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Aquatic Imagination or Unweaving the Rainbow: Introduction to Hydro-Stories about American Art¹

Abstract

As early as the 1940s, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard was convinced that the eye itself is weary of solids. It was obvious to some American artists almost at the same time, because aquatic imagination has accompanied American art at least since the discovery of the fluidity of paint and the oceanic boundlessness of Pollock's paintings. However, only Robert Smithson has opened the water discourse in contemporary art, which is not about the representation of water but about the specific relation between the subject and its background. Moreover, a liquid mind opens up to the unplanned. This also happens in Ellen Gallagher's art, because her counter-memories from the future evoke sea creatures, their mutations and their post-human condition.

Key words: American art, liquidity, ontology of pregnancy, postcolonial studies, post-humanist discourses, watery imagination

*And the unceasing movement of two springs feeding
each other could be the pledge of eternal happiness*

Luce Irigaray,
Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche,
transl. by G. C. Gill, New York, 1991

¹ I first took up the subject of aquatic imagination at the Edward Aleksander Raczyński Art History Methodological Seminar in Rogalin (21–23 October 2021), however, in the context of Polish art. The article will be published in the conference proceedings.

Introduction

The canon of high art created by art history, providing points of reference and standards of excellence, was until recently considered an integral part of the values of liberal-democratic society in the West. It began to fall apart, when it was argued that its supposed neutrality camouflages injustices and inequalities. It deprives the excluded of their dignity and strength, does not support them in their aspirations and dreams, and consequently calls into question the sense of their lives, which are condemned only to conform to the rules invented by others. For instance, it was noticed some time ago that in his popular book *The Story of Art*, published also in the United States, Ernest Gombrich did not include a single woman,² he treats all artists as having the same basic goal and convinces the reader that the story of art should be monocultural and therefore told using just one time line.³ Today this classic book may serve rather as a textbook for unlearning, because in the nowadays postcolonial and posthumanist discourses the very way certain issues are approached and the reasons for their choice seem to belong to a bygone era. For as the prefixes “un-” and “post-” and “alter-” in various contemporary concepts indicate, scholars and activists emphasise the need to turn back from the once taken paths and to change their thinking. The art history aim of producing “a universal medium of (formerly religious, latterly scientific) truth”⁴ has evolved. Now it obligatorily tackles the issue of who and why was given a voice – and whom it was denied – in telling the story of art and creating the image of the world. Instead of the illusory elevation and uplifting through art that is the dream of finding oneself “somewhere over the rainbow way up high”, as Judy Garland sang, today’s art involved in aquatic imagination serves rather to unweave the rainbow. In fact, this is not a new idea, as it was already considered in the early 19th century by the English poet John Keats. Unweaving, as Navajo people believed, reverses the flow of water, the flow of time.⁵ The unweaving of time has been known at least since Penelope wove and unwove her fabric waiting for her husband, Odysseus, who was in trouble at sea, the domain of Poseidon, god of the seas, rivers, and lakes. But perhaps she did not want him back at all, because she was enjoying successfully slipping out of the phallogocentric sphere and gaining her agency in the male world. Thus, Poseidon’s taking command over Odysseus’ life changed the hierarchy of power on land. Contemporary aquatic imagination resurrects Poseidon for precisely the same purpose: endowing counter-hegemonic thinking, associated with an activity that Soja called “thirding-as-Othering”.⁶

2 J. Harris, *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction*, London–New York, 2001, p. 37.

3 D. Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008, pp. 29–44.

4 D. Preziosi, *The Art of Art History. A Critical Anthology*, Oxford, 2009, p. 498.

5 D. Jongeward, *Weaver of Worlds: From Navajo Apprenticeship to Sacred Geometry and Dreams. A Woman’s Journey in Tapestry*, Vermont, 1990, p. 65.

6 E. W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Blackwell, 1996, p. 5.

Legacy of modernism

Feeling and seeing through water differs from feeling and seeing through air. It is no wonder then that underwater optics inspires spaces of dream, hallucination, and marvels.⁷ Undoubtedly *désirs liquids* (liquid desires) of French Surrealists who came to the United States during the wartime were disrupting the Puritan US culture. However, in doing so they demonstrated a pervasive misogyny and idealising woman while marginalising real women.⁸ It was perfectly embodied by inside-the-aquarium photographs of Jacqueline Lamba (who fled from Vichy, France to the US with Andre Breton). The surrealists' watery imagination immobilised the objects of their dreams and, by creating a hierarchy of power, prevented sharing and relations. Lamba commented on her relation with Breton: "He saw in me what he wanted to see, but he really didn't see me".⁹ The Surrealists were unable to see the real Lamba because they perpetuated perceptual stereotypes and claims of control. After all, one of the most famous Victorian pornographic magazines was called "The Oyster".¹⁰ Hence, surrealistic "mermaids" do not fit the aquatic imagination, the framework of which I would like to present here. Nor does Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, which more than two decades earlier (1917) divided the members of the Society of Independent Artists. *Fountain* was completely dried out, there was no moisture in it, and that also implies certain inabilities. However, before we unleash our unfettered water fantasies, we should also emphasise the fact that the lack of access to water is one of the key indicators of poverty. Therefore, as bell hooks noted, an American, even when they are black underclass and unemployed, but still able to turn off the tap are "in a relative position of power".¹¹ Thus, there is no single realm of the aquatic imagination, as it must be apprehended within its changing parameters of historical moment, class, race, gender, and cultural capital.

