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ARTICLE

weathering in-beyond hydro(s)cenes

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Abstract
This paper examines the cultural, ecological and political dimensions of the contemporary water crisis through a curatorial and environmental humanities lens. Through the watery conceptual epoch of the Hydrocene, it highlights the work of artists and interdisciplinary practitioners whose hydro-artistic methods propose ways to realign human–water relations. Central to this analysis is the role of curatorial care, here understood as a practice of convening, holding and enabling reciprocal encounters between bodies of water, artists and communities. Bringing these diverse practices into dialogue, the paper proposes water not only as subject matter but as a potential collaborator and leaky agent. It argues that such watery approaches are vital to reshaping collective imaginaries and navigating the planetary water crisis. Extending the conceptual framework developed in the author's monograph, this paper works with curatorial care as a situated methodology. Through a responsive roundtable bringing marine science, acoustic research and documentary filmmaking into dialogue with hydro-artistic practice, it asks how curatorial work can itself become a mode of inquiry and how artistic and cross-disciplinary water encounters might operate as forms of environmental learning beyond the classroom.

Keywords: arts-based; art-science; contemporary art; curatorial; water; water theory

Acknowledgement of Country and waters

This paper begins with an acknowledgement of Country, including waters here, above and below. This work was created on Aboriginal land and shared on Noongar Country, where Country refers to the living system of relationships between people, place, creatures, waters, sky, stories and kin. I pay my respects to elders past and present, I extend my deepest respects to all First Nations people, and recognise their continuing care of Country, water, sky and community.

I also acknowledge the importance of water within Indigenous knowledge systems, and their deep understanding of water not as resource but as kin, not as property but as Country. These cultural practices, scholarship and cosmologies of First Nations peoples' relationship to water is a vast and deep area of cultural significance and study. As a non-Indigenous Australian, this is not my area of study, I am not the right person to do that, but the ideas I consider, such as thinking with water, have been and continue to be integral to Indigenous water relations here and in other First Nations cultures for all time. The First Nations water protectors and defenders, whose chant is sometimes *Water is Life*, live and fight for the deep and lasting relations between bodies of water.

There are many scholars, artists and curators whose work engages deeply with Indigenous water knowledge and First Nations water relations. This way of thinking of water as a vibrant and living material with its own agency is integral to many First Nations scholarships and cosmologies. As Stó:lō nation poet and writer Lee Maracle reminds us, "The water owns itself" (Maracle, 2017). This is not a

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metaphor; it is a truth held in Indigenous knowledge systems that we must learn to honour and enact. Of particular significance is the work of artist, curator and scholar Léuli Eshrāghi, whose practice centres Indigenous concepts of kinship and responsibilities spanning the Great Ocean. Eshrāghi's curatorial work, including the 2023 Tarrawarra Biennale, *ua usiusi fa'ava'asavili,* as well as their publication *Indigenous Aesthetics and Knowledges for Great Ocean Renaissances* (2023), offers vital frameworks for understanding oceanic thinking and Pacific sovereignty. Similarly, Quandamooka artist Megan Cope's powerful installations on Sea Country, including *Kinyingarra Guwinyanba* demonstrate Indigenous leadership in caring for water and Country, as does Tongan-Australian artist Latai Taumoepeau, whose performance practice amplifies Pacific voices in the face of the climate crisis (Jetñil-Kijiner *et al.*, 2021; Taumoepeau, 2016)

Water as curatorial companion

As a curatorial theorist, researcher and waterist, I pose and sometimes answer urgent questions at the intersection of contemporary art, ecology and technology. Through curatorial projects, academic research, and international collaborations, I craft new vocabularies for understanding how aesthetic practices navigate the complexities of our planetary crisis. This paper is written with three practitioners whose work runs alongside my own: a marine scientist who dives into seagrass meadows, an acoustic researcher who sings into waterfalls, a filmmaker who documented her community's flooding in real time. Their contributions are the Hydrocene in action. This collaborative structure is itself a curatorial act. Here, hydro-artistic methods meet and mingle in other waters.

