

**THE CORPO-GRAPHIES OF WATER: READING THE RELATIONSHIPS
BETWEEN BODIES THROUGH SALTY WATER.
HOW VISUAL ART HELPS TO UNDERSTAND BODIES OF SALTY WATER**

By

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Abstract

This thesis will describe the logics through which bodies of salty water trace their oceanic corpo-graphies,¹ a term taken from Suvendrini Perera and from which I drew inspiration, which I used to describe the paths traced by these bodies in the closed and salty water system. Bodies of salty water are bodies of water that follow logics related to salt properties – cicatrizing and drying, healing, and killing, an element inseparable from water in its liquid state. This concept takes its shape following Astrida Neimanis’ idea of bodies of water – bodies out of politics able to subvert biopolitical power by challenging political and social boundaries - described in her homonymous book (2017)². Neimanis outlines the image of bodies of water as bodies bonded together in a renegotiation of their relationship with nature through several modalities, following what she calls hydrologics - logics through which bodies are capable of change and evolve in the closed system of water. Bodies of water concept come through a posthuman reading of Luce Irigaray’s *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1991)³, who outlines her posthuman phenomenology. Given this theoretical background, my argument will present how Neimanis’ bodies of water and my image of bodies of salty water can be read thanks to contemporary art, facilitating ways of understanding them. My analysis will be based on a close reading of three artworks, one performance, and two installations. I will analyze how specific characteristics of performative and installation medium - as unpredictability and hybridity - and the choice of the subject investigated concerning the exhibition site, can show the properties of salty water and connect viewers to artworks. Acknowledging the importance of contemporary

¹ Suvendrini Perera, “Oceanic corpo-graphies, Refugee Bodies and the Making and Unmaking of Waters.” *Feminist Review* 103 (2013): 58-79.

² Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*. (New York/London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

³ Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

art as a medium to better comprehend theories through images, I will analyze artists that use activism - art that intervenes in struggles and debates - and research, as their working tools.

The notion of bodies of salty water and all the implications that underly will be presented through the juxtaposition of theories of feminist new materialism and posthuman feminism - referring to Donna Haraway's image⁴ of the salamander/cyborg as a creature similar to bodies of salty water and thus capable of regeneration, of visual and performance studies.

⁴ Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s." *Feminism/Postmodernism*. (New York: Routledge, 1990).

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

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Signed _____ (Arianna Sollazzo)

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Thank you, it was necessary!

It has been and will be beautiful.

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Introduction

This thesis will explore what Astrida Neimanis calls *Bodies of Water* (2017)⁵ - bodies implicated in water and involved in an act of solidarity between people on a planetary scale - to try to provide a further understanding of these through the reading of three contemporary artworks inscribed within the scope of research and activism,⁶ an art form that intervenes in struggles and debates and gives centrality to the body. These bodies of water follow specific logics, the hydrologics - the modes of being, relationality, resistance, and becoming of these inside the water - and outline trajectories that enable the construction of new relationships between humans, and nonhumans, in and among water. These bodies no longer see water as a negative space between lands but as a space of life. These traced paths are the so-called ‘oceanic corpo-graphies.’⁷ I owe this term to Suvendrini Perera who uses it to delineate the trajectories of refugees, conceived as the main actors and political bodies capable of charting new counter geography, that opposes its traditional understanding of humans’ paths through waters – settlers and slaves. I do not engage with this concept as Perera may have first laid it out, but I took inspiration from it, redrawing this concept and using it to refer to the geographies traced by bodies of water, intent on following their hydrologics.

In this thesis, I seek to define these bodies of water, their interactions, and their logics from the ideas of Astrida Neimanis. Neimanis defines these bodies by rewriting their relations from the ideas of Luce Irigaray in *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1991)⁸, in a posthuman key.

⁵ Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*. (New York/London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

⁶ Diana Taylor. *Performance*. (Durham, and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 147-168.

⁷ Suvendrini Perera, “Oceanic corpo-graphies, Refugee Bodies and the Making and Unmaking of Waters.” *Feminist Review* 103 (2013): 58-79.

⁸ Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

In doing so, she attempts to reconceptualize them through posthuman phenomenology, tracing the logics that describes these bodies capable of change and evolution in the closed system of water. My research question will be to demonstrate how visual interpretation of art and listening to it will help to understand the main ideas of *Bodies of Water*, exploring the characteristics of what I have decided to call bodies of salty water. These are bodies that follow the same logics as Neimanis' bodies of water but additionally respond to the characteristics of salt, an element inseparable from water in its liquid state. These logics respond to its being deadly and its connection to the feeling of the sublime.

Through the visual input of the artworks and their inherent characteristics of unpredictability and hybridization, reminiscent of the characteristics of water bodies, I will try to speculate on bodies of salty water, attempting to trace the contours of their image. I will outline a path through Lina Lapélytè's chorus of fish-humans in *What happens with a dead fish?*⁹ to the installations of Dineo Seshee Bopape¹⁰ and Diana Policarpo¹¹ exhibited in Venice and thought during the Ocean Space¹² program, a research project created to catalyze literacy and advocacy for the Ocean - the fluid that unites lands, no longer seen as just an element of cohesion between them, but an element of life, a gestational fluid for all salty water bodies - through the arts. What these three artists have in common is an interest in research and activism, which are fundamental to my research path. Additionally, to answer my research question in more detail, I will provide arguments regarding the site-specificity of the artwork and the characteristics of the medium used, which will guide my argument on the theoretical significance of the idea of salt when

⁹ "Lina Lapélytè, *What happens with a dead fish?* description," Kunstenfestival des arts.

<https://kfda.be/en/festivals/2021-edition/projects-july/what-happens-with-a-dead-fish/>

¹⁰ "Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?* description," Ocean Space.

<https://www.ocean-space.org/exhibitions/ocean-what-if-no-change-is-your-desperate-mission-the-soul-expanding-ocean-3-dineo-seshee-bopape>

¹¹ "Diana Policarpo, *Ciguatera* description," Ocean Space. <https://www.ocean-space.org/exhibitions/ciguatera-the-soul-expanding-ocean-4-diana-policarpo>

¹² "Ocean Space description," Ocean Space. <https://www.ocean-space.org/about>

theorizing bodies of water. Initially, there was a fourth artwork included in the original plan of the thesis that would have been placed in a hybrid plane between performance and installation: Patricia Kaersenhout's *Soul of Salt*.¹³ This could have provided more detailed elements regarding the properties of the salt and its implications. Narrowing the field of research, however, I found myself forced to forego its analysis, which is more related to salty water and its change of state from liquid to solid. Surely this analysis regarding the consequences that changes in the state of salty water can cause, will be included in future research.

Chapter 1 will analyze Neimanis' concept of bodies of water and the path that led her from Irigaray to feminist new materialism and posthuman phenomenology and the construction of this posthuman image. At the end of this chapter, I will outline the structure of what I have called the bodies of salty water. Chapter 2, methodology, will explain the methods of analysis applied to artworks and the criteria for inclusion in research. Chapter 3 will be devoted to the analysis of the artworks, in an attempt to bolster and supplement the understanding of Neimanis' theories and thus define bodies of salty water.

Building on Neimanis' reading of bodies of water through a posthuman and feminist new materialistic lens, I will try to delineate the definition of what I define bodies of salty water through an analysis of salt and the feeling of the sublime. In this way, by trying to make my reasoning and Neimanis' ideas more understandable through the lens of contemporary art, I will try to add further logics to the hydrologics described in *Bodies of Water*.

¹³ "Patricia Kaersenhout, *Soul of Salt*." Amsterdam, 2016. Video performance. Vimeo website. <https://vimeo.com/254706794>

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Blood bile, intercellular fluid; a small ocean swallowed, a wild wetland in our gut; rivulets forsaken making their way from our insides to out, from watery womb to watery world: we are bodies of water.¹⁴

Essential to the concern of this thesis is an investment in the interconnection of several theoretical frameworks such as feminist new materialism, posthuman feminism, and feminist phenomenology. Specifically, my interest is focused on Neimanis' concepts explained in *Bodies of Water* (2017)¹⁵, related to a critical reading of contemporary art, which sees artists as activists and researchers.

Through the thesis it will be possible to see how the concepts developed by Neimanis could be illustrated by visual art, adding a layer of understanding of them. Neimanis' concepts of hydrologics, gestationality, hydrocommons cycles, bodies of water, hydrofeminism, and the 'thinking ecologically' of feminist new materialism take shape. The forms of these ideas are made more fluid through the mediality chosen by the artists in question: performance and the installation. To be clearer, on the one hand, I decided to use works of installation art by referring to the definition thought and given by Claire Bishop: "an installation is an art kind in which an ensemble of elements occupies a space a spectator explores, and all of them are integral elements of the whole artwork."¹⁶ On the other hand, I chose performance art because of its existence in the present, "performance's only life is in the present."¹⁷ It implies the presence of bodies that, by participating in it, disappear and become something through movements, sounds, and dance.¹⁸ As the key concept for the analysis of these artworks, I chose Neimanis

¹⁴ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 1.

¹⁵ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 2017.

¹⁶ Gemma Argüello Manresa, "Towards a philosophy of Installation Art." *The journal of aesthetics and art criticism*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (2020): 337.

¹⁷ Peggy Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction," *Unmarked*. (Routledge, 1993), 146.

¹⁸ Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance," 146-150.

reading of water, the material in which bodies are implicated. I will analyze the three artworks through her interpretation of bodies of water as bodies involved in an act of solidarity between people on a planetary scale.

Engagement with nature enables a shift in discussion about body and matter, and defines analysis about and around it, involving corporeal practices. Feminist new materialism speaks of the “materiality of the body as itself an active . . . force”¹⁹ and fosters a proper way of talking about it and the materiality it inhabits.²⁰ Nature is no longer a social construction, but an agent. The consequences of its acts can change the human and non-human world. Water has a central role in it, and its discourse aims to preserve it and make humans aware of its exploitation. I’m speaking about the so-called fluid turn, a material turn as well, a trope for post-structuralist thinking, that refers to water, but not only to that. The interest in this shift in a more material understanding of fluidity is also attributable to Haraway’s discourse on diffraction.²¹ The term comes from the physical phenomenon that takes place when “waves encounter an obstacle [in] their path, and . . . these waves themselves overlap.”²² In Haraway, it is employed to denote a critical mode of consciousness and thought concerning difference(s), and alterity. It is a “subtle vision” of the differences that exist, it is “an optical metaphor,” as a “critical consciousness” that allows being more aware of “how differences are being created in the world, and what . . . effects they have.”²³ Her idea comes from Trinh T. Minh-ha’s theory of a “non-separational model of identity and difference, in which identity categories . . . co-establish one another, and [in which] differences are . . . allowed to exist.”²⁴ At the same time, ascribing to the concept of

¹⁹ Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. “Introduction: emerging models of materiality in feminism theory,” *Material Feminism*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 4.

²⁰ Alaimo, “Introduction: emerging models of materiality in feminism theory,” 3-4.

²¹ Donna Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others,” *The Haraway Reader*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).

²² Evelien Geerts and Iris van der Tuin, “Diffraction & Reading Diffractively,” *New Materialism almanac*, July 2016. <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/d/diffraction.html>

²³ Geerts, “Diffracton and reading diffractively.”

²⁴ Geerts.

fluidity, it is possible to remember the term intra-action,²⁵ a Baradian word used to replace ‘interaction,’ which understands agency as a dynamism of forces in which all ‘things’ are constantly diffracting, influencing, and working inseparably.²⁶ Fluidity is interaction, diffraction, intra-action, and critical thinking about differences and their effect. Fluidity is not just water but has many other forms embedded in it. Water preserves its name in all its states: gaseous, solid, fluid. It is maintaining its ground composition, losing, or acquiring other substances, due to temperature or pressure.²⁷

This is why I will follow the idea that reads human bodies as inseparable from water, in a biophysical relationship with it. Human corporeality, as Stacy Alaimo argues, is a trans-corporeality that opens these to a more-than-human world. Humans are inseparable from the environment, which makes them able to expand the limits of their knowledge.²⁸ And that is why they stand outside of politics by acting in a larger world. Following the theories of posthuman feminism, these bodies find themselves endowed with the capacity to subvert biopolitical power and, like cyborgs²⁹ - the figure depicted by Donna Haraway in *A Manifesto for Cyborgs* (1990) that reject rigid boundaries between “human” and “animal,” “human” and “machine,” and used to overcome the limits of gender – and can challenge the limits of the political and social spheres. The cyborg can be linked to the body of water; it is a body that provides no boundaries and regenerates itself by melting. They follow the dictates of a reticular ideological image, endowed with a permeability of boundaries. Power has margins, but water, following the rules of changing and modifying fluids – the concept of hydrologics will be explained later - has no borders. Water permeates bodies and soil, flows fluidly in rivers and gushes from clouds,

²⁵ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

²⁶ Whitney Stark, “Intra-action,” New Materialism almanac, August 2016.

<https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/i/intra-action.html>

²⁷ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 23.

²⁸ Alaimo, “Introduction: emerging models of materiality in feminism theory,” 14.

²⁹ Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s.” *Feminism/Postmodernism*. (New York: Routledge, 1990).

expands into vapor, and again promotes hydration of bodies. Bodies of water live in this water, all together, aggregating. Specifically, in my research, water takes the form and chemical composition of salty water, that lives as well in the same fragile hydrocommons, a common basin where all waters are in communication, a situation favored by its phases, states, chemistry, and specific physical rules that characterize it. These state transitions, including between birth and development, take place in water and create a complex and shared cycle among bodies of water. The specific logics of water, the hydrologics, are these ways of being, movements, and modes of relationality, sociality, resistance, and becoming. In addition to these, to differentiate bodies of salty water, I added features that belong to salt, which is characterized by its duality, its ability to dry and preserve, to kill, and be essential for marine life. Water, vulnerable and disruptive, able to preserve itself in its circular movement from bodies to seas, creates eternal connections by uniting beings in a chemical relationship, in a renegotiation of the relationships between nature and culture through different logics such as gestationality, dissolution, communication, differentiation, archive, and unknowability. In addition, salty water is the liquid in which many lives have ended, the Ocean. Bodies of salty water follow an ecological perspective of life. They are born and die, they live and suffer, in it as fish die and become food for humans, as humans die and become fertilizer for the soil. Nothing is wasted, there is no more distinction between humans and non-humans.

To present the main theme of this thesis, I will illustrate how salty water can be read through the concept of the Kantian sublime located in Neimanis and Irigaray's theories. I will then introduce how I related the notions belonging to *écriture féminine* to the main concepts of feminist new materialism main concepts. Furthermore, I will explain how Neimanis read, from a Posthuman perspective, Luce Irigaray's thoughts. Moved by this Neimanis' way of developing concepts, I will explain the image of the Salamander described by Donna Haraway in *A Manifesto for Cyborg* (1991) and its involvement in regeneration rather than rebirth -

similarly to the ability of bodies of water to differentiate and gestate in and by itself. After explaining the context related to the thesis, I will present Neimanis' main ideas of hydrocommons cycles, watery gestationality, and hydrofeminism, illustrating the idea of bodies of salty water. This chapter will lead to the reading of the artworks through a different perspective, hoping to reveal and convey the main concepts developed during the artists' research and deepen the perspective related to bodies of salty water.

1.1 The Kantian sublime and the discourse about nature

This thesis situates itself at a point of intersection, acting as a project that draws together discourses that consider contemporary art as a field of research and a place of action, a venue where it is possible to mirror an already existing literature. The first body of literature that I will introduce is the theoretical step fundamental to understanding the goal that moves my interest toward the field of feminist new materialism, and subsequently toward Astrida Neimanis' concepts. Interweaving these two theoretical bodies is necessary to understand why salty water undergirds the concept of the sublime. Therefore, I will analyze the discourse related to the Kantian sublime and its connection to nature.

Immanuel Kant, in 1790, published *Analytic of the Sublime* as the centerpiece of his *Critique of Judgement*, which in turn forms the trilogy comprising *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788).³⁰ Here, Kant argues that liking the sublime does not so much contain positives such as admiration and respect, but alternates between attraction and repulsion. The focus of the sublime is not the object itself, but how it is perceived. It is not a property of nature.³¹ These thoughts derive from the Kantian idea of "aesthetic judgment," which cannot be validated but is based on personal taste.³² And although these judgments

³⁰ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime*. (New York: Routledge, 2006).72-73.