Nowadays putting Lamba in an aquarium seems interesting because of her feelings, not because of the feelings of male voyeurs. Avoiding adoption into a misogynistic world and perpetuating harmful fantasies is at stake.¹² By immersing herself in water Lamba entered the portal to imagining an altered reality that she later developed in her art. The aquarium was her half-way point – treated as a muse, but becoming someone else, rediscovering herself as an artist. Liquid male desires might have also been turned into a vivid and real experience of sharing, if only they had not been associated with an unwillingness to stop at just personal visions and fantasies and allowed to involve attentiveness and respect.

7 M. Cohen, "Underwater Optics as Symbolic Form", *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 2014, 32, no. 3, pp. 1–23.

8 D. Ades, "Surrealism, Male-Female", in: *Surrealism. Desire Unbound*, ed. J. Mundy, Princeton, 2001, p. 171.

9 S. Grimberg, "Jacqueline Lamba: From Darkness, with Light", *Woman's Art Journal*, 2001, 22, no. 1, p.7.

10 R. Stott, *Oyster*, London, 2004, p. 10.

11 P. Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*, London, 1993.

12 L. Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, transl. by G. C. Gill, New York, 1991.

Thinking and acting not through water, but with water, with moisture that changes body resonances, the skin and breath cause a different perception of the space we occupy. It no longer seems empty. The palpable and intense feeling of the space around and in us convinces us that we are not isolated from our surroundings. Such situation inspires investigations concerning relations with the environment, which are not expressed in Cartesian geometry. Re-situation of a human in water leads to a different mobilisation of all our senses and to unlearning naturalised patterns of thinking and behaving. It is a chance to abandon anthropocentrism and its hierarchy of power. This includes rethinking the legacy of modernism, with its misogyny and racism, for, as Toni Morrison wrote, the experience of black slavery made them the first truly modern people.¹³ So the first truly modern individuals crossed the Atlantic on slave ships. And although humans cannot live underwater, the creation of fiction on that theme might be seen as a mode of producing reality. One such fictional tale, for example, is the myth of the underwater land of Drexciya, populated by children born to pregnant black women who were thrown overboard as unnecessary ballast during their passage across the Atlantic. This Black-Atlantean mythology of free people breathing underwater was conceived as a counterfactual narrative about the Middle Passage (described by Arthur Jafa as an “Auschwitz on the water”¹⁴), by a group of electronic musicians from Detroit for the album *The Quest* (1997). It has become an important element of Afrofuturism, enabling critical insight into the current situation of the Afro-diaspora.¹⁵ Indeed, counterfactual stories reveal ways of thinking absent from the dominant narrative, and for that very reason, they are a handy tool for judging history. They also express desires for justice to triumph. Drexciya and other Afro-American ensembles were featured in the exhibition *Aquatopia: The Imaginary of the Ocean Deep* (2013) at London’s Tate. As James Attlee explained, Drexciya’s music is “a great storehouse of techniques for coping with the vagaries of life” and has a rich tradition of creating “alternate mythologies for a people whose individual histories have been stolen”.¹⁶ Ruth Mayer, on the other hand, claimed that while listening to Drexciya’s music “we are literally forced into an underwater sound pattern meshing together the synthetic and the natural, bubble tones and electronic scales which could be called breathtaking in more than one sense”.¹⁷

13 Gilroy, op.cit., p. 178.

14 G. Tate, *Flyboy 2: The Greg Tate Reader*, Durham and London, 2016, p. 200.

15 K. Eshun, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism”, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 2003, 3, no. 2, pp. 300–302.

16 J. Attlee, “Gazing into the Watery Abyss”, *Tate Etc*, 14 November 2013, <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-29-autumn-2013/gazing-watery-abyss> [accessed: 15 April 2022].

17 R. Mayer, “Africa As an Alien Future: The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Postcolonial Waterworlds”, *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 2000, 45, no. 4, p. 563.

New idea of the subject

Drexciya's example shows how much we need new imagination, new inspiring images, sounds, and stories. Instead of land-based imageries, today we are witnessing a shift towards seas and oceans. So-called wet ontologies provide tools not only for diaspora studies, but also for indigenous, feminist and posthuman studies. What is more, the ontology of pregnancy (with the indispensable foetal water component) implies, on the one hand, a radical hospitality and thinking of the subject as a relational being, ready to affirm the unknown,¹⁸ but, on the other hand, when teardrops transform into wombs, holding small blue bodies, we get (as Astrida Neimanis put it) a repetition of decades-old anti-abortion imagery that sacralises the foetus.¹⁹

Some photographs by Cindy Sherman seem to invoke the foetal water metaphor, opening a phenomenological perspective on pregnancy²⁰ and revising the theories on the subject. It seems that Laurie Simmons expressed these ideas in *Swimming Women, Water Ballet (Cindy Sherman)* (1980). Also Robert Gober explores motherhood.²¹ The exploration of male motherhood, supported by aquatic references, stems from a desire to rethink the established stereotypes of military and heroic masculinity, pointing to the frustrating adversarial and dry relationship between body and thought.

