

It's all about listening to the sounds of the waves—on the Solid Art exhibition *Tides in the Body*

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In her essay "A Sketch of the Past", Virginia Woolf invokes an image that represents her memory of life: "If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills—then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St. Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach."¹

Afternoons spent lying half asleep, half awake, hearing the waves breaking had been an important part of Woolf's life. As she lies in her room listening to the crashing of waves outside the window, what seems removed from her state of being becomes the "base upon which life stands". The water pays no heed to her intent and predicament, yet the symbol of life—the "bowl" inside her—by the ocean's motions, dries, soaks, soaks, and dries.

Bodily experiences connected directly to nature's rhythms make the memory as Woolf depicted untenable in dualistic discourse—the ocean is not only "external" to the body, being more than a locale, a history, or a redistributable resource and deployment strategy, but also exists within our bodies of 70% water, within the cavities and organs which ingest and expel to the moon's motions (Perhaps the womb is the "bowl" of which Woolf speaks.)

Let the tides take you in

The tides we see today are no longer as Woolf portrays them, but unleashed through a barrage of floods, droughts, and abnormal weather conditions. Mankind's response to this onslaught is no longer to resist, but to let it take us in, being taken in so that one by necessity becomes engulfed, submerged and infected to the point where internal water bodies become filled and emptied out with the tides.

Ecofeminist Astrida Neimanis in *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* contends that "we are bodies of water". "We" in the plural form rather than the singular "I" means that "watery" bodies are not just "lonesome partners for one's body" in isolation², but exist inseparably in symbiosis with the environment. If humans are indeed part of the water body, then they will surely go beyond barriers, flowing reciprocally and merging mutually, and ebb and flow in relation to conditions we don't necessarily understand.

Without a doubt, water influences us all. The more perplexing question remains of how under the premise of maintaining our differences one proceeds to ponder the relationships between water bodies? How in the state of being mutually immersed can we still discern differences among pluralistic water bodies?

Bad water

The *Tides in the Body* exhibit, curated by WU Hung-Fei, builds upon Neimanis' theory. The artists evoke forces of tides, rivers, clouds, and icebergs within the white box, breaking up rigid visual, auditory, and language bounds to call forth sensations of weathering, intermingling, soaking, and eroding.

Participating artists and writers depict various forms of water bodies as well as disparate personal experiences and expressions to invoke the sense of "interconnectedness": that we are indeed water bodies, with tides turning within and their churning constantly reminding us—though their sounds reach us through various forms, they act from a distance on the rise and fall of water within our body.

Tides in the Body is provocative due to each work's unique imagining of the "water body". Each of the four artist-collective's perception of water certainly differs from the romantic poet's depiction of still lake surfaces, but as tainted, blighted, and war-ravaged "bad water", or even in the form of volatile gases, particulate matter, and glitches. Not only is bad water no longer pure, but it is also a carrier of multiplex signals. This aggregate state perhaps better describes the water bodies we encounter today.

Turbulence

In her early work *The Particle and the Wave*, Indian-born artist Himali SINGH SOIN algorithmically converted each semicolon in Woolf's novel *The Waves* into musical scales, collaborating with sound artists to translate semicolons into voices, synthesizing audio from her text, and playing upon people's consciousness from afar as tidal waves do. Those unpronounceable sounds, unrecognizable punctuation marks in a phonocentric consciousness, contain not only language but also indiscernible noise, actualized through the work of the artist as particles move in a wave, also giving the novel, written in the wake of the Great War on the collapse of order and state of uncertainty an added non-human perspective.

The *We Are Opposite Like That* series, through which SINGH SOIN became widely known, not only includes works of video, but also a book by the artist first published in 2020, three sound installation works, photographs, and live performance. The artist retraces a fictitious historical map, discovering polar region histories, and through anthropomorphizing polar ice in a female voice gives an eyewitness account of the mythology of ice between the Indian subcontinent and the Arctic and Antarctic regions, from the initial formation of the ice to a future where it no longer exists.

