

## Hannah Rowan. *Tides in The Body*

Critical Essay by Tatiana Martyanova

(On the occasion of the first solo show in Italy of Hannah Rowan at C+N Gallery CANEPANERI, Milan)

*What is water?  
an alibi, a lover, a debt, a promise...*  
Astrida Neimanis

With this poetical and never-ending answer that “always will be a question”, Astrida Neimanis, feminist scholar, philosopher, and environmental humanities thinker, concludes her book “Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology”. In her text Neimanis traces the reciprocal relationship between the constellation of matter and forces, which we call our bodies, and its surrounding environment through the connecting qualities of all the watery exchanges we have with the world. This study is fundamental to the artistic research of Hannah Rowan (1990, Brighton, UK), who works with water and the body to visualize ephemeral processes of movement and transformation, as well as liquid connections between the human body and geological and ecological systems.

As Neimanis reminds us, *corporeality* has been for centuries seen through a prism of anthropocentrism, individualism and phallogocentrism. To challenge this approach, the philosopher offers us a possibility to feel ourselves as fluid and to “imagine ourselves as bodies of water”. Quoting Virginia Woolf “there are tides in the body”, Neimanis talks about “wateriness” that conceptually (but also materially) verifies the “more-than-human” nature of the human. Underlining the parallels between physical bodies that have gestated our own becoming body and “bodies of water”, the researcher quotes poet Jeanette Armstrong, “water is “coursing / to become the body” – “waiting”, “over eons / sustain this fragment of now”. “Water extends embodiment in time – body, to body, to body. Water is...directed towards the becoming of other bodies”.

The art of Hannah Rowan is sensitive, fluid and speaks to material intimacy, touch, memory, gesture. *Tides in the Body* explores slipperiness, phase change in matter and our porosity as interconnecting bodies of water, as well as the relationship between the body and the Earth’s living systems. Her sculptures and performances dissolve boundaries between self and other and explore a merging of human and more-than-human bodies. Central to her work are ideas of transformation, ephemerality and becoming, she foregrounds material liveness, animacy and interaction that is enriched by research in Greenland, Svalbard, Iceland and the Atacama Desert.

The artist is investigating the ephemerality and flux of materials that transmute into other forms. Many of the works are in a continual phase of becoming, the materials used morph, shift, melt and evaporate (for example melting ice, drying clay and crystalizing salt present matter in flux). This interest in working with fluid materials and embodiment is continued in the use of glass blown forms, glass as an amorphous solid form appears as solid, yet its material structure is disordered and closer to that of a liquid. Molten glass has been blown into bronze casts of the artist's hands, the glass retains the imprint of the fingertips, the memory of touch and the hands cradle the glass. In different works the bronze casts hold diverse elements: in *Prima Materia* (a formless primeval substance regarded as the original material of the universe) - small fragments of volcanic lava from the recently erupted Fagradalsfjall volcano in Iceland have been encased in molten glass; while in *Ocean Held*, a glass vessel holds a piece of ice cast from an oyster shell.

In *Vessels of Touch* the artist evokes the duality of water taking form within vessels whilst also holding and sustaining life. These works center Rowan's interest in the body as a recipient that holds states of being, a *container* for ("our ancestors' greatest invention", according to Ursula K. Le Guin): tender gestures of touch, kinship and holding. The artist creates almost alchemical process of working with materials that embody elemental conditions and flowing states of matter. The cupped hands evoke a fleeting attempt to hold sacred water, a transitory and leaky vessel. In this way, these works are also an artistic metaphor of Merleau-Ponty's consideration the human body as "the first and the most immediate cultural location of water".

Tracing the line from the holders of the *Vessels of Touch*, we see similar methods of holding and gathering to different recipients – this time the drops of rain - in *Petrichor (Living Waters)*. It contains the smell of the first rain after a long period of warm, dry weather. The scent of petrichor is the fleeting trace after rain has fallen, a sensorial ephemeral moment of the Earth's hydraulic cycles. A tall steel structure branches out to support hand blown glass vessels that hold ice casts of aquatic beings such as oyster shells and octopus tentacles, the forms of the glass are inspired by alchemical vessels and hourglasses. As the ice melts to fill the vessel with water, beads of condensation form on the outside of the vessels, slowly drips of condensation will fall into a terrain of bentonite clay and salt at the base of the sculpture. Bentonite clay is powdered clay which is very absorbent with swelling and viscous properties. The moisture is absorbed and the clay swells, morphs and congeals before drying and cracking to echo a cracked desert terrain. The sculpture responds to the atmospheric conditions of the space and will sweat, drip, leak, congeals and rusts before drying and evaporating to begin the cycle anew. The movements of the cracked Earth are echoed in *Desert Vessel*, a cyanotype made using light sensitive chemicals painted onto paper and exposed to sunlight. The source imagery comes from a photograph Rowan took in the Atacama Desert and the cracked terrain of the desert contained within the vessel echoes the piecing together of fragile archaeological fragments of ancient pottery.