The concept of the maternal might be interpreted as implicated in Derrida's notion of radical hospitality and ambivalent *hospitality* [hospitality+hostility] a disconcerting experience fraught with perils.²² Thus the Birthing and its Unborn evokes the religious term 'visitation' (instead of invitation) and the secular trust in the process of mutual recognition. What is more, Gober's installations with their dysfunctional storm drains, plumbing systems, sinks and urinals stir up personal psychodrama, as related to predicaments of the heteronormative culture and the AIDS crisis of the '80s and the '90s. When one knows Gober's art, washing dishes in the kitchen sink can turn into an epiphany. It is possible that keeping plates and cups clean is not the most important aim of pouring water on them. No doubt,

18 T. Welsh, "The Order of Life: How Phenomenologies of Pregnancy Revise and Reject Theories of the Subject", in: *Coming to Life: Philosophies of Pregnancy, Childbirth and Mothering*, eds. S. LaChance Adams, C. R. Lundquist, New York, 2013, pp. 283–299.

19 A. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, London–Oxford–New York–Sydney, 2017, p. 180.

20 "where the labours of maternal bodies are still undervalued and denigrated, where these bodies are still and increasingly subject to marginalization and technologized colonialism, and where they still enact a profound material connection between a present life and a becoming life in an (as of yet) non-substitutable way, there is still reason to attend to the specificity of maternal bodies within a broader ethics of responsivity to other kinds of life" – wrote Neimanis, op.cit., p. 91.

21 A. Markowska, "Macierzyństwo w twórczości Mary Kelly i Roberta Gobera" [Maternity in Mary Kelly's and Robert Gober's Art], *Quart*, 2007, no. 2(04), pp. 73–91.

22 I. Aristarkhova, "Hospitality and the Maternal", *Hypatia*, 2012, 27, no. 1, pp. 163–181.

the autonomous and ultra-rational subject in many artworks inspired by aqueous imagination is philosophically insufficient. Although pregnancy and birthing compel a future-oriented attitude (an expectation) and constitute a creative process of change, they do not enable omnipotence. In this context, unrestrained openness meets the requirement of humbleness here and leads to the acceptance of the force that takes possession of the subject. By rejecting controlling and disciplining elements in his unrestrained fantasies and not defending his integrity, Gober actually opens himself up to otherness.

Nevertheless, hosting is not a matter of good intention, willed desire and elaborate protocols because then it is reduced solely to political calculation.²³ Therefore, although aqueous imaginary easily becomes a political statement, here it means first of all different possibilities, consent to fluidity and ambiguity, uncertainty and leaving something to follow its own course.

Turning to testing other ways of inhabiting the world and the unclear ways, in which art can be used imply accepting the possibility of failure and call for the development of broader solidarity rather than the creation of artist-leaders who provide mandatory models of form. Both the artist and the viewer somehow have to surrender to the environment and defamiliarise their human perspective, which is characterised by an endorsement of individualism and exploitation.

Between Pollock and Cage

Aquatic imagination has accompanied American art at least since the discovery of the fluidity of paint and the oceanic boundlessness of Pollock's paintings. Viewers looked at these huge canvases, and to grasp their deep meaning and better see the watery part of the world they read experts' comments about the development of the Post-Cubist work and re-read *Moby Dick* to recall how the narrator stumbles through pitch-black wet darkness. Quotes from Herman Melville's masterpiece helped to describe the abstract canvases and at the same time emphasised their tragic nature (all the watery world of woe, the heathenish sharked waters, the wild watery loneliness of life, forever exiled waters, depressions of the watery horizon), because painting was a risky venture into an unknown world. Today it is not Pollock's canvases themselves, but their interpretations, focusing on autonomous form, that seem obsolete. This explains why younger artists, while paying homage to him, at the same time made their "misinterpretations". When Douglas Kahn remarked that the moment Pollock ceased dripping, it was John Cage who began pouring, he emphasised, on the one hand, how much the young were indebted to Pollock, and on the other, how much they did not want to follow the supposedly masterly path of interpretation focusing on a flat abstract image.

23 C. McNelly Kearns, "Mary, Maternity, and Abrahamic Hospitality in Derrida's Reading of Massignon", in: *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, eds. Y. Sherwood, K. Hart, New York–London, 2005, pp. 73–96.

Water Music (1952) with actual water sounds by John Cage heralded not only forbidden extramusical sounds but also the dissolution of media and a period concerned with the ephemeral and an increased osmosis between art and life.²⁴ Shortly thereafter, *Drip Music* by George Brecht (1959) continued Cage's idea of rejecting the attitude of the solitary genius immersed in regions inaccessible to the profane. Chance imagery was a joke on the gravity of Pollock's paintings, enhanced with heroic narratives about pioneers in the unknown world (i.e. known only to experts). No wonder that his high seriousness was overturned in the next generation ("noisy, wet, and performative"²⁵), not only by Cage. It still drew on the source of watery imagination, as seen even in the playful and technologically advanced container of bubbling mud by Robert Rauschenberg (*Mud Muse*, 1968–1971), but evoked ordinary everydayness. *Mud Muse* can be considered both an homage to Pollock and distanced water-gazers, as well as a continuation of wet dreams evolving in muddy nightmares. Although the experts are still intermediaries, commanding the audience what to think, works like *Mud Muse* seem to be more democratic because Rauschenberg (and his generation) used ordinary, not artistic materials, suggesting that all of us are in the middle of the world to be explored as art. Rauschenberg, however, insisted on the ordinary viewer and the ordinary world; because a work of art could become an ordinary object from everyday life, it meant that its context gradually became more and more visible. However both Cage and Rauschenberg did not push the artist out into society, but pulled the audience into the work.²⁶ For Allan Kaprow, in turn, the scale of Pollock's paintings provoked immersion and a state of delirium, hypnotising the viewer. This is why he developed the immersive tactics of dissolution through performance.²⁷ His happenings rarely took place in galleries. A visit to the gallery became almost unnecessary. Ideal access to the works of art, made possible by close inspection in specialised institutions and through photographs, allowed to increase specialisation and expand knowledge, but it separated people from art. Kaprow, meanwhile, was all about deconstructing the expert attitude. This is why the emphasis in his works is on processes rather than on work-products, and on art embedded in the everyday, in which there is no audience because everyone is a participant. *Fluids* (1967), for example, is an action-instruction involving the placement of about twenty blocks of ice in a city, which were to remain there until they melted. In addition to the frozen water, the artist also used warm water. For instance, in the *Affect* action/instruction it was a matter of putting one hand into warm and the other into cold water, so as to feel simultaneously warm in one hand and cold in the other. The knowledge one gained from Kaprow's happenings was aversive to what Cynthia Townley termed acquisitive epistemo-

