

PICTURES, TIME, COLOUR AND APOLOGY: SOME TERMS OF ADDRESS IN ART ABOUT WATER

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These days, water is a highly charged subject of discussion and debate. Canadians know it as a resource significant within history and also as an increasingly desirable international commodity. The collaborative artists' project about water initiated in 2011, Immersion Emergencies and Possible Worlds, focused on using research and practice in visual art to address this subject's cultural and environmental importance. Dedicated to relating the historical practice of picturing nature to the idea that contemporary art offers opportunities for aesthetic and socio-cultural engagement with the present, Immersion Emergencies also provided a context for speculation about water and the future.

A central goal of the project was to bring together approaches by Canadian and international artists/researchers from multiple backgrounds to highlight their varying attitudes and ideas. Focusing on water from multiple vantage points,

Immersion Emergencies challenged the idea that there could possibly be a monolithic attitude toward such a "universal" substance. With an emphasis on differing and possibly competing perspectives, it was a site where information, attitudes and values – even spiritual or religious ones – found a place and also a springboard for display and discourse.

The exhibition The Source: Rethinking Water Through Contemporary Art linked artists involved in Immersion Emergencies with other invited artists to establish a rich and variable context of engagement throughout Rodman Hall Art Centre, both inside and out. The ten artists whose works were presented in the show – Nadine Bariteau, Raymond Boisjoly, Elizabeth Chitty, Soheila Esfahani, Gautam Garoo, Colin Miner, Lucy + Jorge Orta, Gu Xiong and I – mobilized contemporary art to ruminate, educate and also mourn about water, inviting audiences to pay attention to a substance that is, in the truest sense, us.



Immersion Emergencies Poster Project, 2013
Co-production with Fuse Magazine, Toronto

INTRODUCTION

The artist's studio, whether in a garret, an office cubicle or on a laptop, *beckons* the artist as a site for creative work. Alongside this, 21st-century culture, following on the heels of a century of unparalleled change that showed modern art in the West giving way to the challenges and dramatics of postmodernism, fosters a ground of expectation for the products of individual and collective makers. Artistic work today can involve the finer points generated by graphite marks and paintbrush strokes, and also include pictures made using a robotic stylus, sculptures made with light, and experiments with bodily fluids and tissues. Utilizing tools both traditional and not, artists demonstrate that they know they have a job to do in these times of unprecedented flux – times that include environmental and political turmoil as well as advances in science, technology and the humanities.

In the face of all of this, it could certainly be argued that the challenging subjects and pressing questions of our day aren't intended first and foremost as mere invitations to artists' responses. Surely the troubles of the times won't be fixed by artistic works – will they?

Instead of wrestling directly with that broad query, we might instead remind ourselves about one of the most urgent topics at issue today – water – in order to be more specific about the relationship between 21st-century realities and the job of art. By doing so, our inquiry can focus substantially on whether creative aesthetic works can have a useful place in public discourse in general, and on whether relevant problem-solving concerning water needs input from artists.

How do we know when art matters?

In this essay, I will suggest that we can address this question and its potential answers in two ways: by looking at what artists are doing (in the case at hand, regarding water) and, inferentially, why artists are doing the things they do. In short, we may answer the question about whether art matters through engaging with artistic strategies and intentions, and consider how they come to be part of our lived experience.



PICTURES

Water has long played a role in the historical artworks of the West through pictorial representation, including in the Classical mythological narratives of the Greeks and Romans and later in Christian religious imagery. Eventually, following the Baroque, modern artistic developments and aspirations made water a subject addressable through means that emphasized its complexity so it could be thought about non-metaphorically: in terms of socio-politics and technology. Eventually, the term environmentally also had to be appended as another way to frame considerations of water.

A more geopolitically widespread acknowledgement of water in the history of visual culture includes vast numbers of works contemporaneous with the art of the West: 17th-century Mughal painting in India, and Japanese ukiyo-e prints of the same era, are examples. Such inclusions indicate that water has been an ostensibly “ubiquitous” presence in art around the globe for centuries. Whether represented in its relationship to human culture, as fundamental within nature or for other more arcane reasons, water is, was and continues to be in the picture.