SINGH SOIN's sound installation consists of 3 chapters, in which the artist prerecords a non-linear narrative for the imagined history of the Antarctic continent. Selected for this exhibition are "Chapter 1: Subcontinentment" and "Chapter 3: Antarctica Was a Queer Rave Before It Got Busted by Colonial White Farts", with both selections using sound as turbulence to disrupt the white-centric value hierarchy. As the artist travels across the professed "white" continent, she realizes that her brown skin color marks her as an intruder in this white expanse. She made recordings of skidding rocks on the ice surface, layered with live percussive instruments, electronic dance music, and 90's rave to host a fictional queer party in this place of desolation and to make the case for "South-Asian Futurism", which through her imagination has the potential to write back conventional historical narratives.

Polluted Pond

Since the work *Perhaps, she comes from/to_Alang*, LIN An-Chi (Ciwias Tahos) has used her body as the medium, exploring the theme of tribal ethnicity and gender identity in Temahahoi Atayal oral lore. First exhibited at the Green Island Human Rights Art Festival, *The Land in the Middle of the Pond* also follows this context, reconnecting with the depths of one's self-identity through the body. The artist visits the reservoir to collect water at the source and traces over the veins on her legs with ink. Off-camera, she converses with the village elder, investigating the forced relocations of tribes affected by the damming of the river, the pollution, exposure to illness, as well as experiences of the White Terror. She uses tribal vocabulary to "exchange names" with plants. The veins the artist inscribes on her leg are in intertextuality with the polluted water she immerses herself in—if pollution and persecution find their way into the tribal ancestry, then the way of giving voice to one's self-identity may well be to inscribe onto one's body all those that have been forgotten, in the name of the tainted water that bears witness to history.

Concurrently on exhibit at *documenta* in Kassel, Germany, *Pswagi Temahahoi* is a new work

that retraces the origins of Temahahoi mythology, moving upstream from the dam and looking up through the forests, attempting to return to the ethnic tribal origin story of asexual reproduction through the touch of the wind and communication with the bees. The artist fashions an ocarina reminiscent of body parts and “sound scripts” with inscriptions in blood-red in the likeness of veins. The empty cavity of the ocarina leaves room for the imagination, waiting for the touch of the wind to resonate and be impregnated.

Within Temahahoi Atayal oral lore, LIN An-Chi explores the intersection between tribal ethnicity and queer identity, where females impregnated by the wind and talk to bees can break free from heterosexual birth natalism and anthropocentric confines, juxtaposed with the path of the Atayal diaspora and providing the artist an alternative narrative space.

Man-made Fog

YANG Chi-Chuan’s new project *Foggy Mountain* captures Taiwan’s unique fog-shrouded “fog forest” regions in stone sculptures. In the face of climate change, fog forests serve to protect water resources, providing headwater regions with enough moisture to overcome droughts and conserve water.

The artist preserves the texture of Guanyin stones, volcanic rocks, and artificial stones, creating a rock garden replete with living plants and lichen, with fog emanating from the landscape. Yet these “foggy mountains” are not as natural and pure as they are made out to be. They are essentially “artificial fog” extracted from various plants in the way aroma atomizers produce scents.

This fits the artist’s creative context of intentionally re-creating “man-made objects”. The artificial fog’s “impure” and “unnatural” elements offer therapeutic effects, but ironically, do so by creating pollution. The existence of fog forests can conserve water for the habitat, but what exists before us is not a pure unadulterated mountain fog, but an admixture of human fabrication and selection.

Be Water

Lololo’s *Future Tao: The Great Shift* is “Future Tao”. The work is a reimagining of the film *Tjambuk Api* by the late Indonesian film director Djadoeg Djajakusuma. The whip featured in the film title is an everyday tool used by all in the village, regardless of age or gender. It is both a weapon and a symbol of one’s social power, allowing fighters from different villages to face off, or through rituals of punishment to carry out exorcism, benediction, and prayer.