24 D. Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Voice, Sound, and Aurality in the Arts*, Cambridge, London, 2001, pp. 242, 260.

25 Ibid., p. 242.

26 C. Bishop, *Artificial Hell. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London–New York 2012, p. 166.

27 Kahn, op cit., p. 274.

logy focused on collecting data, which benefits members of certain social groups from which experts are selected.²⁸ The price for this was an autonomous work of art, existing in an extra-temporal and non-relational state. Neither *Fluids* nor *Affect* need experts as guardians of appropriate behaviour and understanding; they need hospitable participants, ready for the unexpected and for sharing direct experience.

Robert C. Morgan described the series of photographs *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass* (1968) by Ed Ruscha as “simply facts – data which will later be applied to a system, only without a conclusion”.²⁹ It appears that the photographs of similar-looking Las Vegas pools are taken as an illustrative part of a real estate rental ad. You can estimate the size, shape, and the view around them, all things that might be helpful in deciding whether to rent or buy the property. The last, tenth, photo seems to be from a different classification system, as it shows broken glass and spilled water on an unidentified dark reflective ground. A blue glow and the reflection of a rectangular window can be seen against the dark background. Formally, the last image repeats all the essential elements of the previous images: the colour blue, reflections and water. What makes it different is that in the nine images the water is confined in closed containers, while in the last image it has broken free from its confinement. The damp patches of water are irregular, disorderly, and the broken glass is potentially dangerous because you can injure yourself with it. Was Ruscha alluding in his illogical systems to Cage’s idea of simultaneous events during his happening that have nothing to do with each other, to show entrapment in worn-out narrative patterns? He certainly realised that water can be a social status symbol as long as it is tamed. And subjugation and classification are part of the logic of capitalism. Disrupting the system is also about Ruscha’s *Liquid Words*, introducing entropy into the system of language.

Pernicious desiccation of fluidity

“The artist or critic with a dank brain is bound to end up appreciating anything that suggests saturation, a kind of watery effect, an overall seepage, discharges that submerge perceptions in an onrush of dripping observation. They are grateful for an art that evokes general liquid states, and disdain the desiccation of fluidity,” – wrote Robert Smithson in *A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects* (1968),³⁰ thus opening the water discourse in contemporary art, which was not about the representation of water but about the specific relation between the subject and its background.³¹ The

28 C. Townley, “Toward a Revaluation of Ignorance”, *Hypatia*, 2006, 21, no. 3, p. 40.

29 R.C. Morgan, *Conceptual Art. An American Perspective*, Jefferson–London, 1994, p. 69.

30 Robert Smithson: *The Selected Writings*, ed. R. Flam, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London, 1996, p. 109.

31 A. Markowska, “Mokre oczy w muzeum. Częściowo zagrzebana szopa Roberta Smithsona a muzealne dylematy” [Wet Eyes in the Museum. Robert Smithson’s Partially Buried Woodshed and Museum Dilemmas], in: *Muzeum sztuki. Od Luwru do Bilbao* [Art Museum. From the Louvre to Bilbao], ed. M. Popczyk, Katowice 2006, pp. 163–171.

background usually (on land) denotes the continuum behind the figure, but also names that what is outside the main focus of attention. Therefore, it also concerns the relationship between the subject and its environment and defines a situation of mutual dependence, responsibility and care for the common “we”. Robert Smithson seems more interesting as an artist who affirms not a finished work, but being on the way, suspended in-between, leaving the solid ground. Flying in a helicopter and making circles over the Great Salt Lake, Smithson was searching for his inspiration in Cézanne’s strolling around Mount St. Victoria and his diabetic coma dreams rather than in paintings-‘products’ revered by aesthetes in galleries.

Converting painterly Pollock’s whirls into real muddy circles and watery vortexes might be retold as a story about Rauschenberg’s *Mud Muse* or Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*. It would be a story not about something happening inside a work of art, but a story where something is happening with the onlookers. Not keeping the required distance from the *Mud Muse*, one can be theoretically splashed with a mucky substance. However, such lack of hygiene and tidiness is, of course, not allowed in any museum. That is why *Spiral Jetty*, a form made of stones, accessible after a long journey whose destination is not a museum institution, opens potential viewers to an adventure understood differently than by abstract expressionists. Moreover, the rise and fall of Great Salt Lake water levels make the form of the work changeable, occasionally even invisible.

