

PREFACE

PATRICK MAHON WITH SOHEILA ESFAHANI, COLIN MINER AND GU XIONG

Water's capacity to exist in different states – liquid, solid and gas – and to perform in radically different ways (to leak, to flow, to dribble and to rush, for example) is an analogue for the multiplicity of ways artists often approach a subject. In light of this, it could be said that the work of producing the exhibition *The Source: Rethinking Water Through Contemporary Art* began as something of a trickle. Indeed it started with the modest intention to link some of my own artistic projects with those of other Canadian artists who I knew were also “aquaphiles.” In 2011, along with artists Gu Xiong and Soheila Esfahani, I applied for funding to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Our intentions – to work together and to eventually form a larger group of artists interested in water – led to the three-year project *Immersion Emergencies and Possible Worlds*.

The enterprise of working together around water and, ultimately, *the cultures of water*, was central to the ethos of our multifaceted, oftentimes heterogeneous undertaking. Soheila Esfahani had already concentrated on water in earlier works before joining in the collectivity. She recalls, “My initial interest was in looking into non-Western traditions around water, and at the depiction of water in visual arts in places with arid climates. This impulse led me to research cultural practices around the subject of water in a global context.”¹ Gu Xiong, whose work has a longstanding connection with water and human migration, had this to say, regarding the specific preoccupation he wanted to bring to the project: “The renowned Niagara Falls has always been an iconic ‘landscape’ of Canada, its grand magnificence attracting tourists from all over the world – each of them ready to exclaim over its ‘wonder’ when face to face with the awe of nature. But for me, Niagara Falls is not just a tourist site, it is a symbol of culture, migration and also sometimes a barrier regarding individual memories.”²

Upon receiving SSHRC support in spring 2011, I felt an urgent need to begin to work with a team and to move forward with the ambitions of the project; fortuitously, Colin Miner, then a PhD candidate at Western University, expressed his interest in becoming involved. He recalls that when we began, we recognized

“the need to collect as much information as possible about artists, exhibitions and visual art projects that in some way engage with water. A key decision we made concerned not becoming fixed on water as a discrete topic, or limiting ourselves to thinking about it via the ways it was already represented in the visual arts. Rather, we wanted to develop a position from which we could explore the depths such a project could reach, while developing a focal point from which to question, discover and facilitate expansive artistic approaches. What struck us at that stage in the development of *Immersion Emergencies* was the remarkable resonance of some works and research projects that had sought out seemingly indirect and sometimes idiosyncratic engagements and conversations with the subject. Such strategies appeared to relate to the aspirations described in the grant application, which proposed the value of practice-based research methodologies. Fundamentally, we determined that the project would not be as successful if it merely ‘depicted’ water...we knew we had to go further.”³

After a lengthy period of development in 2011, we ended up with a list of significant artists, institutions and projects we thought could operate as case studies regarding our group's evolving work. For instance, artists Lucy and Jorge Orta had already done some amazing projects we hoped we could connect with. Above all, it was clear that we had to find a way to bring together a diversity of perspectives and practices, and self-organized residencies appeared to be the way to do this. The first of the two that we held occurred in Niagara Falls in spring 2012. Gu Xiong, Soheila Esfahani, Colin Miner and

I were joined there by artists Nadine Bariteau, Raymond Boisjoly, Gautam Garoo and curator Stuart Reid – as well as guest artist presenter Basia Irland. The second gathering, for two weeks, was an independent thematic group residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts (spring 2013), at which Lucy and Jorge Orta and water policy expert Robert Sandford joined us. Among the benefits of that second residency, the opportunity to include the Ortas in the exhibition and to have Robert Sandford's thoughtful and impassioned written contribution to this publication were important outcomes. Following those gatherings, in order to chart the ongoing work that continued among the participants, we all contributed to a website that presents aspects of our individual and group research (see: <http://immersionemergencies.wordpress.com>).

Approximately a year after our residency at the Banff Centre, *The Source: Rethinking Water Through Contemporary Art* was presented at Rodman Hall Art Centre. Thanks to the patient and insightful guidance of Stuart Reid, the aspirations of *Immersion Emergencies* were harnessed within the gallery, providing a platform for a vast range of works that were often poetic, sometimes political and always highly engaged. The inclusion of the artwork of Elizabeth Chitty – a St. Catharines-based artist whose deep research into and commitment to water impressed us all – was important in helping “site” the project and give it a greater connection to the local waters.

What had begun at a comparatively modest point of origin had grown, and shifted and adapted, connecting to other new and welcome tributaries.

September 2015

¹ Soheila Esfahani, email to the author, May 2015.

² Gu Xiong, email to the author, May 2015.

³ Colin Miner, email to the author, May 2015.

PREVIOUS SPREAD LEFT

Gu Xiong

Waterscapes [installation detail], 2014

BELOW

Patrick Mahon

Water Table #2 [detail], 2014

