

# The Hydrocene



Eco-Aesthetics in the Age of Water

BRONWYN BAILEY-CHARTERIS



ROUTLEDGE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

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“With the all-pervasive hydrosphere guiding its organising structure, an ethos nurtured through feminist relations of care and attention attuned to the most critical of materialities subtending life – *The Hydrocene: Eco-Aesthetics in the Age of Water* offers significant insights into the approaches that artists and curators are making to reimagine and practice relations with the planet’s myriad watery formations. It does this while addressing the social and ethical implications and responsibilities of creative engagements beyond anthropocentric and extractive modalities. It positions its principal concept of the Hydrocene as being continually suffused by embodied connections between human and non-human forms and forces. In the Hydrocene being, thinking and practising are always done in profound intra-relationship *with*. This timely book offers new ways to learn from, think through and practice hydrologically in the context of rapid planetary change and offers a range of innovative methods for contending with the climate crisis.”

**Bianca Hester**, *Associate Professor, Co-Director of Research and Engagement, University of New South Wales, Australia*

“This impressive survey of aqueous artwork reminds us of the urgency of creative practice as a bold research method in a time of climate catastrophe. Diffracted through water, both predicament and possibility become strangely clearer.”

**Astrida Neimanis**, *Canada Research Chair in Feminist Environmental Humanities, The University of British Columbia, Canada*

“Harnessing the transformative qualities of water, hydro-artistic practices from Scandinavia to Australia are proposing more empathic forms of engagement with the natural world. In demonstrating how artists are re-framing human relationships with water, this timely book challenges conventional perceptions of environmental art and articulates new approaches to curatorial care-taking.”

**Felicity Fenner**, *Associate Professor, University of New South Wales, Australia*

“Bronwyn Bailey-Charteris’ book is a timely overview and analysis of an emerging field of artistic and curatorial practices relating to water – not only as a theme or topic of interest but as an ontological starting point, methodology and collaborator. Bailey-Charteris’ way of linking practices operating in the Nordic and Oceanic regions is indicative of the far-reaching scope of the matters at hand: water, and the manifold challenges connected to it in the face of the climate catastrophe, is a planetary issue. It is also a cultural question: what stories are called for in the age of ecological collapse and how should they be told in order to make a difference? The excellent examples discussed in this book show how art can contribute to the

understanding of the climate crisis as embodied and relational. This is an urgent and much-needed contribution to the fields of artistic and curatorial practice, as well as to the wider sphere of ecological thinking.”

**Lisa Rosendahl**, *Independent Curator and Associate Professor of Exhibition Studies, Oslo National Academy of the Arts, Norway*

“This book elevates the important topic of water as a key component of the climate change crisis. Having coined the term *Hydrocene* during the development of this book, she has framed a consolidating voice for the vital role that water plays as the ecosystem that covers most of the planet. How we often overlook water while living right next to it, with major cities populating estuaries and coastal regions, is researched as a life force we cannot only live without, but one which the work of creative practitioners has recognised and made visible for millennia. In the first book to do so, Bailey-Charteris draws these practices together through a curatorial lens that calls on us to learn and respect the very element on which life itself depends.”

**Marie Sierra**, *Professor and Dean, Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, University of Melbourne, Australia*

“In this lucid and passionate book, Bronwyn Bailey-Charteris proposes a new name for our current epoch, one that acknowledges the centrality of water to climate change: the Hydrocene. She deftly weaves together artistic and curatorial practice with ecofeminism to show how art can shift our collective imaginations regarding the devastating planetary climate crisis in which we are all embedded.”