And yet, even hampered by the museum’s guardians of order or seated in front of a computer screen, we can nevertheless escape the imposed restrictions of perception through the power of imagination triggered by the new research methodologies offered by humanities. Situating themselves in the midst of mud splashes of *Mud Muse* the onlooker seems on the way to an unknown destination. Their goal is obscure. They are a distant observer no more but not a mud swimmer yet. However, half way through, with their affirmative approach – becoming wet and staying dry – they would also remain altered, contaminated by a pulsating substance. Oscillating between watery matter and air, the observer might become an object of the “amphibious anthropology”.³² The amphibious participant of *Mud Muse* or *Spiral Jetty*, dazed and confused, is not driven by conscious intentionality and agency, but by attention to the unknown. The irregularly repeated rhythm of emerging bubbles in *Mud Muse* describes unknown life cycles hidden in the opaque matter and resonates with the onlooker’s body. It trembles in response, corresponds with the movement of mud. Smithson highly valued the “leaky mind” and transformation of the dry into the wet, hence probably his comment: “brain drain leads to eye drain”.³³ It was with great aptitude that he used terms associated with softness, impermanence, fluidity: watery syntax, liquid mind, mind of mud.

32 F. Krause, “Towards an Amphibious Anthropology of Delta Life”, *Human Ecology*, 2017, 45, no. 3, pp. 403–408.

33 *Robert Smithson...*, op. cit., p. 42.

Dynamic “in-betweenness”

My concept is also to offer a different view and a different way of thinking, when it comes to in-between relationships. In the subject-background contextual relation, emphasised in Smithson’s work, the linguistic specificity might be taken into consideration. Whereas a background in English, like *Hintergrund* and *Grund* in German, is directed towards ground references related to a solid surface, something heavy and stable, in Polish *to* refers to *otulanie*, i.e. wrapping/embracing/tucking with care. It connotes softness, tenderness and lack of distance. As a Polish scholar, in my introductory project of new and revised hydro-stories, I would like to transfer this idiosyncratic meaning from my native language to the analysis of background-figure relations, in the aqueous perspective, to American art. However, it is also important to keep in mind, when it comes to background expressing care that relational and affirmative *otulanie* might unexpectedly change into liquefaction, the evaporation of structures, “this flaccid leaking away of substance that makes everything – us, our ideas, and the ambience in which we live-like jellyfish or octopi”³⁴ and, as Yve-Alain Bois remarked, lead to entropy. Both the affirmative enveloping and liberating evaporation of structures occur, for example, in many works by Roni Horn. For her water enables reflection on the fluid nature of identity.³⁵ In her cycle *Haraldsdóttir* (1996) the face of a young girl changes because of the weather. Once there is a mist on her face, at other times small drops of moisture or streaks of water, sometimes the contours of the cheeks and chin become unspecified and the colour fades. The girl is not a stable figure with defined contours and therefore has the potential for change. Following Tim Ingold’s concept of the ontological difference between “between” and “in-between”, perceiving *Haraldsdóttir* should focus on her melting figure, steam, water and beholder’s affects – corresponding and midstreaming, developing feelings for one another. While being “between” one point and another, between two terminals or stops, for Ingold means that we know where we are going; being “in-between” implies uncertainty and ignorance concerning the final destination. The dynamic “in-betweenness” of sympathetic relations implies inarticulate manifestations of consciousness “that streams around and amidst the fixed points”³⁶ suggesting impossible bodies and limitless possibilities. What has hitherto been silenced and submissive is expected to have a “voice”. Nothing is known in advance because the “in-betweenness” is a world of becoming, a movement of generation and dissolution, flows and inhalations. Why is turning to the water so important in this

34 M. Leiris, quoted in: Y.A. Bois, R.E. Krauss, *Formless. A User’s Guide*, New York, 1997, p. 181.

35 A. Markowska, “Pary-nie-do-pary oraz inne fragmentaryczne kolektywy. O twórczości Roni Horn” [The Unmatched Couples and Other Fragmentary Collectives. About the Work of Roni Horn], in: *Zawsze fragment. Studia z historii kultury XX i XXI wieku* [Always a Fragment. Studies in the History of the 20th and 21st Century Culture], eds. M. Kitowska-Łysiak, M. Lachowski, Lublin, 2011, pp. 271–302; W. Szymański, “Hornitologia” [Hornitology], in: idem, *Argonauci* [Argonauts], Kraków, 2015, pp. 203–261.

36 T. Ingold, *The Life of Lines*, New York, 2015, p.148.

search? A “between” with fixed joints, dry terminals and purely instrumental and rational thinking is typical for modernism, while the “in-between” in watery conditions enables the un-learning of modernist thinking. “Between” expresses itself in a modernist culture of planning and projects,³⁷ eviscerated of affects, focused on acquisitions, products, commodification. Nothing unexpected can happen because everything is predicted in advance, prepared as a product. Obviously, *Haraldsdóttir* lives in the realm of “in-betweenness” and her status quo depends on weather conditions as well. As Lynn Cook remarked “we’re very conscious of reading the face as a physical surface.”³⁸ It seems that Horn shows a different girl in subsequent photographs because the model is constantly changing under the influence of water. The collective of multiplied *Haraldsdóttirs* shows the inconsistency of the human being and the potentiality of multiple personalities that can be developed under (un-)/favorable conditions. In a way, the girl is decapitated because she stands in a warm spring submerged up to her neck. What is below is fluid, unknown, related to either *otulanie* or “flaccid leaking”. Her body has become water and her head might also dissolve soon. Looking directly at the viewer, she provokes their imagination, seems to encourage them to immerse themselves and take a dive together. Without a full understanding of the situation and a rational calculation of gains and losses, the artist suggests “fiat” (let it be) to make unexpected events unfold – all that can be found in the abysses of immersion.