John Withington’s significant volume *Flood: Nature and Culture* (2013) highlights shifting narratives of and changing social orientations to the subject of the “flood,” as pictured in a host of historic artworks. In *The Deluge* (1508-09) from Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel painting, water threatens to engulf humanity as punishment for people’s widespread sinfulness. In French painter Nicholas Poussin’s *Winter* (1660-64), the artist treats the flood within a wintry landscape that shows nature as a threat to terrified humans; it is an early Romantic example of what came to be called the “horrific sublime.”¹ English artist J. M. W. Turner also pictured the flood from a Romantic perspective, in *Shade and Darkness – The Evening of the Deluge* (1843), but as we shall see, his pictorial preoccupations also came to lend themselves to other newer modes for conceiving of water and its impact in the world.

With the dawning of high modernist painting in the 20th century and the lessening of narrative picture-making in visual discourse, in place of representations of water, “watery effects” in abstract works provided the major continuity of the subject in art.

Michelangelo Buonarroti
The Deluge, 1508-09
 from the Sistine Chapel, Rome
 Source/Photographer: The Yorck Project: 10.000
 Meisterwerke der Malerei. DVD-ROM, 2002.
 ISBN 3936122202. Distributed by DIRECTMEDIA
 Publishing GmbH.

The HMS *Bounty*, an 180-foot sailboat, is submerged in the Atlantic Ocean during Hurricane Sandy, approximately 90 miles southeast of Hatteras, North Carolina, on October 29, 2012. (ABC News video capture)



Helen Frankenthaler
Nepenthe, 1972
 color aquatint on paper
 15 5/8 x 24 1/4 in. (39.8 x 61.7 cm)
 Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.
 © Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Inc./SODRAC (2016)

In witness to this, we may recall both the stain paintings of American Morris Louis, and also the delicate washes of Helen Frankenthaler, both from the 1950s. Such works bespoke the waning of an interest in utilizing a language of representation to plumb the potential within conventional picture-making to engage with social and political topics. Instead, visual evocations not directed toward narrative engagement predominated.

Nevertheless, following this reticence to “speak through pictures,” in the 1970s an array of postmodern artistic preoccupations involving various social, political and environmental concerns, including regarding water as both a phenomenon and a resource, emerged. Among such works, many used photography and became allied with significant sub-genres of contemporary practice: land art and eco-art, in particular. Allan Kaprow’s famous gesture of *performing a river* was documented in a photographic “activity booklet,” in which each moment of the performance, titled EASY, was appended with a subtitle – including “wetting a stone,” “dropping it” and so on. In addition, artistic practices eventually constituted under the rubric “relational aesthetics” emerged to include picturing the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles washing the steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, in her famous *Maintenance Art* performance series.

TIME

While pictures involving water in culture were significant at many stages in Western and non-Western art history, dramatic shifts in how water was represented in early modern art in the West arguably reshaped its status in cultural representation, with important consequences. To consider how this reframing led to revised understandings of the subject, we turn further to the graphic and painted works of J. M. W. Turner.²

Historian Simon Schama has acknowledged that Turner’s 19th-century depictions of the Thames were steeped in Romanticism, reversing the flow of the Thames in one image and borrowing from Dutch landscape in another.³ About Turner’s interest in rivers, the writings of French philosopher Michel Serres, in “Science and the Humanities: The Case of Turner” (1997), are compelling: they direct us to a consideration of the artist’s pictures of rivers as urgently speaking to us both *in time* and *of time*. Serres offers an understanding of Turner’s rivers not limited by sociological notions, but instead shows the artist presenting time and the river together. He invokes a social science via a hard-science context not freighted by traditional metaphors, nor, alternatively and too simplistically, by the “mechanics” of aqueous action:

Far from flowing in...continuous lines, like a well-behaved river under a bridge, upstream to downstream, time descends, turns back on itself, stops, starts, bifurcates ten times, divides, and blends, caught up in whirlpools and counter-currents, hesitant, aleatory, uncertain and fluctuating, multiplied into a thousand beds like the Yukon River.⁴