³¹ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 79.

³² Shaw, 76.

function as objective properties of an object, they require the consent of others and a definition of the kind of subjectivity involved in their perception. “How is it . . . [possible for] humans to gain pleasure from a painful experience,”³³ such as that of the sublime might be? Kant argued that this feeling probably does not arise from the sensation of pleasure derived from it, since the object no longer has any influence on judgment.³⁴ This underscores the primacy of the mind in the discussion around the sublime.

Moreover, the Kantian idea of “limitlessness,” one of its foundational characteristics that causes the feeling of fascination towards it, determines its impossibility to be contained, like the sea. We feel awe and fascination in front of it since we cannot see its limits, although we can imagine them thanks to reason. We cannot physically measure it, but we can imagine its immensity.³⁵ Philip Shaw (*The Sublime*, 2006) gives the example of contemplating the stars. He argues that the ability to comprehend an object does not prevent the “idea” of it as infinite, an ability that belongs to reason. The sublime “is the name given to . . . what is large [or great] beyond all comparison.”³⁶ He gives the example of the milky way: to measure it, it is possible to begin by giving a comprehensible “unit of measurement such as the size of . . . [a] body,” down to the “distance from the sun to the nearest star.”³⁷ But you cannot compare the length of a body with the enormity of the galaxy, it is an overwhelming comparison. Infinity is an idea of reason,³⁸ that recalls the definition of the Kantian mathematical sublime, different from the dynamical. This relates to the more emotional aspect of the experience, associated with fear in the face of nature, and the perception of it. A sublime event, the more it is contemplated from afar, the more delightful it is, in this way nature cannot have consequences for us. And this

³³ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 79.

³⁴ Shaw, 79.

³⁵ Shaw, 80.

³⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, (trans. Walter S. Pluhar, Indianapolis and Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 103, quoted in Shaw, *The Sublime*, 81.

³⁷ Shaw, 81.

³⁸ Shaw, 81.

allows us to discover a resilience that makes possible the belief that we are omnipotent.³⁹ Therefore, the sublime is an attribute of the mind. Both mathematical and dynamical, sublime is “a pure ‘idea’ of . . . freedom, . . . not subject to the . . . conditions of nature.”⁴⁰ It involves a feeling of sorrow at the inability of a real and physical imagination of the vastness of nature and a sense of relief at the mind's ability to comprehend the totality as a rational idea. This faculty shows the mind's ability to think beyond given boundaries.⁴¹ But alongside, the faculty of perception of the infinite lies the pain due to the mind's inability to measure the extent of nature. Here is hidden the relationship with Neimanis' discourse. Human beings feel satisfied when they are contemplating the immensity of nature and its uncontrollability; on the other hand, they experience a feeling of fear that leads them to think they must control it. In *Bodies of Water*, Neimanis devotes an entire chapter to the imagination of water in the Anthropocene and calls it “the story of man-made water.” Neimanis emphasizes the concept of humans “having made” water and dominating it, arguing relative to the need to change the human approach to nature. The physical occupation of a place through bodies is not necessary; settlers no longer need their bodies to produce the environmental effects of this “(neo)colonial power.” This kind of human domination over the environment has led to such bioaccumulation of contaminants to cause gender entanglement, the intoxication of mother's milk, and the poisoning of human beings themselves.⁴²

For these reasons, Neimanis address the main cause of this problem as the lack of “togetherness” among humans, which highlights the differences among them.⁴³ The main goal of her reflections is to try to bind all bodies into, with, and within the same water. Bodies of water invite human beings to imagine bodily water as a part of the hydrocommons that binds

³⁹ Shaw, 82.

⁴⁰ Shaw, 83.

⁴¹ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 83.

⁴² Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 162-165.

⁴³ Neimanis, 165.

bodies together, trying to bring them out of individualism. Bodies of water do not see nature as something frightening, but as something to which they belong, in the perspective of Posthuman gestation.⁴⁴ Bodies of water are antidotes to the Anthropocene water – the human-exploited water - and are connected, thanks to nature's ability, in intimate contacts that eliminate differences.

1.2 From *écriture féminine* to feminist new materialism. A posthuman phenomenology

In *Bodies of Water*, Neimanis took her starting point from the ideas of Luce Irigaray, a Belgian linguist representative of *écriture féminine* writers. Irigaray, in *Marine Lover Friedrich Nietzsche* (1991),⁴⁵ emphasizes the bond that exists across women's bodies and water reflecting on the main theme of psychoanalysis starting from the feminine unconscious and body, and the bond between the woman and the mother. She investigates the nature of gender, language, and identity, following the universal paradigm of the relationship between man and woman. For Irigaray, defining the fundamental differences between gender was the fundamental element to reaching the full acceptance of others, to arriving at the achievement of a happier and better future. *Écriture féminine* takes the distance from the traditional masculine styles of writing, examining the difference in language. *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* was written as a lyrical imaginary dialogue with Friedrich Nietzsche, which she undertakes to interrogate from the point of view of the water. The use of the element of water is crucial because of the complicated relationship between the fluid and the feminine, a connection that she uses as a method to engage in an amorous dialogue with the male philosopher.

To trace the transition from Irigaray to Neimanis' reading of water, it is useful to follow both their interest in the matter and their reinterpretation of the act of embodying it. For Irigaray, the

⁴⁴ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 166-172.

⁴⁵ Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 1991.

central issue is related to women's new way of talking about relationships, capable of creating new identities. Through this idea, Irigaray offers a symbolic representation for women: fluidity. This fluid, the “feminine feminine,” is the unheard feminine in patriarchy; it is the demand of women claiming their right to be epistemological subjects.⁴⁶ This is a fluid that cannot be contained; it is the vast ocean that will struggle to not be conquered by men’s ships. Irigaray addresses through Nietzsche the marginalization of the feminine⁴⁷ and uses water to attribute him the provocations related to the fluidity of women. Water connects and facilitates aquatic bodies and their specific ontology. This interest in water, in its essence and its connection and entanglement with women’s bodies, encouraged and enlightened Neimanis’ curiosity, who was blinded to read Irigaray as a posthuman thinker, interpreting her ideas concerning water bodies, as both common and different.⁴⁸

Irigaray’s idea of water as a process of being and becoming that collects from bodies and flows back into other bodies, is closely interconnected with the ideas of feminist new materialism and the concept of ‘thinking ecologically.’ It is understood as a concept that sees objects involved in a network of relationships, in which humans are in a close relationship with non-humans. It is a process that sensitizes to consider the dynamic interrelationships and the transformative effects of bodies.⁴⁹ In fact, ‘thinking ecologically,’ as Bennett explains, means “draw[ing] attention to its necessary implication in a network of relations,” emphasizing that “humans are always in composition with nonhumanity,”⁵⁰ not simply considering “individuals” or “communities,” but the interrelationships between “subjects, objects, and habitats.”⁵¹ Barad

⁴⁶ Lynda Haas, “Review: Of Waters and Women: The Philosophy of Luce Irigaray.” *Hypatia*, Vol. 8 No. 4 (Autumn, 1993): 154.

⁴⁷ Haas, “Review,” 155-157.

⁴⁸ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 68.

⁴⁹ Frost, “The Implications of the New Materialisms for Feminist Epistemology.” *Feminist Epistemology and the Philosophy of Science: Power in Knowledge*. Ed. H.E. Grasswick. Springer (2011): 78.

⁵⁰ Jane Bennett, “The force of things: Steps toward an ecology of matter.” (*Political Theory* 32(3): 2004), 347–372, quoted in Frost, “The Implications of the New Materialisms,” 78.

⁵¹ Frost, “The Implications of the New Materialisms,” 78.

adds that matter can no longer be represented as passive and unchanging, but as a discursive material that arises from a series of dynamic arrangements. It arises from ‘intra-action,’ a series of dynamic agreements that completely change the conception of this and bind bodies and matter.⁵² These concepts lead Neimanis toward an increasingly posthuman interpretation of the world.

1.3 Neimanis’ reading of Luce Irigaray: towards a posthuman understanding - the salamander

Neimanis, referring to the ontology expounded by Irigaray, calling it ‘amniotic,’ explains the concept of posthuman gestationality: a facilitative mode of being, not necessarily related to the feminine reproductive human womb. This way of reading Irigaray underscores Neimanis’ desire to interpret her as a posthuman thinker beyond the anthropocentric/human-exploited vision of the world and water, avoiding Irigaray’s explicit idea about sexual difference – the binaristic logic of two – against her intention. Women’s bodies are fluid in their genital mucousness, placental exchanges, and amniotic flows, and therefore cannot be included in the male paradigm, “because this logic is [based] on rigid and static forms, solid truths, and knowable entities.”⁵³ The core of Neimanis’ consideration is: “if we are all aquatic, then we all harbor the potential of aquatic gestationality within our bodily selves.”⁵⁴ Humans learn gestationality from water, and concerning the “world’s . . . water crises, this lesson . . . encourage [humans] to be more . . . responsive.”⁵⁵ But what do we give back to the water, particularly the planetary water we exploit? “How might we, in partial dissolution of our sovereign subjectivity, also become gestational for this gestational milieu?”⁵⁶ Irigaray's

⁵² Frost, “The Implications of the New Materialisms,” 71.

⁵³ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 78-79.

⁵⁴ Neimanis, 69.

⁵⁵ Neimanis, 69.

⁵⁶ Neimanis, 69-70.

interpretation says that water is a “liquid ground,” essential and ever-changing. And it is precisely water that embodies the difficulty of understanding her ambiguous philosophy.

To understand Irigaray’s contribution to feminism, it is necessary to address Neimanis’ hydrologic of gestationality. Irigaray reads sexual difference as ontological, as a possibility of existence linked to the maternal. Maternity is material, and this focus on the maternal gestational material causes sexual differences, “the condition[s] of presence.”⁵⁷ Irigaray’s ideas are related to the equivalence of a woman with her anatomy and her potentiality to be connected to her fleshy matter.⁵⁸ Through a posthuman and new materialistic lens, Irigaray’s thoughts could be explained concerning dynamic and facilitative. Neimanis brings Irigaray’s theories closer to Barad and Bennett’s understanding of the agency of matter, involved in ‘thinking ecologically.’ Irigaray’s idea of the feminine changing and becoming is comparable to the potential of matter to become something else, inside the same “sticky web of connections,”⁵⁹ in a relationship that is impossible to interrupt.⁶⁰ Women’s bodies are not static but are capable of change and growth. However, Neimanis pushes her interpretation further. From a phenomenological point of view, the author insists on the need to pay attention to bodies by stressing the importance of returning to the reality of the world.⁶¹ On the other hand, her posthuman understanding is linked to becoming and is endowed with impermanence and openness to correction. “Bodies will always exceed what they ‘are’, across time, space, and species.”⁶² Neimanis’ goal is to understand how reading Irigaray helps to imagine humans and non-humans as bodies of water, entangled in an aquatic world. Human bodies are porous and have extensions into other bodies. “[Humans] are made up of these elements [air, water, fire,

⁵⁷ Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love* (trans. H. Bostic and S. Pluhacek, London, New York: Continuum, 2002), 171, quoted in Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 70.

⁵⁸ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 72.

⁵⁹ Jane Bennett, “The force of things: Steps toward an ecology of matter.” (*Political Theory* 32(3): 2004), 347–372, quoted in Frost, “The Implications of the New Materialisms,” 78.

⁶⁰ Frost, “The Implications of the New Materialisms,” 78.

⁶¹ Neimanis, 73–75.

⁶² Neimanis, 75.

and earth] and [they] live them.”⁶³ Irigaray's focus on the environment leads Neimanis to describe her phenomenology as trans-corporeal, which becomes posthuman since humans are soaked with the matter.⁶⁴ Those trans-corporeal bodies can be described as Haraway's cyborgs, creatures that live their porous lives in close relation to the concept of regeneration. And as Haraway's salamanders, after being injured, are capable of regeneration through the regrowth of damaged structures, recovering their functions. Bodies of water and cyborgs are both posthuman creatures that try to live their lives in a non-human world, re-negotiating boundaries of living and regenerating their limbs, growing as posthuman beings in a post-anthropocentric environment. Those bodies of water, constructing and destroying their identities can regenerate their bodies, thanks to water.⁶⁵

1.4 Hydrofeminism, hydrocommons cycles, and watery gestationality

Humans are composed of water, biologically, chemically, and ecologically. Neimanis asserts the urgency of this assertion relating it to world survival and watery crisis. Inscribing this idea in the field of feminist new materialism, she states that wet bodies are inseparable from ecological issues because they have the same vulnerable boundaries as the environment. Humans' margins must be renegotiated into a human cohesion within the water, a wet environment that rejects individualism. Individualism is dry. What does this water do? Where does it come from? Where does it go? And what does it mean? It transforms, assumes, and exchanges with pee, sweat, and weeping. Water's flow connects human bodies to other bodies undoing the idea of bodies as only humans. Human beings are not autonomous; they 'swim' building relationships with water, drawing hydrocommons.⁶⁶ And following Neimanis'

⁶³ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (trans. G. Gill, New York: Columbia University Press., 1993), 57, quoted in Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 77.

⁶⁴ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 76-78.

⁶⁵ Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," 223.

⁶⁶ Neimanis, 1-2.

posthuman phenomenology, humans that live in this environment become more-than-humans, creatures able to challenge anthropocentrism. Bodies of water are gestation environments for other bodies. Not only as beings endowed with reprosexual wombs, but as plant, animal, and planetary bodies.

Human bodies ingest reservoir bodies, while reservoir bodies are slaked by rain bodies, rain bodies absorb ocean bodies, ocean bodies aspirate fish bodies, fish bodies are consumed by whale bodies – which then sink to the seafloor to rot and be swallowed up again by the ocean's dark belly. This is the hydrological cycle.⁶⁷

Gestationality rejects a dualistic logic, emphasizing diversity and equality, rejecting the separation between humans and nature, with a common understanding of space, time, and species.⁶⁸ Neimanis' bodies of water come from a posthuman feminist conception of figuration, which understands it as an embodied concept. From Donna Haraway's powerful and mundane 'material-semiotic' knots to Rosi Braidotti's 'living maps,' keys to imagining and living, these are amplified imaginative 'interventions.' The figurations arise in response to a particular contemporary problem. Neimanis' figuration arises both as a direct response to the water crisis and as a feminist protest. The figuration of embodiment as aquatic is an extension of feminist theories of embodiment in posthuman waters. As Neimanis argues, the story of bodies of water did not originate in posthuman feminism but made its way there.⁶⁹ Bodies of water took their starting point from three places. First, in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, in which the mind is biologically constituted in the body. Then, in Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari's theories, and acentric system without hierarchies capable of unifying concepts far apart. Lastly, Irigaray's *écriture féminine*, writes of a new kind of embodiment, fleshier and material, even though dualistic thought is subservient to the phallogentric and heteronormative regime.

⁶⁷ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 3.

⁶⁸ Neimanis, 3-4.

⁶⁹ Neimanis, 5-6.

Neimanis push her theories in queer waters, into a posthuman facilitative world of corporeal waters. Bodies of water, as figurations, could have emerged from different feminisms. From ecofeminism and its connection to environmental bodies, queer feminism that challenges stories of fecundity, anticolonial feminism that advocates for environmental justice for the vulnerable, feminist technoscience and its creative vision of matters, and women of color feminism that thinks about differences as a source of strength. Neimanis situates her work within posthuman feminism.⁷⁰

1.4.1 Hydrofeminism

“We are all bodies of water,”⁷¹ Neimanis writes, beginning her discourse about hydrofeminism. With this statement she emphasizes the idea of a society formed by units entangled in relationships of gift, complicity, and differentiation. “Bodies need water, but water also needs bodies.”⁷² Because of it, following Neimanis, new feminism must consider creatures as trans-species and trans-corporeal. In margins is possible to open to otherness, act in the world, and recognize this otherness as something that flows through us. These bodies of water are no longer humans, but an intricate web of the geographies of bodies of all kinds: humans, animals, vegetables, meteorological and technological creatures, that flow with culture, power, politics, and economics. Feminist new exploration pushes their boundaries, expanding them, beyond sexual difference.⁷³ Hydrofeminism sees the materiality of bodily and planetary waters as sites of ethics and politics and water as a connector, differentiator, facilitator, and communicator that brings these bodies into intimate contact despite their differences. This

⁷⁰ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 5-9.