Aquatic communities

In my yet unwritten story I would like to ask how and what binds the aquatic imagination, and what horizons it expands. Water might no longer be an abstract symbol of purity or an anthropocene liquid (bottled and sold, carried in pipelines to heavily polluting coal-fired stations), but with its materiality and potentiality it would become an invitation to imagine, inhabit and share otherwise. It is Proteus, son of the sea god Poseidon, with his constantly changing nature and mutable forms, who rules the watery realm.³⁹ Therefore, things, plants and animals (and in fact the whole world) can no longer be treated merely as substitutes for human ideas. For Horn a sort of aquatic community was built, when she included a collection of reports about the weather (spoken testimonies of 75 people living in or near Stykkisholmur) in the *Water Library* (2007).⁴⁰ Given that the presence of air is so natural and obvious that it feels almost non-existent, it is weather that seems

37 L. Porter, *Unlearning the Colonial Cultures of Planning*, London, 2010.

38 L. Neri, L. Cooke, T. du Duve, *Roni Horn*, London, 2000, p. 17.

39 *Kultugeschichte des Wassers*, hrsg. von H. Böhme, Frankfurt am Main, 1988; T. Dobrowolski, *Mity morskie antyku* [Maritime myths of antiquity], Warszawa, 1987; *Estetyka czterech żywiołów: ziemia, woda, ogień, powietrze* [Aesthetics of the Four Elements: Earth, Water, Fire, Air], ed. K. Wilkoszewska, Kraków, 2002.

40 R. Horn, *Vatnasafn/Library of Water*, London, 2007.

to become a true social bond. The library is a space of many events integrating the global community with the local rain, fog, wind, puddles and swamps. (Did Horn have to leave America to reveal people's deep ties with their environment?)

In turn, the community that Cindy Sherman offers brings about mixing the natural with the artificial, the mechanical and the virtual and results from her experiments with the camera angle. The represented figures are neither vertical nor coherent, neither real nor figments of imagination. Most of them are also a bunch of pretenders and crooks, in the state of in-betweenness, neither that nor the other, neither women nor mannequins. The transformation of a figure into a "landscape" and back is one of the principles of the ontology of pregnancy. One figure is a background for another and vice versa. With the artificial body or face emerging from the real, the new parasitises on the old in a never-ending pregnancy and unfinished transmutation. Wounds on the skin turn into landscapes and shifting ways of looking at the work are crucial here. But in the artist's world of props and repetition, where everything has already been finished, the hope of new life lies in humidity, so rare and precious. In her analysis of Sherman's photographs Rosalind Krauss underlined "the refractive surface of water" which sparkled and produced multiple points of light.⁴¹ However, for the scholar it was only "the formless pulsation of desire",⁴² as if there was no routine there and as if that routine with irony did not suppress desire. What is interesting in Sherman's masquerade is Oneness in trouble, exceeding the bounds not only by desire but by really being "in-between". Robert Gober in turn was referring among others to amorous dating in men's restrooms, to disrespectfully treated HIV-afflicted people, to the Catholic symbolism of living water and to Our Lady's springs. In his art the plumbing system is fertile. Fertility is bizarrely and surprisingly displaced, both redundant and welcome. The birth is never complete as the tap gives birth to just a single leg. Heads are absent. Gober's monstrous entities are born on something like an island – a meticulously elaborated environment. The island character of created places prevents the maternal genealogy of Gober's work to be supplanted by the patriarchal order. There is no All Powerful One to explain and rationalise the unexpected appearance of legs in wet pipes. Last but not least, during his work on *Spiral Jetty* Smithson thought about the communities of indigenous people and intercultural solidarity, about those who failed and whose various business ventures (undertaken, among others, around the Great Salt Lake) were unsuccessful. Remnants of these enterprises rest at the bottom of the lake. Smithson thought of art exploring failure, vulnerability and mortality. The watery syntax implied mental weather (so important later for Horn) and a climatology of the brain and eye. A liquid mind opens up to the unplanned. In fact, in the 1940s, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard was convinced that the eye itself is weary of solids.⁴³

41 R. Krauss, *Cindy Sherman, 1975-1993*, New York, 1993, p.111. See also: K. Šantová, "Aesthetic Evaluation of the Water Element: The Metaphor of the Mirror in the Works of Cindy Sherman and Lucia Nimcová", in: *Scientia Nobilitat Studies*, Łask, 2015, pp. 16–22.

42 Krauss, op.cit.

43 G. Bachelard, *L'eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (1942), Québec, 2016.

Counter-memories from the Middle Passage

Returning to reflections on the Middle Passage in today's art and culture is not only a consideration of history, but also of all those people who, every day today, lose their homes and are forced to exile themselves into unknown territories. In Steven Spielberg's film *Amistad* (1997) – which tells the story of rebellious slaves kidnapped from Africa and willing to return to it – particularly moving is the portrayal of desperate Cinqué (Djimon Hounsou), the leader of the rebellion, who does everything to avoid being captured by American soldiers. Once he realises that the boat chasing him is going faster than he is, he decides to make a hopeless escape into the ocean. Although we know this may be a dive into death, watching Cinqué underwater we see a man fighting for his inherent dignity. As Ruth Mayer put it: "The scene is fascinating because it is both utterly hopeless and absurdly enticing: for once, Cinqué's way out is obviously no way out, his effort at getting away a suicidal undertaking. But on the other hand, and simultaneously, the scene is replete with an aura of a total escape, absolute freedom. Briefly, Cinqué seems to have drifted into a realm, where the laws of the land do not hold. Of course, once the African comes back to the surface, Spielberg's film sets out to follow an altogether different course, leaving the underwater world and its strange logic behind and turning to the world of American law and order."⁴⁴ Regrettably, with Cinqué not rescued by any of the submarine Drexciyans, Spielberg's story does not veer toward a comforting fantasy. While Spielberg's aquatic imagination intended to portray the utterly tragic fate of Africans, Drexciya's project is ambivalent, and the message ambiguous and dehumanising, aimed at the unexpected work of imagination. It may be defined as "future-memories", i.e. remembrances of liberatory things not yet happened and seen.