Water has been my curatorial companion for the last decade. My focus as an active curator and researcher is on processes of watery thinking in contemporary art, ecology as social metaphor and feminist methodologies of curatorial practice. I have been fortunate to curate exhibitions in floating bathhouses, commission permanent works for ponds, use swimming as a research method and collaborate on watery artistic networks and gatherings including initiating the Hydrocene in multitudes, including the hydro(s)cene.

My work on the Hydrocene centres water as the primary medium through which we experience the climate crisis. This is a move and method that learns from First Nations water-relations (Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water 2021; Eshrāghi, 2023) as well as feminist environmental humanities to realign human-water relations and move beyond capital-colonial logics of water as resource (Chen *et al.,* 2013; Neimanis, 2017). What the Hydrocene learns from First Nations water-relations is not a simple set of practices to adopt but a deep reorientation. Water is not a passive substance to be managed, it is a living relation with its own sovereignty, memory and agency. From feminist environmental humanities, particularly Neimanis (2017) and Chen *et al.* (2013), it draws the understanding that human bodies are themselves bodies of water, porous and implicated in the planetary hydrological cycle. Together, these knowledge traditions insist we move from extraction towards reciprocity. The artistic practices gathered here seek to enact that shift.

The waters I speak from, about and with have their own sovereignties. Consider the watersheds that hold and sustain you. In showers, in tea, in fruit, in tears, in humidity, in rain, in other bodies of water and our own. All water is part of a grand planetary circulation of which we partake, ever so briefly.

We always start from and exist in a specific water body, in a specific hydro-reality, a watershed of our own and social making. I am a white settler Australian with European heritage, mainly Scottish, with parts of my family coming to the East Coast of Australia from the 1850s onwards. I am also a Swedish citizen by family and immigration. I was raised on Dharug and Gundungurra lands in the beautiful Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, where I have recently returned to after living in Sweden for many years. It is funny to return to a place where I was a child, and now to experience it with my own children, the mist, the rain, the noisy waterfalls, all feel like home. This abundance of water and my privileged access to water and these water places is part of my positionality as a researcher and I acknowledge its privileges and potential limitations. I have been

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in Sweden and Australia for the majority of my life and always had access to drinking water, beaches and places of water connection. I have not lived with drought seasons or water shortages as part of everyday life, nor have I experienced flooding in my family home, but more and more of us are and will experience these traumatic interrelated climate realities.

In the face of this planetary water crisis, I turn to the water to lead and to the artists to show the way. There is an emerging field of blue health, the study of how water environments promote human wellbeing (Foley & Kistemann, 2015), but it is something many of us know intuitively. Returning to a family beach. Noticing the mist lifting in the morning. The pleasure of watering a garden or pot plant. The new wave of sauna fascination. We are drawn into hydro-realities through communal experiences, communing with other bodies of water. For me, as a curator and curatorial theorist, I find that artists are a kind of watery magician when it comes to sharing the pull and lure and balm of water with others. The artists I work with open these water worlds for us, through sound or sculpture, performance or film, luring us into the almost unspeakable: the reflections, the colours, the sensory digestion of water. The practices in this paper exist in this register. They do not (only) illustrate the water crisis, instead they pull us into it, they let us slip and submerge into the watery worlds they construct.

My internal image for my process of researching art, water and the climate crisis is this: I am half submerged in an ocean pool, I cup the ocean in my hands, I am never able to hold it all, yet I keep trying. The water drips, leaks and returns to the ocean. In my hands, these temporary pools become zones of observation, contemplation, and water-based ontology. These pools are my research, shaped by nature–culture (Haraway, 1991), and they hold rhythms, cadences and memories, connect artists and water in relational ways of which I am learning to notice more and more. The pools are also archives of living waters that carry Indigenous knowledge, colonial violence, traces of toxicity, and the climate crisis simultaneously. They speak of algae blooms, of unseasonal rains, of disappearing kelp forests, of dead fish in the river, these direct depletions and violences of colonial-industrial realities. Through these acts of listening and looking, sensing and scoring, the Hydrocene revealed and reveals itself to me, glistening in the pool of my hands. Between land and sky, I form a curatorial counterbalance: climate crisis on one end, radical artistic potential on the other.