**Tara McDowell**, *Associate Professor and Director, Curatorial Practice Monash University Art Design and Architecture, Australia*

“The concept of the Hydrocene displaces the anodyne generality of the Anthropocene by putting water right where it should be: everywhere. Bailey-Charteris shows that water’s many forms – as bodies, rivers, swamps, oceans, fog and ice – are pluralities that flow into the singularity of the hydrological cycle. *The Hydrocene* is a bold, original and evocative demonstration that attention should be paid to the efforts of contemporary artists to picture the watery worlds in which we live, their beauty, endangerment and resilience. An active curator, she draws on her direct experience of exhibitions of work by artists from two of the earth’s regions: Scandinavia and Australia. These may be far apart geographically, but Bailey-Charteris reveals the contrasting challenges and watery resonances that flow between them and everywhere else on our wounded planet.”

**Terry Smith**, *Andrew W. Mellon Emeritus Professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory of the Department of the History of Art and Architecture, University of Pittsburgh, USA*

# THE HYDROCENE

This book challenges conventional notions of the Anthropocene and champions the Hydrocene: the Age of Water. It presents the Hydrocene as a disruptive, conceptual epoch and curatorial theory, emphasising water's pivotal role in the climate crisis and contemporary art.

The Hydrocene is a wet ontological shift in eco-aesthetics which redefines our approach to water, transcending anthropocentric, neo-colonial and environmentally destructive ways of relating to water. As the most fundamental of elements, water has become increasingly politicised, threatened and challenged by the climate crisis. In response, *The Hydrocene* articulates and embodies the distinctive ways contemporary artists relate and engage with water, offering valuable lessons towards climate action. Through five compelling case studies across swamp, river, ocean, fog and ice, this book binds feminist environmental humanities theories with the practices of eco-visionary artists. Focusing on Nordic and Oceanic water-based artworks, it demonstrates how art can disrupt established human–water dynamics. By engaging hydrofeminist, care-based and planetary thinking, *The Hydrocene* learns from the knowledge and agency of water itself within the tide of art going into the blue.

*The Hydrocene* urgently highlights the transformative power of eco-visionary artists in reshaping human–water relations. At the confluence of contemporary art, curatorial theory, climate concerns and environmental humanities, this book is essential reading for researchers, curators, artists, students and those seeking to reconsider their connection with water and advocate for climate justice amid the ongoing natural-cultural water crisis.

**Bronwyn Bailey-Charteris** (PhD) is an Australian and Swedish curator, writer and academic with expertise in the politics and poetics of eco-aesthetics. Based in the Blue Mountains, Australia, she lives within the *Ngurra* (Country) of the Dharug and Gundungurra peoples. Bronwyn is a sessional academic of curatorial theory and practice at Stockholm University, the University of Sydney and the University of New South Wales where she was also awarded her doctoral degree with distinction. Bronwyn maintains an independent curatorial practice, having curated multiple exhibitions in Stockholm, Sydney, Melbourne and Madrid, alongside regular international publications and presentations on water and eco-aesthetics in the Nordic and Oceanic regions. She is currently the Curator of the Climate Aware Creative Practices Network and her academic work is committed to meeting the challenges posed to creative practice and pedagogy by the climate crisis.



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*Bronwyn Bailey-Charteris*



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*Bronwyn Bailey-Charteris*



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*This book is dedicated to Svea and Oskar. You and your generation are facing a terrible ecological inheritance and for this I am truly sorry. This dedication is my promise to always face the monstrous task of climate justice and climate action head on, in all areas of my life and work. For you, I promise not to dwell in inaction but instead keep fighting for the hydrosphere. To do this I will be listening and supporting the leadership of First Nations folk as well as gathering brilliant artistic, scientific and curatorial collaborators around me. Together we will: restore the kelp forests, clean the swamps, liaise with coral and clouds, and en masse we will work to build artistically rich, collective futures where you and your generation, and the generations beyond yours, can find solace in nurturing, multiplicitous watery worlds.*



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# INTRODUCTION

## Reimagining the hydrological and hydrosocial cycle in the Hydrocene

Think of yourself on a beach on a grey and cloudy day: you notice the incessant waves landing steadily on the shore; you feel a chill in the air from the low clouds on the horizon; perhaps a foggy sea mist rolls in; wet imprints on the shells of scattering crabs. You take a deep breath of the salty air. This is the hydrological cycle in process. The element of water passing through multiple bodies of water simultaneously, transforming and sustaining. And yet this image of the hydrological cycle, as an eternal dance between bodies of water, is threatened by the current climate crisis.