⁷¹ Astrida Neimanis, “Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water.” *Undutiful Daughters. New directions in Feminist thought and practice*, Edited by Gunkel, Nigianni, Söderbäck. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 85.

⁷² Neimanis, “Hydrofeminism,” 90.

⁷³ Neimanis, 92-96.

posthuman concept goes beyond membranes and containers, breaking them, and continuing to try to change them!⁷⁴ This is where Neimanis places the definition of hydrofeminism.⁷⁵

1.4.2. Hydrocommons cycles

Concepts elaborate by Neimanis encourage us to consider in how many ways water might be the element that sustains relationships between bodies. Humans are created and gestated in an amniotic sac, where water is responsible for their protection, nutrient supply, and waste elimination. After birth, humans' experience outside the amniotic liquid begins, always inherent to water, their vital conduit, and gestational medium. Human life passes “from a smaller womb to a larger one, or from one tiny sea to a greater one.”⁷⁶ Human life is born and develops in water, and is accustomed to receiving, harboring, sustaining, and protecting it. Bodies of water pass from one to another drawing what Neimanis calls hydrocommons cycles: complex, shared cycles between bodies of water. Those hydrocommons follow some logics - hydrologics, which are modes of being, relationality, resistance, and becoming of water, and schematized as gestationality, dissolution, communication, differentiation, archive, and unknowability.⁷⁷ Following Neimanis' understanding of water, bodies of water are more than just ‘fluids.’ Water gives us life as a gestational medium and a universal solvent, from a chemical point of view, but also referring to the power of transformation in terms of meteorological events, through which organic life dissolves. As “cyclical, water is complicit in death, . . . [also understandable as] recycling. Ashes to ashes, water to water.”⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Richard Bright, “Bodies of Water.” *Interalia Magazine*, September 2018.

<https://www.interaliamag.org/interviews/astrida-neimanis/>

⁷⁵ Neimanis, “Hydrofeminism,” 96.

⁷⁶ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86.

⁷⁷ Neimanis, 85-86.

⁷⁸ Astrida Neimanis, “Feminist subjectivity, watered.” *Feminist Review*, No. 103 (2013): 30.

Water is a communication tool: the flow of water supports and connects bodies with the environment, with other animals and plants, allowing them to circulate through each other. On one hand, it relates to the pattern of currents that helps communications across the world, and on the other hand, it is the cause of wastes flooding from streams into lakes and rivers, all the way up the food chain to humans, contaminating aquatic wildlife. These are the planetary hydrocommons cycles. Water is a closed system: the planet does not gain or give up water, it reorganizes it. The more it connects, the more it differentiates. Each “mutation” produces something new. But this differentiation is sometimes too slow, in terms of time, that it comes to a halt, creating archives, such as islands of non-recyclable plastic in the Ocean, archives of human consumption, or currents on the seafloor, memories of the climate 300 years ago.⁷⁹ To conclude, the characteristic of water to proliferate into new things drives a manifold and inexhaustible production of future and unknowable bodies of water. The watery matter is unknowable because it eludes calculation and geographical knowledge, and because it is chemical and pressure features, results in a limitation for all living bodies. “We cannot master that which we cannot bear.”⁸⁰ Water allows humans “to compose a complex figuration of . . . bod[ies] of water . . . [able to] open up an innovative conceptual space for reimagining what might behave the feminist subject.”⁸¹

1.4.3. Watery gestationality

Neimanis’ logic of gestationality is the most important for my argument. Following her thoughts, water gives life to bodies in “a watered milieu necessary to proliferate.”⁸² Water baths “new life into being in an amniotic milieu.”⁸³ The gestational power of water expands beyond

⁷⁹ Neimanis, “Feminist subjectivity, watered,” 31-32.

⁸⁰ Neimanis, 32.

⁸¹ Neimanis, 33.

⁸² Neimanis, 30.

⁸³ Neimanis, 30.

bodies to “bacteria in . . . [the] gut, . . . seed[s] in the soil, coral[s] in the sea.”⁸⁴ All species are watery gestational milieus for other species’ proliferation, and Ocean is the greatest supporter of the creation of this diversity. The proliferation of life is facilitated by a watery environment, a place where differentiation begins as part of overlapping and interconnected cycles of repetition.⁸⁵ What is repeated is always different. Here is the connection to Irigaray’s ideas related to the critique of Nietzsche’s concept of eternal return that elides the feminine. Irigaray argues about gestational waters always repeat themselves by generating a difference. And the difference is everything that can repeat itself.⁸⁶ Irigaray’s theory of difference is related to bodies of water and sexuate difference: she argues that feminine waters flow and connect, while masculine waters harden and evaporate. Irigaray’s feminine waters include menstruation and amniotic liquid and maternal gestational waters, as the becoming of humans depends on the watery gestational medium. For Irigaray sexual difference is important.

Can this dichotomous gulf, Neimanis asks, be overcome?⁸⁷ Does sexual reproduction require a sexuate dualism? Or are only two bodies of difference required for other life to proliferate? Could this be thought of as gestationality? Sexuate difference is a ‘yet-to-come.’ But this doesn’t eliminate sexual differences. A posthuman understanding of gestationality without binary differences, let alone based on sex, is needed. This understanding is vital.⁸⁸ On the other hand, Irigaray invites us to consider water as fundamental to human life: “the first ecological gesture is to live and situate ourselves as living beings among other living beings.”⁸⁹ Water has always been exploited by humans, to avoid it humans have to move beyond anthropocentrism, thinking about water biodiversity and all bodies inhabit it. Neimanis propose to think of water

⁸⁴ Neimanis, “Feminist subjectivity, watered,” 30.

⁸⁵ Neimanis, 30.

⁸⁶ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86-87.

⁸⁷ Neimanis, 90-91.

⁸⁸ Neimanis, 92-94.

⁸⁹ Luce Irigaray, “Starting from Ourselves as Living Beings,” (Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, 46(2):2015), 101, quoted in Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 104.

as gestational of difference, capable of avoiding sexuate diversity within bodies and “suggest[ing] . . . a queer, multispecies, posthuman, and elemental proliferation of life-in-the-plural.”⁹⁰ All bodies of water owe their existence to gestation in water. This ‘amniotic’ logic is more radical when we include all bodies like Ocean, hailstorm, or morning dew, dissolving into each other. Gestationality is posthuman.⁹¹

1.5 The implication of bodies of salty water

This thesis is at the intersection of several conversations: Neimanis’ ideas that support posthuman phenomenology of bodies of water, my specific reading called bodies of salty water, and an attempt to show how visual art can help to understand Neimanis’ bodies of water and my adaptation in bodies of salty water.

I worked to articulate, through the reading of these salty bodies, which embody the characteristics of water and salt, might be the easiest way to understand why salty water is important in a posthuman understanding of the world. Salt is a fundamental element in the composition of a watery environment, both chemically and symbolically. It is “also known as table salt or sodium chloride, is an ionic compound with the chemical formula NaCl.”⁹² To comprehend its importance, it is necessary to date to ancient times, when it was considered an extremely valuable commodity, on par with gold. It was known as the ‘white gold,’ along with sugar, cotton, marbles, and all food preservation resources. Currently, table salt is important in food because of its role in sensory appreciation, however, its excessive consumption can cause serious health problems related to cardiovascular diseases. Salt is a flavoring agent and preservative but has also useful properties in food production, such as dehydration, that reduce

⁹⁰ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 106.

⁹¹ Neimanis, 104-107.

⁹² Elias et al. “The role of salt of food and human health.” *Salt in the Earth*, (London: Cengiz and Karabulut, IntechOpen, 2020), 19.

water availability and decrease the growth of pathogens and microorganisms.⁹³ Its dual role in humans' and non-humans' lives is fundamental. On one hand, it is a very useful element, as I mentioned before; on the other hand, it has a dangerous side to human health, as when it is spread on the ground, preventing the growth of any form of life, or as to how salty water becomes increasingly lifeless and harmful the more its salt concentration increases. The usefulness of salt is evidenced by its wound healing and disinfection characteristics, which however act on killing microorganisms to cure. Salty water kills bacteria, a process that involves regeneration from death, as happens with Haraway's salamander.⁹⁴

This understanding of salt is connectable to the Kantian sublime, a negative source of pleasure, an ambivalent perception of an object related to humans' subjectivity. A sublime event, the more is contemplated from afar, the more delightful it appears, because from afar nature has no direct consequences for humans.

But in the end, what exactly is salt? And does it exist in the water as a solid element? No, it is possible to obtain salt from salty water, but this does not mean that salt is present in it in its liquid state. Therefore: "[w]hen ingredients are combined to produce something new, do the constituents remain in the [solution]"⁹⁵, as they do in salty water? "How do they do so? This set of questions has been considered by many philosophers,"⁹⁶ starting from Ancient Greece. Does the sea contain salt? Salty water is an aqueous solution that produces salt as it evaporates. Through some chemical measurements, the presence of two species of solute in aqueous salt solutions has been shown. In the aqueous one, the salt dissociates into individual elements that disrupt the properties and structure of water. When salt is added to water, the solute and solvent acquired different structures. Only the evaporation of brine makes salt solid, and "water can be

⁹³ Elias, "The role of salt," 19-21.

⁹⁴ Haraway, "A manifesto for Cyborgs," 223.

⁹⁵ Joseph E. Earley, "Why there is no salt in the sea." *Foundation of Chemistry*, No. 7 (2005): 85.

⁹⁶ Earley, "Why there is no salt in the sea," 85.

recovered by condensing what evaporates from brine.”⁹⁷ But these “facts do not indicate that salt and water are . . . present in [it].”⁹⁸ In fact, in both cases, a specific action is required to obtain the desired product. There is no actual salt in the salty water!⁹⁹

Bodies of water are inseparable from the sticky network of nourishment and preservation that these bodies need, drawing them to a place of life and death. Because salt is never harmful to bodies composed of it: from the amniotic fluid that generates and nourishes them, to sweat, an excess of salty liquid that returns to feed the cauldron of salty water, putting it back into circulation, so it can nourish and preserve other bodies. Salty water is harmful to whom do not adapt to it.

But if only some bodies can be bodies of salty water, is it possible to preserve indistinction among all bodies in a new materialistic and posthuman worldview? Or does it all depend on how salty, from a chemical point of view, salty water is? Or does it depend on how we interpret saltiness? These are questions that only experience in this salty environment or perhaps reading the chosen artworks could help. These are questions that need the help of artists, activists, and researchers. These are questions that I hope to have the chance to answer after spending more time on this topic.

⁹⁷ Earley, “Why there is no salt in the sea,” 97.

⁹⁸ Earley, 97.

⁹⁹ Earley, 96-97.

Chapter 2: Methodology

My research question looks at the analysis of three contemporary artworks, one performance and two installations, which in different ways are related to the idea of bodies of salty water. To acknowledge the correlations between the chosen artworks and the understanding of the theories embedded in Neimanis' *Bodies of Water*, I have used a close reading of these through the analysis of the site-specificity and the medium used. This close reading involves analyzing how the specific characteristics of performative and installation medium and the choice of the subject investigated concerning the exhibition site, can connect viewers to the artworks. This examination could make them active subjects, helping them understand the connection between the concept of bodies of salty water and the artworks themselves. For the analysis of installation arts, I used the methods of Visual Studies, adding Performance Studies' methods only for the performance. The images' aesthetics of associated meanings, the reading of historical and sociological context, the interpretation of icons and sounds, and the contextualization of backgrounds of authors, were employed to obtain the ground that allows me to explain the ideas of bodies of salty water. I choose these specific methods to address my preliminary hypothesis: contemporary art, specifically performance and installation art, can illuminate some specific aspects of Neimanis' theory by providing an immediate level of visual, sound, and tactile understanding.

The world is made up of images, living beings that inhabit the world and as language, cyclically return as topics of interest in humanistic and scientific studies. For this, I introduce the idea of W.J.T. Mitchell, one of the main contemporary image scholars. He published *The Pictorial Turn* (2011), a collection of essays that outlines the shift toward reading the world through images. He took the concept of 'turn,' introduced by Richard Rorty to describe history as a succession of turning points, and then he elaborated on the concept of turning toward the

realm of pictorial.¹⁰⁰ The pictorial turn is a cyclical rediscovery of images as interactions between visuals and bodies with the realization that traditional strategies for understanding no longer seem adequate and need a new critique.

Mitchell's reflection on images as animate beings is contained in his book titled *What do pictures want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (2005)¹⁰¹, in which he states that images deserve to be asked what they want. They are bodies necessary to understand how the world works. They do not obey the will of their author but are autonomous, so they can be interpreted through the medium that conveys them.

To understand the relevance of this thought, it is essential to clarify what I mean by medium by introducing the idea of Media Studies, a field of study concerned with the content, history, and effects of media, the core of which is communication studies. In 1964, Marshall McLuhan wrote his known statement "The medium is the message" contained in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.¹⁰² His main point was to explain how communication is the medium itself, and thus the focus of image analysis. The choice of media plays an important role in the viewer's reception of the message. The medium must be contextualized in the historical period in which it is used. Therefore, I will provide an overview of the two media chosen to clarify bodies of salty water's main concepts.

First, I decided to analyze performance and its essential features: unpredictability, precariousness, and temporality.

The only life of the performance is in the present.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Image Science. Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 26.

¹⁰¹ W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹⁰² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. (The MIT Press, 1994).

¹⁰³ Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance," 146.

Performance, as Peggy Phelan argues, depends on temporality because its life is in the present. Its mortality and its inherent trait of finitude are its primary defining characteristics. Performance has an end, and when it ends it becomes other than itself. Its ontological definition depends on its precariousness and disappearance, which means that all its repetitions are ‘different.’ Performance is not reproducible - I will explain why in Chapter 3. It acts as bodies of water’s flow, capable of changing its essence and form, in a closed and precarious system. In my understanding of it, another pivotal feature of performance art is the necessity of an audience, which presence compromises the success of the performance. This may change the audience’s attitude, which may be required to participate. Performance is unpredictable. Its perception depends on the spectators’ point of view, and on the performers’ ability to engage them. The audience plays an important role in the performance’s success. Their attention also influences how many concepts and feelings they can take in, without leftovers, because when the performance ends, it disappears, beyond their control. The relationship between performers and spectators calls viewers to action, placing them in a condition of power.¹⁰⁴

Diana Taylor, echoing Augusto Boal’s words, advocates the alternative designation of spect-actors, a figure capable of breaking the convention of passivity, by converting their role to acting. Spect-actors can interrupt and modify the progress of the performance. According to Jaques Rancière, being spectators involve watching and seeing what is also done. Following Rancière, George Didi-Huberman states that the spectator must see and imagine. In conclusion, performance calls spectators to action by placing them in sometimes confusing and uncomfortable situations. “Performance is a doing to a thing was done to and with the spectator.”¹⁰⁵ Here is the connection to Neimanis’ ideas: the bodies of spectators actively involved in the performance, are comparable to bodies involved in the posthuman and new

¹⁰⁴ Phelan, “The Ontology of Performance,” 163.