An artist dedicated to the representation of water at a particular moment in history, Turner worked through drawing and painting in a period when water was shifting from its subjection to mechanical power, and being put to industrialized service through thermodynamics. His paintings, and, indeed, the turbulent webs of his graphic representations of rivers, manifest this shift. So, water in Turner’s works came to demonstrate that “[t]urbulence deviates from equilibrium.”⁵ Water was no longer



J.M.W. Turner
Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth, 1842
 Oil paint on canvas, 91.5 x 122 cm
 Source/Photographer: The Yorck Project: 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei. DVD-ROM, 2002.
 ISBN 3936122202. Distributed by DIRECTMEDIA Publishing GmbH

flowing benignly through the landscape, but moving in all directions, carrying with it an industrial, cultural and scientific revolution.

Keeping in mind such images of water shaped by modern notions of industry and science, let us also take a moment to turn to the idea of “the religious” according to contemporary conceptualizations, to further extend our thinking about water’s temporal nature. If we accept that water played a long-standing role within historical religious thinking, then we may speculate that the need to understand the relationship between water and beliefs and values remains (perhaps inferentially) urgent in a contemporary context. To address this, we turn to another text by Michel Serres: among his writings, the influential book *Le Contrat Naturel* begs for the establishment of a natural contract between humans and the earth that would enable a renewed system of balance and reciprocity. In making his case, Serres observes that, as a result of our historically determined need for mere social contracts, we have

...abandoned the bond that connects us to the world, the one that binds the time passing and flowing...outside, the bond that relates the social sciences to the sciences of the universe, history to geography, law to nature, politics to physics, the bond that allows our language to communicate with mute, passive, obscure things.... We can no longer neglect this bond.⁶

For present purposes, a brief section entitled “The Religious,” from the aforementioned book, is essential. Invoking the manner in which historical religious practitioners – Benedictine monks, Trappists and Carmelites – pray according to the hours of the day and night, Serres reminds us that such acts are not about spending time but sustaining it. Indeed, he says that – like Penelope, who never left her loom – “religion presses, spins, knots, assembles, gathers, binds, connects, lifts up, reads, or sings the elements of time.”⁷ And, offering us a picture of the religious as woven within the world through time, Serres adds, “The term *religion* expresses exactly this trajectory,



J.M.W. Turner
Shade and Darkness – The Evening of the Deluge, 1843
 Oil paint on canvas, 78.7 x 78 cm
 Source/Photographer: The Yorck Project: 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei. DVD-ROM, 2002.
 ISBN 3936122202. Distributed by DIRECTMEDIA Publishing GmbH

Edward Burtynsky
Nickel Tailings #34, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996
 Chromogenic colour print, 102 x 155.5 cm
 photo © Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Nicholas
 Metivier Gallery, Toronto.



Basia Irland
*Tome I: Mountain Maple, Columbine Flower, Blue
 Spruce, Boulder Creek, Colorado* from the series
 "Ice Books," 2007
 Image courtesy of the artist

this review or prolonging whose opposite is called negligence, the negligence that incessantly loses the memory of these strange actions and words."⁸ For Serres, negligence is religion's opposite; in light of this, he asks, "While we uneasily await a second Flood, can we practice a diligent religion of the world?"⁹

Serres' suggestion here invokes the attentive, time-sensitive practices of artists such as Allan Kaprow. The eco-artist Basia Irland, whose interventionist projects involve "collaborative and locally based actions encompassing an ethic of inclusion that focuses on important scientific and artistic outcomes along rivers,"¹⁰ also demonstrates the sort of "non-negligence" and temporal sensitivity regarding water that Serres' theories so eloquently enlist.

COLOUR

Representations of water, whether invoking temporality or otherwise preoccupied, invariably rely on water's myriad capacities to enliven colour, whether "natural" or not. Among the most troublingly colourful artistic images of water in recent memory are Canadian artist Edward Burtynsky's photographs of the "runoff rivers" that emanate from mining projects. In *Nickel Tailings #34, Sudbury, Ontario* (1996), a wide stream of thick, orange fluid manifests a gash across the landscape, creating an impression at once shocking and beautiful. Undoubtedly this is a late-20th-century echo of the "horrific sublime" that Poussin's *Winter*, mentioned above, portrays.