The impacts to the hydrological cycle, caused by the burning of fossil fuels and colonial-capital industrialisation, are seen in extreme shifts in the atmosphere. With the acceleration of the climate crisis, water has now become a central material and metaphor for the times. When viewed through the prism of water, the climate crisis is a story of extreme loss and transformation: melting glaciers, rising seas, erratic rainfall, extreme flooding, severe droughts and on it goes. In 2023, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)<sup>1</sup> delivered yet another more severe and alarming report that the climate crisis has arrived. Alarms are sounding. This is Code Red,<sup>2</sup> or, given the centrality of water, Code Blue.

In response, art is going into the blue. While water is one of the most important materials of our time, ways of considering the poetic and political intentions and possibilities of water are still dominated by the idea of water as a resource and capital. There is an urgent need for a more nuanced understanding of the hydrological cycle, one that reflects on the bodily entanglements and relational qualities of bodies of water and acknowledges the hydrological cycle as embodied.

## 2 Introduction

This reimagining must work on the scale of the planetary as well as the local and can be enabled and enacted by artistic practice, theory and the expanded blue humanities.

The aim of this book is to develop a curatorial theory that meets the needs of eco-aesthetics created in response to the planetary climate crisis. More explicitly, it asks: how does art relate to and engage with water in the climate crisis? And in which ways and to what ends does the curatorial engage with, address and relate with water in this crisis? As a result of this questioning, I present the theory of the Hydrocene.

I developed the theory of the Hydrocene in order to argue for artists in the climate crisis, and their importance as cultural leaders. There is such deep and fruitful value in learning from these hydro-artistic methods that ‘think with water’<sup>3</sup> towards climate justice. The field of hydro-artistic practice is a hot-bed of cultural leadership and expansive human-water relations that is unique in art today. Throughout the book, I define, map and share the tide of ‘eco-visionary’<sup>4</sup> artists working in the expanded field of eco-aesthetics to reformulate human–water relations. These artistic approaches are built on thinking with water and acknowledge water’s own agency and knowledge systems. The artists and artworks are finding ways to relate with swamps as family, to move with the tides, to engage an eco-sensibility and engender inquisitive and non-destructive water–human relations.

As artist Favianna Rodriguez writes, ‘culture is power’ and what is needed is a cultural strategy for the climate crisis.<sup>5</sup> This book forms one such cultural strategy that tackles the complications of devastating ecological demise and learns from the relationship between art and water as a strategy towards liveable, just and collective futures. I ask how can art transform the limited narrative of the hydrological cycle within the climate crisis: how can audiences and participants in these artworks see the water cycle as culturally significant, as part of embodied selves, and in dialogue with the planetary in the tumultuous climate crisis? In understanding these questions as part of the complex intersection of art and water in the climate crisis, I set to form a curatorial theory that meets the needs of eco-aesthetics created in response to the climate crisis – meet the Hydrocene. This book is a guide to the Hydrocene, a map towards decentring anthropocentric water relations and a stream to learning from eco-visionary artists as we move towards climate justice.

### **The Hydrocene as part of my expanded curatorial practice**

Water has been my curatorial companion for the last decade.<sup>6</sup> My focus as an active curator is on processes of watery thinking in contemporary art, ecology as social metaphor and feminist methodologies of curatorial practice. Across practical learning platforms, publications and exhibitions, my curatorial work looks at the possibilities of art made in dialogue with the climate crisis, with a particular focus on water. I have been fortunate to curate exhibitions in floating bathhouses,