Water is my inner compass, guiding me through planetary points of connection in art, led by the artists and the water. In practice, this is always shared. For example, in 2015 I curated a performance programme called Penelope and Lucinda in the floating bathhouse at Hornstull, Stockholm. One performer was long-distance swimming, a gesture towards Ulysses and his long swim home. Another was the misunderstood Penelope, scheming while waiting with her harp in the change rooms. Another was a version of the river Lucinda, a personified river, a woman in the warm bathwaters. The water was so present it had rolled up and was part of the making. The steam, the brackish waters, the hot showers, the chlorinated bath, they all seemed to elevate the gathering. The water in the camera. The water in the paper for the script. The water in the performers' bodies. The condensation. This movement of deep time, old waters mixing and submerging. This is the (aqueous) curatorial act: placing practices beside each other and noticing what the water does between them.

This paper works with curatorial care as its guiding methodology (McDowell, 2019). By this I mean the practices of convening, sharing and holding space through which practitioners and bodies of water are brought into encounter. The roundtable format with the four authors of this paper, is itself a curatorial act: it extends the Hydrocene beyond my own perspective and into shared, cross-disciplinary knowledge production. This approach draws on feminist methodologies of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1991) and Neimanis's hydrologics (2017).

Hydro(s)cenic methods in practice

The artists of the Hydrocene are showing us innovative methods to care for and with water. To become water stewards, these artists are cultural leaders who demonstrate ways of cultivating what Donna Haraway terms "response-ability" (2016) and whose methods for collaborating with water, thinking

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with water, strengthen and deepen the possibilities of living within the natural-cultural climate crisis. Rather than seeing water as a theme, backdrop or a material to work with, the artists of the Hydrocene have developed water-based methodologies, what I call hydro-artistic methods, for entering principled and artistic relations with water. These methods are not a definitive or exhaustive list, but examples found in certain artists' practices; there are many other possible and existing hydro-artistic methods to which the theory of the Hydrocene can pertain (Bailey-Charteris, 2024).

Water moves through bodies internally and links bodies to the planetary circulations through the hydrological cycle. In this way, water is ingested and visceral: it is both internal and external to bodies. This duality of water as internally and externally sensed is one of the double-sided paradigms which means that water is also both a physical and metaphorical connector within this new wave of water-based arts practices. Water is the guide, the archive and the mediator for art to contribute to the cultural discourse on the climate crisis.

This understanding of the logic of water as "hydrologics" builds on Neimanis's work in her essay "Water and Knowledge," (Neimanis, 2017) where she argues for the powerful logic and knowledge of water, and on her foundational concept of hydrofeminism, which reframes embodiment itself as watery (Neimanis, 2012, 2017).

These modes of watery relations are what she terms "hydrologics", which to my reading show us the ways bodies of water perform in transforming and exchanging with other bodies of water. Neimanis lists possible hydrologics and the list reads like transferrable skills on a curriculum vitae: communicator, conduit, memory-keeper, sculptor, differentiator, lover, scribe, alibi, genealogist and saboteur. What the list shows is that water is always already a relational agent. It communicates, sculpts, differentiates, sabotages. The challenge for us is to attend to what water is already doing, and to develop practices that respond to and attune with water's agency.

These hydrologics suggest water itself could be seen here as a pedagogue. The hydro-artistic methods are artistic strategies and forms of environmental learning at once, operating through embodied encounter and more-than-human care. The three artists show us how to bring the learnings of water and water's eco-systems out to the public. Their important artistic and scientific work practices attunement to immersion and watery ways, teaching us through encounter and reflection.

In my book, I outline the hydro-artistic methods of archiving, cleaning, incubating, infusing, misting, resisting, submerging, swamping, tiding, unfreezing and waving, which the artists themselves have developed in their unique relationships with water. This list is not exhaustive or exclusive, and many artists work with multiple methods across multiple states of water. These methods are slippery, water-based ways of thinking with water to make art in common. In this setting, water is not a passive material engaged by artists; it is a vibrant and active agent, through which art engages with the planetary circulations of the hydrological and hydro-social cycle.

The artists of the hydro(s)cene carry what we cannot hold alone. They hold water stories in their bodies and in their practices, and they offer them to us as shared knowing. The intricate curatorial task is to gather these carrier bags (Le Guin, 1989) and arrange them so the water stories they hold can circulate.

