic practice, as has John Clarke. Instead, my thesis has attended to the triangular relationship between water, contemporary art and contemporaneity.

This is a valuable relationship to examine, particularly because art is a rich and revealing window into our world. Mieke Bal sees art as an interlocutor within the

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14 Bauman, Liquid Modernity. Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One; Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche; Elemental Passions.

15 Clarke, Water and Art: A Cross-Cultural Study of Water as Subject and Medium in Modern and Contemporary Artistic Practice.
culture from which it emerges; as such, artworks are theoretical objects that ‘think’ and theorise the world around them.\textsuperscript{16} Similarly, Smith argues that art, as an act of ‘world picturing’, has a rich, puzzling and revealing engagement with the conditions from which it emerges.

This dissertation has touched upon some of the more complex questions of our time: How can we describe the conditions, forces and processes that shape us today? In some respects, these questions are unanswerable—or at, least, unprovable. It is not possible to account fully for the myriad of conditions, environments and individual experiences that take place at any given moment. Any attempts at analysing such questions must resort to hazy, unmeasurable and generalising claims about reality. Nevertheless, the unprovable nature of such questions has never stopped scholars from grappling with them and hazardaing a provisional answer. In fact, such theorisations are crucial to understanding who we are, what shapes us and who we want to be. This thesis is one such offering.

In these pages, I have sought to give structure to the chaos, complexity and multiplicity that is our era. I have drawn examples from contemporary art in the belief that art is able to articulate and conjure experiences of things we might not grasp through language alone. Art takes us to the edges of the thinkable, revealing things we might not otherwise acknowledge. The specific works challenge and confront—the precariousness of Zhu Ming in his bubble; the magnetic pull of water in Another Water, taunting the viewer with a desire and the danger of dissolving; the thrilling terror of the sublime void in Five Angels. Artworks such as these reveal and express anxieties, transformations and social and cultural forces. They register and try to explain shifts in how we see ourselves. Any answers drawn from analysing cultural objects are however partial: there is always more than one way of making sense of an artwork and how it fits within a broader set of concerns. Studies such as this therefore offer a particular kind of knowledge: one that is partial and unprovable, and opens out to further questions.

Befitting the complex, diverse and multiple conditions of contemporaneity, this thesis has left a number of avenues of investigation untravelled. As I suggested in the introduction, my claim that water in art materialises contemporaneity could be tested on any number of contemporary works, such as Patricia Piccinini’s computer generated ocean Swell, Julius Popp’s irrigated waterfall words in bit.fall and Asako Narahashi’s lopsided horizon photographs of ocean and land colliding. Water comes in a wide range of guises in different artworks: I suspect an analysis of its vocabulary in other works could provide different insights into other aspects

\textsuperscript{16} Bal, Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History; Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide.
of contemporaneity; but it is possible that these would complement rather than conflict with my findings.

A significant aspect of contemporaneity is the challenge posed by climate change and environmental destruction. As I briefly indicated in my literature review, a significant number of contemporary artists are concerned with these issues, and water—whether melting icecaps, rising sea levels or clean drinking water—is often a feature.\textsuperscript{17} Terry Smith, too, writes about environmental catastrophe as a significant current or concern in contemporaneity.\textsuperscript{18} While some of this art on climate change is more representational, didactic and polemic,\textsuperscript{19} an interesting extension of this project would be to investigate how artists deploy the vocabulary of water in their work to grapple with the unfolding environmental disasters of our time.\textsuperscript{20} Further research might also consider how the vocabulary of water in contemporary art materialises the infoscapes and flows of our increasingly

\begin{itemize}
  \item Some of these artists include Chris Jordan’s photographic series \textit{Midway: Message from the Gyre} (2009-current); Nele Azevedo’s \textit{Melting Men} ice sculptures \textit{Minimum Monument}; Edward Birtynsky’s photographs of oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico, \textit{Oil Spill} (2010). See also the 2007 exhibition \textit{Grey Water} at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia, which focused on the purity and pollution of water; the travelling exhibition \textit{Melting Ice/Hot Topic} that toured the Nobel Peace Centre, Oslo, Norway in 2007 as well as galleries in Monaco and Chicago.
  \item See eg chapter 11, ‘Climate Change: Art and ecology’ in Smith, \textit{Contemporary Art: World Currents}.
  \item Eg created by eco-warrior artists such as Chris Jordan to communicate the urgency of action on climate change.
  \item American artist Chris Jordan has created a series of digital collage artworks called \textit{Running the Numbers: An American self-portrait} (2006-current) which visualise, for example, the number of birds that die every year in the US from exposure to agricultural pesticides (\textit{Silent Spring} (2014)); others visualise huge numbers of \textit{Cigarettes} (2007), \textit{Plastic Bottles} (2007), \textit{Cell Phones} (2007), \textit{Packing Peanuts} (2009), \textit{Toothpicks} (2008), \textit{Office Paper} (2007), \textit{Shipping containers} (2007) and so on. Similarly, his series \textit{Running the Numbers II: Portraits of global mass culture} uses 50,000 plastic bags in a photo montage of a whale to depict ‘the estimated number of plastic pieces floating in every square mile of the world’s oceans’ (\textit{Whale} 2011) and 2.5 million pieces of plastic to create a photomontage of Hokusai’s iconic woodcut \textit{The Great Wave} (c 1831), in \textit{Gyre} (2009).
\end{itemize}

I have traced water closely, as a material of the millennium and a vocabulary of the now, through three artworks. In my analysis, the nature and characteristics of water resonated strongly with the forces and conditions that define our era. The power of the three works I have analysed lies in their ability to capture the complexities of these turbulent times and fluid conditions, and to offer a picture which is stunning and terrifying, disorientating and revealing, materialising the conditions of contemporaneity and acting as an ontology of the present.

Water is a powerful concept that materialises the conditions in which we live. It bubbles. It drifts, circulates, surges, lacks an anchor, and quenches thirst. It overflows, leaks, shape-shifts, dissolves, and flows. It is slippery, turbulent, ubiquitous, immersive, boundless, fluid, precarious, surface and depth, all at sea, deep and dark. It is not easily navigated nor harnessed. It is an androgynous solvent, a chameleon, a mime, a void. It is you. It cannot be pinned down.

Water is everywhere, a metaphor for the millennium and a vocabulary of the now. In contemporary art, water’s vocabulary materialises the complexities and dynamics of our contemporary era. It captures and reveals the turbulence and flow, the precarious uncertainty, the accelerating complexity, the conflicted diversity, the sublime possibility. It offers an ontology of the present, a glimpse of what is in the world, of what it is to be in the world and of what is yet to come.
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