¹⁰⁵ Taylor, *Performance*, 86.

materialistic understanding of water. Spect-actors cannot avoid being involved in the flow of the performance, just as bodies of water cannot attend to the flow of their own lives, but must participate, along with other bodies, in water's life cycles.¹⁰⁶

Secondly, the analysis of the two installations gives me the possibility to reflect on both the mediality of bodies and their physical and practical relationship - seeing practice as a way of communication - by examining how they coexist, in and within salty water. Installation art is a hybrid of practices between aesthetic engagement with a specific 'object,' and new non-aesthetic 'practices' that engage spectators within their own space.¹⁰⁷ Its definition, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Art*, limits it to two certain types of art called assemblages and environments. An assemblage fastens together different types of objects and materials. An environment fills a space with all objects and materials, including spectators. Both art practices "cannot be defined . . . on their medium specificity,"¹⁰⁸ but they follow a practice-based analysis.¹⁰⁹ For this reason, analyzing installations requires questioning the traditional approach to the notion of the medium, thinking of it as a post-medium, as with performance, given its inherent precariousness. As Stanley Cavell argues, "a single medium (understood as the use of a material or a technique) can no longer define either art kinds, or artistic styles,"¹¹⁰ because "to create an artwork is to create a medium"¹¹¹ that frees the artistic creation from the previous automatisms established by conventions. Following this logic, Rosalind Krauss also supports this shift in understanding, stating that many artworks cannot be distinguished because of their medium specificity.¹¹² Therefore, the concept of an art form based on the engaging practice of

¹⁰⁶ Taylor, *Performance*, 80-86.

¹⁰⁷ Ken Wilder, "Installation Art and the question of aesthetic autonomy: Juliane Rebentisch and the Beholder's Share." *The journal of aesthetics and art criticism*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (2020): 353.

¹⁰⁸ Manresa, "Towards a philosophy of Installation Art," 334.

¹⁰⁹ Manresa, 333-335.

¹¹⁰ Manresa, 335.

¹¹¹ Manresa, 336.

¹¹² Manresa, 335-337.

diverse and independent media, allows me to speculate on communication relationships and their coexistence, comparing this relationship to that between bodies of salty water.

Not least, artists were selected according to two basic criteria: they must be activists and researchers. First, following Diana Taylor's argument, those who can be called activists are artists who use performance art to intervene in struggles and debates - I would like to extend her discourse to visual art more broadly. An example of activism extended to visual art, in general, might be the use of *femzines* (feminists' zines) by third-wave feminists, particularly by Mexican American women artists in the United States of America (1997), to heal, through art and poetry, the trauma of violence experienced by marginalized women and to speak out against patriarchy and gender violence.¹¹³ Moreover, Taylor specifically argues for the centrality of the body in this "performance activism" that implies the need to do something. She explains that protest and indignation are vital social responses and activists are those who act.¹¹⁴ This is what those selected artists do, they express thoughts, and act in the world. They are activists.

Second, the contemporary artist is often a researcher. Most contemporary artists are involved in long research projects, which sometimes also intersect with activism. The figure of the artist-researcher stands out because exposes statements on production and thought processes.

This allows others to participate in the process, discuss it, and open it up to critique. Research is one of the prerogatives of contemporary art, which often sees artists as scholars, pursuing academic programs or participating in doctoral programs or post-doctoral fellowships, often sponsored by art academies or state museums. Following Graeme Sullivan's statement "Artist as a researcher,"¹¹⁵ many visual artists are expanding their practice by using textual forms to create imaginative responses to important societal issues. This specific practice stems from the

¹¹³ Norell Martínez, "Femzines, Activism, and Altar Aesthetics: Third Wave Feminism Chicana Style." *Chiricú Journal*, Vol 2.2 (2018): 47-49.

¹¹⁴ Taylor, *Performance*, 147-168.

¹¹⁵ Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as research. Inquiry in the visual arts*. (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005).

critical urgency to create an expressive process that communicates vision and experiences through an authentic research practice that can construct new and culturally relevant knowledge. According to Sullivan, this way of doing research must incorporate ways of analyzing information that has to be robust enough to produce new knowledge. Following this way of creating art has given rise to a new transdisciplinary alliance of artists, scientists, scholars, and art writers involved in collaborative projects.¹¹⁶ I chose two artists, part of the Ocean Space 2022 program, who was commissioned to conduct research inherent to the Ocean environment during The Current II research program.¹¹⁷

To conclude, the following chapters will provide the analysis of the three artworks through which I will try to answer my research question: to demonstrate how visual interpretation of art and listening to its will, can help to understand the main ideas of *Bodies of Water*, drawing bodies of salty water.

¹¹⁶ Sullivan, *Art Practice as research*, 149-181.

¹¹⁷ “Ocean Space description,” Ocean Space. <https://www.ocean-space.org/about>

Chapter 3: Bodies of salty water read through performance and installation art

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will present and analyze three selected contemporary artworks – one performance and two installation art - to examine how visual art helps understand the ideas included in Astrida Neimanis' book *Bodies of Water*¹¹⁸ and the development of the concept of bodies of salty water. My interest in reading the author's theories, concepts, and methodology, which can be traced to feminist posthuman phenomenology, stems from the possibility of seeing bodies from a posthuman perspective that eliminates boundaries between humans and non-humans, including them in an endless ecological circle.¹¹⁹ Specifically, I will focus on Neimanis' reading and understanding of water and bodies of water. Moreover, I will concentrate on what I decided to name bodies of salty water, water bodies made up of water and salt, constituting the brine: a solution in which the two elements cannot be separated.

First, I will provide a critical explanation of the examined artwork, analyzing the background of the artist, the developed subject, and the relationship to the context in which the artwork was or is now exhibited. Then I will provide the reading of materials used, the analysis of the medium in question, and the historical-cultural contextualization of the artwork concerning the artist's practice. Subsequently, I will use the artwork to argue that contemporary art, particularly performance and installation art, are useful media capable of transmitting multiple theoretical knowledge, differently and through other channels. The second goal is to convey and emphasize the importance of artists seen as contemporary researchers, as scholars interested in transmitting through images the thoughts arising from their research. As Diana Taylor describes in her book *Performance* (2016), and as I explained in the previous chapter, some artists can be considered

¹¹⁸ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 2017.

¹¹⁹ Neimanis, 23-24.

artists (artist-activist), as artists who “use the performance to intervene in a political context, struggles, and debates.”¹²⁰

To conclude, I will argue how salty water, involved in the artworks, composes humans’ bodies and conditions their formation, and their vital creational fluid. Neimanis omits from her theory of water other states of water and the ambivalence of salt for life and death, things that are symptomatic of a discourse that is in denial of death and/or that is a discourse of connectivity through fluidity. The artworks I chose offer a different take on the ethos of hydrocommons that they also in part resonate with. My idea is to continue this research about salty water, analyzing it in all its chemical and physical states. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, so far, I will refer to water only in its liquid state, focusing on it as the substance that animates hydrological cycles, and on ecological struggles. In recent times environmental struggles get a foothold, engaging different artistic practices and research projects. Related to this topic, I will argue about the contradiction embedded in contemporary art in general, that on one hand, tries to sensitize about ecology, and on the other hand, is implicated in mainstream festivals – huge exhibitions that typically colonize venues, summon many spectators/colonists that pollute and destroy places for few days, leaving and abandoning them devastated.

Moved from these goals, I will analyze one performance art and two installations art, building a strong relationship between these and the discourse of feminist new materialism, posthuman feminism, feminist phenomenology, and Neimanis’ ideas, trying to convey the main concepts developed during artists’ research and struggles.

¹²⁰ Taylor, *Performance*, 147.

3.2 What happens with a dead fish? by Lina Lapélytė



Figure 1: Lina Lapélytė, *What happens with a dead fish?* Above water view.¹²¹

Lina Lapélytė is a Lithuanian artist who investigates how pop aesthetics, as a mainstream medium, can be the vehicle of choice to amplify and simplify any message. For this reason, on the “opening of the first public open-air swimming pool in Brussels,”¹²² during the Kunstenfestival des arts, the artist decided to create a new musical performance focused on failure, fragility, and eternity of living beings and society. The swimming pool that hosts the performance is the brainchild of two famous Brussels-based designers, Pool is Cool and Decoratelier through which they want to address the lack of public outdoor entertainment space for Brussels’ residents, at a time when thousands of families could not travel due to pandemic. It is an environment-friendly structure built to highlight the discourse inherent to the privatization of land, the exploitation of seas, and the impossibility for the population to access the seacoast. Thought as a participatory sound installation around this swimming pool, the

¹²¹ Lina Lapélytė, *What happens with a dead fish?* Brussels, 2021. A frame from the video performance. Pompeii Commitment website. <https://pompeiicommitment.org/en/commitment/lina-lapelyte/>

¹²² “Lina Lapélytė, *What happens with a dead fish?* description.”

performance has created a hybrid space for swimmers and spectators, producing a storytelling environment concerning mainly narratives about water and its surface.

Understanding the artwork could be useful as an overview of Lina Lapélytė's artistic practice. It takes place mainly through performance art, influenced by pop music aesthetics, able to transmit important messages to the viewer. One of her most important artworks, *Sun&Sea*, won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale of Art in 2019. The performance has involved several professional and non-professional Opera singers singing songs revealing white people's concerns, from frivolous worries about sunburn to fears about environmental catastrophes. These stories grew into a global symphony, a universal human choir addressing issues of planetary importance. Analyzing the selection of both Opera music and the sung topics, we noticed that all belong to the white humans' sphere, as Biennale itself and its spectators. On the other side, examining it from the audience's overlooked viewpoint, the performance seems a fleshy *tableau vivant* about humans' condition. Spectators act as viewers in a museum of living artworks, unaware observers of a 'living picture' belonging to another era. Their gaze is deceived by 'verisimilitude' with a painting, that gives contemporaneity its interpretation. *What do pictures want?* (2015)¹²³ What do those pictures want to say? We must listen to them!

Similarly, in *What happens with a dead fish?* Lapélytė worked with a local choir of singers immersed in a swimming pool. For this performance, the artist reasoned, on one hand, on what means to be a fish – a creature victim of ecosystem change - living in the contemporary, sinking and floating in the water; on the other hand, on life's fragility and eternity. Linked to these attempts of the artist, I want to emphasize the 'Aquatic Ape Theory.' Following this evolution story developed by Elaine Morgan, humans share bodily connectivity with whales and other cetaceans because, during unmapped ages, large areas "of the African continent were flooded

¹²³ Mitchell, *Image Science*. 2015.

by seas.”¹²⁴ During that period, some apes became semi-aquatic, coastal dwellers only to return, after the seas receded, to their former terrestrial form, but changed, transformed into what became human beings. Neimanis’ interest in Morgan’s theories was born because of the echoes of this evolution theory in what Neimanis describes as “our salty tear ducts, or our watery wombs.”¹²⁵ Humans are connected to water, in particular to salty water.

Coming back to performance analysis, the artist created it as a live musical performance designed for both the inhabitants/bather of Brussels and the specialized audience of the *Kunstenfestival des arts*. In this hybrid space, bathers and spectators can share the same playground, listening to Lina Lapélytè’s song. This ability to reach the audience of contemporary art insiders and pique the interest of unsuspecting bathers is due to the song’s magnetic lyrics, written to be remembered. Herein lies the will and significance of conveying through pop music her words as messages of criticism of the system and environmental exploitation. Lapélytè message is related to the importance that she gives to the water crisis and the involvement of human bodies, living creatures, and matters, tangibly.

My concrete intent here is to analyze the performance, explaining how contemporary art, and some contemporary artists, analyze and convey theoretical concepts. This idea stems from the certainty that contemporary artists’ involvement in research is necessary to convey knowledge and messages that through images appear more understandable to the audience. My interest arises from the imaginative ease that can be seen in Neimanis’ words and concepts and Lapélytè’s questions that sit squarely in Neimanis’ thinking. If water is so essential to our lives if we are experiencing what is called the fluid turn, why are we not paying attention to the environment in which we live, to the matter of which we are composed? Lapélytè’s questions are related to Neimanis: “How is water in and of my body? When I drink a glass of water, where

¹²⁴ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 135.

¹²⁵ Neimanis, 135-136.

does it go? How does it animate me? Where does it come from? How does water ask me to move, what sensations does it evoke, what effects does it engender, in me and in the bodies it connects me to?”¹²⁶ “What happens”, the artist asks. What will happen if we continue not to pay attention to the world? These are questions that do not have an answer now or in the future. I intend to further my research concerning water in all its forms, states, and changes. Water is not related to the flow of life and rebirth, but it is death and suffering as well. Can its change of state, the splitting between water (H₂O) and salt (NaCl), be interpreted as the end of fluid’s vital property, coinciding with death?

To conclude, to better organize the analysis, I will begin by examining the environment in which the performance took place, moving on to an analysis of performers, then investigating the medium used, and consequently, the song’s lyrics. Finally, I will follow the meaning of the gestures used by performers, and the objects they employed.

3.2.1 The importance of the watery environment: a site-specific performance

What happens with a dead fish? was shown during Kunstenfestival des arts, an international contemporary art festival held annually in Brussels since 1994. It is an “urban and cosmopolitan” event characterized by the proposal of “a complex network of communities in which the concepts of nation, language, and culture are relativized”¹²⁷ and which brings together the two main Belgian identities, the Flemish Community and the French-speaking Community.¹²⁸ During the three weeks of the festival, artists from all over the world and from Belgium are invited to redefine the boundaries of theater, dance, and performance.¹²⁹ Related to the artwork in question, the thesis topic, and Neimanis’ ideas, it is necessary to talk about

¹²⁶ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 24.

¹²⁷ “Home page of Kunstenfestival des arts,” Kunstenfestival des arts. <https://www.kfda.be/vv>

¹²⁸ “Home page of Kunstenfestival des arts.”

¹²⁹ “Home page of Kunstenfestival des arts.”

how international festivals colonize places, going against the artwork's message and Neimanis' idea of preserving water. Bodies are made of water and live in it. Why a swimming pool? Humans are the subject of Lapélytè's critique in their expression of global colonizers and the environment's exploiters, suffering the consequences of their exploitation. Humans, exactly like Lapélytè, keep on exploiting the world, despite their need to convey an 'ecological message.' Through an in-depth examination of the chosen title, we need to answer an interesting question: *What happens with a dead fish?* Does the fish survive? Do they survive in a swimming pool? An inhospitable place for animal life, a place of leisure and entertainment for humans who need to engage their minds to not think about the enormous environmental damage they are causing. Lapélytè compares humans to fishes and forces them to live in water, in non-hospitable water, to which they belong, as bodies of salty water - as Haraway's cyborgs.¹³⁰

Is the swimming pool the right place to argue a critique of Anthropocene? Lapélytè's swimming pool is an artificial playground created by humans for humans, which wastes water, with no possibility of reusing it, because of the chemicals employed to keep it clean, killing microorganisms - as salt does. On the other hand, the commonality implied by living in a public space underscores the possibility of living as bodies in common by providing humans the possibility of understanding an expansive sense of 'we,' which abolishes any dualism.¹³¹ This reflection on the artwork's site-specificity leads me to draw a connection between theory and visual art through feminist new materialism through the 'thinking ecologically'¹³² and Neimanis' hydrocommons cycles. Water gives life, it's a universal solvent complicit in death, understandable as recycling as well. Water is communication in its closed system, it's an

¹³⁰ Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," 1991.

¹³¹ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 12.

¹³² Frost, "The Implications of the New Materialisms," 69-85.

unknowable archive that eludes calculation: the planet, neither gains nor relinquishes water, but only reorganize it.¹³³

Everything that lives on earth is part of a single group, matter and humans are on the same plane, no longer referable to the Cartesian system of understanding. Everything is part of a cycle without a beginning or end.¹³⁴

3.2.2 One common voice: the choir and song lyrics

WHAT HAPPENS WITH A DEAD FISH?

What happens with expired food?
What happens with retired wood?
What happens with your body liquids?
What happens when you are not there?
What happens with your fallen hair?
What happens when you lose a signal?

What happens What happens?
What happens What happens?
What happens What happens?

No sharp tools
No sleek shoes
No used perfumes
No silver spoons
No extra plates
No special creams

I will give my eyes to turtles
Shark will eat my rotten guts
Tail will sink into the bottom
Scale will melt into the flood

What will we have for the dinner
What will we have for the dinner
What will we have for the dinner
What will we have for the dinner

¹³³ Neimanis, "Feminist subjectivity, watered," 30-32.

¹³⁴ Frost, "The Implications of the New Materialisms," 69-85.

What happens when you forget to breathe?
What happens if the air is not what you need?

What happens What happens?
What happens What happens?
What happens What happens?

What happens when you forget to breathe?
What happens when you have no needs?