Watery worlds do not emerge spontaneously. They are built through acts of bringing together, of making space for different waters to meet. Jo Pollitt, Helena Grehan and Renee Newman at the Centre for People, Place & Planet and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, Edith Cowan University, curated a responsive roundtable and invited ECU researchers to bring their own watery practices into dialogue with the Hydrocene. Rather than presenting the Hydrocene as a finished theory to be received, I offered it as a body of water that might mingle with other bodies of water, each transforming the other through shared understandings. What follows is a selection of findings from this aqueous event.

Submerging: Kathryn McMahon in seagrass meadows

The research I do collaboratively is developing ways to care for the ocean differently. It is about developing climate actions for the ecosystem. The ocean is vast and regulates climate. It has an

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amazing capacity to absorb heat. Ninety percent of the excess heat trapped by earth due to human-caused global warming is absorbed by the ocean. So, the ocean is heating up much faster than the atmosphere and marine heatwaves, these extreme underwater weather events are causing rapid environmental degradation. You may have heard about coral bleaching and coral reef degradation from ocean warming but seagrasses, marine plants that live in coastal waters, are also impacted by heatwaves. In the amazing Gathaagudu, Shark Bay World Heritage Area, 1,000 square kilometres of seagrass was lost or degraded due to a marine heatwave. If like me, the number does not mean much, think about 670,000 Olympic Size swimming pools as the surface area.

In our research we use an experimental scientific approach to find seagrass species, places where seagrass grows or particular seagrass plants that are more likely to survive a marine heatwave. We put small pieces of plants in chambers, heat the chambers up and measure their health, a bit like a stress test but for plants. We have found species and places that are more tolerant. So now we are working with community to plant these into the ocean in restoration programmes to build resilience into our ecosystems. This community of seagrass planters aligns with Bailey-Charteris's statement where the vast ocean is a place for collaboration and collective strategies of salty relationality and storytelling.

I connected with the hydro-artistic method of submerging as described in the Hydrocene book, knowing the ocean from inside-out. As part of my scientific research practice I SCUBA dive or snorkel to see and learn. It is incredibly immersive, skin covered in lycra or wetsuit, heavy on land with weight belts and air tanks but freed by the density of the water when submerged, moving effortlessly. It is a special way to relate and engage with water. When migratory whales, schooling rays or sea snakes pass by me I am reminded of and feel the connectedness of the ocean expanse. With my head down looking, counting, recording seagrass I am immersed in the ocean and learning from it. To me there were synergies with the artistic practice described by Bailey-Charteris as the hydro(s)cene. The ocean connects me, engages me and supports me in my learning and life – for me it is Eco-Science in the Hydrocene.

Kathryn McMahon shared in her presentation, that she was one of the first women marine scientists in her field, running her own boat, eventually bringing on more women crew and scientists (Figure 1). I could immediately see her out there, launching the boat, gathering samples,

Figure 1. Photograph of McMahon undertaking seagrass research. Image courtesy of McMahon.



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the bright blue skies above. Her description of being "freed by the density of the water when submerged, moving effortlessly" echoes the embodied knowledge that artists such as Signe Johannessen and Latai Taumoepeau cultivate through their watery encounters. Seagrass research can be done by remote sensing, drone survey, laboratory analysis, but McMahon chooses to learn from the inside, placing her body within the ecosystem so the ocean becomes not an object of measurement but a relational milieu.