The artist created a virtual volcanic crater for the VR installation, accompanied by thunderous, reverberating cracks of the whip in the film *Tjambuk Api* to present an ominous scene of an imagined future apocalypse. “Tjambuk Api” (literally “fire whip”) as a weapon of defense, as well as a mediatory instrument, gives those suffering from extreme violence a measure of life-supporting energy and substance. It is also like the artist’s analogy for “The Great Shift”, in which one alternates between states of yin and yang, and through this release latent energies in the face of imminent dangers, in the way water changes states to resolve conflict and continue its existence.

Besides VR installations, lololo also presents the text of *The Great Shift* as a script for this apocalyptic scene. *The Great Shift* is a collage of Gaston Bachelard’s *A Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Nam June PAIK’s exhibition introduction, and Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées*, like a compendium of somniloquy and noises, mutually interfering and interrupting, yet co-shaping a narrative. The narrator, having experienced the menace of volcanoes and the threat of intruders, felt what was summed up in the latter part of the “On the Equality of Things” chapter in *Chuang Tzu*, of “suddenly waking up with the firm awareness of being Chuang Chou, the person, again”. The artist suggests that humanity’s way to survive the apocalypse may well be to “be water”, in an existence both ethereal and physical, substantial yet wisplike, flowing and changing under the circumstances so that in the end, we cannot tell whether we are Chuang Chou having dreamt of being a butterfly, or have only existed as Chuang Chou in the butterfly’s dreams.

The List of Bad Actors

The other foreshadowing in the exhibition is a strategy of resistance in “Politics of Citation”. The concept was emphasized in queer studies expert Sarah Ahmed’s book *Living a Feminist Life* in 2017, in which she believes we should recognize those who came before us and in times when we lose our way, let them direct the way forward. Ahmed refers to non-white feminists, believing that they not only contribute to the research, but also took down the white paternalist constructs of intellectual work.

Through citation, recognition, and naming, the marginalized are made visible, to break away the discourse from the bounds of intellectual exercises. This is of course not limited to the “acknowledgment” of participating parties, but to explicitly point out the characteristics of those acknowledged which are no longer tolerated by institutions and academies, or the unconventional ways in which they have contributed to the project. “Citation” thus not only becomes the basic building block of feminist defense, but the “list of bad actors” can also

become an important index, “citing” item by item their associated individual differences, constantly dissolving historical narratives which intend to institutionalize them. This is a rather politically meaningful act of resistance.

“Citing” unconventional participants has also become an important strategy for making a statement through the *Tides in the Body* exhibition. The parties credited in the exhibition not only include conventional “author” roles such as curators and artists but also, in the early stages of the exhibit’s concept development, the “pathfinders” who translate source materials and report and communicate ideas, as seen in various guises throughout the exhibition.

As sources of inspiration in the conceptualization stages of the exhibit, writer-translators WU Ren-Yu and HSU Shih-Yu selected a list of keywords and concepts from their translation and revised translations of the book *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. Furthermore, they invited participants in creating terms, sentences, co-writings, and recitation, stirring up the surface and reshuffling meanings.

The reshuffling of meaning and canceling of firmly entrenched subject matter are the movement principle of “water bodies”—unnamed, noise-like, synthetic, hybridized, ever-shifting between the physical and virtual states. It continually subjects us to an unstable, incomplete, and scattered “wave-like state”, where boundaries cease to be at any given moment, to either huddle on the same boat, or give in and become as one with the ocean. When “water bodies” engulf us on all fronts, forcing itself upon our existence rather than the lull of waves on the shore, making waves might not be just a strategy of choice, but a way to the future or even a present inevitability.

Note 1: Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past,” *Moments of Being*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985, p. 64.

Note 2: In the conclusion of Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* (1915), the female protagonist lies on the sickbed of her father’s seafaring vessel, taking stock of the ocean: “the glassy, cool, translucent wave was almost visible before her, curling up at the end of the bed, and as it was refreshingly cool she tried to keep her mind fixed upon it ... She was completely cut off, and unable to communicate with the rest of the world, isolated alone with her body.” Towards the end of the novel, Rachel passed away, feeling herself entering the depths of the ocean and becoming as one without bounds.