Hydro-stories employ a variety of narrative patterns, from tragedy to romance. They also use humour and irony, as Ellen Gallagher's example shows. Richard Schur has called her aesthetic post-soul because in the post-Civil-Right era she and many other artists (e.g., Jean-Michel Basquiat before her) are no longer concerned with the social construction of race. From her work we can deduce the observation that the tradition of African American art is not only complex but also incoherent.⁴⁵ Greg Tate has called Ellen Gallagher "our high priestess of ambiguity, ambivalence, and incisive ephemerality",⁴⁶ and described her work as "the visual analogue to Thelonious Monk's music: hard edged, whimsical, laconic, eccentric, historically conscious, hypnotic, and precise".⁴⁷ In her *Watery Ecstatic* series (2001 – present), which includes works on paper, objects, and short animated films, Gallagher returns to the murders of women on slave ships crossing the Atlantic. She is preoccupied with counter-memories: not only the transformation of women into aquatic crea-

⁴⁴ Mayer, op. cit., p. 555.

⁴⁵ R. Schur, "Post-Soul Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Art", *African American Review*, 2007, 41, no. 4, pp. 641–654.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 645.

⁴⁷ Tate, op.cit., p. 210.

tures breathing efficiently in the Atlantic depths, but also the current situation of African-Americans in the USA. Depicted within the framework of underwater life, her counter-memories from the future reveal the extraordinary sea creatures, their mutation, and the post-human condition that resists heteronormativity: “the remnants of words unmoored from the burden of racial signification, in dazzling aqua-/Afrofuturist migrations”.⁴⁸ After a detailed examination of her works with three different subjects (a dancer Clayton “Peg Leg” Bates, a mysterious jellyfish-like creature and the artist’s self-portrait as an odalisque) Suzanna Chan described the eclectic maritime aesthetics of her work as aquafuturist. As Chan believes, a posthuman and interspecies imagery defies the historical animalisation of the African people and her queer aquafuture images challenge Freud’s foundational myths. Post-traumatic stories of murdered mothers are evoked by the artist through, among others, an alien jellyfish mother. This strange creature obviously might be an object of the “amphibious anthropology”. She inscribes “a future of coexistence with difference, outside of a phallic either/or model of assimilation or expulsion”.⁴⁹

In light of the changes in the writing and telling of American history, it should be also noted that in New Orleans in 2022 *Monument to a Water Deity* by Simone Leigh replaced the statue of confederate general Robert E. Lee (removed in 2017 as a symbol of “a menacing white supremacist presence that loomed over the city”).⁵⁰

Summary of the unwritten story

By all means, the list of works and artists analysed in my yet-unwritten story should be expanded (e.g. Betty Beaumont, late Joan Jonas, Allan Sekula, Trevor Paglen, Buster Simpson, Helen and Newton Harrison). Emily Dickinson, Roni Horn’s favorite poet, about whom she wrote that each thing she named “breaks with symbolic meaning and takes its place in the actual”,⁵¹ gave a simple framework for thinking about water and structuring the book – from “a neighbour from another world residing in a jar” to “My Caspian – thee”. After all, “water, is taught by thirst”. Dickinson begins with ordinary colloquiality and arriving at non-knowledge or she can be silent and wait to give voice to what has no language yet. But looking for inspiring and encouraging masters should be especially deliberate. As a documentary film *My Teacher Octopus* (2020) by a South African filmmaker Craig Foster shows, we don’t have to learn necessarily from humans. Revised hydro-stories are expected to reveal humans as beings expanded by their diverse human and non-

48 S. Chan, “Alive...Again. Unmoored in the Aquafuture of Ellen Gallagher’s *Watery Ecstatic*”, *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 2017 (Spring/Summer), 45, no. 1&2, p. 261.

49 Ibid., p. 255.

50 B. Sutton, “Simone Leigh statue of African deity installed at former site of Confederate monument in New Orleans”, *The Art Newspaper*, 24 January 2022, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/01/24/simone-leigh-statue-new-orleans-confederate-monument> [accessed 04 February 2022].

51 Neri, Cooke, Duve, *Roni Horn*, op. cit., p. 118.

human environment. One way or another, the structure of the hydro-stories should be an assemblage of incommensurable parts that do not complement each other to make a whole. Aquatic imagination is governed, like cosmos, by infinity.