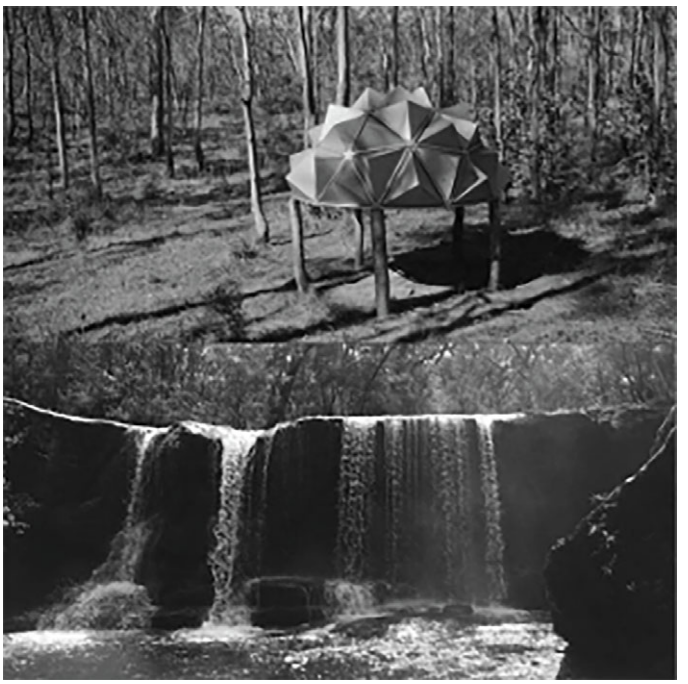
She chose to end her presentation with a poem she had written while based up north, and it had this watery feeling, living with and through the water. It spoke to a release, a refusal of merely "studying" water in favour of learning from it. Her words reminded me of what Neimanis calls hydrofeminism, the insistence that our watery embodiment is always already political (Neimanis, 2012). This connects her practice to curatorial care: a shared commitment to embodied attention as a way of knowing water differently. McMahon's community seagrass planting, researchers and locals working together in the water, is response-ability in practice (Haraway, 2016).

Listening: Mary Rapp at waterfalls

Water as mentor and catalyst

My relationship with water in my artistic practice began unexpectedly: in my second year as a jazz double bass student at the Sydney Conservatorium, I heard a performance by Bae Il Dong, the extraordinary p'ansori singer from South Korea . P'ansori is a 400-year-old musical storytelling tradition, recognised by UNESCO as a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity, a raw, resonant, intensely textured vocal art. Il Dong's performance moved me profoundly; I had never heard anything like it. So, despite never having sung before, I travelled to Korea to study under Il Dong, who has now been a friend and mentor for 15 years (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Image of *Retroreflection waterfalls* by Rapp with Chris Abrahams, Carl Dewhurst, Peter Farrar. Courtesy of the artists. https://maryrapp.bandcamp.com/album/retroreflection-waterfalls.



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Practising in water's presence

Il Dong is an outlier: both radically traditional and fiercely progressive. He is one of the few living artists to undertake "Dokong," ten years of solitary training deep in the mountains, singing daily all day into a waterfall. The waterfall's sound and energy become both obstacle and teacher. To sing against that noise, you must summon a radically new tone, developing new vocal resonance and power.

Il Dong long advocated the importance of practice at waterfalls, so about ten years into my p'ansori studies, and while studying acoustic science, I began waterfall training. Looking through the acoustic science lens, I discovered that at a waterfall, airborne sound is masked by the broadband frequency roar of the water. The usual ways I monitor my voice as I sing, either directly from my mouth to my ears or reflected by nearby surfaces, are occluded. This masks normal feedback, enacting the Lombard effect, where the body unconsciously generates more vocal power due to masked listening pathways. You might have experienced this effect yourself, like talking to someone with headphones on or holding a phone to one ear. Without thinking, people speak louder; it is an automatic and hard-to-suppress response. Singing at a waterfall intensifies this response, unlocking new vocal resonance. After more than 300 recorded hours of practice in these environments, I've systematically measured profound changes in my voice.

Collaborating with sonic environments

Inspired by these changes from stepping out of my usual beige practice room, I started designing and building acoustic spaces for practice, retroreflective domes and open reverberant chambers, in a remote NSW location. I am very lucky to have friends with a property in the Burragorang Valley where I could put my creations, and they have a waterfall. I practised in these places that are completely unlike any regular practice room, placing myself in dialogue with diverse sonic environments. Il Dong taught me that to avoid merely emulating our teachers or other artists and find one's unique tone, we must learn from nature. Our sonic environment shapes and challenges us, demanding new listening and reorganising how bodies, voices, and spaces interact.

Today, my research involves composing music that interacts with specific sonic environments, using the sonic identity of place as a compositional voice. Every space's unique sound becomes a collaborator, not just a container for music. I collect comprehensive acoustic data to inform pieces crafted for instruments tailored to the place itself.

