

we start below the surface

a walking essay to accompany *precious balance walk*
bronwyn bailey-charteris

We start below the surface.

Half bobbing, tipping between, clouds and waters matter – new neighborly horizons. It is August 2019. Before corona meant planetary changes, before the pandemic losses, before Biden rejoined the Paris agreement, before cruiseships became infected floating prisons in international waters, before George Floyd was murdered on the street and the streets were full of rage, before this season upon season of turmoil, there was a gathering in the late summer light, in the littoral zones of Ridersberg beach, Öresund in southern Sweden. A beach of the city of Malmö became the gathering point for six Nordic-based artists, to meet the waters, to speak with them urgently, to be with them, softly. It is these before times that the waters know, a circulating set of realities, that brings all this to the surface now.

We meet at the horizon.

Lone figure, artist Erik Högström, sits atop the water, between, waiting. The body draws a line between bodies of water in a shifting cartography. There's a steady equality, some kind of half/half that the floating camera captures, while the lone figure contemplates, we submerge again.

From a distance, we hold the new horizon with fragility.

A glass, clear with water, contained and containing, balanced atop the head of artist Lisa Nyberg, with grey lined hair tied in a tight knot, the artist forms levitating vessels who draw lines, and sense the horizon. Oceanic feeling, specifically in theorist Gérard de Nerval's version where oceanic feeling is a "transparent network that covers the world" (Kristeva, 1989), this permeates the new horizons that the artists and the water draw together.

Emerging with tentacles, we listen.

Floating, artist Meri Nikula, uses a human housed voice to make liquid song sounds. A fluctuation of vocal aquatics. Calling with the sea, wide mouthed, sounding the sea for us. An embodied hydrological (Neimanis, 2017) insistence.

Rains arrive and we are surfaces gleaning.

The water glass returns, half full, in the evening light, reminding of Butoh training of the pelvis, imagined as a bowl full with water, being walked carefully, returns. Don't slip, don't drip a drop, into the purple sky.

With words that float, we develop a second skin.

Artist Ignacio Pérez Pérez sounds Ursula K Le Guin into the waters, drawing lines in the sand, on a page, in my mind. The artist's actions bob with a reminiscence of artist Song Dong's water writing, where surfaces and words, evaporate and return.

Suggesting we retreat.

And then a white flag, the flag of peace, matched with a smile and a speech, artist Joakim Stampe, shows a sign of retreat, 'make peace with waters' it might say. A flag muted by underwater islands. The submersion of peace, water-based rights and wars, signs of futures, and returning pasts. Here we float alongside nations as borders, as part of the leaky Nordic fictions, dripping with uncertainty.

We return to the surface, our hands untied.

'The water owns itself' says First Nation writer Lee Maracle (Christian and Wong, 2017), and in these half submersions the hands of artist/curator Elena Lundquist Ortiz perform in unison with Maracle and other indigenous water defenders, Ortiz's careful punctuation is a subtle choreography, placing light onto the surface, fingers in unison with soft waves.

Flicking surfaces, we sink.

In these half submersions, the film *Precious Balance Walk*, directed by the artists Felicia Konrad and Johan Haugen from the art project *I Still Live in Water*, locates a certain trajectory, a considered pace, a reconfiguration of Astrida Neimanis' 'hydrofeminism' (Neimanis, 2012) through performance. There is a perpetual, returning, 'precipitational' (Bailey-Charteris, 2019) based movement to the work. Where the camera swims past algae, past archives, past water dust, the film walks in water, attempting to leave vertical terracentric bodies behind them, reenchanting Elaine Morgan's 'aquatic ape' theory into practice. The film seems to take scholar Melody Jue's offering in her book 'Wild Blue Media' to heart, where Jue suggests we reorient ourselves to water-based knowledges and adopt a horizontal watery way (Jue, 2020). In the film, horizontal beings bubble in the tension of the surface, the tension between us all, webbed and welcoming.

We are walking horizontally in the Hydrocene

Precious Balance Walk, as a set of actions, illuminates the watery web, this hydro-planetary cycling, that is unrelenting in its material and physical repercussions of the before times, and the future times, as cyclical. I call this the Hydrocene (Bailey-Charteris, 2019) – keeping in the logic of a watery deep time, the Hydrocene, as a curatorial theory, names and connects the water-based constellation of artistic practices, the blue zeitgeist of the Hydrocene. Connecting artistic water-based methods, the Hydrocene names and celebrates this shift of art into the blue, of

which this film is a part of. *Precious Balance Walk* traverses the horizon of the Hydrocene.

The art of the Hydrocene demands radical change to anthropocentric ways of relating to water, and this film fulfills that demand. It is also a film that pulls out threads that untangle the Hydrocene as an era but also a scene, performatively acting the Hydro'scene' of our times - where water relations are internal, shared, complicit, collaborative and critical.

We walk in the watery horizontal zone, leaving our legs behind us, with a glass of water balanced atop of heads, drawing new horizons.

References

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