What?
What
What¹³⁵

What happens with a dead fish?’ choir is composed of local singers, a collectivity, and a group of living beings. Lapélytė built her choir as a ‘school’ of the hybrid watery and non-watery creatures, embodying posthuman beings endowed with their individuality, expressing the need for togetherness and co-dependence. Those are bodies of water. To exist, the choir needs cohesion; without this characteristic, it could not be a choir, but an uncoordinated group impossible to hear and understand. A choir is a single voice, a single being without distinction of head and body; it is a single body, with a specific thought and a single purpose. And it is no coincidence that the fish swim in ‘schools’ as well: without their fellows, they are unable to survive the sea. Together with their group, there are stronger. In the sea, they begin and end their lives, all together, as in a choir of voices singing in unison. Living beings embody water and together represent all its creatures. They are formed of water, they are bodies of salty water, and they sing along with it like a hydrological chorus.¹³⁶

Moreover, the lyric has a predetermined structure and employs certain words that have a precise relationship to the themes presented by Neimanis. The human chorus itself embodies fish life, singing those humans are fish, implying that the chorus itself is a school. There are no more differences between humans and non-humans. It condemns humans to death because of

¹³⁵ “Lina Lapélytė, *What happens with a dead fish?* description.”

¹³⁶ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 65.

the damage they caused to Earth. Humans are accused of using Earth as their playground – the swimming pool, slowly killing all its living creatures, and then dying, like fish. Humans are responsible for their death. The artist, with her words, tries to wake them up from the coma that prevents them from reflecting on the current situation. She forces them to be embodied in a fish's dead body, to understand what it means to be the victims and not the executioners. Humans are victims too, but of themselves! The fish's figure refers to a Cartesian perception of life subjected to life and death, to sinking and floating, before disappearing completely. The circular structure of the lyric refers to the life of the fish. This repetitive collective chant is a metonymy of the society in which we live and in which we try to find our common voice. The continuous repetition of the same two words "What happens" is a mantra, a ritual dance, a propitiatory ceremony that asks and asks again, and subsequently denies.

No sharp tools
No sleek shoes
No used perfumes
No silver spoons
No extra plates
No special creams¹³⁷

Does Lapélytè allude to the denial of death? Is she referring to the denial of awareness of the deadly damage, we are doing to the environment? But it is death that leads to a new possibility, as evidenced by the repetition of the cycle of words: everything, from death, will begin again and again. This is part of a positive cycle in which dead bodies become food for other bodies. Death is a consistent part of the salty water and is embedded in it: it is its saltiness. The salt is the element that triggers the sublime, the element that causes death - as I already explained in the first chapter. Who knows why the Dead Sea is so called? Because of its very high salinity that does not allow any animal species to survive. In this text circular movement, it is glimpsable

¹³⁷ "Lina Lapélytè, *What happens with a dead fish?* description."

the environment's circularity. Humans do not care about the environment, so it will not care about them. Life is circular as the lyric is.

Moreover, the author is speaking directly to the listeners, questioning them about how they lead their lives, and how they manage their daily lives. She focuses on their ability to raise their awareness in a way that makes human beings more informed about what is happening in the contemporary world. Lapélytè keeps asking them, insistently, about what they are doing to take care of their world, and more importantly, about what they are not doing.

What happens. What happens?¹³⁸

Is the human being the culprit? The recipient of the question is considered the culprit! The author puts the listener in the position of finding out what is going on, insistently asking why those questions about the contemporary environment are so relevant. All performers-living beings are linked in a physical and chemical relationship that passes through both the narrative of life and death and the discourse of the environment's cyclical life. The medium of pop music used by the artist in the construction of the text, the questions' repetitiveness, the words used, the pop music structure, and the blaming, lead the viewer to both identify themselves with the dramatic situation narrated by the artist and to easily remember her critique. It is precisely the medium of pop music that helps to remember the words of the artist, who uses the medium to get to her goal.¹³⁹ The structure of the lyrics can also be attributed to the body of the hymn, which in its message hides a litany of death, disguised as a light pop song. It is a choir of fish singing in Brussels' first and only public open-air swimming pool, a place of play and relaxation for humans, but an unsuitable and inhospitable place for fish.

¹³⁸ "Lina Lapélytè, *What happens with a dead fish?* description."

¹³⁹ McLuhan, "*Understanding Media*," 1994.

3.2.3 The medium: performance and its mediation

To analyze the medium is necessary to understand the message the artist wants to convey. Lapélytè's artistic form of choice is the performance, a live show provided with unpredictability and precariousness, but without memory, she decided to give through another medium, the video. Moreover, she chose to record the performance from an unusual point of view: the mid-water and the underwater views - I will explain these later.

Why did Lapélytè use the performance as her medium of choice? Quoting Peggy Phelan "The only life of the performance is in the present."¹⁴⁰ Once performed, the performance ends, and its representation becomes other than it. Its ontology depends on its precariousness, its disappearance. Also, its repetition distances itself from it, from its being unique, and defines it as 'different.' Its documentation depends only on the will to remember.

Performance is not reproducible. It needs the presence of the audience, of living bodies that must try to take it all in, without leftovers, because then it will disappear into memory, escaping control. Even the act of writing about it is something that is destined to alter it. The precariousness of the performative act helps the artist to emphasize the uncertainty of lives she is telling about, to reinforce her "What happens." Who will remember, who will care? The artist's message will remain vivid only in the minds of those who will have paid the necessary attention to her words. And so, the cycle of words and music begins again, and the performance continues. It could go on forever. But no. Performance is in the present! Another interesting thing is that the performance's perception depends on the viewers' point of view, which affects the spectators' perception. The relationship between performers and spectators and the desire stretched between them, reveals how this relationship depends on the nature of the individual performance event.¹⁴¹ This connection calls viewers to action, positioning them in a condition

¹⁴⁰ Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance," 146.

¹⁴¹ Phelan, 163.

of power. They became spect-actors, and they can act, interrupt, or change the proceeding of the performance.¹⁴² On the other side, the video performance does not include any active relation but preserves its memory, documenting its unfolding that examines the relationship between the artist's willingness to change viewpoints and its different modes of analysis. Performance remains the same, but the spectators' view is completely different. This change could be traced back to the swing of perspective about water. Salty water becomes the subject; it is what animates hydrological cycles, forming bodies and environments. Water is no longer an abstract place, a place without place.¹⁴³ Water is the subject where everything happens, it is the Anthropocene River, it is the place where we can learn to swim, like fishes, and where we can realize the consequences of our disrespectful human living.

As glaciers melt, deltas flood, and we row our lifeboats down the middle of the River Anthropocene, it seems we need any valuable tool we can muster to negotiate the rising tide pushing in from the sea. Bodies of Water – as lived embodiment, as figuration, as hydrocommons in difference, and as feminist protest – may not be the paddle that will guide us out of this planetary mess. But. I am wagering that this figuration might just help us learn to swim.¹⁴⁴

Firstly, by observing the under water point of view proposed by the artist, it is possible to realize that water is the real milieu in which humans survive, of which humans are composed. Water, and its salinity, infiltrate and inhabits the vapor they breathe, the land they work, and all the creatures with whom they share the planet. Humans are bodies of water in a watery world, in a salty watery world. These are never stagnant and are imbricated in water's intricate movements that create and sustain life through transpiration, evaporation, and condensation, dealing with its bequest, salt. Bodies of water float, go down, swim, and interact with water, they are part of this environment that involves birth and death at the same time. Their floating

¹⁴² Taylor, *Performance*, 79-81.

¹⁴³ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 19.

¹⁴⁴ Neimanis, 26.

is made possible by the intrinsic properties that saline osmolarity gives and that allows bodies to survive. In addition, the under water point of view gives those bodies a semblance of death, appearing as floating lifeless bodies. Water is implicated in multiple complex cycles.¹⁴⁵ In human bodies, the ephemeral cycle of water implicates the “collection and expulsion of maternal amniotic waters, the absorption and circulation of water within our gestating bodies.”¹⁴⁶ It entails “the flow and flush of waters in the various bodily fluids that . . . sustain . . . [organisms as] part of the biological and meteorological cycles”¹⁴⁷ that feed them. “Water is . . . both finite and inexhaustible, it is “the same and [it] always become[s] different.”¹⁴⁸

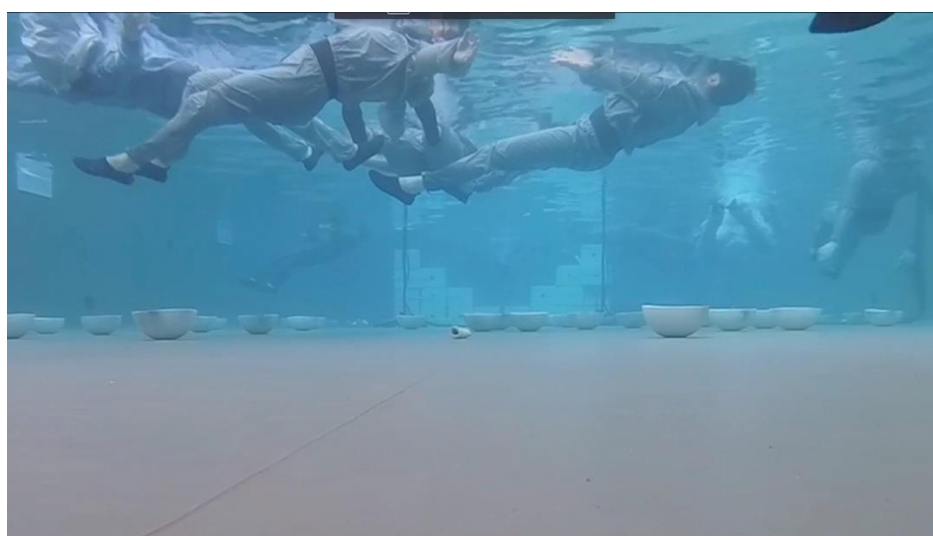


Figure 2: Lina Lapélytè, *What happens with a dead fish? Under water view*¹⁴⁹.

Bodies of water are bodies that play in unison through the same range of notes. They float and dance in a protective but suffocating element. Secondly, observing the mid-water view of the performance - gives spectators a complete point of view on the performance, giving them the possibility to see the relationship between these bodies with the aquatic environment (under

¹⁴⁵ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 65-66.

¹⁴⁶ Neimanis, 66.

¹⁴⁷ Neimanis, 66.

¹⁴⁸ Neimanis, 66.

¹⁴⁹ Lina Lapélytè, *What happens with a dead fish?* Brussels, 2021. A frame from the video performance. Pompeii commitment website. <https://pompeiicommitment.org/en/commitment/lina-lapelyte/#03>

water view) and with the surrounding external space (above water view). Here “bodies [of water] find a thread of commonality and connection in this ‘closed’ system,”¹⁵⁰ showing how water affects human bodies, and how humans affect the water in which they live. Water is a facilitator of connections and expression of their differences.¹⁵¹

Through this continuous demonstration of watery difference, bodies keep on transforming, seeking out a new manifestation of embodiment,¹⁵² as visible in the mid-water view video. “Difference[s] begins in the gestational watery elemental.”¹⁵³ Repetition and recirculation always involve differentiation.¹⁵⁴ All waters, although different, contribute to the sustenance and buoyancy of bodies. Water movement contains being, being state, and being willing, altogether because it can evaporate, condense, transpire, and precipitate. Water is excreted and expelled, and then returns, always different in osmolarity, salinity, and composition, to be used and expelled again. Earth does not produce water: its enclosed water system continues to regenerate and differentiate itself. And, as Lapélytè's swimming pool hosts creatures that are no longer singers and performers, it hosts creatures that process water, living and dying in it. The mid-water view helps me to introduce the discourse about hydrological cycles.¹⁵⁵

In conclusion, concerning the artist's message based on the text of the song and the different media used, I want to highlight the political implication of Neimanis' hydrocommons. Performers' bodies embody salty water, leaving following hydrologics. Are fluid bodies to whom water gives life as a gestational medium. Do bodies dip in salty water, in this brine saturated with salt, are victims of life cycles, from humans to fishes and vice versa, from life to death and again at the beginning?

¹⁵⁰ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 67.

¹⁵¹ Neimanis, 67.

¹⁵² Neimanis, 66.

¹⁵³ Neimanis, 66.

¹⁵⁴ Neimanis, 86.

¹⁵⁵ Neimanis, 88-89.

Thinking of Neimanis' interpretation of Irigaray as an *avant la lettre* posthuman feminist, I considered that water is a place of beginning, a matter that refuses biological and material essentialism.¹⁵⁶ Water is both a being and a process of becoming that connects bodies and transforms them. Water follows the logic of communication and differentiation: it circulates in a closed system made of water, rain, vapor, ice, etc.



Figure 3 Lina Lapélytè, *What happens with a dead fish?* Mid-water view.¹⁵⁷

It is “body and milieu; . . . [it] is what comprises bodies . . . [and] which bathe[r] . . . [these] into being. [It is] [b]eing and becoming.”¹⁵⁸ Neimanis' intention in reading Irigaray beyond humanism and anthropocentrism, is related to her idea of posthuman gestationality thought as a facilitator mode of being, no more related to the reprosexual womb, but as a lover, as a neighbor, as an accidental stranger. “We learn gestationality from water,”¹⁵⁹ and because of that, we have to be more aware of its exploitation, pollution, and instrumentalization.¹⁶⁰ As

¹⁵⁶ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 67.

¹⁵⁷ Lina Lapélytè, *What happens with a dead fish?* Brussels, 2021. A frame from the video performance. Pompeii commitment website. <https://pompeiicommitment.org/en/commitment/lina-lapelyte/-02>

¹⁵⁸ Neimanis, 68.

¹⁵⁹ Neimanis, 69.

¹⁶⁰ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 88-89.

bodies of water, performers are immersed in the gestational liquid as the life-promoting liquid, that donates the ability to float but causes death. This is the embodiment of the natural fear of the unknown, the scare that nature stimulates. It is the double soul of salty water, an element that heals and kills, in which life is born, grows, lives, and dies. A gestational milieu.

3.2.4 Performers, their gestures, and the materials' ambivalence

To better analyze the performance, it is useful the examination of the performers' gestures, the clothes they wore, and their movements in and with water. These aspects make explicit their being water bodies.

What happens with a dead fish? choir floats and sinks grouped throughout the performance; singing and alternating in gestures that keep repeating themselves in a vicious cycle that reproduce the lyrics' repetition of "What happens?" and the hydrological cycles that Neimanis describes. Everything keeps producing and reproducing itself, always different, but the same. The performance takes place on and in front of a scaffold that lies below the surface of the pool water. It resembles the podium of a sports competition bringing us back to the playful place of the swimming pool, but also to the scale of importance in which humans insert matter, water, and fish - animals. This underlines that humans do not give importance to the matter and ruin it and dyeing because of their natural disasters. This is symbolized by the performers' movement that, at the end of the song, starts to fall from the highest scaffold into the water, returning to its lowest stage. The performance image does not change during the song, except for performers' positions, as water seems different but is the same but recycled. It is an inexorable cycle. A wheel of fortune. The hydrocommons cycles.

At the very end of the performance, performers interpret dead fishes floating in their plastic suits evoking unmistakably the shiny fish skins, but also the sticky plastic that often wraps them, letting them die. The performance ended with the performers' death, which reminds me

of Phelan's arguments cited in Amelia Jones' article "'Presence' in absentia" (1997), in which Phelan said that body-in-performance puts forward its lack, "for the spectator the performance spectacle is itself a projection of the scenario in which her own desire takes place."¹⁶¹ It is a body that, embodying something else, shows its absentia, interpreted as death. This body is not showing itself, but its mask, its belonging to another environment. We do not know bodies, but we know what they are part of. Despite its absentia, the performance is anyway considered alive, it is present because it relies "on a receptive context in which the interpreter or viewer may interact with [performers'] bod[ies]."¹⁶² And the relationship between these bodies/subjects to documentation - to representation - reveals deadly features of visual art in a larger sense. Performance guarantees the presence of the artist, other kinds of visual art don't - photography or video. Performance implies the artist's real presence, with anything between spectator and performer.¹⁶³ According to Jones, the body itself, in performance, is presented as a loss or lack, as lacking in self-sufficiency. Performers - bodies of salty water - during shows become metonymies of something. They are no longer their selves but are bodies metonymic of voices and presences. They disappear and become their dance, movement, and sounds. Performers' bodies become unseen, starting to reproduce the referent, the real subject of the piece: bodies of salty water or fishes. Metonymic unifies those bodies in only one "school" of fish,¹⁶⁴ in a watery world of which they are a part of it.¹⁶⁵

According to this idea, specific bodily waters, such as "breast milk . . . or amniotic waters, . . . are material metonyms of a planetary watery milieu . . . [able to] connect bodies, . . . [creating] new kinds of plural life."¹⁶⁶ Neimanis' ideas are indebted to Irigaray's work on metonymy

¹⁶¹ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New ledge, 1993), 152, quoted in Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in absentia." *Art Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 4, (1997): 14.