Water teaches by masking, demanding adaptation, reordering senses, and showing new paths for listening and creation. Learning with and from water invites exploration of other ways of being, belonging, and becoming, urgent transformations for our changing world.

Mary Rapp's waterfall training resonates with hydroscenic methods in unexpected ways. Where artists such as Fujiko Nakaya work with fog to disorient and reorient the senses, drawing on *p'ansori* traditions, Rapp uses the roar of falling water to mask her usual listening pathways and unlock new vocal resonance. Both practices recognise that water can teach us to perceive differently. Rapp's insight that "our sonic environment shapes and challenges us, demanding new listening and reorganising how bodies, voices, and spaces interact" could equally describe the embodied encounters that watery artists cultivate. Her work reminds us that the hydro(s)cene includes visual and performative practices and also the sonic and the vibrational. Her waterfall training, read through curatorial care, shows how hydro-artistic methods operate pedagogically: the waterfall teaches the singer to sing and listen differently, just as the curated encounter teaches audiences to attend to water's agency in new ways.

Witnessing: Natalie Davey in floodwaters

Natalie Davey's short film *River Report* (2024) bears witness to the 2023 flooding of Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia, where unprecedented wet season rainfall transformed the Fitzroy

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River into a force of destruction and displacement. Over five days, Davey filmed her home flooding and the river's power in real time (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Still image from Davey's video work, *River Report*, 2024. Courtesy of the artist.



Davey's practice of documenting the flood in real time enacts a form of witnessing that resonates with the Hydrocene method of archiving, her camera becomes its own archiving instrument, capturing the Fitzroy River's power as it unfolds. As a First Nations person and artist, Davey shares her lived experience of the flood and the river as family. She crafts the video through documentary footage, to-camera pieces but also hand-drawn animations which together make a powerful aesthetic remembering and witnessing of the flood. *River Report* reminds us that the natural-cultural water crisis is a lived reality, and that bearing witness, in all its difficulty, is itself a form of response-ability.

Davey's contribution here does not take written form. The film itself is the testimony, her work with documentary practice and community witnessing, makes space for the voices most directly affected by the water crisis.

The artistic and scientific practices above demonstrate what it can look and feel like to think *with* water (Chen et al, 2013). In looking at these practices, we also need to understand how we got here. The following section maps four pillars of the natural-cultural water crisis: the dominant systems of thought that have alienated us from water and that the Hydrocene, through its artists and collaborators, seeks to disrupt.

The natural-cultural water crisis

In Amitav Ghosh's book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, he stipulates that the climate crisis is not only a crisis of ecologies but "also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (Ghosh, 2016). This crisis of the collective imagination is what Ghosh posits to be one of the greatest challenges ever to haunt human culture in the broadest sense. The power to expand the collective imagination is a chance to imagine truly sustainable and liveable world-making in multiple temporalities and ecosystems. Drawing on Ghosh's illumination of the cultural climate crisis, I expand on his by stipulating that the crisis is specifically a crisis of water, both

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socially and ecologically. That is to say, the planet is currently experiencing a natural-cultural water crisis. This water crisis is both material and ecological and at the same time metaphorical and social (Bailey-Charteris, 2024).

As Rob Nixon articulates in his theory of "slow violence," we face "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). This "slow violence" is particularly visible in water, for example in the acidification of oceans, the accumulation of toxins in watersheds, the incremental rise of sea levels that will (and already does) displace millions of climate refugees. Yet the slowness Nixon describes is unevenly distributed. In Lismore, on Bundjalung Country, the 2022 floods displaced thousands, revealing how decades of floodplain development concentrated risk in the communities least resourced to recover. What registers as slow from the comfort of reliable water infrastructure is acute crisis on the front lines. The concept remains vital, but it must be placed, the speed of destruction depends on where you stand.

It is here, in this intersection of crisis and imagination, that the Hydrocene emerges. In plain terms, the neologism names an epoch in which water is the primary medium through which the climate crisis is felt, and in which artistic and curatorial practices offer ways to realign human–water relations. It is a conceptual epoch, curatorial theory and invitation at once. We can encounter the hydrocommons in the present age, this Age of Water, when all water is implicated in the planetary performativity of the hydro-social cycle. This is where the hydrocommons coalesces into the hydro(s)cene (Bailey-Charteris, 2024).