Reinterpretation means searching for a new viewpoint which paves the way to genuinely welcoming the other (also “I” as another) and to considering relations. What does it mean to discover the possibilities for being and thinking differently? Many attempts have been recently made to imagine a different kind of thinking – from assemblage thinking (Jervis, after Manuel DeLanda),⁵² and thinking “with pelage” (Lestel)⁵³ to tentacular thinking (Haraway),⁵⁴ so bravely incorporated into life and art by Gallagher. The off-shore and off-ground aquatic perspective is meant to show the different status of the subject, its protean instability and the possibilities of different identities and becomings. The tangibility of space disrupts the boundaries of bodies and opens up to their surroundings. Dynamic interactions in an aquatic imaginary open up to be in wet contact in-between and to include environmental qualities. Not knowing our boundaries, we must face our ignorance. The underwater world is less known. In this situation epistemologies of ignorance – a tool urging us to look at types of knowledge – can be deemed dangerous – will prove to be useful. A positive kind of ignorance (termed “loving ignorance” by Tuana⁵⁵) might be an epistemology of resistance against reinforcing the established patterns of dominance. The imposition of “correct” knowledge is exclusory in its character. The weak, vulnerable and silent subject (i.e. not imposing ways of understanding) makes listening and understanding possible; it enables meeting and sharing.

Following Astrida Neimanis’s concept of posthumanist feminist phenomenology of water, the yet non written hydro-stories about American art should focus on a more capacious aqueous imaginary for being responsive to other human and non-human bodies with whom we share our existence. The project challenges modernist isolationism which subscribes to Western ontologies assuming dichotomies and hierarchical oppositions of cognition and performance. The crucial argument of this challenge is the ontology of pregnancy developing a new concept of identity and hospitality. It might be encapsulated in a paraphrase of Bruno Latour’s statement that “we have never been individuals” or in Gaston Bachelard’s belief that water generates a long dream of bonding.

Art allows the imagination to work. Today’s art is understood as a communal activity in which different resources of “I”, “you” and “we” are discovered. Since the contemporary art world has recognised the significance of art practices beyond individual ambition, a space for collaborative art projects has opened up. The aqueous

52 B. Jervis, *Assemblage Thought and Archaeology*, London–New York, 2019.

53 D. Lestel, “Myśleć sierścią. Zwierzęcość w perspektywie drugoosobowej” [To Think Hairy. Animality from the Point of View of the Second Person], in: *Zwierzęta i ich ludzie. Zmierzch antropocentrycznego paradygmatu* [Animals and Their People. A Decline of the Anthropocentric Paradigm], eds. A. Barcz, D. Łagodzka, Warsaw, 2015.

54 D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham–London, 2016.

55 N. Tuana, “The Speculum of Ignorance: The Women’s Health Movement and Epistemologies of Ignorance”, *Hypatia*, 2006, no. 3, pp. 1–19.

imagination, as applied in the discussed artworks, can be useful tool for revising the concept of the subject and can help foster a change from the autonomous and enclosed towards that, which is protean, entangled with other entities, open to mutual trust, care, loving ignorance and relations beyond the all-human world. Instead of the modernistic planning culture based on ultra-rationality and mono-linearity, water imaginary recovers the religious concept of unplanned visitation. I claim that ecological and aquatic interconnectedness might built an alternative understanding of the subject and create a new collective identity.

When viewed through the lens of the ontological turn, today's art is part of life's experience and activity. The blue humanities place "cultural history in an oceanic rather than terrestrial context" and believe that the prehistory of the posthuman lies underwater.⁵⁶ What this means today, however, is not expanding exploitive/instrumental thinking, but becoming more sensitive to the interrelationships between different ecosystems. While evoking the colour blue, it should not be forgotten that it might be lined up with such projects of capitalist and colonial cleanliness as greenwashing and whitewashing.⁵⁷ Utopian thinking rooted in modernism continues to produce sterile visions of the future, without respect for the intricate relationships that cannot be contained within old classifications. The main goal of art in the domain of aquatic imagination, which wants to give a voice to those who have been denied it so far or to those whom they did not want to listen to, is to overcome cultural and social (gender, ethnic, class) inequalities and speciesism. Many art historian are nowadays interested in the arts going hand in hand with the recent social movements and postulates reimagining the late capitalist world of ecological disaster and dramatic social inequalities for future generations and keeping alive hope instead of scepticism. Ewelina Jarosz who wrote recently about the American ecosexual artists Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens and their marrying-water ceremonies, claims that "the navigating tools offered by the blue humanities are to argue for a visually non-obvious and discursively experimental narrative, sensitive to the areas of ignorance and embarrassing truths hidden behind colors"⁵⁸. What really matters is the quality of the established ties with the surrounding world and human and non-human persons. The eponymous imagination has a reference to *imaginaries* – enabling, through making sense of certain ideas, the practices of a society. Yet imagining a different relationship with disenfranchised subjects is not just about intentions that replicate old ways of thinking. Aquatic imagination has the potential to turn good intentions into reality. Experimenting with research methods may be cogent if epistemic triumphalism – appropriative, colonialist and other oppressive ways of knowing – is replaced by doubts and transitional ignorance

56 S. Mentz, "Blue Humanities", in: *Posthuman Glossary*, eds. R. Braidotti, M. Hlavajova, London–Sydney, 2018, p. 69–70.

57 Neimanis, op.cit., p. 180.

58 E. Jarosz, "Hydro-sztuka w Polsce z perspektywy błękitnej humanistyki jako tratwy ratunkowej wobec katastrofy ekologicznej" [Hydro-art in Poland from the Perspective of the Blue Humanities as a Life Raft in the Face of Ecological Catastrophe], *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy*, 2021, no. 2 (48), p. 294.

(a temporary denial of information), which corresponds to aposiopesis, the figure of silence in rhetoric and to staying “in-between” – in “a movement of generation and dissolution in a world of becoming where things are not yet given”.⁵⁹

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⁵⁹ Ingold, p. 147.

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