

## **The Waterwheel: Another Way For Knowing?**

Keith Armstrong 22/03/12 {1675 words}

### **Introduction**

*Water is what we make of it.* (Linton, J)<sup>1</sup>

Water: A colourless, see through, lightly tasting, scentless compound, made from molecules of oxygen and hydrogen - an innocuous-sounding composite that circulates throughout our biosphere - always in a state of continual flow; always in flux, neither created nor destroyed.

But, water is much more – it is as much an object of ‘culture’ as it is of ‘nature’. Water is clearly therefore “what we make of it”.

Bruno Latour<sup>2</sup> has done as much as any thinker to try and problematise the old Modernist view that would keep imagining and talking up the separation of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. If he were here to speak to us about water now he would undoubtedly call it a ‘matter of concern’ rather than a ‘matter of fact’ – a distinction that suggests he believes calculative science can tell us only a part of water’s big picture entity.

There are many ways to understand water beyond those lenses that science and functional thinking have given us. How about ethics of water for example; its politics; or the social systems that water constitutes? How do we really ‘think’ about water and therefore treat it? Who controls its flow and quality and what happens when it runs out? How many days might there be between a disconnected pipe and outright war?

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<sup>1</sup> Schmidt, J. J. (2011), What is water? The history of a modern abstraction by Jamie Linton. *Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe canadien*, 55: 513–514.  
doi: 10.1111/j.1541-0064.2011.00374.x

<sup>2</sup> Latour, Bruno, (2004), *Politics of Nature : How To Bring The Sciences Into Democracy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass

## Another Way of Knowing?

The more you think about it, the deeper water becomes. But just how deep? And how best might we descend to understand it?

In Goya's famous black-series painting 'Duel With Cudgels' two combatants collectively and unwittingly are sinking - thanks to the liquid ground upon which they fight: Like these two swamp-bound recalcitrants, we too now face our own urgent ontological and mortal dilemmas. We too are a sinking force, looking the other way.



**Francisco de Goya Y Lucientes** **Duel with Cudgels** 1820 – 1823, Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain, Painting, Oil on canvas, 123 x 266 cm

Today we pay lip service to problems that will surely soon engulf us – eating, travelling, working and buying away water-dependent resources like there are no tomorrows. Our hopes for a future remain pinned upon technology, the physical sciences, and economics to shore up this unsteady ground beneath our feet. We firmly believe that new enabling technologies, lubricated by optimal 'market instruments', will lead us to the necessary ecological changes. We can manage our way out of crisis.

Unfortunately evidence for success with this course action is still somewhat lacking<sup>3</sup>.

This is because the real problems of water are not solely ‘out there’, arraigned as a series of technical problems to be solved, underpinned by a climate of ‘business as usual’. The real problems of water are ‘in here’. We are their source; because how we think water has become the central ‘crisis’. Therefore how we re-think water is the significant (but largely unimagined) strategy for reparation. Will we always fail to see the precarious cultural ‘ground’ of water as it sinks away under our misguided toes?

## **Tactics**

Right now.. for most of us in the affluent world water is merely a cheap delivered service, rather than a (secular) ‘sacred’ resource – an invaluable asset drawn from the global Commons. We need to re-think what we ‘make’ of this water, and with real urgency. Is this where we can deploy the powers of the environmental arts to help us tackle this cultural dilemma?

Critically, if we artist practitioners have a place in contributing to big cultural problems such as water, then we must travel beyond the novel communication of ‘facts’. Congealing with the environmental communication theorists ‘knowledge deficit’ model<sup>4</sup> of thinking, traditional approaches to the form have often attested that more knowledge (created through experiencing the work) leads to improved behaviour. In other words, experience of work heightens an awareness that leads to action. A veritable bevy of designers and graphic and oral communicators have long engaged in such creative-informational pursuits – trying to create ‘better images’ to foment such action.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.environmentmagazine.org/Archives/Back%20Issues/November-December%202009/Psych-Climate-full.html>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record\\_id=10401&page=70](http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=10401&page=70)

Environmental psychologists however remind us of another critical issue; that the correlation between knowledge and fundamental behaviour change is not always causal, and indeed can often be poor<sup>5</sup>. Much is already ‘known’ about our watery environmental ills and yet culturally we have consistently been unable to embody any big-picture changes to our practices. We have been piecemeal, inadequate and dilute in the face of the challenge’s enormity. In our defence Tony Fry reminds us that we have long been ‘educated in error’<sup>6</sup> – educated to be fundamentally unsustainable human beings. In that case we cannot easily be anything but how we have been constituted.

Or can we?

If we face a fundamental cultural crisis (of water and much more), then we have to tackle it, even if that starts with small, focused change communities of engaged actors. Later the thinking will ripple out, but right now we should never doubt, never waver, always imagine better. We cannot let ourselves be blocked in a time of urgency. The capacity to imagine a different future is actual freedom’s greatest gift.