Pillars of the natural-cultural water crisis

Continuing to view the climate crisis as an intersecting axis, as the product of colonialism, imperialism and late capitalism, and to give a greater context to the natural-cultural water crisis, I consider four "pillars" or socio-cultural belief systems that have contributed to the crisis development. These are the ideas that uphold the dominant colonial-capital and anthropocentric understandings of water, which the Hydrocene seeks to disrupt (Bailey-Charteris, 2024). These are the logics that McMahon's seagrass meadows, Rapp's waterfalls and Davey's floodwaters push against.

Water as modern

The first pillar is the modernisation of water. Sophisticated First Nations hydrological tools have been developed and utilised as technology for millennia; for example in the form of the fish traps at Brewarrina in New South Wales, known to the Ngemba people as Baiame's Ngunnhu (Department of Climate Change, 2021). This Indigenous hydrology site manages fish populations and practises sustainable fishing, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of the interconnected ecologies of fish, river and humans (Martin *et al.*, 2023). Compare this with the current Murray–Darling Basin Plan, where water is managed in spreadsheets and allocations of fictional water are traded on markets while actual rivers run dry (Hamilton & Kells, 2021).

Theorist Veronica Strang writes about the process of "domesticating water" that took place as part of the expansion of European cities during industrialisation, where the power to control water access and sanitation was keenly interlinked with the power of the church and state. This notion of domesticated water or "modern water" marks a shift in the collective understanding of water within cultural and social arrangements (Linton, 2014; Strang, 2015).

In Australia, this transformation was and is particularly violent. The extreme changes to the Australian water landscape inflicted by settler colonialism is enabled, in part, by the importation of European water management and even naming. Jay Arthur highlights how imported European English has mislabelled Australian bodies of water. Terms such as "lake" and "river" suit the

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hydrological environs of Europe, not Australia, and "reflect the discrepancy in the settler understanding of this place" (Arthur, 2005, pp. 85–89).

Water as resource

The second pillar emerges directly from the first. When dominant cultures treat efficiency, profit and progress as given, water becomes invisible, reduced to a "resource" to be contained, commodified and instrumentalised (Chen *et al.*, 2013). In Australia, water trading has separated water from land, allowing institutional investors and foreign pension funds to acquire vast permanent water rights in the Murray–Darling Basin (Hamilton & Kells, 2021). The ACCC's, 2021 water markets inquiry concluded that Australia's water market had failed the environment, farmers and Indigenous Australians (ACCC, 2021). The resource mindset is also domestic, habitual, bodily. We have outsourced our water relations to infrastructure, often forgetting that we too are part of this planetary hydro-social system (Budds *et al.*, 2014). As Linton (2014) argues, "abstract water" strips water of its situated relations, reducing it to a tradeable unit.

Chen, MacLeod and Neimanis write about how through water the otherwise invisible phenomena of climate change become "immediately tangible" and that "at the slower but epochal scale of acidifying oceans, changed currents, wet-land encroachment, and desertification, we are also part of watery transformations" (Chen *et al.*, 2013, p. 5). McMahon's community seagrass planting works against this logic, returning water relations to the local and the embodied.

Water as (only) weather

The third pillar reduces water to meteorological phenomena divorced from political and social contexts, ignoring the ongoing "slow violence" of the hydrological cycle in the climate crisis (Nixon, 2011).

Christina Sharpe offers another lens, "In what I am calling the weather, antiblackness is pervasive as climate. The weather necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies" (Sharpe, 2016). Sharpe's use of climate is figurative: she names the pervasive atmosphere of antiblackness. I draw on her work not to conflate racial violence with ecological crisis but to show how elemental phenomena are never separate from social life. If weather carries the histories Sharpe describes, water carries them too: in the uneven distribution of flood risk, in colonial infrastructure that determines who drinks clean water, in the slow violence of contaminated waterways in communities already marginalised by race and class.