"We are all sea. Water as body; water as communicator between bodies; water as facilitating bodies into being. Entity, medium, transformative, and gestational milieu. All this enfolding in, seeping from, sustaining and saturating, our bodies of water" (Neimanis).

"There are tides in the body" writes Virginia Woolf. The intertidal realm is a liminal space on the shore between high and low tide, where land and sea meet, the intertidal zone is underwater during high tide and exposed to air during low tide. Rowan's ceramic works take ideas of porous and leaky boundaries to work with motifs of saltwater, tidal movements, melting ice and aquatic beings who inhabit the intertidal realm such as oysters, muscles, seaweed, jellyfish and octopus.

The work that connects the artist physically to the water of oceans and ice is *Tides in the Body* (the title has been borrowed from Virginia Woolf) – it is a video of performances with ice and the tides in Greenland. We see the artist walking through an ebbing and flowing shoreline of brash ice, moving her body with the breath and motion of the tides whilst also trying to stay upright against the weight of the ice and the force of the push and pull of the tides. To contrast the force, in other scenes Rowan's bare skin caresses small chunks of ice, tender, quiet and intimate encounters with a melting form. Finally, the artist lays on a floating iceberg that is being carried out toward the open ocean, her body morphing with the ice. It is an absolute merging of fluid process of coursing and becoming bodies. The soundscape is composed from field recordings of tidal movements, the interaction of ice upon the shoreline and from underwater hydrophone recordings that capture the sounds of melting ice the artist was hearing during the performances. It is an intimate amalgamation of bodies.

\*From Hannah Rowan's journal after the performance:

*I wanted to learn about the ice through the seeping form of my fleshy body, ice to skin, membrane to membrane. The ice was slippery, hard to stay on, I pressed my fingertips and toes into small water indentations made on the surface of the ice. I moved between pressing and resting into the ice or feeling like I might slip off at any moment. My fingertips traced the surface for undulations I might cling to, I dug my fingertips into the water marks embossed into the ice. These indentations, pressed and licked into the ice by the dissolving and warming caress of salty sea water. They felt like enlarged fish scales, a fleshy iridescence of touch - sharp and smooth I wanted to morph my body with the ice - to become with. To be carried into the salty tides that were continually shaping and dissolving the ice, merging into the cold smoothness that was slowing the flow of the blood through my body. As I lay there with my left ear pressed to the hard cold surface and my eyes facing out towards the open ocean, I could hear the internal working of the ice. I listened to the digestive churnings as ice was metabolized by the contact with warmer sea water and air temperature. I could hear the fizzing, cracking chorus of air bubbles escaping the melting ice and dispersing. The waves lapped up against the ice that was ebbing in the current, the rise and fall becoming more exaggerated as time went by.*

The agency of matter is centered, this work evokes fragility, transience and loss in relation to bodies of water and relational ecological and geological systems. The installation itself invites the visitor's gaze to move like waves through the works of the exhibition.

Hydrofeminism is about solidarity across watery selves, across bodies of water, it shows us that we are all involved in this through watery interactions and circulations. Hannah Rowan is influenced by Hydrofeminist theory as a means for representing the interconnections of ecological systems, to chart the movement of water from the liveness of melting ice, across weather systems and within bodily fluids like sweat. Water flows through bodies, species and materialities, connecting them for better or worse. Today, planetary thinking is feminist thinking, and Hannah Rowan is both metaphorical and concrete "provider" while her work is a medium for thinking on such a reflective subject within her art. Rowan's work reflects on what it means to be intimately connected as Bodies of Water, layering a post-human feminist perspective on states of matter, embodiment and ecological collapse to challenge Anthropocentrism.

\***Hannah Rowan** (b. 1990 Brighton, UK) is a multidisciplinary artist based in London, UK. Her work explores the slippery complexities of water that draws together a liquid relationship between the human body and geological and ecological systems. She works across sculpture, installation, performance, video and sound to explore the uncertain form of materials. Rowan studied MA Sculpture at the Royal College of Art, London and BA (hons) Fine Art at Central Saint Martins, London.

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