¹⁶² Jones, "'Presence' in absentia," 14.

¹⁶³ Jones, 11-14.

¹⁶⁴ Phelan, *The Ontology of Performance*, 147-151.

¹⁶⁵ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 27.

¹⁶⁶ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 39.

because of her thought about the contiguity or continuity with the elemental. “We are made up of these elements [air, water, fire, and earth] and we live them.”¹⁶⁷ Therefore, humans’ bodies are elemental bodies made of elements: they drink the rain and feel the drought, and they grow thanks to the warmth of the sun. Irigaray’s attention to bodily matters, and Neimanis’ ideas following her thoughts, can be seen as “an attunement to the matter of our elemental milieus,” like salty water.¹⁶⁸

To conclude the analysis, it is interesting to examine the materials that singers play with. They handle dozens of hemispherical porcelain bowls asking spectators to pass them on hand in hand. The hemispherical shape of those bowls could be connected to planet Earth's form, arguing, on the one hand, about how humans' eating, exploiting, and intensely living on Earth is ruining its environment. On the other hand, the hemispherical shape could highlight the existing split between the two halves of Earth’s globe, which determines the division between the two political and economic understandings of the world: the Global North and the Global South. On the outside, according to Lapélytè, those bowls could look like rubber balls for sports, with a clear relation with the podium-scaffold structure built in the swimming pool. It reminds, on one side of the swimming pool fun, and on the other side, of the competition to survive. Those porcelain bowls reveal the Japanese decorative porcelain’s typical crackle that remembers eating pleasure, relating to human's willingness to eat fish, living beings equal to humans. Humans exploit nature and feed themselves only for the pleasure of eating.

I will give my eyes to turtles
 Shark will eat my rotten guts
 Tail will sink into the bottom
 Scale will melt into the flood
 What will we have for the dinner¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (trans. G. Gill, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 57, quoted in Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 77.

¹⁶⁸ Neimanis, 77.

¹⁶⁹ “Lina Lapélytè, *What happens with a dead fish?* description.”

At the very end of the performance, these shells-balls-bowls slide into the pool, where they float in groups against the edges. They evoke the ticking of swinging shells, touched by the tumult swaying of the sea. Finally, the porcelain bowls, filled with water, like dead fish, slowly end up on the bottom. And dyeing they become food for other living beings, beginning a new cycle.



Figure 4: Lina Lapélytè, *What happens with a dead fish?* Final frame.¹⁷⁰

3.2.5 Conclusion

To conclude, “water connects bodies - across times and spaces, through various . . . movements and cycles,”¹⁷¹ resulting in exchanges, differences, and similarities. Water is fluid and flowing and follows the logics of connections and communications included in the

¹⁷⁰ Lina Lapélytè, *What happens with a dead fish?* Brussels, 2021. A photograph from the video performance. Kunstfestival des arts website. <https://kfda.be/en/festivals/2021-edition/projects-july/what-happens-with-a-dead-fish/>

¹⁷¹ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 94.

hydrocommon cycles, through which bodies change. Water facilitates bodies' transformation, birth, and rebirth as bodies through a transcorporeal interpermeation across time and space.

Bodies of water obey a membrane logic, equivalent to that which the amniotic membrane obeys.

Bodies of salty water follow the same logic, including the osmolarity - the concentration of particles in a solution – on which these depend. If the osmolarity of two liquids differs, the one with fewer particles' concentration starts to cross the membrane that separates the two solutions, till its end. Therefore, if the salinity is too high, the body inside is in danger of dying. Salt is poisonous, even in the circumstances in which it is useful. Salt heals wounds, killing microorganisms. Some fishes could live in salty water only if its salinity allows them to maintain their homeostasis –relative stability of physical-chemical properties.

Bodies need water, and vice versa. Salty water must be as salty as the bodies within it. To explain these watery dynamics, Neimanis refers to what she calls “onto-logic . . . [a philosophical proposition,] a common way of being that is expressed across a difference of beings,”¹⁷² that helps us to resolve questions such as: where, when, and because of what. Bodies of salty water share the same way of being and differentiating inside the hydrologics, and they resemble each other because they are made of wet matter. They share the same urgency related to the water crisis. Those bodies of salty water are inseparable from each other's, they need to gather in a wet environment, rejecting individualism, and the ecological questions inscribed in the relationship between humans and water. Salty water is a watery environment that unifies, but, on the other side, it divides because of the deathly features of salt. Salty water is a transformative element in a closed system. It is intaking and exchanging with peeing, sweating, sponging, and weeping. Its flow bonds humans as they swim in this sea, building water

¹⁷² Neimanis, 96.

relationships inside hydrocommons. Their connection is transcorporeal, it is passing between and through bodies, facilitating communication between them, differentiating them.¹⁷³

This is how reading about *What happens with a dead fish?* comes in aid of understanding Neimanis' theories. The choir of bodies of water performs a cyclical journey of exchange between the self and the salty watery environment. The singers are no longer performers, but metonymy of voice and sounds and concepts conveyed by their gestures and words. They are bodies floating in sublime waters, in the amniotic fluid of exchange and differentiation. They are differentiated bodies that change position and form as the performance proceeds, destined to begin again through its various media reproductions. They are subject to continuous osmotic changes, trying to reach a homeostatic balance. Everyone is transformed: actors, bodies, and spectators. Their point of view changes and their memory changes, evolving within the corporeal water. They are bodies immersed in a gestational liquid that makes them posthuman bodies. And as bodies of salty water, like fishes, humans are facilitated by this water and by other bodies that came before them. We all depend on the presence of water on Earth, albeit salty.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 94-97.

¹⁷⁴ Neimanis, 110-112.

3.3 *The Soul Expanding Ocean at Ocean Space in Venice*



Figure 5: Ocean Space, Venice.¹⁷⁵

Ocean Space is a planetary center of exhibitions located in San Lorenzo Church in Venice, where research and public programs are aimed to catalyze Ocean literacy and advocacy through arts. Ocean Space was established by TBA21-Academy in 2019 with Joan Jonas' exhibition, an American pioneer of performance and video art.¹⁷⁶ TBA21-Academy is a contemporary art organization and "cultural ecosystem, . . . an incubator for collaborative research, artistic production, and new forms of knowledge [that] combine[s] art and science, resulting in exhibitions, research, and policy interventions."¹⁷⁷ Established in 2011, it believes in the power of exchange between disciplines and art as a weapon for communication, change, and action.¹⁷⁸ Ocean Space was established in San Lorenzo Church in Venice, on one side, because of the

¹⁷⁵ Ocean Space, Venice. Exterior view of San Lorenzo Church. TBA21-Academy website. <https://press.tba21.org/news-ocean-space-a-new-platform-for-collaborative-research-and-innovation-opens-first-phase-in-venice?id=80774&menuid=9361>

¹⁷⁶ "Moving off the Land II, Joan Jonas, 2019," Ocean Space. <https://www.ocean-space.org/it/mostre/joan-jonas-moving-off-land>

¹⁷⁷ "TBA21-Academy description," TBA21-Academy. <https://www.tba21.org/#item--academy--1819>

¹⁷⁸ "TBA21-Academy description."

Venice lagoon, the largest coastal wetland in the Mediterranean basin. With its rich biodiversity and the human impact, it is the reference for watery environment studies that cannot ignore the importance of cultural relations between humans and non-humans, such as mud or salt marshes. This idea of the active participation of non-human forces in events comes from Bennett's concept of vital materiality¹⁷⁹ that runs through living beings' bodies, exploring how public events' political analyses could change only if humans become ready to give agency to non-humans spurring a more responsible and ecologically sound politics. Bennett is sketching the contours of a 'green materialist' ecophilosophy.¹⁸⁰ On the other side, San Lorenzo's Church, which dates to the IX century, is fabled as the final resting place of Marco Polo.¹⁸¹ It has been the site for temporary installations since 2016, when Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza started a conservation project on it, trying to bring the building back to life, deciding to host the Ocean Space project there.¹⁸² The first aim of the TBA21-Academy program was to propose "a systemic understanding of nature's structures and cycles concerning art, aiming to reclaim space for speculative thinking about our ecological future."¹⁸³ The program started in 2019 with a two-year research cycle named *The Soul Expanding Ocean*: a series of exhibitions that involves the collaboration between artists and scientists around the world. The installations I will talk about are belonging to this cycle. Both were curated by Chus Martínez, a Spanish curator and art historian, that tried to pursue the intent to "give voice and presence to the Ocean as a repository of colonial histories, where storylines interconnect past, present, and future."¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*. (Durham, NYC: Duke University Press, 2010), 95–96.

¹⁸⁰ "Coabitare nell'umidità," Ocean Space. <https://www.ocean-space.org/activities/coabitare-nellumidita>

¹⁸¹ "Church of San Lorenzo description," Ocean Space. <https://www.ocean-space.org/about>

¹⁸² "Ocean Space description."

¹⁸³ "The Soul of Expanding Ocean #4: Dineo Seshee Bopape 'Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?' at Ocean Space, Venice," Mousse Magazine, April 20, 2022.

<https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/the-soul-expanding-ocean-3-dineo-seshee-bopape-ocean-what-if-no-change-is-your-desperate-mission-at-ocean-space-venice/>

¹⁸⁴ "The Soul of Expanding Ocean #4: Dineo Seshee Bopape 'Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?' at Ocean Space, Venice."

Exhibitions aren't the program's goal; their interest is in artists' and curators' research and collaboration with environmental and oceanographic scholars. Despite all, it is important to point out the environmental impact that this research project entails. Relocations, flights, materials used, the attraction of spectators to Venice, and their colonization of the city, provoke several consequences on the environment. Ocean Space program is not environmentally friendly, but it is aware of it. On its website it tries to be transparent about the unsustainability of producing and researching artworks, stating that its research opens new perspectives that "provide a powerful expression of a new life. Joy, kinship, and trust in life's diversity, in the many non-linguistic, and yet fertile ways of transmission are the center of a new pedagogy through art. A pedagogy that strives for equality and future forms of organizing survival that respects all that is alive."¹⁸⁵ It tries to outline what relationships and responsibilities should "be when it comes to helping ensure the survival of waters."¹⁸⁶

You understand that it is this infinite number of small acts that constitute a universe that you need to respect, that you need to be in coexistence with," she said. "I think that after this 17-minute experience, you totally understand coexistence. That was my response. I thought, Wow, I am in connection, and this is in me. It's asking for an understanding and for a commitment."¹⁸⁷

The focus of its research projects is related to water and to the desire to deepen the relationship with it as a bearer of life respecting all its creatures. Its research argues around salty water as a connector between bodies, an archive of past eras, and a fluid entity that changes and differs. The "reflection on the power of elements - water, salt, earth, spirit,"¹⁸⁸ is central in the Ocean's

¹⁸⁵ Chus Martínez, "I am an evening cloud too," said the ocean," Ocean Space. <https://ocean-space.s3.amazonaws.com/images/CURATORIAL-TEXT-ENG.pdf>

¹⁸⁶ Maximiliano Durón, "In Venice, Artist Dineo Seshee Bopape Asks Us to Consider Our Relation to the World's Waterways." Art News, April 22, 2022. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/dineo-seshee-bopape-ocean-space-venice-1234626320/>

¹⁸⁷ Chus Martínez quoted in Durón, "In Venice."

¹⁸⁸ Martínez, "I am an evening cloud too," said the ocean,"

discourse. Through the unseen embedded in Ocean's memories, art/research can activate a multifaceted presence of scientific data and spiritual encounters enhancing, on one hand, the inseparability of technological vision from emotional experiences, and on the other hand, the sound background of this complex reasoning.¹⁸⁹

The artwork I will introduce are both installations, the perfect medium to convey these messages. It has specific characteristics related to hybridization and indefiniteness. It enables acts of imagination/ideation by problematizing space, time, and relationships with viewers.¹⁹⁰ It needs an imaginative and ideational encounter between the space and its beneficiaries.¹⁹¹ It is a mixed-media art that includes bodies, as bodies of salty water, in their physical relationship, coexistence, and process of sharing within the salty water environment. As a mixture between assemblage and environment makes possible the relationship between matters and viewers, in the 'neutral' space of art. Salty water was born within relationships considering it in its logic of gestationality, as Neimanis might argue. It is the aquatic milieu in which bodies and matter proliferate and differentiate,¹⁹² as installation art, a practice-based medium that involves different and independent kinds of media.¹⁹³ These media build relationships that proliferate in salty water, in which bodies of salty water live and generate.

¹⁸⁹ Martínez, "I am an evening cloud too," said the ocean."

¹⁹⁰ Wilder, "Installation art," 353.

¹⁹¹ Wilder, 354

¹⁹² Neimanis, "Feminist subjectivity, watered," 30.

¹⁹³ Manresa, "Towards a philosophy of installation art," 333-335.

3.3.1 *The Soul Expanding Ocean #3 - Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?*

by Dineo Seshee Bopape

3.3.1.1 Introduction



Figure 6: Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?*¹⁹⁴

Dineo Seshee Bopape is a South African multimedia artist that uses experimental video montages, sounds, found objects, photographs, and sculptural installations to explore the performative aspects of culture. *Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?* engages with powerful sociopolitical notions of memory, narration, and representation. She analyses the concept of sovereignty and the metaphysics of nothingness through an exploration of forms of containment and displacement, occupation, and hosting. Bopape combines digital and analog aesthetics, as well as natural and synthetic elements expressed through immersive assemblages and environments. Her practice reflects on memories and histories and the logic of

¹⁹⁴ Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?* Venice, 2022. Installation view. Sfeir-Semler Gallery website. <https://www.sfeir-semler.com/galleryartists/dineo-seshee-bopape/work>

dispossession and possession, blending different perspectives. Bopape describes herself in a very specific manner in each of her biographies. Here's a fragmented example:

Dineo Seshee Bopape was born in 1981 CE (Gregorian calendar), 1974 in the Ethiopian calendar, the year of the golden rooster, on a Sunday. If she were Ghanaian, her name would be akosua/akos for short. During the same year of her birth, there were perhaps 22 recorded Atlantic Ocean hurricanes and 4 Indian Ocean cyclones close to Mozambique . . . In Chile, the Water Code, is established, separating water ownership from land ownership . . . Hurricane Katrina brings floods to the Caribbean. A Haiti-US Agreement allows the US Coast Guard to patrol the sea corridor between Haiti and Cuba. It is said that right whales born in that year are taller than right whales born since.¹⁹⁵

This short biography describes Bopape's attachment to nature and her need to situate herself in time and space, declaring her political, ecological, and environmental stance. She declares the significance of the relationship between humans and nature and her interest in nature's life cycles. Despite stating this, she pursues veiled anthropocentrism: everything is related to her birth. Bopape describes herself as a body of salty water, dangerous and devastating as nature unknown. Bopape's more recent practice has water as the central theme. For *The Soul Expanding Ocean*, the artist participated in an expedition that begins on the Solomon Islands - a small group of islands in Oceania, near Papua New Guinea, and continues to Mississippi and Jamaica's plantations, and going back to South Africa. This research journey "becomes a language that allows timelines to converge and intersect in the space"¹⁹⁶ created for bodies of salty water and led to *Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?* which brings together historical inquiry, conventional wisdom, illusion, imagination, and hope - I will discuss it later.

¹⁹⁵ "Biography of Dineo Seshee Bopape." Ocean Space. <https://www.ocean-space.org/exhibitions/ocean-what-if-no-change-is-your-desperate-mission-the-soul-expanding-ocean-3-dineo-seshee-bopape>

¹⁹⁶ "Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?* description."