Hamilton, Neimanis and Zettel propose a feminist figuration of "weathering" which "attunes us to human embodiment and difference in a time of climate change, where 'weather' is not only meteorological, but the total atmospheres that bodies are made to bear" (Hamilton *et al.*, 2021). As Hito Steyerl declares in her video work *Liquidity Inc* (2014): "Weather is money. Weather is terror. Time is money . . . Weather is water with an attitude" (Steyerl, 2014). Steyerl's work sits at the nexus of water, data and financial flows that the Hydrocene seeks to make visible. Davey makes this visible in her filmmaking of the flood when she records, animates and shares the social and cultural stories of her familial river and the water in flood.

Water as data

The fourth pillar represents the newest form of water alienation: the datafication of water and the computational consumption of water resources. A wet-techno fantasy that with enough data we can manage water and all its power. Meanwhile, the digital cloud has a very material thirst in the form of data centres which maintain our digital lives and consume millions of litres of water daily. For example, in Western Sydney, down the mountains an hour or two from my home, temperatures regularly hit 40 degrees, all while new data centres are planned that will soon

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compete with communities for water access. In England's recent drought the population was asked to clear old photos to relieve the data infrastructure of water, and in Texas folks have been asked to take shorter showers while the data centres drink up water supplies (Newsweek and The Independent, 2025). Rapp's waterfall training refuses this logic: she learns from water by being inside its sound. In the Hydrocene, these digital and computational practices continue to emerge, allowing potential for an eco-technological intimacy to occur.

Final water thoughts, the evaporation returns

How, then, do we move from thinking about water to thinking with water as artistic, cultural and curatorial agent? This is where the Hydrocene emerges, and where the constellation and zeitgeist of watery artists become essential guides in developing new and remembered hydro-relations across all four pillars of the crisis. Here, through a curated gathering of practitioners from within and beyond contemporary art, we test whether the hydro(s)cene can hold water beyond our own hands.

The Hydrocene is a way of building a small posthuman refuge towards counteracting the dominant anthropocentric understandings of water (Haraway, 2016). Based on my findings as a curator, I hypothesise this neologism as a curatorial act of establishing a name among many, and watery alternative to the Holocene, Anthropocene and others. Rather than a strict geological era or linear time-based matter, the Hydrocene is proposed as a conceptual tool and as one of many alternative names for the current epoch and aims to disrupt the supremacy and land-based logic of the Anthropocene (Bailey-Charteris, 2024).

The Hydrocene responds to TJ Demos's call for an expansion of the names of this planetary age (Demos, 2017). It aims to be one of many slippery names for the current times, a conceptual tool for understanding and elevating water, art and culture in the current times. The Hydrocene brings together "watery makers" in contemporary art with "watery thinkers" in the expanded environmental humanities, and becomes a way to enact Karen Barad's "reconfigurings of the world" in theory and practice (Barad, 2012).

The Hydrocene asks us to stay with the water, after Haraway. To cup it in our hands even as it leaks through. As environmental education meets the scale of this crisis, it may need to follow the water out of the classroom and into these artistic, scientific and more-than-human encounters. In sharing in these works, we notice new and remembered ways for the boundary between ourselves and water to evaporate and return. The practitioners gathered here are showing us how we might do this and what it feels like to be waterlogged, and return again, in watery worlds.

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Author Biographies

Bronwyn Bailey-Charteris (she/they) is an Australian and Swedish curator, writer and researcher working at the intersection of contemporary art, ecology and technology. Based on Dharug and Gundungurra Country, they are a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at UNSW as part of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society (ADM+S). Bronwyn maintains an independent curatorial practice and is the author of *The Hydrocene: Eco-Aesthetics in the Age of Water* (Routledge, 2024).

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Natalie Davey comes from Fitzroy Crossing, in the Kimberley of Western Australia. She has Bunuba, Walmajarri, Scottish and English heritage and identifies as a custodian from Bunuba Danggu Muway. She is a multidisciplinary artist (painting, sound art, film, animation etc) and spends a lot of her creative time at Mangkaja Arts. Recently winning the Multi-media award for the 2024 Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards. Her work titled 'River Report' about the rising waters of 2023 Fitzroy Crossing Major flood disaster. Natalie is also a language reclamation and conservationist working with Wangki Radio, the community station of Fitzroy Crossing.

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