### **Media Induced Possibility?**

Water is our future; Water is us; We are water. So how, where and why could we ‘talk’ together about it better? What contemporary tools do we artists now have at our disposal to ‘re-embody’ this fast-moving conundrum? Is there anything being offered by the social media revolution that daily swirls and eddies around the feet of our private/public lives? Whilst the online shift towards community authorship has been profound, the same cannot always be said for the metaphorical tools that

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.environmentmagazine.org/Archives/Back%20Issues/November-December%202009/Psych-Climate-full.html>

<sup>6</sup> See Fry, Tony (2010), *Design Futuring: Sustainability, Ethics, And New Practice*

we have used to communicate our collective ‘matters of concern’. Metaphors are inherently weak when they are marooned in the shallow end of thinking. Facebook, to name but one new(ish) platform, has been great for getting in touch with the social microworlds that lie in front of our noses, but how often has it been there for us when we ponder ontological dilemmas such as ‘water-how’ futures? Both water-thinking and new experiments in social platforming have their rolling consequences: both are now inseparable from the way we think about, and therefore design, our future. (The power of design writ broadly<sup>7</sup> must be clarified here as a fundamental human capacity, a practice far beyond surface and artifice: in short, an ontological practice. A design that recognizes that design goes on designing).

## **The Wheel?**

Some artists are, its fair to say, already distinctly wet. H, H & O are not therefore the elements of water’s whole that directly whets the Suzon Fuks-led Waterwheel project, although they are both part of what inspired her and also the inspiration for many of the events that have since animated it. Yes, at times Waterwheel events have referenced the literal forms of water, as do some parts of its fluid interfaces. But look a little closer and it becomes clear that the Waterwheel invites deeper reflection beyond seductive surface.

The Waterwheel is free to use, multidimensional, encouraging of shared play, collaboration-inducing and ultimately self-serving of the communication that it fosters. It has good media display and manipulation abilities and is relatively easy to grasp. It offers and outlines a particularly open set of possibilities: being just as much at home as a tool of energetic chatter as a palace of image

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<sup>7</sup> See again this idea fleshed out in depth in Fry, Tony (2010), Design Futuring: Sustainability, Ethics, And New Practice

manipulation, or a coordinated space for group mood flow, or indeed (as it has been ably demonstrated), a fully featured online performance tool.

But whichever current or eddy its users take, once thing is clear – it is calling out to the water within us. Just as rivers flow to lakes and lakes flow to oceans it has, (depending on your vision), many ways in, many sources, courses and sinks – many capacities for assisting tracing of latent geographies, through its promoting of experiential flows. But in the end you'd have to say that the Waterwheel's potential is very simply, 'US'.

And so, correspondingly, if we are the problem of water, then can the Waterwheel contribute to the voyage that must now be taken?, helping to accelerate us from re-knowing towards re-learning and then re-embodiment: Extending, not contracting: A future – not a finitude. Can it help us shift from accumulating more and more facts? (How much freshwater is there on and in and under earth?) to activated embodiment; focusing us on securing futures by cutting out new cultural tributaries. (So why did Brisbane significantly lessen its water usage over the past decade – can that impetus somehow survive in this micro-minute's time of abject plenty? Was the impetus embodied and is there a germ somewhere, somehow, with a real future to give?).

Is there a place for the Waterwheel, and (necessarily) a hundred other requisite social media projects, to help us chart out the naturalized-artificial landscape of the culture of water?

The Waterwheel is irreducible to the thinking of any single discipline. It covers many ports – often simultaneously, being therefore a generous and capacious donation to the media sphere. But, as stated, it remains only as intelligent as the 'actors' who choose to deploy within and through it. Its metaphors are well meaning, but simply a lubrication rather than a propeller. As a work of dedication it clearly leans towards embodied learning and reflection around water – and ultimately given right conditions, it could just be one viable place to think towards transformations – of knowledge into action. That in the end

depends upon the conversations its usage evokes – the questioning it foregrounds and the provocations that it carries towards us. That depends on whether it simply becomes a bulletin board for more things, and a meeting place for yet more, more, more, or if it can actually help the works it hosts become knowledge making processes in themselves, and therefore more potent precursors for subsequent embodying.

So, where the ‘collective we’ might take the Waterwheel next depends how well its fulsome intent is recognized and how we can re-imagine it within our renewable landscapes of tools, activities and thinking.

Will we ecological citizens, we humans, the floating ‘flesh of the world’ – cease dueling on sodden ground and look beyond each other? Will we choose to take away or give time to the future of our watery common ground? Will we use what we are being so generously offered?

Keith Armstrong: Brisbane 14/02/2012