To speak of water and colour according to more seemingly naturalistic terms, it is notable that today a rhetoric involving the colour green surrounds discussions (and marketing) regarding the environment – often in a manner that is ubiquitous and even downright insidious. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* (2013), notes:

Green dominates our thinking about ecology like no other [colour], as if the colour were the only organic hue, a blazon for nature itself... Green has become our synonym for sustainability, but such a colourful ascription begs the question of exactly what mode of being we are attempting to sustain and at what environmental cost.¹¹

This assessment of the hue that overdetermines sustainability discourse is significant for our purposes; it is perhaps even more important for us to note that, functioning in parallel to the predominance of "green," the colour "blue" has recently become ascribed to "water movements," with their contemporary problems and interests. While presumably subject to similar impulses toward "branding an issue," be they motivated by ideological or capitalistic aspirations, the blue movement is more nascent and therefore more interestingly nuanced.

Among the more publicly recognized examples of this phenomenon, in Canada, the Royal Bank's *Blue Water Project* was launched in 2007: "a 10-year global charitable commitment of \$50 million to [helping] provide access to drinkable, swimmable, fishable water, now and for future generations."¹² While it seems churlish to question such a worthwhile corporate investment distributed through charitable organizations dedicated to protecting watersheds, our interests in other undertakings bearing the rubric "blue" are potentially more valuable for present purposes, because, for one, of the readiness of some other projects to engage the work of artists.

British Columbia artist, poet, forester and mediator Michael Blackstock – who is of European and Gitksan First Nations descent – has adopted the term *blue ecology* as an entrée to asking a fundamental political and humanitarian question: What is water? Blackstock describes his intentions as follows:

My purpose is to reveal cross-cultural assumptions and definitions of fresh water, thereby helping to reconcile forest-related conflicts between First Nations and government agencies. This approach is my local contribution to the emerging global recognition that fresh water has the potential to become a catalyst for co-operation rather than a source of conflict.¹³



Participants in *The Blue Water Project*, launched 2007
 Image courtesy of the RBC Blue Water Project



Roni Horn
Vatnasafn / Library of Water, 2007
 Commissioned and produced by Artangel
 Photo: Gudmundur Ingolfsson



Mierle Laderman Ukeles
Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside, 1973
 performance at the Wadsworth Atheneum,
 Hartford, Connecticut

Interestingly, the term *blue ecology* has also been adopted by the scholar Steve Mentz, in his book *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* (2009). Regarding Mentz's usage of the term, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes that "against a landlocked green perspective, a blue ecology conveys what Mentz calls the 'real taste of ocean...a sharp tang of nonhuman immensity' that wrenches us violently from our 'landed perspectives.'¹⁴

Yet despite these compelling usages of "blue" to name attempts at harnessing possibilities for engaging with and sustaining water (which offer needed counterpoints to "green" via a dose of rhetorical complexity), such language should not be taken as prescribing the signal "colour" for artistic addresses to water. An example of a water work that abjures blue – or any other dramatic hue, for that matter – in favour of the subtle and often bereft colours that nature, time and environmental degradation insist upon water, is the groundbreaking project in Iceland by American Roni Horn, *Vatnasafn / Library of Water*. Observing the project's development, writer James Lingwood records:

Over the course of a year, blocks of ice were gathered from twenty-four of the major glaciers and glacial tongues in Iceland, formed many millennia ago and now rapidly receding. The collection of water, melted from the glacial ice, is housed in a constellation of glass columns which flow through the interior [of the space]....¹⁵

Horn's elegant response to the loss of glacial ice across Iceland employs industrially made glass containers and a floor installation of text referring to states of water, in an elegiac site of muted greys and browns – a space for contemplation and mourning.

APOLOGY

Early in this essay I suggested that "we may answer the question about whether art matters through engaging with artistic strategies and intentions." This aspiration was recognized as involving the need to determine "whether creative aesthetic works can have a useful place in public discourse in general, and...whether relevant problem-solving concerning water needs input from artists."