Bopape's research tries to counter the trivialization of African oceanic imagery, challenging the supposed boundlessness of the Ocean, forced between lands as a negative space between them. Bopape recounts the artwork that appeared in her mind during a swim in the Solomon Islands, where she found herself in the waves during a tropical rainwater curtain,¹⁹⁷ inspiring the artwork, involving an analysis of wounds that salty water carries. These wounds are visible scars that furrow the sea due to death and grief. Salty water has a rich memory and, following Neimanis' hydrologics, is an archive endowed with its agency. Bodies of salty water are its inhabitants, the circles on the decapitated trunks of centuries-old trees. The salty water's dual soul is visible in the artist's technique. The installation consists of the footage of Bopape's encounter with the Ocean, shot with a GoPro camera - it reminds the control cameras that monitor migrants' flow, and drawings that hide the augmented reality technology that accentuate the ephemeral spirituality of her marine 'baptism.'¹⁹⁸

To conclude, the artwork's analysis will begin by examining the environment in which it takes place, then I will move on to the sound and song chosen by the artist, and therefore I will investigate the meaning of its title. Subsequently, I will analyze the media used and their meaning, the spectators' gaze, and their positioning concerning the artwork.

3.3.1.2 The importance of site-specificity of the artwork: environments and narratives

Bopape's approach blends magic, history, tradition, illusions, imagination, and hope, creating a conversation between post-colonial agency and the Ocean that begins by envisioning a life where the Ocean intersects in every story, where "dreams, songs, spirits, imaginaries are carried by water."¹⁹⁹ The artwork represents a step toward "the marriage of the earth and the memory

¹⁹⁷ "Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?* description."

¹⁹⁸ "Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?* description."

¹⁹⁹ "Dineo Seshee Bopape and Diana Policarpo: The Soul of Expanding Ocean #3 and #4," E-flux, April 11, 2022. <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/448984/dineo-seshee-bopape-and-diana-policarpothe-soul-expanding-ocean-3-and-4/>

of the Ocean,”²⁰⁰ in which myths no longer belong to the past of oppression, colonialism, destruction, and exploitation. Connecting her ideas to Neimanis' reading of water, Bopape's installation seems to speak to the hydrologics of the archive - introduced in chapter one – that explains that water, as a closed system, continues to slowly differentiate, creating archives. The unrecyclable plastic islands in the Ocean and the currents on the seafloor are tangible memories of eras.²⁰¹

Furthermore, Bopape's artwork refers to “ghost slave ships” imprisoned in the Ocean and embodied by scars illustrated by the waves' white foam. These foamy waves, processed and translated through a complex juxtaposition of materials and artistic languages, are linked to the history of Venice and Solomon Islands. Venice was a trading city that in the XIII century dominated much of the Adriatic coastline. It was the most important military power in the Mediterranean Sea. Venice is a lagoon city, surrounded by water and exposed to its fluctuations. It will be submerged by water for over 100 years, according to studies implemented by Climate Central.²⁰² For this reason, a program to protect the city through a system of dams - the MOSE project, was implemented in 2003. It will become invisible, referring to Bopape's idea sowed by the usage of augmented reality able to activate a multifaceted presence-absence, like in performance art.²⁰³ The invisible is related to death, a foundational characteristic of salty water seen through the sublime. Bodies of salty water are hybrids between the feeling of communication and death and, reading them through Bopape artwork, they can mourn water's hidden deaths and traumas, showing them through augmented reality. Bopape's experience in the Solomon Islands' waters, opens connections between sensory experience, ancestors, and the slavery routes, connectable to the trade history of Venice.²⁰⁴ Bopape's narrative tells a

²⁰⁰ “Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?* description.”

²⁰¹ Neimanis, “Feminist subjectivity, watered,” 30-32.

²⁰² Brian Kahn, “Sea Level Rise Threatens World's Cultural Treasures,” Climate Central, March 5, 2014. <https://www.climatecentral.org/news/sea-level-rise-threatens-worlds-cultural-treasures-17144>

²⁰³ Jones, “‘Presence’ in absentia,” 13.

²⁰⁴ “Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?* description.”

dream implemented by the water's sounds in the video and of the Venice canal, echoed in the church environment.²⁰⁵

This deem narrates the story of a message Bopape received from the water, from a local Solomon Islands man in a canoe, who “asked . . . [her] to sing him a song.”²⁰⁶ Bopape chose to sing a reggae song from South Africa reminiscent of slaves' scars resulting from whippings that she compares to water waves. From the Salomon Islands Bopape starts her journey around the world by reasoning about bodies of water and retracing the transatlantic slave trade route, marking a new oceanic corpo-graphy – reminding Perera - of a stream of memory.²⁰⁷

The ocean and the water have this ability to remember a person's self or nurture or rehabilitate. What things are part of the present but ghosts almost? How do I invite my peers to hear those ghosts more clearly, to be at the level where we're able to heal?²⁰⁸

The Ocean remembers. The foam produced by its waves is the memory of the Ocean's atrocities. Salt preserves memories, as it preserves food, a quality that makes the recollection of spiritual and political rebellion possible!²⁰⁹ On the other hand, salt heals water's wounds killing bacteria. Salty water heals by killing. The chosen location adds another aquatic level of understanding of the project. Water for Venice is both a protector and a destroyer. It is slowly submerging the city, but it become waterpower and a multicultural meeting place because of it. Moreover, the church of San Lorenzo is the place where the remains of Marco Polo, the man who made exchanges with the East possible, are enshrined, and it stands facing the water, reconnecting the artwork to its birthplace. In conclusion, reflections regarding the Ocean, its stories, and the power of elements such as water, salt, earth, and spirit, lead to a narrative around

²⁰⁵ “The Soul of Expanding Ocean #4: Dineo Seshee Bopape ‘Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?’ at Ocean Space, Venice.”

²⁰⁶ Durón, “In Venice.”

²⁰⁷ Durón.

²⁰⁸ Dineo Seshee Bopape quoted in Durón.

²⁰⁹ Durón.

salty water and its properties. These speculations about the energies that connect humans to the environment are at the center of Bopape's artwork. The installation becomes a narrator guiding humans toward breaking the separation between nature and culture, science, and belief. The Ocean is enriched by scientific and technological visions inseparable from emotional experiences.²¹⁰

3.3.1.3 The wet dream: sound, song, and title

The song that accompanies the installation appeared in the artist's dream while traveling to the Solomon Islands. For the exhibition, she decided to translate into English one verse only: "Ierato laka le a phela le a phela / My love is alive, is alive, is alive."²¹¹ This translation could be a reference to the power of English imposing its authority over other languages. It is perhaps an allusion to the slave trade, to the killer Ocean's history. Or perhaps it seeks to teach the languages of the Ocean, which is why the artist provides a translation? It is a lullaby for souls that died in the Ocean. It keeps repeating itself, and this repetition reinforces the concept of the water's cycle and waves' breaking reminding its differentiation in water's "closed" cycle.²¹² The sea kills, and I hope "my love is alive." On the other side, "my love" may refer to water itself, to the salty water capable of living and surviving all horrors that humans attribute to it. Salty water becomes the main actor of hydrologics that allow it to act because of the salinity characteristics that enable it to save and kill, to be admired, and frighten.

The title gives an overview of the artwork. It is a question posed directly to Ocean. Bopape tries to initiate a dialogue with it, asking it what will happen if its goal is to no longer be vulnerable to the humans' actions? Following Neimanis, water changes and differentiates to survive. Does

²¹⁰ Martínez, "I am an evening cloud too," said the ocean."

²¹¹ "Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?* description."

²¹² Neimanis, "Feminist subjectivity, watered," 30.

Bopape refer to this idea?²¹³ What does ‘change’ mean? Does it involve rebirth and a change in appearance and function? Or does it imply regeneration-like the regrowth of the tail of salamanders in Haraway’s *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*?²¹⁴ Or perhaps it alludes to the desire to forget what happened? Ocean, since you are endowed with your agency, you can decide! That is why Bopape asks Ocean directly. Maybe you don’t want to change, and by not changing you will continue to remember your past made of horror and connection, characteristics that salty water embeds!

3.3.1.4 The medium and the relationship with spect-actors



Figure 7: Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?* Installation view.²¹⁵

²¹³ Neimanis, “Feminist subjectivity, watered,” 30.

²¹⁴ Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” 223.

²¹⁵ Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?* Venice, 2022. Installation view. Sfeir-Semler Gallery website. <https://www.sfeir-semmler.com/galleryartists/dineo-seshee-bopape/work>

The medium chosen by Bopape is at the center of this analysis because of its hybrid nature, a mix of different media that can be defined with a practice-based distinction. The installation consists of a video recorded with a Go Pro, some sculptures made of branches, and drawings that can be read through augmented reality. First, I will analyze the video, displayed fragmented in three large frames that occupy the entire exhibition space. Is this perhaps an allusion to waters' partition among nations? Certainly, the use of the Go Pro alludes to surveillance cameras that monitor the flow of migrants, it alludes to the salty water's inherent characteristics of decision-making power over lives - features of salt.

The second medium analyzed is the branch sculptures that support the drawings, which are visible through augmented reality. In the curatorial text, Chus Martínez writes: “[the sculptures] really add this is spectrum relationship with things you don’t see. Things you don’t see are spirits, but also problems that you don’t see. You could see a drawing, but it could be a problem.”²¹⁶ The use of those materials reminds Bopape of the places she visited during her research journey, which with augmented reality, creates friction that ignites the viewer's interest. Augmented reality has been used to reveal a story hidden under the layers of biopolitical control - GoPro - an interesting gesture of blending scientific and artistic interest in the environment. This is how the logic of unknowability works: the invisible-unseen water bodies, the forgotten, and the inexhaustible production of the future make water bodies unknowable. Water is indomitable and incalculable.²¹⁷ Consequently, the spect-actors must interact with the installation and have to choose their position concerning the large theater/cinema created by the artist. They can choose their point of view to ask questions about the Ocean and grasp its answer related to the artist's main question: *Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?* The artwork follows the water’s repetitive cycle, and, in this circle,

²¹⁶ Martínez, “‘I am an evening cloud too,’ said the ocean.”

²¹⁷ Neimanis, “Feminist subjectivity, watered,” 32.

spectators become bodies of salty water that act in this watery environment. The viewers' gaze is filtered, translated, and manipulated by the artist who declares the possibility of a fake hidden under the façade of technology, which instead seems to show reality.

3.3.1.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the sum of the title, the media used, and the artwork's components are all elements that compose a precise question to salty water: *Ocean! What if no change is your desperate mission?* Materials, technologies, and bodies are involved in this complex artwork. Spect-actors' bodies as bodies of salty water participate in the hydrological cycles: from the logic of archive as the foamy white Ocean's waves to the logic of differentiation and its continuous change, evolution, and mutation, from the logic of unknowability and its impossibility of knowing its future and its 'ghosts,' to the logic of communication, and its feature of connecting bodies.

But Ocean, if you don't want to change, do you want to remember your atrocities forever? Perhaps, thanks to salty water bodies and their characteristics, you can experience relief in death, heal your wounds and preserve your positive properties.

3.3.2 *The Soul Expanding Ocean #4 - Ciguatera* by Diana Policarpo.

3.3.2.1 Introduction.



Figure 8: Diana Policarpo, *Ciguatera*.²¹⁸

Diana Policarpo is a Portuguese “visual artist and composer,” born in Lisbon in 1986. Policarpos’ research involves the usage of “visual and musical media . . . [such as] drawing, video, sculpture, text, performance, and multi-channel sound installations.”²¹⁹ She aims to investigate power relations and popular culture, particularly in the areas of “gender politics, economic structures, health and interspecies relations through transdisciplinary research.”²²⁰ She uses music to give rise to a rhythmic structure of sound, the tactile material through which she speculates on social constructions. Policarpo works primarily with performance and sound installations she uses “to examine experiences of vulnerability and empowerment associated

²¹⁸ Diana Policarpo, *Ciguatera*. Venice, 2022. Installation view. Ocean Space website. <https://www.ocean-space.org/it/mostre/ciguatera-the-soul-expanding-ocean-4-diana-policarpo>

²¹⁹ “Diana Policarpo, *Ciguatera* description.”

²²⁰ “Diana Policarpo, *Ciguatera* description.”

with acts of exposing . . . to the capitalist world.”²²¹ Her work revolves around individualism and mysticism analyzed through sound performances, juxtapositions of sounds, sculptures, and images that dance and perform together in a balance making reflecting on the system’s imbalance.²²² Her installations are rituals of understanding, mystical events that help viewers to open their minds toward a new comprehension of the world. The installation helps to understand the possibility of mixing elements and sounds by pursuing a practice-based structure.²²³

For *The Soul of Expanding Ocean*’s program, Policarpo created a large installation that consists of a large rock with several screens inserted on its surface projecting videos showing microflora and fauna hosted in the Savage Islands marine landscape, a small archipelago in the North Atlantic Ocean between Madeira and the Canary Islands, place where she accomplishes a research trip. The Savage Islands now are a National Park in which lives only custodians and biologists. Over the years those islands have been used for various economic activities related to Spanish and Portuguese colonial trade to America and Africa and as a crossing point for fishing. During this research period, Policarpo speculates on how matter that makes up these islands can be seen both as victims of colonial routes and as endowed with a role in the development of geographical history. “How do rocks know history? How do species communicate about time?”²²⁴ We are aware of the alterations in climate, and the narratives we have invented. The Ocean and all its creatures are also aware of it. They have probably created expressions through the very matter of their bodies to deal with these negative changes. They call to us with their cells, in a language reminiscent of the unexplained damage they suffer.

²²¹ “Diana Policarpo, *Ciguatera* description.”

²²² “Biography of Diana Policarpo.” Diana Policarpo. <https://dianapolicarpo.com/info>

²²³ Manresa, “Towards a philosophy of Installation Art,” 334-335.

²²⁴ “Dineo Seshee Bopape and Diana Policarpo: The Soul of Expanding Ocean #3 and #4.”

Policarpo's main interest is mapping colonial histories through monitoring natural biodiversity.²²⁵ Her main mode of analysis is empathy for the Ocean seen as a great expanse of salty water inhabited by different bodies of salty water. *Ciguatera* consists in transmitting information on the environmental disaster caused by territories' colonization to free humanity from the impulse to possess and impose its will on nature and life. But are not only humans which want to impose their will and possess all forms of life. This idea stems from Elisabeth Grosz's reasoning in her book *Becoming Undone* (2011),²²⁶ in which she addresses three concepts such as life, politics, and art, exploring Charles Darwin's theories of species evolution. Grosz outlines a postmodern Darwinism that sees all living beings as competing and coordinating forms. Nature is no longer seen as the abused victim but as a powerful entity. It expresses its will to overcome dualism leading humanity toward new beliefs, and new movements of thought that can recognize its agency.²²⁷ Policarpo speaks of fauna and flora and sea's inhabitants inscribing them in the great whole of bodies of salty water. Bodies that are at the heart of hydrological cycles that Neimanis speaks of. Water and bodies differentiate in a closed system.²²⁸ They change and take on the nuances of bodies they encounter, like the subjects investigated in *Ciguatera*. Bodies change, as microflora and fauna. When subjected to pollution, they become poisonous, poisoning all creatures that live with them in the closed water system. Humans, poisoners of the seas, become the victims of their exploitation.

The installation narrates all this theoretical background. Sounds, videos, and the sculpture contribute to the formation of a clear artistic and aesthetic language. The artwork needs the participation of viewers, who can activate it. The landscape is aesthetically represented through

²²⁵ "Diana Policarpo, *Ciguatera* description."

²²⁶ Elisabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 11-25.

²²⁷ "The Soul of Expanding Ocean #4: Diana Policarpo 'Ciguatera' at Ocean Space, Venice," Mousse Magazine, April 20, 2022. <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/the-soul-expanding-ocean-4-diana-policarpo-ciguatera-at-ocean-space-venice/>

²²⁸ Neimanis, "Feminist subjectivity, watered," 30.

images and videos showing the condition of the seagrass and fish that inhabit the coast conveying the problems that plague it. Policarpo tells a science fiction story that alters the way we look at nature, actively engaging the viewer in the experience of textures and image perception. The island speaks for itself and tells of the exploitation that humans have imparted to it.