In response, this essay has invoked a range of art projects and strategies: some invested in "picturing" water, others engaging with it expansively, even "performing it" and, in the above citation of Roni Horn's work, an example of saving or "archiving" water. This last project suggests that, in addition to shedding light on water through images, and finding other ways to invoke it productively and symbolically, artists sometimes charge themselves with a task of mourning – and perhaps *apology* – regarding water.¹⁶

The term *apology* is a dense and potentially fraught one in our time. In this regard, we should be reminded that the 20th century brought to the fore the many traumatic social consequences yielded by centuries-old colonial programs, typically motivated by oftentimes unconscionable attitudes to "progress." In response, we have recently seen national governments apologize to groups whose suffering at the hands of programs of domination often continues today. And although many of those gestures could be seen as cynically motivated by the need for those in power to maintain control, including over public discourse, the "culture of apology" demands our attention. In response, we might consider the potential necessity of also engaging in apologies to the non-human "agents" – such as water – that also suffer the consequences of unchecked and dominating attitudes to progress.

Philosopher Nick Smith, in the study *I Was Wrong: The Meanings of Apologies*, offers a wide-ranging analysis that encompasses such potentials:

Apologies to inanimate objects raise [many] issues... We can again notice how underlying metaphysical beliefs can make even an apology to a rock a significant ritual. If I understand the world as an interrelated web of kinship between humans and nature, as many Native Americans do, I might give thanks to killed prey by blowing tobacco smoke into its nostrils... Because such a worldview considers a broad scope of beings within its moral horizons, it extends opportunities for gratitude and contrition...¹⁷

Smith's example describes an apology to an animal presumably killed in a legitimate act of hunting for food. While the question of whether the ostensible "suffering" of our planet and its waters has been *legitimately* caused is beyond our scope here, asking whether gestures toward apology for that suffering are appropriate is not beyond us. Indeed, as suggested earlier, artists' intentions often act as necessary or even compensatory social declarations. As such, a work that appears to suggest itself as a form of apology – Roni Horn's *Vatnasafn / Library of Water* is arguably such a work – may be doing so according to an implied if unspoken imperative.

How do we know when art matters? Perhaps when our encounters with artworks suggest that they are speaking to and about urgent subjects, in the only form of "language" possible at the moment in history at which they appear.

¹ John Withington, *Flood: Nature and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), 87.

² An earlier version of this section appears in "Drawing on the River," in *Patrick Mahon: Drawing Water* (Kamloops: Kamloops Art Gallery, 2009).

³ Simon, Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 395.

⁴ Michel Serres, "Science and the Humanities: The Case of Turner," in *SubStance*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Issue 83: *An Ecology of Knowledge: Michel Serres: A Special Issue* (1997), 15.

⁵ Michel Serres, *Heremes: Literature, Science and Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 102.

⁶ Michel Serres, *Le Contrat Naturel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 48.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. 47.

⁹ Ibid. 48.

¹⁰ see: <http://www.basiairland.com/projects/gatherings/description.html>; Note: *Basia Irland was an invited guest presenter to the "Immersion Emergencies and Possible Worlds" group in Niagara Falls, ON, in May 2014.*

¹¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Introduction" to *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), xx.

¹² see: Royal Bank's Blue Water Project: <http://www.rbc.com/community-sustainability/environment/rbc-blue-water/index.html>

¹³ see: Michael Blackstock: http://forrex.org/sites/default/files/publications/jem_archive/ISS31/vol6_no2_art4.pdf.

¹⁴ Ibid. Cohen, xxxiv.

¹⁵ James Lingwood, *Roni Horn: Vatnasafn / Library of Water* (London: Artangel/Steidl, 2009), 17.

¹⁶ This sentence alludes to the important essay on abstract painting by Bois, a text whose resonance is not unwelcome here, but not crucial to my argument. See: Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning," in *Painting as Model*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990).

¹⁷ Nick Smith, *I Was Wrong: The Meanings of Apologies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 130.