To analyze the artwork more comprehensible, I will begin with the examination of the environment in which the installation is shown and its relationship to the space, and I will continue with the analysis of the media used and the relationship between them. Next, I will turn to the analysis of the artwork's title, essential to complete my examination. Finally, I will delve into reading the viewers' gaze and their positioning in the artwork's space.

3.3.2.2 The significance of the surrounding environment



Figure 9: Diana Policarpo, *Ciguatera*.²²⁹

²²⁹ Diana Policarpo, *Ciguatera*. Venice, 2022. Installation view. Mousse Magazine website. <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/the-soul-expanding-ocean-4-diana-policarpo-ciguatera-at-ocean-space-venice/>

Ciguatera represents a perfect marriage between the artist's depiction of nature and nature itself. The ancient and the mythical come together in a perfect blend of legends, colonial history, and humans' destruction of nature, all in an attempt to improve humans' knowledge. *Ciguatera* could embody Neimanis' logic of gestationality, a logic that involves the power of water to create life. The Ocean is the greatest creator of living beings' diversity.²³⁰ This differentiation depends on chemical reactions that need an aqueous medium to create a plural living environment.²³¹ All living bodies of water owe their existence to gestation in water just as the lives mentioned by Policarpo owe their existence to salty water.²³² Humans are polluting water in general. This is not only related to Policarpo analysis but has also connections to the history of exploitation of the Venice lagoon. Water now is rebelling! *Ciguatera* shows that stopping to observe without destroying is possible. *Ciguatera* is the story of 'ghosts' imprisoned in the Ocean, both human and matter, translated through a juxtaposition of sounds, materials, videos, scientific practices, and collaborations. The salty water remembers and embodies the hydrologic of the archive because of its saline qualities.²³³ Salt kills silently, like ciguatoxin - the toxin responsible for *Ciguatera* disease which affects humans who eat fish - and like humans. Salty water helped and sustained humans in their horrendous conquests and massacres, as the main used currency of exchange and as a healing and flavoring agent, despite the fact it sometimes reserved them for deadly fates. Salt water is powerful, it would be able to submerge Venice. Its power and ability to act have been underestimated, which is why it has been subjected to exploitation.²³⁴

Ciguatera's exhibition reconnects two distant lands - the Savage Islands and Venice. On one side there is Venice, preserved and made unique by water, now in danger of sinking due to

²³⁰ Neimanis, "Feminist subjectivity, watered," 30.

²³¹ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 104.

²³² Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 104-107.

²³³ Neimanis, "Feminist subjectivity, watered," 30.

²³⁴ Kahn, "Sea Level Rise Threatens World's Cultural Treasures."

continuous human intervention on the water. On the other side, there are the Savage Islands, a natural environment that has witnessed human colonization and travel. Moreover, the church of San Lorenzo, the place where the remains of Marco Polo have been preserved,²³⁵ is located on the canal which provides an additional salty water connection. There the spectator is immersed in a totalizing environment characterized by the smell of the lagoon's salinity. Inside the church, the huge rock/sculpture, *Ciguatera*'s main installation, is a metonymy of the Ocean, its subject, a positive and living space showing how water and lands are interdependent and co-present. On the other hand, the relationship between *Ciguatera* and its home - the church of San Lorenzo - results in a reflection on the Ocean and its intrinsic elements - salt - and its power. Policarpo's stories speak of a micro nature that preserves an invisible memory - impossible to see with the unaided eyes - of the exploitation of the past. Matter and humans live in the same environment and share the same fate. They. Are no more divisible as the Cartesian system wants.²³⁶ They are all part of a cycle without end nor beginning, a circle of regeneration and not rebirth.²³⁷

3.3.2.3 The medium: sculpture and its videos

The installation consists of a large sculpture simulating a sea rock, and several videos displayed on screens mounted inside of it. *Ciguatera*'s sculpture is Policarpo's largest sculptural installation to date. It. is made from a mixture of materials such as wood, earth, plaster, polymers, pigments, and paint. In the treatment of the large sculpture, transparency and fluidity play a fundamental political – the possibility to see through history/rock's layers what it wants to hide - and aesthetic role. Policarpo wants to involve viewers in a bodily experience similar to that with water, placing them in the position to respond to different settings. The materiality

²³⁵ "Ocean Space description."

²³⁶ Frost, "The Implications of the New Materialisms," 69-85

²³⁷ Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," 223.

of the artwork contributes to the feeling of being in salty water, of thinking from within it, and like it as a body of salty water involved in its hydrologics.²³⁸ The artist tries to create in spectators a feeling of disorientation making a connection between the ‘fake’ marine environment of Ciguatera, the video recording, and the Venice landscape. This collision of sensations, transforms the visitors’ perception, turning them into explorers-scientists.

Our eyes become lenses, we see like a microscope, we see like a camera recording the depths of the seas, we see like a drone. Diana Policarpo plays with our physical presence in space to render visible the many ways the Ocean makes sense to life.²³⁹

This space-time jumps leads spect-actors to follow the cycle from the Savage Islands and their marine microorganisms to Venice and its aquatic smells and sounds. From colonial history to the commercial one. The analysis of human exploitation of water is read through microorganisms and algae’s state. They carry with them the traces of evolution, permitting the examination of the creatures that live in communication with them.²⁴⁰

The installation is an island, a wild island, untouched by humans.²⁴¹

On the other hand, videos show living beings that cannot be seen by human eyes, recorded through special technological lenses that allow her eye to see those micro life forms, to understand the invisible history of water and its impact on the aquatic life. The videos create a dramaturgy in which the camera, narrating its version of things, shows how “science is implicated in colonial processes and . . . power relations.”²⁴² The subjects of this narrative are microorganisms, invisible bodies of salty water involved in colonial history, and protagonists

²³⁸ “Diana Policarpo, *Ciguatera* description.”

²³⁹ Martínez, “‘I am an evening cloud too,’ said the ocean.”

²⁴⁰ Martínez.

²⁴¹ Martínez.

²⁴² “Diana Policarpo, *Ciguatera* description.”

of myths since antiquity. They are the background of colonial and mythological stories, aquatic historical archives, always different – differentiation logic - but always made of the same matter that continues to recirculate and communicate through the salty water.²⁴³ With *Ciguatera* spectators can contemplate nature without intervening or being afraid of it, in a position of distant observation. Spectators fear nature, but they are fascinated by it, as described by the Kantian dynamic sublime. It is the ability to contemplate nature from afar that makes minds capable of realizing the rational idea of freedom from it through imagination.²⁴⁴ Thanks to *Ciguatera*, the viewer can imagine moving through nature, inhabiting it. This combination of assemblage and environment implies that the artwork fills a space, including viewers as necessary elements of it. Here is the definition of installation art.²⁴⁵

3.3.2.4 The title and the perspective of spect-actors: the compulsion to reflection

Ciguatera is one of the most common forms of human fish poisoning in tropical or subtropical areas, caused in particular by the ingestion of food of marine origin contaminated with a toxin known as ciguatoxin. In many cases, fish harmful to humans are large predators at the top of the food chain. Unfortunately, the conditions under which these fish become toxic are unclear, but the most valid reason is related to human-caused pollution of water.²⁴⁶

My speculations regarding the title start with Grosz's idea concerning Darwinist theories about the competitiveness of all living beings, humans, or non-humans.²⁴⁷ Following my reading, predators at the top of the food chain, such as humans, become poisoned as a result of their exploitation of other water creatures. Then they die, and the cycle begins again.

²⁴³ Neimanis, "Feminist subjectivity, watered," 30.

²⁴⁴ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 82-83.

²⁴⁵ Manresa, "Towards a philosophy of Installation Art," 333-337.

²⁴⁶ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "ciguatera". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 5 Apr. 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/science/ciguatera> Accessed 6 June 2022.

²⁴⁷ Gosz, *Becoming Undone*, 11-25.

Policarpo's idea can be traced back to Neimanis' hydrologics of differentiation and communication, as the salty water flow connects bodies that change within the aquatic closed environment. This reorganizes itself, and by reorganizing it continues to poison human beings, killing them. It has its agency, and it is free from the victimhood attributed to it.²⁴⁸

Ciguatoxin functioning can be traced back to that of salt. It is nonpoisonous to salty water creatures as they are endowed with specific characteristics that allow them to survive, but it is instead poisonous to humans. Do these ciguatoxin characteristics seek to preserve bodies of salty water, exactly as salt does? Are these characteristics necessary to preserve life in salty water, as salt preserves food and heals wounds?

To conclude the performance analysis, it is interesting to examine spectators' interaction with Policarpo's large. The environment recreated by the artist fosters the viewer's immersion in a marine environment, despite being far away from its place of origin. A further level of analysis considers the location of the exhibition space in an environment surrounded by water; this encourages immersion in a damp, cold, salt-scented milieu. Spect-actors find themselves on the cliffs of the Portuguese Savage Islands, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, a place of passage for settlers, a place tainted by their travels to and from distant worlds. Spect-actors encounter a rocky distant land, beautiful but inhospitable. Nature filtered through the screens, transforms viewers into foreign observers, a rare role for human destroyers guilty of still-visible brutality. Spect-actors act like settlers, but with the deterrent of ciguatoxin harming them. Will this be the result of matter's rebellion, the manifestation of its agency? The matter is conceived as having a peculiar and distinctive agency, with its drive and trajectory.²⁴⁹ Viewers are allowed to walk around the enormous sculpture, without being able to invade its space, without being able to spoil what 'nature' has made and preserved. This external gaze recalls the position that human

²⁴⁸ Neimanis, "Feminist Subjectivity, Watered," 31-32.

²⁴⁹ Frost, "The Implications of New Materialisms," 71.

beings must continue to maintain toward nature, without upsetting it, passively suffering its sound, noise, and presence, as it has always done toward us. Spect-actors can stop and think, on the rocky shore, without acting, in a passive floating position. The buoyancy is made possible by the salinity of water, and its osmolar characteristic, which depends on the concentration of salt in it. Spect-actors are carried by the sound of the sea and can see what humans cannot see, what the artist wants to show them. This is made possible by structured reflections on the matter and its importance within the salty water ecosystem. Microorganisms shown by the artist are bodies of salty water and because of this, they respond to the logic of water, to its hydrologics, mutating to make the aquatic environment livable.²⁵⁰ Viewers' eyes become lenses that, like microscopes, can record the depths of the seas. Videos reproduce and sound out the seacoasts and spect-actors act like lenses that inspect and analyze these marine areas. We are thus in the presence of the resultant of the sum of two gazes, that of the artist, with her prejudices, and that of spect-actors, unaware of the prejudices embedded in the visual medium. The artist makes her vision visible, gives them her interpretation, and shows them her research.

3.3.2.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the sculpture and the videos created, the environment reproduced, and the viewer's interaction with the installation, are all elements that catalyzed a specific reflection on salty water that flows into the title of *Ciguatera*. Matters, technologies, and bodies are all involved in a multifaceted artwork that aims at a single goal: to make possible a reflection on the connection between humans and non-humans in a new materialistic and posthuman perspective. Bodies of salty water are involved in hydrological cycles described by Neimanis. From the logic of gestationality that sees each species as the aquatic environment for the

²⁵⁰ Neimanis, "Feminist subjectivity, watered," 30.

proliferation of other species²⁵¹ to the logic of the differentiation of bodies of water as the result of years of exploitation such that it has become the analyzable model of the past, its continuous evolution, and change. Finally, the logic of communication is added, connecting all salty water bodies that have a common future in a ‘closed’ environment. Moreover, through the use of installation as a practice-based activity, and following Neimanis’ hydrologics, the artist emphasizes that a place of thought and coexistence of bodies could be created only by the union of matter and spectators.

This cohesion of bodies and means, through practice-based logic, facilitates understanding of hydrological cycles and the dependence of saltwater bodies on themselves and their regeneration. Policarpo adds to Neimanis’ hydrologics, her interpretation, seeing salty water not only as a means of transport but as a matter endowed with its agency. Salty water heals historical wounds, preserves natural environments, and makes the marine environment inhospitable for some living beings, at least for humans, trying to make its exploitation impossible.

²⁵¹ Neimanis, 30.

Conclusion

This thesis seeks to demonstrate how visual interpretation of art and listening to its will can help to understand the main ideas of Neimanis' theories in *Bodies of Water* (2017)²⁵², specifically by reading these relationships through what I call bodies of salty water.

Starting from Irigaray's reading of water revised by Neimanis in a posthuman key, I decided to try to trace a further level of understanding of this path with the help of contemporary art, specifically performance and installation art. The lines of connection that led Neimanis to relate *écriture féminine* to feminist new materialist and posthuman Feminist theories, and Neimanis' narratives related to the so-called hydrologics determine the proceeding of the creation of bodies of water. Neimanis' ideas guided my interest toward the "visual" features belonging to the descriptions of water's dynamics, bodies of water's relationships, and their transformations. Therefore, I decided to add to these theories a further level of understanding through a visual reading of these.

Bodies of water are the subjects of interest of Neimanis, their indistinguishability, communication, indeterminacy, and recirculation. These bodies, neither human nor non-human, swim in the water and are composed of water. Next to these is developing my field of interest, concerning bodies of salty water: bodies that underlie the discourse concerning one of the main characteristics of water, death. Neimanis' bodies of water are fluid, vital, and changeable and reason according to what she calls hydrologics which include gestationality, dissolution, communication, differentiation, archive, and unknowability.

On the other hand, bodies of salty water revolve around the feeling of the sublime, a perception of danger and fascination which originates from the unknown and the unmeasurable, as they are immersed in salty water. This fluid is an inseparable mixture of water and salt and

²⁵² Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 2017.

responds to the characteristics that salt carries: healing and preservative, curative and lethal. The feeling of the sublime is related to these characteristics.

To develop my argument, I have chosen three artworks that relate to Neimanis' logics and to geographies – oceanic corpo-graphies²⁵³ - that these bodies of salty water go through and experience. These are precarious and 'in the present' lives, alluding to the medium of performance, composed of different media, voices, and bodies, such as Bopape and Policarpo's installations. In addition, I was interested in developing my analysis on artworks that fall within the field of research and activism. I included the three artworks both in the field of scientific-humanistic research, which emphasizes the importance of art in understanding and transmitting theories, and activism, which is the battle to make their voices audible within struggles and debates. These artists are those who act.

In conclusion, with this research, I have tried to create the preconditions to show that contemporary art, in this case, performance and installation art, with their intrinsic characteristics, are useful in transmitting and understanding theoretical research. I firmly believe in this characteristic of contemporary art, which, through in-depth analysis of works, has made speculations about them possible, allowing viewers to understand them thoroughly through an examination of the media used, the materials, and the texts and sounds produced. "The medium is the message,"²⁵⁴ McLuhan writes. Certainly, the analysis of the site-specificity and the correlation with watery places illustrated by the artworks led to adding further levels of understanding to my speculation about salty water. Through these installations and performances, I began to imagine its implications. During thesis writings, additional questions concerning salty water and its properties emerged. What changes in its logic if we transform water from a fluid to a solid? What happens to the salt inseparable from it, in its liquid state?

²⁵³ Perera, "Oceanic corpo-graphies," 2013.

²⁵⁴ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1994.

Related to these ideas, I would like to continue my research on salty water concerning the properties of water during its change of state, when it becomes other than itself, and returns to the beginning of its cycle, flowing in its closed system.

In addition, regarding the discourse on salt, a series of speculations and questions have arisen around it and its cicatrizing, preserving, healing, and killing power. Its dual soul ties in with the discourse of the sublime and with the humans' desire to dominate the water. The sea, an immense expanse of salty water is no longer a space of communication between lands, but a place of birth and death for bodies of salty water that inhabit it and are composed of it. It is a milieu of gestation of bodies that use other bodies to be born and grow, a great 'amniotic sac' of all human and non-human creatures that change and differentiate in the great cycle of 'thinking ecologically.' That is why the answer to my research question needs to be developed further.

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